



**The Concept of Identity and
Subaltern in Atwood's *The
Handmaid's Tale***

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ABSTRACT

Identity is a contested concept in the presently diverse and multicultural world, and is reflected in the works of literature as well. Great numbers of theoretical works have been applied to literary works concerning the issue of identity, the most recent of which is postcolonial criticism. Spivak, the prominent figure in postcolonial feminist criticism, mainly concerns her theory with the struggle of the minority (the colonized or the females) against the oppression and injustice of the dominant system of power, which denies them an identity through which, they would assert themselves as dynamic agents who can act in history, rather than being acted upon. The aim of this study is to analyze the ways by which the female characters of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, are objectified as groups rather than individuals, and in Spivak's words, subalterns who have no voice and their identity is affected by the ideological system of power. The researcher eventually indicates that the subaltern, though being silenced, would find her own way to assert her subjectivity.

Keywords: Female othering, Oppression, Postcolonial studies

مفهوم هویت و عاملیت زنان در رمان نهمه اثر مارگارت اتوود

نکی از مفاهیم مورد بحث در جهان مکتب و چندرنگی کنونی، مقوله هویت می باشد که در آثار ادبی نیز به آن پرداخته شده است. نظریه های ادبی و نظریه های میناوی نمركز خود را بر بررسی مفهوم هویت در ادبیات قرار داده اند که اخیرترین آن ها نیز پس از سیمیناری می باشد. گاتاری چاکراوینی اسپواک از میناوی پس از سیمیناری با رویکرد میناویسم، به مساله ازلیت ها در هر جامعه ای می پردازد و نشان می دهد که چگونه زن ها و رنگین پوسیان توسط سیمین قدرت به حاشیه رانده شده و مورد ظلم قرار می گیرند. از این منظر، سیمین های سیاسی و اندولوژیک، هویت را از انراد گرفته نا آنها قادر به باشند خود را به عنوان سوژه های ایسانی و دارای ناندرگذاری تاریخی مطرح کنند. هدف از این مطالعه بررسی روش های است که عاملیت زنان در رمان نهمه اثر مارگارت اتوود چنان توسط قدرت محو شده که آنها به شی وارگی و نروسی دچار شده اند. این تحقیق در باآنان نشان می دهد که چگونه زنان نروسی و سرکوب شده راه های برای اعتراض و بیان خویش می نمایند. واژگان کلیدی: عاملیت زنان، سیمین و نشر، مطالعات پس از سیمیناری

INTRODUCTION

A brief review of the major developments of the literary theories in the past few decades shows different attitudes toward the concept of ‘identity’. Different approaches in literary theory, such as psychological, feminist, postcolonial, and sociological, are widely concerned with the definition of the identity of the subject. While for the cultural theorist, Louis Althusser (1918-1990), identity is socially constructed and is formed in relation to dominant beliefs, values, and norms known as ideology (Althusser, 2010, p.1355), The psychoanalysts such as Freud (1856-1939) introduced the idea that human identity is always subject to forces and effects “within itself”, in terms of what is called “the unconscious” (Bennett & Royle, 2016, p. 344).

Most feminist critics, on the other hand, deal with the question of how one becomes a woman and thus, claim their concerns over the issue of the ‘subject’ and ‘identity’ in regard to women and men. The oft-quoted claim, made by Simone de Beauvoir, that “one is not born, but becomes a woman” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 85) shows the significance of the identity matter to feminism, which advocates the idea that gender can be conceived as a “system of meaning”, rather than a quality “owned by individuals” (Robinson, 1991, p. 1), to this idea, therefore, identities are no more than names and titles imposed by the social roles taken by the individuals through their conflict with the structure of power.

Postcolonial critics take into account the matter of identity in a very similar way to feminists. The ‘other’ unprivileged people of color are excluded and marginalized by the western ‘center’ oppression; therefore, ‘race’ is the criteria by which the black identity is constituted. The similarity with feminism is that according to both groups, individuality is taken away from the marginalized class of society and instead, a collective or group identity is granted. The common feature among all the various attitudes towards the concept of identity, discussed above, is the fact that ‘I’ is not autonomous and does not exist in a sort of vacuum. Rather, ‘identity’ is always subject to forces both outside itself (cultural, political, social, and so on) and within itself (unconscious). In other words, the human subject is not centered in itself and is defined by its relation to the surrounding world.

The works of the postcolonial/feminist critic, Gayatri Spivak are also notable in this debate. She deals with the subject of ‘identity’ for human individuals and takes two essential components of identity, namely gender and race, as her topics of interest. She employs the concept of ‘subaltern’ in this regard, which refers to the people who have been effective in history and social context, but have been under-represented, hidden and repressed by the structure of violence (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2013, p. 278). Spivak borrowed the term subaltern from Gramsci to refer to the “unrepresented” group of people in the society (Gramsci, 2020, p. 55). In an interview made by Leon de Kock, she argues that, everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern. Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'...They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. (De Kock, 1992, pp. 45-46).



She used the term in her theory of subalternity in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and clarified that it by referring to the oppressed subjects or more generally those of inferior rank. Spivak believes that it is difficult – almost impossible – for the subaltern to reach self-recognition unless they cease to be passive under the patriarchal system.

The Handmaid's Tale: Narrative of Women as Objectified and Rebel

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on the concept of identity in regard with the individuals who live in a totalitarian system which violates their freedom and personal human rights. The story is full of the images of horror designed by the government to intimidate and suppress the individuals. One recurrent image is the frightening scene of the hanging dead bodies of the criminals, shown publicly. “It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than faces themselves would be. It makes man like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted; like scare crews, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare” (Atwood, 2012, p. 29). The narrator clearly states that her attitude towards this scene is much different from what it is supposed to be: “what we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn. This isn't what I feel. These bodies hanging on the wall are time travelers, anachronisms. They've come from past. What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel” (Atwood, 2012, p. 31). That's true that she does not submit to the system's will in determining her emotional reaction, but it's regretful to see that she chooses to be blank, to be senseless. In such an oppressive system to feel, to think is painful. Thus, the individuals unwillingly choose to be reserved and even blank. Their identities and feelings are framed by the system.

The other frequently used imagery is the nun-like dresses of the handmaids, intentionally emphasized by the author. “The red ankle-length skirts”, “full sleeves”, “red gloves”, “red flat-heeled shoes”, and “the white wings” (Atwood, 2012, p. 4) around their faces. That's a uniform designed by the system for the handmaids. Spivak pictures such a pessimistic scene of the situation of subaltern. The subaltern is reduced to “group” (Atwood, 2012, p. 273) rather than individuals and their identity is denied by the oppressive ruling system, which decides even for the clothing of its subjects. Here the handmaids – actually all the women in this novel – are treated as ‘others’ who occupy a position outside the mainstream of life and they are treated as marginals for whom decisions should be made.

Another pitiful image is Moira's tattered bunny costume in the brothel, like a cheap and vulgar toy. “She is dressed absurdly, in a black outfit of once-shiny satin [...]. Attached to her head are two ears, of a rabbit or deer, it's not easy to tell. She has a black bowtie around her neck and is wearing black net stockings and black high heels. She always hated high heels” (Atwood, 2012, p. 271). Moira is metamorphosed. She was a symbol of protest and resistance through the novel particularly by her two attempts to escape.

However, her new life as a prostitute in Jezebel, symbolized by her ridiculous costume, is completely the opposite of what she had stood for, which indicates the manipulation of the few subalterns who try to ‘speak’, and whose cry is suffocated by the ruling system. This subjugation of the women's identity is also manifested in the narrator's official name “offred” which means that she is the possession “of” the commander, “Fred”. Very explicitly, this action of naming the subjects by indicating them as possessions of commander reminds one of Beauvoir's points in *The Second Sex* that a man defines a woman not as



autonomous but only as relative to him. He is the self and woman the other. “Women are being treated as the other since they are subordinated to their men” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p. 16).

Women as subaltern in this society are determined to possess certain social roles. Offred and all other handmaids as fertile women in a nearly sterile society have the duty of producing offspring. The narrator describes herself and other handmaids as “two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood, 2012, p. 121). Thus, subalterns are objectified; No more human individuals. There is nothing erotic about the handmaids, and their function is merely biological: “We are for breeding purposes. We aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans” (Atwood, 2012, p. 120). The worst – and unfortunately the most exact – view towards women is expressed by the commander himself:

“I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel”, he says, with shame-facedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but with good works”. “Let the women learn in silence with all subjection”. Here he looks us over. “All”, he repeats.

“But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve”.

This view of man’s marginalization of women emphasizes the fact that since men in this society hold the reins of power, they assign the roles on the basis of social, legal and religious rules, all lead to their own advantage.

Even the commander’s choice of gifts to give to the narrator at the nights of their visit can be considered as a sign of his underestimating her intelligence. Skin lotion, fashion magazines, and also a secret visit of a house of prostitution. A woman might become happy only by such things. However, what Offred wants when she is asked, “what would you like, besides hand lotion?” (Atwood, 2012, p. 169), she answers “I would like to know” (Atwood, 2012, p. 170). She shows her enthusiasm to know “whatever there is to know” (Atwood, 2012, p. 170), and in this way proves herself to be beyond the vulgar suppositions of the commander as the representative of the system towards women. Unfortunately, these gestures of rebellion are very conservatively done, and the general idea held by women is that “it’s only women who can’t, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective” (Atwood, 2012, p. 181).

Although there is social ranking among female characters and some in higher ranks seem to be cruel and unsympathetic towards the lower layers, looking deeply, it could be understood that even the Wife –Commander’s wife who possesses the highest position among females– is also a victim of this cruel totalitarian system. The First Woman is also subaltern. Once, Offred after the fertilizing ceremony in which the Wife accompanies the handmaid in the sexual intercourse with commander, questions “which of us is the worse for, her or me?” (Atwood, 2012, p. 134). After the secret obligatory visits of the narrator to commander’s building, she mediates over the nature of her feeling towards the Wife. “Serena Joy had changed for me, too. Once I’d merely hated her for her part in what was being done to me. [...] But now I was jealous of her; but how could I be jealous of a woman so obviously dried-up and unhappy?” (Atwood, 2012, p. 141). And finally, near the end of novel, when the narrator feels her life in danger after coming to find out that the Wife knows all about her secret visits to commander’s room, she thinks of the impossible idea of killing the Wife, and says: “To knock her down, kick her sharply and accurately in the head. To put her out of her misery, and myself as well. To put her out of our misery” (Atwood, 2012, p. 259). Obviously, the common fate of the subaltern is misery.



There are many more evidences to add to reinforce the submission of the subaltern to the extremist ruling force. All these instances and evidences can be summarized in an utterance by Aunt Lydia when encouraging the handmaids to be non-persons: "Modesty is invisibility. Never forget it. To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" (Atwood, 2012, p. 26).

CONCLUSION

Spivak's (1988) theory of subalternity continues to be relevant as long as there are still systems which suppress their subjects in the name of gender, class, race or religion. The prospect of a change depends only on the subaltern's attempt to dismiss the pre-determined identities and show its dynamic subjectivity to the authorities. As Sally Robinson has declared in her *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, "the minorized subject proudly claims its own difference from the norm, and so makes itself as the bearer of an embodied particularity" (Robinson, 1995, p. 4). Offred, although very subtly, asserts her selfhood by delicate rebellions against the oppressive totalitarian regime that governs her life.

Such seemingly small but significant acts of disobedience such as seizing the few minutes of bathroom break to talk with Moira, her nightly recollections of past life with her husband and daughter which is against the law but helps her emotionally to tolerate her present misery by sticking to the sense of identity and family ties those reminding give, and such more daring assertions when she asks the commander to tell her of the state affairs, or maintaining sexual relationship with Nick. The heroine of Atwood's Novel does not only effort to survive and tolerate, as the system expects the subaltern. She also shows the strength of her individuality to assert a sense of subjectivity and selfhood.

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Biodata

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