Gender, Language, Power: Discursive Mechanisms of Oppression and Agency in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* delineates a nightmarish totalitarian state in which religious fundamentalism not only deprives people of their agency but also enacts total oppression. This article explores how discourse is employed as a tool to suppress and subjugate women in Gileadan society. Michel Foucault's idea of discourse analysis is used to demonstrate how power constructs reality through the operationalisation of discourse. We investigate how the inclusion or exclusion of specific words, the destruction of the past, and the banning of books are used as an insidious strategy to construct a pseudo-reality, which, through discursive impositions, becomes real. The existence of the past in a dystopian society, even in the form of memory, is considered a stumbling block in the complete assimilation of the subjects in its discursive franchises. A paradoxical view of the Gileadan discourse on religious tenets is unfolded, in addition to exploring how religious discourse acts as a camouflage for the power leaders use to enact brutal and barbaric acts without creating suspicion that they are, in reality, tyrants. A paradox emerges; totalitarian oppression creates agency and humanity for its victims.

Key Words: discourse, dystopia, gender, language, oppression, religion, totalitarianism.

Introduction

This article analyses how a totalitarian regime censors language or transmutes it according to its interests through discursive impositions to control people. The totalitarian regime depicted Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* wants to ensure that the people of the state are invariably subservient to the state.[1] The regime makes efforts to block all avenues that might spur people to challenge state authority. The regime erases the history of people, so that they cannot know what kind of world existed before the present regime took over. It considers history or the past of the people as a potential threat to its authority because the past provides a glimpse of the past system of governance and hence, may transport an individual, mentally if not physically, to the past discourses and the past ways of life.[2] When a regular social order is transmuted into a totalitarian system, it negates the previous discursive practices and implements a new social order with its own discourse. To establish the authenticity or validity of this new discourse, the totalitarian regime erases past remnants, censors language, and so on, so that nothing can challenge the absolutism of the regime. Essentially, totalitarianism is a

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[1] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1985]).

[2] Luis Alfredo Velasquez Guerrero, "Orwell and the Reduction of language", *Revista de Letras*, vol. 58, no. 1 (2018), pp. 133-142.

"political system where the state recognizes no limits to its authority and strives to regulate every aspect of public and private life wherever feasible."[3] There is a general consensus among political scientists that a totalitarian state has six basic features: propaganda, which is promulgated by state-controlled media; censorship of language; destruction of the past; ideology, mass surveillance and widespread use of terror.[4] The presence of all six features in Atwood's Gilead makes it a vehicle to study totalitarian regimes.

The Handmaid's Tale was chosen to enlighten the readers about totalitarian regimes, and also to make them aware and cautious about the perils of totalitarian propensities that are expeditiously flourishing underneath religious, racist and nationalistic ideologies in the contemporary world. All states in the contemporary world that have one or more features of a totalitarian regime, as listed, arguably is on the way to totalitarianism. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Gilead regime employs censorship of language as a controlling mechanism to condition its subjects linguistically so that they may not be able to think contrary to the prevalent status quo.[5] Before analysing the phenomenon of censorship of language by a totalitarian regime: first, a brief overview of the notion of language will be given; second, an attempt will be made to explore the use of language and discourse as mutually inclusive tools used by the regime to control people; third, Michel Foucault's concept of discourse is employed as a theoretical framework for an analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Human beings are distinguished from animals by the complexity of language. Infants do not speak, but linguistic proficiency develops rapidly, and small children have cognitive flexibility and may learn multiple languages simultaneously. Language enables us to express our thoughts, feelings and emotions in community, and also assists in comprehending society. Language deepens an individual's capacity for thought and creative ability and enhances the power of perception. However, language can also be used to manipulate power relations with others; and human beings have fought for centuries with one another to attain power.

Literature portrays how language can facilitate human emancipation as well as in human subjugation. Literature that depicted how language can be employed for this subjugation of humans emerged with the publication of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).[6] This novel, set in London in the year 2540 AD, depicts a highly stratified and class-oriented society where human children, mass-produced in hatcheries, are conditioned by a process called hypnopedia, a sleep-learning process. In this process, babies are taught vocabularies according to the strict specifications of the class to which they belong: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, or Epsilon. Mond, one of the state controllers, explains the importance of these groups as "the foundation on which everything else is built."[7] The totalitarian regime employs language to control but to harmonise people according to its mandated social system. Words like "love," "motherhood," and "marriage" are eliminated from the state dictionary because these are thought to be the stereotypical and obsolete concepts of the uncivilised society of the past.

[3] Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York: Norton & Company, 1999), p. 74.
[4] Colin Ridgewell, *The Popular Concept of Totalitarianism*, University of Southampton (PhD. Dissertation, 1968), p. 21.
[5] George Orwell, *1984* (London: The Folio Society, 2024 [1949]).
[6] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Random House, 2006[1932]).
[7] Huxley, *Brave New World*, p. 95.

In another iconoclastic political novel, *1984* (1945), George Orwell depicts how people are made docile and subservient through a process of banning language. He illustrates how language can be employed to delude and manipulate people to comply with government policies unquestionably. By controlling and manipulating language, the regime transforms people into robots who accept all propaganda as reality. Hence, language acts as a mind-controlling tool in *1984*, with its ultimate objective of destroying the will and imagination of the people. The Oceanian State, depicted in *1984*, obliterates the common language by supplanting it with a new artificial and restrictive language called Newspeak.[8] Thirteen years after the publication of *1984*, the theme of the use of language as a tool to control people emerges with the publication of Anthony Burgess's work *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). This novel is set in futuristic London, where a repressive totalitarian state is in charge. The state has conditioned its subjects by eliminating moral choices and programming them to choose good over evil. Alex, a fifteen-year-old teen, forms a gang with his friends Dim, Pete, and Georgie and indulges in criminal activities, which are expressed in Nadsat (an invented language combining Russian and English), which is almost incomprehensible to older people.[9] Eventually, he is apprehended by the police and incarcerated, where he is conditioned to adult language and deprived of free will; Burgess argues freedom entails the choice of good or evil.

Repression through Language in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is here explored using Foucault's concept of discourse and how it is employed to suppress and subjugate people. Foucault's theory of discourse not only analyses the way reality is constructed and defined but also explores how people are unconsciously forced to take their positions as natural instead of discursively constructed. It should be borne in mind that language not only determines discourse but is also an essential aspect of it because the discourse is framed and, therefore, influenced by language. In Gilead, language is used so that women are subjected to men. The male-dominated society does so by introducing new class words such as Martha, Wife, Jezebel and Handmaids to the social structure. The creation of a new vocabulary assigns new roles that women are supposed to play. For instance, Marthas do housekeeping, Wives belong to the Commanders, Jezebels (prostitutes) are for sexual satisfaction, and Handmaids exist to produce children.[10] These new words creates a society that is shaped by new societal roles. From the Foucauldian perspective, it could be argued that adding these words to Gileadan vocabulary means adding new words to the patriarchal discourse. Stuart Hall argues discourse is a lens by which people meaningfully speak about their milieu or derive the meaning of words at a particular historical moment.[11] By creating Handmaids and promulgating misleading interpretations of their role in society, the regime constructs not only a new reality but also legitimises it through theocratic discourse. The inclusion of these new words in Gileadan vocabulary eventually leads to acceptance of the

[8] Orwell, *1984*, p. 23.
[9] Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000[1962]).
[10] Sanne Kamphorst, *He Has Something We Don't Have, He Has the Word: On the Use of Language in the Struggle for Social Power in Margaret Atwood's Novel The Handmaid's Tale*, Utrecht University (PhD. Dissertation, 2017), p. 13.
[11] Stuart Hall, "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse," in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader,* eds Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage Publications, 2001).

social roles because when these positions in Gileadan society are discussed they become part of reality. Therefore, Gileadan women subject themselves to these roles "because they only think of themselves in connection to these roles and the assumptions that come with them."[12]

Most of the women in Gilead, including Offred, have not entirely reduced themselves to their role as Handmaids, even though they are part of the Gileadan discourse, because they are cognizant of a reality from the past in which things were different. They, nonetheless, act as per their roles because they cannot escape. Every Gileadan woman must espouse her role or be no longer accepted in society as a woman, declared "unwoman," a euphemism for the death sentence.[13] It is entirely in the hands of the Commanders to determine how the social roles of women are classified. Mario Klarer (1995) insists that not being in command of Gileadan discourse means the women become "pre-literary and follow the pre-scriptions of men."[14] Here, Klarer seems in agreement with Judith Butler, a prominent feminist, who believes that social roles are constructed, in the same way as gender construction, through performative acts.[15] The role of Handmaids is linked to female identity, and thus these women must enact roles, and come to accept them as natural. The enactment of roles are obligatory protocols, such as the ritual of the Handmaids going to the store in pairs and wearing red clothes.

The narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* oscillates between two societies: Gileadan society and the society 'before' Gilead took over. A comparative analysis of these societies can reveal how reality is not only a discursive construct but is also strategically poised to change with the change in discourse. According to Foucault, actions, interpretations, opinions, and statements are all constructed according to the truth of the discourse. Foucault states, "Each society has its regime of truth. Its 'general politics' of truth—that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanism and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements."[16] In the context of Gilead, this means that statements not in congruence with the 'regime of the truth' of Gileadan discourse are invalid. For instance, women's powerlessness in dressing as they wish is implied within the 'regime of the truth' of Gileadan discourse. However, depriving women of their choice of dressing in the society 'before' would have meant to challenge the official equality between men and women, because at that time it would be incongruent with the truth of generally accepted discourse.

The criteria of how language should be used are based on the discourse of the new regime in the Gilead. The regime is aware that every society is a web of discourses—religious discourse, political discourse, and gender discourse, that are invariably in a perpetual struggle to prevail in society. To ensure that biblical discourse (interpreted as they wish) permeates Gileadan society, the theocratic regime of Gilead eliminates other discourses from its territory. For controlling language, the totalitarian regime obstructs all avenues that are associated with language in one form or another. Consequently, the regime takes two steps: first, it destroys the past, and second, it effaces every kind of literature except the Bible.

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[12] Kamphorst, *He Has Something We Don't Have, He Has the Word*, p. 14.
[13] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 20.
[14] Mario Klarer, "Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Mosaic*, vol. 28, no. 4 (1995): p. 132.
[15] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1988): p. 522.
[16] Michel Foucault, *Knowledge/Power: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977,* trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 131.

Since every piece of dystopian fiction portrays people in miserable circumstances, the past is the sole source of happiness in which the subjects of a dystopian society take refuge. The past in dystopian fiction evokes sweet memories of good times and can instigate resistance against and subversion of the regime. The control of the past, as well as history, is necessary for theocratic discourse to permeate Gilead society. Foucault believes that discourse should be considered historically, according to its specific time and context.[17] However, the despotic regime ruling a dystopian society erases history and the past of the people to create new discourse to gain control over its subjects. For instance, while instructing the Handmaids at Leah and Rachel Education Centre, Aunt Lydia tells them: "You are a transition generation . . . it is hard for you. . . For the ones who came after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts . . . Because they did not want things they cannot have."[18] It is hard for the transition generation of Handmaids to accept the theocratic discourse because they are aware of the previous discourse that gave them freedom; nevertheless, that freedom of Handmaids has disappeared. In the pre-Gileadan era, women were free to choose, but now their choice has been taken away; making it hard for them to embrace the new discourse.

It will be easy for the new generation to accept Gileadan principles because they are ignorant of all prior discourses. The Gileadan regime is so stringent about the effacement of the past that it even changes the names of Handmaids, as Offred reveals: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden."[19] The regime prevents vestiges of the past discourse lingering in the new social order; Handmaids have the patronymic titles of the Commanders for whom they are supposed to bear children. The Gileadan regime wants Handmaids to forget their previous lives. The regime wants to ensure that those who are acquainted with society 'before' do not transfer their knowledge and opinions to the next generation. To this end, the totalitarian regime bans reading and writing.

The Relationships Between Reading, Writing and Language

The real repression of women through language in the society of Gilead commences with the fact that women are not allowed to read and write. They are, therefore, withheld from gaining objective knowledge and from the possibility to express their ideas and feelings. By denying these possibilities, David Hogsette opines, "Women become non-personal individuals who lack the rights and opportunities that might enable them to counter society's construction openly. . . [it] strips them of any resources with which to create their own subjective reality."[20] The possibility to read and write may be seen as a source to counter the construction of Gilead as it exists. By removing this resource, women are stripped of the possibility to challenge or resist.

Reading and writing are processes through which individuals disseminate their ideas not only to the people of their era but also to the later generations. Reading gives an individual access to texts that are repositories of memories, chronicles of past societies, and compilations of different perceptions of life. Reading and writing impart knowledge that not only assumes

[17] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 103.
[18] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 127.
[19] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 94.
[20] David Hogsette, "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*: The Reader's Role in Empowering Offred's Speech Act", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 38, no. 4 (1997), p. 263.

the authority of truth, but also has the power to make itself true. "Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of the practices."[21] In discourse power and knowledge are harmoniously integrated in such a way that it not only paves the way to oppress "others" but also acts as a tool to marginalise, silence and subjugate them. Withholding people from acquiring knowledge and controlling information are kinds of oppression as they allow only certain groups of society to gain them and push "others" to fringes. The regime forbids the people from reading and writing and, consequently, precludes the general public from acquiring knowledge. For instance, for Christians, the Bible is a literary manifestation of Christian religious discourse, and here, the power of discourse is associated with the written text. Now, biblical verses, as well as biblical words, act as a source of power in this discourse. The ideological language of the Bible furnishes firepower to the theocratic discourse and its implementation. Offred ponders upon the power of the Bible by calling it not only "an incendiary device,"[22] but also expressing suspicion about the verses being read to them from it. First, the Commander may read out the verses of the Bible to his congregation out of context. Second, Offred labels it as incendiary because it is open to interpretation. However, deprived of the possibility to read or write, women remain defenceless against the construction of Gilead as a theocratic male-dominated society. Hence, women's illiteracy makes them unable to know whether the three categories: Handmaids, Commanders' Wives, and Marthas, are inscribed in the Bible or are propaganda of the regime to oppress them.

Foucault argues that in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures that determine the rules of exclusion and prohibition.[23] The regime has produced and organised religious discourse in such a way that only top government officials can proliferate and actively participate in this process. To mitigate the number of active participants in the religious discourse, the totalitarian regime authorises only the Commanders to possess and read the Bible, and reading and writing are prohibited by the Gileadan law. This way, the regime obstructs all possibilities of other interpretations that can jeopardise the theocratic discourse.

All reading and writing (not just the Bible) are forbidden in Gilead for the common people. Some individuals, like the Commanders, surreptitiously keep forbidden material. Their secret is exposed when Offred clandestinely enters the Commander's room at night. She is stunned at the display of forbidden books and magazines which she thinks had been destroyed very long ago. Why the Commander keeps all this prohibited material is beyond her. But on inquiry by Offred, his reply exposes the necessity of confining and giving the command and operationalisation of discourse in the hands of a few people only. He asserts, "What's dangerous in the hands of the multitudes, with what may or may not have been irony, is safe enough for those whose motives are . . . Beyond reproach, I said. He nodded gravely."[24] Certainly, 'multitudes' alludes to the ordinary people. By prohibiting the general public from reading and writing, the regime neutralises every eventuality of thoughts and memories of the previous society. This way, the regime excludes common people of the state, particularly women, from

[21] Hall, "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse", p. 76.
[22] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p, 98.
[23] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader,* ed. R. Young (London: Routledge, Kegan, and Paul, 1972), p. 228.
[24] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 166.

the possibility of partaking in any formal discourse. Reading and writing associated with books contain a subversive power that the regime wants to preclude. On seeing the books in the Commander's room, Offred feels: "What was in them was a promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities… They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended endless love. The real promise in them was immortality."[25] Offred knows these books contain everything that she is deprived of by the regime. These books depict the life of the past society when people had freedom of choice. Most important of all, Offred knows that these books are the emblem of the power of the regime; the reason why the regime eliminates all books from its territory except the Bible, which solidifies and substantiates the patriarchal order.

The truth lies, Foucault argues, "within the discourse" because it is "discourse that defines the objects of knowledge."[26] Thus, discourse constructs reality and shapes it according to its own 'regime of truth'; the male-dominated society in the Atwood's novel redefines truth. For instance, in the regime, the word "sterile" does not exist. There are only women who are fruitful or barren. In theocratic Gilead, the fact that men can also be sterile is invalid; only women are to be blamed for their infertility. Offred, the protagonist, had a daughter in society "before," which is proof of her fertility. However, she fails to conceive in her first two postings in the new regime. Now, it is her last chance, her third posting at Commander Fred's house, to prove her fertility. If she fails in this third attempt, she will be declared "unwomen" and die. Hence, what the regime legislates as true will become true, regardless of the truth. Lois Feuer in her comparison of *The Handmaid's Tale* with *1984* demonstrates how discourse reconstructs reality by arguing, "O'Brien [a member of the inner party] forces Winston [the protagonist of *1984*] to acknowledge that two plus two is equal to five if the party says so . . . O'Brien's point is that truth, even the *a priori* truth of mathematics, is relative and subject to the violence—enforced will of whoever is in power."[27] The rulers manipulate the truth and mould it according to suit them. Similarly, though the Handmaids have the capacity to have babies, the new truth absolves the Commanders and holds the former responsible for infertility. The regime's discourse is so powerful that it insidiously brainwashes the women and makes them perceive the truth in the light of the prevalent theocratic discourse. For instance, when one day Offred incidentally comes across some Japanese tourists whose heads are uncovered and hair exposed, she feels repelled and remarks, "They seem undressed."[28] Though Offred herself used to dress the way Japanese tourists are dressed, now she thinks it is wrong to expose one's body. She cannot help but hold that opinion because the discourse of Gilead is too powerful to be refuted. Thus, within a particular worldview, some forms of action become natural, others unthinkable. Different social understandings of the world lead to different social actions, and therefore the social construction of knowledge and truth has social consequences.[29]

Words, as well as concepts associated with these words, have not only vanished from the territory of the Gilead but have also become unthinkable due to the prevalent discourse. For

[25] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 165.
[26] Foucault, *Knowledge/Power: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977,* p. 133.
[27] Lois Feuer, "The Calculus of Love and Nightmare: *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition", *Critique,* vol. 38, no. 2 (1997), pp. 87-88.
[28] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p, 38
[29] Kenneth Gergen, "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Social Psychology", *American Psychologist,* vol. 40, no. 3 (1985), pp. 268-269.

instance, the theocratic discourse has made it hard for Offred to imagine the word "job" now.[30] The totalitarian regime eliminates the word "job" as well as the concepts associated with it altogether. Though in society "before," women had jobs, now it is unimaginable for a woman to think about it. Thus, the objective of the regime is not only to eliminate a certain word from its territory but also to erase the concept associated with it. Another example that demonstrates this comes to the fore at the end of the narrative when Offred ventures into a clandestine relationship with the Commander's chauffeur, Nick, hoping for impregnation. As she furtively enters Nick's room during the night, he tells her, "No romance. Okay?" Listening to these words, Offred recalls that once it would have meant "no strings."[31] Since women are no longer permitted to choose their spouses in the new regime, concepts like "romance" do not exist. Also, a relationship with "no strings" attached is unimaginable in Gileadan discourse. Now such words are not only forbidden, but their utterance has also become treason against the state.

The ban on certain words generally affects people's memories. Offred struggles to recall a song sung in society "before." This song is banned because it contains the word "free," forbidden by the regime. Freedom in Gilead has become an outdated concept. In a state, bound to theocracy and stringent rules, individual freedom has vanished, and its linguistic expression is slowly fading away from the memories of the populace. If the word "freedom" exists in the regime, its meaning has been transmuted. The phrase "freedom to" do whatever an individual wants has been substituted by "freedom from" choice and liberty.[32]

Foucault argues that "we must conceive of discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them, and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of the regularity."[33] Foucault implies that discourse is strengthened or reinforced by the regularity and regularisation of discursive practices. Furthermore, discourse is a lens that constrains one's ability to comprehend an event appropriately. The regime's discourse has affected people's minds subliminally to such an extent that many clinical practices like abortion that were permissible in the pre-Gileadan society are now thought to be atrocities. For instance, on seeing a couple of doctors hanged, Offred remarks: "They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples for the rest."[34] In the pre-Gileadan discourse, women's right to abortion was not an atrocity. However, the Gileadan discourse has changed citizens' minds, and everyone now believes procreation is necessary for life. This is now Offred's stance and may not incorporate all women. Thus, whoever is in control of ruling discourse or social structures is able to determine how reality is shaped, how social structures are ordered and whose interests are maximised.[35]

Gileadan Discourse and its Disproportionate Effect on Women

Though Gileadan discourse is very powerful, it does not affect all the Gileadan women equally. It has tremendously affected some characters like Offred, yet it proves ineffective on Moira,

[30] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 182.
[31] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 274
[32] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 34.
[33] Foucault, *Knowledge/Power: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977,* p, 67.
[34] Foucault, *Knowledge/Power: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977,* p, 43.
[35] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1996), p. 28.

Offred's friend, and Ofglen, the protagonist's companion, and also Offred's mother. All of them seem impervious to the Gileadan discourse and are determined not to live by the Gileadan way of life. Offred's mother used to be a feminist in the pre-Gileadan era. She burnt pornographic material and protested in support of women's right to abortion. She was annoyed by Offred's lack of interest in the women's movement and taking her rights for granted. "You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are."[36] Offred's mother feared that if women did not protect their rights, they would lose them. When Gilead was instigated she was sent to the colonies to clear nuclear waste.

The second woman who shows indomitable courage to resist the patriarchal structure is Ofglen. Though she is as much affected by the Gileadan discourse as Offred is, she is resolved that she would not live by the rules of Gilead. Ofglen is a member of a resistance movement that works to subvert the theocratic regime. She shares her revolutionary thoughts with Offred even though she can be punished by death if Offred reports her. In return, she wants Offred to provide the information she elicits from her Commander. However, Offred does not provide her with anything significant. When Ofglen's secret association with the resistance movement "Mayday" is disclosed to the police, she commits suicide by hanging herself to avoid arrest. Hearing the news of Ofglen's suicide, Offred is relieved because, in this case, the police are unable to extract information from Ofglen about Offred. Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor notes Offred's happiness on the death of Ofglen: "She is flooded with relief when Ofglen kills herself because it means that no one will learn of her own disobedience and indirect affiliation with Mayday."[37] Thus, the efficacy of the Gileadan discourse makes Offred betray her companion, the Handmaid, by feeling satisfaction rather than despair.

Moira, who rebels against the regime, is most often seen in Offred's flashbacks. Unlike Offred, Moira was an active lesbian feminist in the pre-Gileadan era, who is turned into a Handmaid when the Gilead takes over. She is admitted to Leah and Rachel's Re-education Centre for indoctrination, but escapes as she has been sterilised. She is captured and moved to in a brothel called Jezebel. The commonality that binds these women together is their failure, and to survive, argues Stephanie Hammer, "Offred seems to suggest one must surrender."[38] The most successful woman of all in Gilead is Offred, who, as Hammer points out, surrenders to survive. Having seen the severe consequences of the fate of the women who had attempted to challenge the theocratic regime, Offred compromises with Gileadan discourse so that she may survive. Thus, the regime's harsh punitive measures for the people who violate its rules force the rest to comply without protest.

Though Gilead is a society exclusively established on male dominance, it orchestrates a strategy whereby it gives some power to a group of women, namely the Aunts, who assist the regime by policing the religious discourse. This strategy serves two purposes for the regime: first, it creates a rupture in the possible unity of women; second, it enables the regime to create a buffer zone between itself and the oppressed women. The Aunts are a group of infertile women who are assigned to indoctrinate the Handmaids, and in return, their shipment to radio-

[36] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 131.
[37] Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, "From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 45, no.1 (2003), p. 86.
[38] Stephanie Hammer, "The World as it Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Modern Language Studies,* vol. 20, no. 2 (1990), p. 6.

active colonies is abrogated, which is the fate of every infertile woman in Gilead. The Aunts play a prominent anti-feminist role for the retention of their power and to prevent themselves from redundancy. However, in the process, they deal a deadly blow to the feminist movement.

There are serious repercussions for women when power rests in the hands of anti-feminists. For instance, Serena Joy, the wife of the Commander before the Gilead took over, was an exponent of the values that take legislative form in the Gileadan discourse. Offred recalls the days when Serena Joy appeared on television and advocated the notion that women should not handle public affairs, rather they should maintain the sanctity of the home. However, after the establishment of Gilead, she does not seem pleased; instead, she is exasperated. Offred notices: "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word."[39] In the pre-Gilead era, Serena Joy had the power to express her views, but she used it to undermine that very power. Whatever she preached has been implemented now by the theocratic regime, yet she is not happy. Perhaps what she expected from the regime did not materialise. She would not have thought that as a part of the dominance of the Gileadan discourse, she would have to share her husband with her Handmaid. Hence, her exasperation makes her lose regard for the stringent laws of Gilead, as indicated by her suggestion to Offred that she must adopt a different course of action for her impregnation because of the Commander's possible sterility. "Maybe he cannot, she says . . . Maybe you should try it another way . . . What other way? . . . Another man, she says."[40] Serena Joy gives the impression that she does not believe in the official Gileadan discourse that men cannot be sterile. Moreover, she suspects that her husband is, in fact, sterile. She even encourages Offred to commit a crime that is punishable by death. Thus, she disrespects the values of Gilead that an orthodox Gileadan should uphold. Hence, Serena transmutes from an exponent of the Gileadan discourse to an opponent who regrets her choices in life.

The Gileadan Discourse: A Paradox

Though the theocratic discourse of Gilead is equipped with strict rules and regulations, most of the characters in the text do not seem to believe and follow it sincerely. All characters, except the Aunts, have an ambivalent attitude towards Gileadan discourse because of their lack of faith in the new social order. The Aunts are the only group of women who sincerely follow and enforce the Gileadan discourse at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre. In fact, the Aunts are a redundant group of women who enjoy as well as exercise power and authority over other women. Their job of indoctrinating Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre grants them immunity from shipment to the radioactive colonies, the fate of all sterile women.

Characters like Serena Joy, Ofglen, and Moira wear the orthodox face of Gilead, but in reality, they do not believe it. The most remarkable example of unorthodoxy in the Gileadan discourse is the Commander, who is a founder of Gilead. The women's lack of belief in Gileadan discourse in general and the Handmaids' lack of belief in the Gileadan discourse, in particular, is reasonable and comprehensible because this discourse has become an instrument

[39] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 56.
[40] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 215.

of their subjugation. However, the lack of conviction on the part of the Commander and Nick is strange. The Commander is a guardian of faith in Gileadan discourse, but he uses his position to do things that are now prohibited. He covertly keeps books and magazines in his private chambers that are not supposed to exist. He establishes a forbidden relationship with Offred by calling her in his private room and, later on, allows her to read. When Offred inquires about the existence of old material, he responds: "Some of us . . . retain an appreciation for the old things."[41] It indicates that though Gilead enforces a powerful discourse fortified with stringent rules, it somehow fails to erase past remnants which still exist in the form of books and magazines. The ruling class, the Commanders, keep the past in a tangible form like books and magazines, whereas the oppressed class, Handmaids, keep it in intangible form like memories that most often come to the fore through Offred's flashbacks. The regime succeeds in destroying the past and banning literature, but it cannot efface human memories in the minds of the Gileadan populace. Unlike actions and deeds, thoughts are not a system that can be controlled. This may be why all the characters in Gilead exhibit disbelief in the new social order.

Yet even if no one is wholly devoted to the theocratic discourse, no one knows who will disclose whose unorthodoxy to the authorities and get him/ her detained. Rhonda Hammer describes this aspect of Gileadan discourse by arguing that the religious discourse "transforms every citizen into a sinner… liar and a hypocrite in order to exist within the system… this is a theocracy where not one person is devout and where such notions as faith and morality simply have no meaning."[42] Though every character pretends that they align with Gileadan discourse, in reality, they contravene the rules of the Gilead clandestinely to avoid punishment. Hence, the duplicity of characters towards the Gileadan discourse makes them sinners and liars. The Commander is the biggest sinner of all; as a founder of the Gileadan discourse, he should follow its principles in letter and spirit. Nevertheless, he keeps forbidden texts, meets his Handmaid secretly at night, which is prohibited by the law and takes her surreptitiously to an underground brothel where he and other Commanders drink and use prostitutes that work there. The existence of a brothel in the Gileadan state, which is based on higher morals and religious values, makes a mockery of the theocratic institutions of the Gilead. Giving details of women to Offred working in the brothel, the Commander describes: "Well, some of them are real pros … They couldn't be assimilated; anyway, most of them prefer it here … That one was a lawyer that one was in business, an executive position; some sort of fast-food chain or maybe it was hotels."[43] The brothel demonstrates the contradictory situation in the Gileadean discourse because it is supposed to eliminate prostitution from society. Surprisingly, the Commander denounces the existence of the prostitution system in the pre-Gileadan society by reasoning that this system had harmful effects on men. He claims that in the previous society, "sex was too easy; anyone could just buy it," and that made men "unable to feel."[44] However, he not only visits such places without any regret but also justifies it by claiming that "most of them prefer it here."[45] Hence, the Commander indirectly insults Gilead by underscoring that these women prefer to live their lives in the brothel rather than in the 'real' Gilead. In addition, the

[41] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 166.
[42] Rhonda Hammer, *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 3.
[43] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 294.
[44] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 221.
[45] Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 249.

women in the brothel used to be successful careerists in society ‘before’. Gilead reduces them to sex objects for the pleasures of the elite, who should uphold the religious values of Gilead.

Nick works incognito in the regime. He is an 'Eye' or, in Gileadan terminology, 'Eye of God,' who is disguised as a driver of the Commander. It is worth mentioning that 'Eyes' have second ranking in Gilead after the Commanders. He is not only supposed to comply with Gileadan principles by himself but is also supposed to ensure that others do so too. Surprisingly, he, too, does not seem to subscribe to the Gileadan discourse. He is the person with whom Offred has a secret sexual affair, which ultimately turns into an alliance. He rescues Offred from being arrested when Serena Joy discovers her illegal relationship with the Commander. Though Nick is an 'Eye,' at the same time, he is involved in a resistance movement that wants to subvert the theocratic regime. Moreover, he is complicit in assisting the Commander in violating the moral and ethical values of Gilead. Hence, the dual identity of all the characters demonstrates that not a single character in the text, except the Aunts, is genuinely devoted to the Gileadan discourse. The influential people in Gilead disrespect Gileadan values and use their power for personal satisfaction. Consequently, it can be argued that Gileadan discourse is no more than a way to oppress women and deny them power so that only men can have it.

Conclusion

Discourse is so permeated in social structures that the discursive practices in any society seem natural. All regressive discourses most often employ tacit ways to maintain unequal power relations in a society. They imbue themselves in common-sense assumptions that are implicit in conventions according to which ordinary people interact linguistically without conscious cognisance of it. Language as a means of communication is extensively employed as well as banned for the sustenance of specific discourses. When a specific language is imposed on society through a certain discourse, people are imprisoned within the linguistic walls of that discourse. In fact, every discourse shapes and moulds the imaginative as well as intellectual impulses of an individual. Once people are enslaved linguistically, their imaginative as well as intellectual skills are diminished, and they are converted into robots to an obsequious degree.

In addition, by including or excluding certain words in a certain society, the objective of a totalitarian regime is not only to create pseudo-realities but also to cut off people from their past that banned words embodied in them. When people are detached from their past, their source of strength that frames their identities in a dystopian society is gone. Once peoples' identities are destroyed, they are easily harmonised to the prevalent discourse, and they accept all oppressive practices of the regime as natural. For instance, the regime's step of censoring the words “job,” “romance,” and “freedom” in *The Handmaid's Tale* not only eliminates the concepts associated with them but also destroys the past when people experienced them.

Though the regime succeeds in erasing the past of people, banning books, banning reading and writing, its theocratic discourse completely fails to assimilate people in its discursive franchises. The reasons for this debacle can be traced to the discourse's embryonic stage, wherein past political discourse's memories are fresh in the minds of people. Thus, the memories of the past not only act as a stumbling block for the theocratic discourse but also reduce its discursive power to such that its exponents turn into opponents. It can be argued that any regressive discourse cannot be successfully permeated in the fabric of a society unless

people of that society are completely ignorant of any other discourses. On the one hand, the prevalent discourse entitles power holders to attain as well as retain power; on the other hand, this discourse relegates common people, in general, and women, in particular, to subsidiary positions. Rather than upholding the morality and sanctity of religious values, Gileadan discourse seems to be a systematic way of obtaining power and controlling people. If the Commanders of Gilead had belief in religious values, they would not have cheated on their wives and built illicit relationships with Handmaids; they would not have visited brothels for illegal sexual pleasures. Hence, it is evident that the totalitarian regime employs religious discourse in the text to manipulate people so that power can be obtained as well as retained.

Since *The Handmaid's Tale* is speculative fiction, its television adaptation is not an accident but an anticipation of the emergence of possible totalitarian regimes in the near future. Totalitarianism is openly functioning in the contemporary world (for example, North Korea), as well but in more nuanced ways. The need is to recognise the totalitarian propensities that are expeditiously flourishing underneath religious, racist and nationalistic ideologies in contemporary times. When totalitarianism is possible in the world, it can happen anywhere. Thus, it may be argued that totalitarianism is strategically poised to pose a serious threat to the fundamental rights and liberties of human beings. Thus, this article contends that *The Handmaid's Tale* has enormous significance, as it forewarns the world about the impending dangers of totalitarianism, that are likely to strike at any time if utmost care is not taken.