

Postcolonial Features in the Handmaid's Tale

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Abstract:

Postcolonial theory, traditionally applied to histories of empire and colonization, has increasingly been employed to examine power, domination, and resistance within speculative and dystopian narratives. The present study is an attempt to analyse in detail the postcolonial features which make their presence known in the famous novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. The paper puts forth the argument that the Republic of Gilead performs the function of a governance which works on internal level and replicates the typical imperial bases which include control, surveillance, and cultural erasure. With the help of an in depth textual and theoretical analysis, the study tries to explain how Gilead colonizes women's bodies, identities, and voices in such manners which are disturbingly similar to the domination present in the colonial rule, which in turn reduces them to mere products which are in absolute control of the state, instead of the human being. The paper foregrounds key postcolonial concepts such as othering, subaltern silencing, ideological control, and enforced homogeneity to reveal how patriarchal power in Gilead replicates colonial hierarchies. Language is manipulated to suppress dissent, history is selectively rewritten to legitimize authority, and women are renamed and reclassified, echoing colonial practices of cultural dispossession. The Handmaids occupy a position comparable to colonized subjects: stripped of agency, denied literacy, and subjected to reproductive exploitation under the guise of moral and religious justification. Furthermore, the novel's emphasis on resistance; through memory, storytelling, and fragmented narration, aligns with postcolonial strategies of reclaiming voice and identity. Offred's personal testimony operates as a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant ideological discourse of Gilead, illustrating how marginalized voices resist erasure even within oppressive systems. By situating *The Handmaid's Tale* within a postcolonial framework, this paper tries to diversify the scope of postcolonial criticism beyond the geographical imperialism, by analysing the result of the inclusion of factors like gendered colonisation as well as imperialism which is based on ideologies. The study ultimately argues that Atwood's dystopia serves as a cautionary allegory, exposing how colonial modes of domination can be reproduced within modern nation-states through authoritarian, patriarchal, and theocratic structures.

Keywords: Post colonialism, geographical imperialism, gendered colonisation.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has been read in innumerable critical registers: feminist dystopia, ecological parable, critique of authoritarianism, and cautionary tale about the fragility of civil liberties. Less frequently, but fruitfully, it can be read as a postcolonial text. At first glance, a novel set in

a rebuilt New England - the Republic of Gilead - may seem geographically and culturally far removed from canonical postcolonial concerns of empire, metropole and colony. Yet close reading reveals that Gilead enacts many of the central dynamics and discourses that postcolonial theory describes processes of othering, the control and commodification of bodies and resources, the construction and policing of identity, appropriation and rewriting of language and archive, and the production of “internal” colonies and histories of dispossession. This article argues that *The Handmaid’s Tale* stages a postcolonial drama: Gilead is not only a patriarchal theocracy but also a territorial, discursive, and symbolic empire that reinscribes colonial patterns of domination and resistance. Using key concepts from postcolonial theory - Orientalism, mimicry and hybridity, the subaltern, colonial archive and memory - this paper reads Atwood’s novel as a narrative that both reproduces and critiques imperial logics while offering complex (if ambivalent) strategies of survival and dissent.

Defining the postcolonial lens

Postcolonial criticism, broadly, analyses the cultural, political, and economic effects of imperial domination and the responses of colonized peoples. Foundational texts by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and others chart the ways in which empire produces knowledge about the colonized (Said’s Orientalism), instantiates ambivalent forms of imitation and resistance (Bhabha’s mimicry and hybridity), marginalizes certain voices (Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”), and psychically fractures colonized subjectivity (Fanon’s). In literary study, the postcolonial lens attends to language and representation, spatial orders (metropole/colony), institutional structures (legal, medical, missionary), and social hierarchies (race, gender, class) that mirror and sustain colonial power. While these theorists wrote primarily about European empires and colonized nations, their conceptual toolkit applies to any formation in which a centre exerts control over a periphery and where domination is legitimated through discourse, ritual, and bureaucracy. Applying this toolkit to Atwood yields a striking reading: Gilead operates like a settler/imperial formation within the former United States. It maps “colonial” spaces (the Colonies; Mayday’s exile-like underside), organizes labour and reproduction in racialized and gendered terms, rewrites legal and textual archives to create a legitimization myth, and produces degraded others to whom the society delegates pollution, punishment, and erasure. Importantly, the postcolonial frame allows critics to see how gendered violence in the novel intersects with structural forms of dispossession familiar from colonial histories.

Territoriality, internal colonies, and the geography of exclusion

One of the most direct postcolonial elements in Atwood’s novel is its imaginative geography. Gilead is a nation that surgically reorders the former United States: territories are renamed, borders policed, and spaces reclassified according to moral and functional hierarchies. The novel’s most explicit spatial metaphor for colonial exclusion is “the Colonies.” These are sites to which those deemed unfit-environmental dissidents, political undesirables, and racialized or immigrant labourers (implicitly)- are sent to work and die in toxic conditions. The Colonies function like imperial dumps: once the metropole has established its moral and demographic “purity,” it expels and externalizes its waste, literally and symbolically, to spaces designated as expendable. This internal colonization echoes the historical practice of metropolitan powers designating peripheral territories as sacrificial sites for extractive labour and toxic waste. The logic is twofold: the centre achieves moral and ecological cleanliness by externalizing contamination and by delegating manual, hazardous labour to a stigmatized underclass. The Colonies thus

mirror the racialized labour geographies of empire, in which colonized bodies are made to labour in lethal environments while metropolitan subjects remain ideologically untainted. Gilead's urban reordering also reproduces colonial map-making: old place names are erased or recast; the rebranding both enforces sovereignty and effaces prior histories. This is a discursive annexation of space that echoes colonial cartography: naming is an act of possession, and Gilead's renaming is part of the broader project of cultural colonization.

Language, archive, and the rewriting of history

A central instrument of imperial power is the production and control of knowledge. Said's account of Orientalism shows how knowledge about "the Other" is created to sustain domination; similarly, Gilead produces and polices narratives to naturalize its authority. Atwood's narrative demonstrates how language becomes an apparatus of control: biblical texts are selectively quoted and reinterpreted; legal language is appropriated to legitimize punitive practices; and everyday speech is regimented (e.g., greetings like "Blessed be the fruit") to signal allegiance. Gilead's manipulation of the archive underscores a postcolonial concern: colonizers do not merely seize territory; they reframe historical narratives to erase inconvenient truths and to inaugurate a founding myth. Atwood therefore destabilizes the idea of a single, authoritative history and invites readers to be sceptical of institutionalized "objectivity" - a scepticism central to postcolonial interventions that critique imperial archives.

Othring, racialization, and the silent subaltern

Although Atwood's novel focuses explicitly on gendered domination, it is attentive to other axes of exclusion that intersect with gender. One persistent critical observation is that *The Handmaid's Tale* tends to universalize "women" without fully grappling with race and coloniality; yet the novel itself contains hints of racial and ethnic hierarchies, if obliquely. The presence of the Colonies, the deportation of certain populations, and references to "foreigners" and "uncontrolled" groups imply a stratified social anatomy in which racialized others are marginalized. Offred's own ambiguous social position — she is not among the elite Commanders, nor among the handmaids' forced labourers in the Colonies - situates her between centre and periphery. Spivak's provocation "Can the Subaltern Speak?" - asks whether marginalized subjects can be heard within discourses that were constructed by their oppressors. In Atwood, many of the most grievously oppressed have no voice in the narrative. The Colonies' victims, for instance, are represented only through rumour and Offred's imagination; their silence is a form of erasure. Atwood thus models the problem Spivak describes: the subaltern's testimony is either appropriated or muted within dominant narratives. Where the novel departs from Spivak's bleak prognosis is in its persistence in allowing fragments, graffiti, and small utterances (like "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum") to surface as traces of resistance. These traces suggest that even where hegemonic discourse silences the subaltern, alternative forms of expression can survive in residual forms.

Mimicry, hybridity, and the ambivalence of imitation

Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry: the colonial subject's imitation of the colonizer that is never fully accurate and thus generates ambivalence - maps well onto the behavioural and ritual mimicry enforced in Gilead. The women are required to perform roles that replicate idealized patriarchal archetypes: Wives model domestic propriety, Marthas embody servility and housekeeping, and Handmaids enact reproductive utility. Yet these performances are unstable. Offred's interiority; her ironic distance,

contradictory recollections, and covert subversions; undercuts the surface mimicry. The repetition of ritual acts (prayers, greetings, ceremonies) thereby becomes a site of both appropriation and subversion: outward compliance can conceal inner dissent.

Bodies as territories: reproductive colonization

Atwood's novel centralizes the body as a contested site. Postcolonial critics have long argued that empire's first acts of domination are bodily: seizure of labour, sexual exploitation, and the imposition of reproductive regimes (legal, medical, or ritual). Gilead's institutionalization of reproduction - where fertile women are stripped of agency and designated as Handmaids assigned to Commanders- maps onto imperial strategies that colonize reproductive capacity. The Handmaid's body is a site of resource extraction; fertility is made a public good, its management justified as a patriotic or civilizational necessity.

The gendered colonial archive: memory, storytelling, and resistance

If empire governs space and bodies, it also governs memory. The systematic erasure of pre-Gilead information, the alteration of school curricula, and the policing of personal records are archival strategies intended to prevent dissent and sever citizens from historical consciousness. For postcolonial scholars who analyse imperial archives, such destruction of evidence is a familiar technique: it makes resistance more difficult by breaking continuity between past and present. Atwood's narrative, however, contains a paradoxical archival impulse: Offred's storytelling is itself a reclaiming of the lost archive. The act of telling - her narrative - is a recuperative practice that restores the tether between subjectivity and history.

Gendered colonialism and intersectional frames

There has frequently been an intersection of the contemporary postcolonial criticism with the critical insights involving feminist angle as well as intersectional point of view. The same is done to show how the processes of power and dominance work through multiple points of view. By looking at *The Handmaid's Tale* from the intersectional postcolonial point of view helps in showcasing how the dominance, which is there in the social structures inherent in the community from patriarchal point of view, intermingles with other sections like class, nationality, and race. The intentional targeting of the reproductive capabilities of the females by the existing regime is felt variously across almost all strata where the abodes of elite Commanders are considered protected; Handmaids are the intentional targets and victims of institutional violence; Marthas do the labour duties of domestic nature with partial autonomy which is well negotiated; Econowives occupy different liminal positions. Such kind of visible intersectionality's carry the echo of the colonial social hierarchies in which local intermediaries, collaborators, and elites mediate between imperial centres and subaltern populations.

The intersectional postcolonial readings of the text also aid in giving a proper explanation of the ethical complications and contradictions which are present in the novel. Resistance is not only gendered but classed and racialized: what counts as politically possible for an elite ally like the Commander differs from what a black or immigrant woman might attempt.

Conclusion

Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* through a postcolonial lens reveals the novel's latent and explicit engagements with empire's logics. Gilead operates as a territorial and discursive colonial formation: it names and remakes space, rewrites archives, disciplines bodies, and produces internal colonies. Atwood's

text is attentive to the processes of othering and institutionalized erasure that characterize imperial histories. Simultaneously, the novel's gaps - especially around race - complicate its status as a comprehensive postcolonial indictment. Rather than seeing this limitation as a disqualifying flaw, critics can treat it as an opportunity: the novel points to patterns of domination while also exposing the critical work yet to be done in attending to intersecting forms of marginalization. Most importantly, Atwood stages the precariousness of subjectivity under totalizing rule while offering modest models of resistance. Offred's narrative is itself an archival act - a postcolonial testimony that insists upon memory and expression in the face of institutionalized forgetting. Atwood's dystopia, in short, is both a mirror of colonial mechanisms and a provocation to think historically and ethically about the intersections of patriarchy, imperialism, and the politics of memory.

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