

# Symbolism of Red in Margaret Atwood's Feminist Dystopian Novel 'The Handmaid's Tale'

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## Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* features a dystopian society where women's bodies, identities, and freedoms are regulated by a rigid patriarchal theocracy due to the scarcity of fertile women. Among the novel's recurring motifs and symbolisms, the colour red emerges as a reflection of reproductive politics and the control of female autonomy. This paper examines the significance of red in the narrative, arguing that the colour functions as both a visual marker of oppression and a layered symbol associated with fertility, sexuality, blood, and sin. Through close reading of key moments in the text, the paper explores how the colour becomes a site where themes of power, discipline, and gendered control converge. The study finds that red operates as a complex narrative device that exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchal authority regulates women's bodies while also revealing subtle traces of resistance within the dystopian system. Ultimately, the symbolism of red strengthens Atwood's critique of institutionalized gender oppression and reproductive control.

**Keywords:** Feminist dystopia, colour symbolism, reproductive control, patriarchy.

## Introduction

Colours carry cultural memory (Dzulkifli and Mustafar). They travel through religions, myths, politics, and literature like quiet signals that societies learn to read. Among them, red, as a loud colour, stands out like a burning emblem that refuses to fade. Across civilizations, the colour red has been associated with powerful symbols that sometimes get contradictory. Historically, red has symbolized life, vitality, courage, sacrifice, sexuality, sin, and danger (Kaskatayeva et al., 7). Because it resembles blood and fire, it has long been connected with both life-giving and destructive forces in human culture. Studies on colour symbolism show that red frequently represents power, authority, and high status across societies, while also evoking strong emotional and psychological responses in human perception (Mentzel et al.; Buechner et al.).

In many cultures, red is used in rituals of celebration and prosperity (Kawai et al. 705), while in others it marks war, martyrdom, or sacrifice (Chen et al. 11). Such layered meanings demonstrate that the colour red functions not merely as a visual element but as a cultural symbol shaped by historical and social contexts.

The symbolic richness of red has also made it one of the most frequently employed colours in literature. In literary traditions, red has commonly represented passion, violence, love, sin, and transgression. The

Lupercalia festival, referenced in *Julius Caesar* (Shakespeare 1.2.6–9), involved the sacrifice of goats and a dog, after which priests performed fertility rituals, including touching participants with sacrificial blood and striking women with strips of goat hide to promote fertility (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) famously uses the scarlet "A" to signify sin, guilt, and social stigma, transforming colour into a powerful moral marker (Li). Similarly, in many poetic and narrative works, red evokes intense human emotions such as desire, rage, or fear, allowing authors to communicate psychological states through visual imagery.

These symbolic possibilities become particularly significant in dystopian literature, where visual markers often regulate identity and social hierarchy. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood presents a totalitarian theocratic state called Gilead, where women are stripped of autonomy and categorised according to reproductive function. (Vinoth. and Vijayakumar 49) In this rigid social structure, colour becomes a mechanism of surveillance and classification. Fertile women, known as Handmaids, are forced to wear red garments and white bonnets, visually marking them as reproductive vessels within the regime (Atwood et al. 35). Other groups of women are similarly coded through colour, such as the Wives who wear blue and the Marthas who wear green. The red attire of the Handmaids is particularly significant because it simultaneously signifies fertility, menstrual blood, sexuality, and sin (Selva and Martínez-Guillem 90). The colour therefore, reflects both the biological function imposed upon them and the moral stigma attached to their bodies. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* meticulously employs the color red not merely as a descriptive element but as a profoundly symbolic device, central to the narrative's exploration of power dynamics, female subjugation, and societal control within the Republic of Gilead. Specifically, the pervasive use of red in the Handmaids' uniforms serves to visually demarcate their reproductive function and simultaneously functions as a constant reminder of their reduced status within the theocratic regime (O'Neill 2). This visual coding extends beyond mere identification, embedding complex layers of socio-political meaning within Gilead's rigid biopolitics, where fertility dictates assigned gender roles and hierarchical classification (Kümbet 4). The mandated red attire for Handmaids not only signifies their reproductive capacity but also paradoxically renders them highly visible targets for surveillance, reflecting Gilead's overt control over female bodies and their biological processes (Korea and Yang). This chromatic assignment further symbolizes a forced sacrifice for the perceived common good of Gilead, echoing biblical interpretations of sacrifice (Степанова and Zhukovych 150). The Handmaids' scarlet garments, therefore, operate as a visual metonym for their subjugated existence, delineating their reproductive utility while simultaneously stripping them of individual identity (Nannini; Kaličanin 58). The color red, in this context, embodies a dual semiotic function: it overtly marks the Handmaids as fertile vessels for procreation, yet it simultaneously signals their profound disempowerment, stripping them of agency and reducing them to their biological function.

This paper examines the symbolic significance of red in *The Handmaid's Tale*, arguing that the colour operates as a visual language through which patriarchal power regulates women's bodies and identities. Employing qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the study draws upon feminist literary criticism and dystopian theory to interpret the ideological implications of colour symbolism in the novel. By analysing key passages where red imagery appears, the paper explores how Atwood transforms a culturally loaded colour into a political symbol of reproductive control, surveillance, and resistance. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that the colour red functions not merely as costume or aesthetic detail but as a crucial narrative device that reveals the mechanisms of patriarchal domination embedded within the dystopian world of Gilead.

## Methodology

This qualitative study aims to explore the feminist themes in Margaret Atwood's acclaimed novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and examine their relevance to current political and social issues (Alwan). To achieve this, a multi-step approach will be adopted, encompassing close reading and critical examination of key passages where the color red is featured (Alwan). This rigorous textual analysis will be complemented by a theoretical framework drawing upon feminist literary criticism to dissect how the chromatic symbolism interacts with broader themes of gender, power, and resistance within the narrative (Poorghorban and Ghaderi; Rui).

Specifically, the analysis will consider how factors such as reproductive status, perceived purity, and social class intersect to modulate the experience of subjugation, even under the ostensibly uniform symbol of the red garment. The study will therefore examine the varied ways in which the color red, despite its prescribed meaning, becomes a mutable signifier within the narrative, capable of embodying both the oppressive mechanisms of Gilead and the latent potential for subversive agency among the Handmaids.

## Literature Review

Scholarly interpretations frequently emphasize how the Handmaids' red attire functions as a vehicle for ideological polarization, marking them as an outgroup while simultaneously highlighting their perceived necessity for societal continuity (Al-Furaiji et al. 1177). This visual coding underscores the paradoxical nature of their existence, wherein their biological imperative for procreation is simultaneously celebrated as vital for the Gilead regime and condemned as a source of their subjugation (Vinoth and Vijayakumar 2708). The color red thus becomes an international protest symbol, as modern activists frequently adopt the Handmaid's uniform to challenge reproductive rights infringements (Carrola 90). Furthermore, this pervasive visual motif extends beyond the fictional realm, serving as a potent emblem of resistance against real-world attempts to control female reproductive autonomy and bodily integrity. This reappropriation of the Handmaid's uniform in contemporary activism underscores the enduring power of Atwood's dystopian vision as a critical lens through which to examine and resist patriarchal systems of control (Der-Ohannesian 5). This resonance highlights the novel's prescient exploration of how color can be instrumentalized to enforce social stratification and control, particularly over female bodies and their reproductive capabilities (Casibual; Korea and Yang). In essence, the color red transcends a mere descriptor within Gilead, evolving into a complex signifier that encapsulates the Handmaids' enforced identity, their reproductive burden, and the enduring potential for global protest against such oppression. This review will further examine how the semiotics of red are interwoven with themes of power dynamics, drawing on Foucault's insights into the fluid nature of power and resistance to analyze how this color, while imposed as a tool of control, also becomes a site for subtle acts of subversion (Hussainy). Such analysis will consider how the seemingly monolithic control exerted by Gilead is perforated by instances where the Handmaids, despite their visually enforced uniformity, articulate forms of dissent through their embodied experience of the color. Therefore, this paper will delve into the nuances of how the Handmaids appropriate and reinterpret the assigned symbolism of red, transforming it from a mark of subjugation into a subtle but potent visual language of defiance and solidarity within the confines of Gilead.

## Results

The primary findings indicate that the ubiquitous presence of the color red within the Gileadean society, particularly in the Handmaids' attire, functions as a powerful, multi-faceted symbol that simultaneously

denotes their enforced fertility, sexual commodification, and political subjugation. Furthermore, the prescribed scarlet garments serve as a constant visual reminder of their reproductive role within the patriarchal system, highlighting the intersection of gender and power in the dystopian state (Vinoth and Vijayakumar 2705). This symbolic deployment of color establishes a hierarchical structure that categorizes and controls women, thereby solidifying the ideological motivations behind Gilead's social stratification (Dadhich et al.). The pervasive use of red also operates as a mechanism for dehumanization, reducing the Handmaids to their biological function and stripping them of individual identity through enforced uniformity (Al-Furaiji et al. 1177). The societal imposition of this specific hue creates a stark visual dichotomy between the Handmaids and other social groups, further emphasizing their marginalized status within Gilead's rigid societal structure (JUNAID 119). This visual coding underscores the paradoxical nature of their existence, wherein their biological imperative for procreation is simultaneously celebrated as vital for the Gilead regime and condemned as a source of their subjugation. This visual rhetoric not only delineates social roles but also actively participates in the construction of Gilead's totalitarian discourse by reinforcing gendered power dynamics and the subjugation of women (Hussein and Kadhim). The deliberate aesthetic choice of red for the Handmaids' attire thus encapsulates a complex interplay of visual semiotics, functioning as a constant, coercive reminder of their reproductive utility and the pervasive ideological control wielded by the Gileadean regime. Indeed, the linguistic analysis reveals how Atwood employs discursive strategies such as vagueness and ideological polarization, often utilizing negative adjectives, to further emphasize the Handmaids' diminished status and the regime's oppressive ideology (Naji and Abbas 411). Beyond merely signifying their reduced status, this pervasive red functions as a constant, inescapable visual cue, reinforcing their invisibility as individuals while simultaneously making them hyper-visible as reproductive vessels, unable to escape the omnipresent gaze of Gilead's authoritarian system (Driss 117; Agudo 28). This forced identity, symbolized by the red uniform, contributes to the dehumanization of the Handmaids, reducing them to mere instruments of sexual reproduction for the ruling class (Omar and Alanazi 379). Conversely, the wives of commanders wear blue, signifying purity and evoking the Virgin Mary, while other lower-ranking women don muted or striped clothing (Schmitt 68). This strict sartorial stratification visually reinforces Gilead's rigid social hierarchy, wherein color coding dictates social roles and systematically strips women of their individuality, rendering them replaceable objects within the state's functionalist paradigm (Machala 188). This deliberate and pervasive use of color within Gilead's sartorial regulations acts as a potent instrument of social control, subtly dictating behavior and reinforcing the subjugation of women through an overt semiotics of dress (Selva and Martínez-Guillem 90). For instance, the Handmaids, tasked solely with reproduction, are uniformly clad in red, signifying their fertility and subservience to the Commanders, whose wives wear blue to denote their elevated, albeit still subservient, status. The enforced uniformity of these colored garments not only serves as a constant visual reminder of their assigned roles but also suppresses individual expression, thereby eroding personal identity and fostering a collective, albeit coerced, compliance within the oppressive regime. This strict chromatic coding, therefore, functions as a powerful mechanism for social engineering, maintaining order through constant visual reinforcement of Gilead's hierarchical structure and the subjugation of women. This symbolic stripping of identity is further emphasized by the regime's control over their names, demonstrating how personal autonomy is systematically dismantled (Vinoth. and Vijayakumar 48). For instance, Handmaids are renamed with patronyms like "Offred" or "Ofglen," effectively erasing their former identities and marking them as property of their assigned Commanders (Vinoth and Vijayakumar). This re-naming convention, coupled

with the distinctive red attire, creates a dual mechanism of depersonalization, solidifying their reduction to reproductive instruments within the Gileadean system (Kamini and Komal). Moreover, the color red is not merely a marker of status but a performative symbol, enacted by the Handmaids themselves through their enforced silence in public demonstrations, which aligns with their subservient representation within the narrative (Carrola 98).

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