However far fetched it may seem, Margaret Atwood's not so distant dystopian society of Gilead in The Handmaid's Tale paints a scarily real picture for the reader. A picture of a woman much like any other in present day society - a daughter, a mother, a friend, a worker, a person with a job, and how she loses this freedom to continue her life as she knows it. It seems that this loss of control came all too easily with little resistance from her and other women, and now is entrenched so deeply she cannot escape it. 

Madonna Miner argues: "Most readings of The Handmaid's Tale approach the text, quite rightly, as a dystopic novel, a cautionary vision of what might happen if certain attitudes are carried to extremes" (1991, p.149). These attitudes are not only those attitudes of religious and political radicalism that take over the future American society which becomes known as Gilead, but more importantly, the attitudes towards women's role in this new society, that of dehumanized baby machines who are not allowed identities as women. The society takes away women's ability to communicate and choose as individuals and members of the society, and instead turns them into vessels of reproduction, taking away their names, and outlawing reading, writing, and the freedom to even think and speak. Stein states that The Handmaid's Tale 'participates in the current theoretical debate about women's voices in the whole of society' and therefore 'the narrative is constructed and threatened by political repression, interpretation, and the fundamental instability of language itself' (1992, p.270). The Handmaid's Tale explores the connection between a state's repression of its subjects and its perversion of language. Language becomes a tool of power used by the institution to oppress and control women. Gilead maintains its control over women's bodies by maintaining control over their names and their language. Offred, the 'author' of the narrative, proclaims her right to individuality by constructing a narrative of language that undermines the validity of the language of the society around her. The cautionary vision that Miner refers to, then, for women today, is to warn them that they need to take heed and fight against such complacent attitudes, which allow women's power and individuality to be stripped, their language to be taken away, and to keep using their voice and language against oppressive ways of speaking, behaving and communicating; not to become complacent with the supposed freedoms of 'choice' that they enjoy today. The Handmaid's Tale implores ordinary women to ask themselves, how far am I, as an 'individual' living in today's 'free' society, away from being a Handmaid, a Martha, or a Commander's Wife?

To answer this question, it is first necessary to ask another question. Adrienne Rich, a feminist theorist, asks: 'Where, when and under what conditions have we related to discourse? The narrative is constructed and threatened by political repression, interpretation, and the fundamental instability of language itself' (p.638). Rich feels that women need to locate a 'ground' from which to speak with authority as women, seeing as all external politics are given from society's dominant hegemony, which is usually constructed as patriarchal. Women must first discern this view as a construct, and then make the choice to challenge it from the point of view as a person in this society (1998, p.638). Rich, therefore, asks women to go back to the only location that is truly woman, that isn't influenced by the outside, the body. She urges women "to reconnect thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman" (1998, p.538). In Gilead, Rich's notion becomes almost impossible. Women's bodies are used as political instruments and women are biologically controlled and used for their reproductive capabilities. The society of Gilead uses language to take away women's power by instituting a political regime based on readings from the Bible. In this regime, no woman can hold a job, reading and writing are taboo and even words on signs are outlawed. Women's names are also taken away, the new name given being a patronym of whatever male they have been 'assigned' to serve as a reproductive agent. Gilead seeks to deprive women of their individuality and the society does this by controlling women through language. David Hogsette states that the notion of people being socially constructed 'subjects' is based on the assumption that the person has the opportunity to be involved in social discourse and the power to choose (1997, p.262). The way we speak, think, and act are all individual qualities that are given from the society and culture that we grew up and exist in. This society and culture, then, dictates the treatment and even the extent to which women see themselves and each other in relation to the society (1997, p.262). Hogsette further argues that in The Handmaid's Tale, women do not have this power to be involved in social discourse at all, nor are they given the power to choose. Instead they are denied the opportunity to read write and discern their own thoughts and feelings, and therefore they do not have the means to argue against society's construction of them or to create their own subjective reality (1997, p.262). Hogsette believes that in The Handmaid's Tale, Offred reconstructs her subjectivity, her 'self', and articulates her own alternative perception of reality by becoming the author of the narrative (1997, p.262).

The Handmaid's Tale addresses this subjection of women through Offred as the 'author' of the narrative. She uses the narrative for self-empowerment, as her voice in a society where she does not have one. She attempts to create a 'self' through language, her own language, because her 'self' and her 'subjectivity', as located in the female body, has been deconstructed by the external oppressive society and her body has been taken away from her. She is biologically controlled by the state, and her 'self', and hence her subjectivity do not belong to her anymore. She is stripped of not only her individuality but also her 'choice' to argue against society's construct of her. Paradoxically, memory of the past and a sense of a 'self' in that past, is still the only thing that can truly belong to her anymore and offers her a position from which she can speak with authority as a woman, when everything around her is constructed to both strip her of her 'self' and society. Feuer asserts that Offred realizes that the next generation of Handmaids will be more 'docile' because they will have no memories of other possibilities, their pasts having been rewritten, and their individual pasts spent in Gilead without alternatives (1997, p.85). Feuer goes on to note that to 'forget a past of choices is to be enchained in the present' (1997, p.85). Therefore, women raised from birth in Gilead will not know they are being oppressed because their lives have been constructed in the society, and therefore they will not have the language to speak out, as the first wave of Handmaid's do, against this construct of them, nor will they realize a subjective self, separate from the state. Offred's tale fits from past to present, and uses her language from this past ambiguously, playing with words, to rebel against the society and create connections for the reader in this rebellion. Andriano asserts that as Gilead constructs a text, Offred constructs a counter text to undermine it by playing with words and their context (1992, p.91). He goes on to say that Biblical fundamentalism, such as the society is based on, is not based on 'words' but on the 'Word' also known as 'The Bible'. The Bible may be interpreted any which way that society sees fit – the 'word' has only one meaning as far as this society of Gilead is concerned, and this is its justification for this society (1992 p.91). Andriano goes further to say that Offred is constantly playing with words and bringing up the multiple meanings to the reader in the 'interpretation' by showing that there are multiple interpretations in everything (1992, p.90). For example, she connects the book of 'Job', with a dog 'doing a job' on the carpet. (p.73); and the word 'habit' is used in the context of her dress, the dress of a nun, and as something that is 'hard to break' (p.34). Offred describes this word play as one of the many 'tactics' she goes through to 'compose' her 'self' (p.110). Andriano further states that it is in this way in the narrative that Offred attempts to stop the decomposition of her self and instead rebuild it, to keep her individuality from being erased. (1992, p.91)

Because the dystopia that Atwood creates does not allow women to function with speech and writing, Karen Stein also argues that Offred finds solace in her plays on words inside her head, using them to compose her 'self' and create connections for the reader in this rebellion. Andreano asserts that as Gilead constructs a text, Offred constructs a counter text to undermine it by playing with words and their context (1992, p.91). He goes on to say that Biblical fundamentalism, such as the society is based on, is not based on 'words' but on the 'Word' also known as 'The Bible'. The Bible may be interpreted any which way that society sees fit – the 'word' has only one meaning as far as this society of Gilead is concerned, and this is its justification for this society (1992 p.91). Andriano goes further to say that Offred is constantly playing with words and bringing up the multiple meanings to the reader in the 'interpretation' by showing that there are multiple interpretations in everything (1992, p.90). For example, she connects the book of 'Job', with a dog 'doing a job' on the carpet. (p.73); and the word 'habit' is used in the context of her dress, the dress of a nun, and as something that is 'hard to break' (p.34). Offred describes this word play as one of the many 'tactics' she goes through to 'compose' her 'self' (p.110). Andriano further states that it is in this way in the narrative that Offred attempts to stop the decomposition of her self and instead rebuild it, to keep her individuality from being erased. (1992, p.91)

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together. Another such example is Offred talking about the word ‘household’:

Household: that is what we are. The commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow (p.91).

Her use of such plays, using the word ‘hollow’ and ‘death’ and then informing the reader that there ‘is no connection’, show that whilst she is oppressed by the use of words and language in their present context as they are presented to her, she can also use them to rebel against the system that oppresses her by changing them around and rendering them with multiple interpretations, making them meaningless. This is also evidenced in her ‘forbidden’ scrabble games with the Commander. On the first night of the scrabble game, Offred spells ‘larynx’, which means ‘voice’. By playing with the words, Offred allows the reader to play with them in the context of Offred’s tale, in the context of the dystopia, and in the context of a cautionary tale of what might happen if language and the freedom with which to use it are oppressed. By making the language have different meanings to that of the established society, it makes the words in this society ‘meaningless’ because they are allowed to have so many different interpretations, and it is in this way that Offred undermines some of the power that society has by highlighting the fact that the world of Gilead only takes one form of interpretation of the Bible and bases their society around it.

Colour coded in red, Handmaids are supposed to be invisible, interchangeable and have no individuality. They are even forbidden to acknowledge their names, and, as names are erased, so is the Handmaid’s discourse - no writing, no speech, and no language. Andriano asserts that names and words are Offred’s only weapons against the state. As the state attempts to erase her identity by renaming her, she reasserts it by slipping her real name in the end of the first chapter (1992, p.90). Ketterer states that all of the women whose names are listed are accounted for throughout the course of the text, except ‘June’, and attentive readers are the only ones that catch this (p.215). Andriano also states that one’s own name is the thing that creates a sense of self and individuality (1992, p.91) and that Offred accepts her new ‘name’, but keeps her old name hidden in text for readers to find (1992, p.89). Offred states:

My name isn’t Offred. I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. I tell myself it doesn’t matter. Your name is your telephone number, useful only to others; but I tell myself this is wrong. It does matter. I keep the knowledge of this other name, something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up one day. I think of the name as buried. This name has an aura around it. Like an amulet, some charm that survived from an unimaginably distant past (p.94).

That Offred’s name has some sort of ‘charm’ and ‘power’ to her shows that by taking away individuality, such as that of a name, someone’s power can also be taken away. Andriano muses that Offred keeps this name to herself, and reveals it to the reader in the very first chapter, hence again trying to use the reader to undermine Gilead’s society through her use of allusions in language (1992, p.89). The new name given to her, “Offred” is also perhaps a statement, that catch this (p.215). Andriano also states that one’s own name is the thing that creates a sense of self and individuality (1992, p.91) and that Offred accepts her new ‘name’, but keeps her old name hidden in text for readers to find (1992, p.89). Offred states:

Rich states that the body is the point of view, as located by women, as the ground with which to speak with authority on a number of different ‘politics’. Such ‘politics’ are: ‘The politics of reproduction and motherhood. The politics of orgasm. The politics of rape and incest, of abortion, birth control, forcible sterilization. Of prostitution and marital sex. Of what had been named sexual liberation. Of prescriptive heterosexuality (1998 p.638). All of these issues are taken on board in The Handmaid’s Tale. Because women are owned by the state and are living in the role constructed for them they are judged purely on their biological status as women, and the ‘politics’ that affect them as individuals are also controlled. This is important because, in her narrative, Offred connects her images and language of reproduction with images of castration, showing that she is disconnected from her body, and that she has lost the ‘voice’ from which she can speak with authority on this topic. This metaphorical assault on her reproductive system is evident. One particularly significant motif is using the imagery of tulips as the ‘fruiting body’ symbolising her reproductive capabilities:

I look at the one red smile. The red smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same, but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other (p.43).

Like she plays with the words earlier claiming there is ‘no connection’, here Offred does it again, claiming that ‘neither thing makes a comment on the other’. The tulips, then, become the imagery Offred uses to symbolize her position of being controlled biologically through her fertility, referring to flowers as ‘the genital organs’ of plants (p.92). That Offred uses these flowers as a symbol and then follows them with images of castration shows the exercising of power that others have on her biological body. The imagery of the shears cutting up female reproductive organs had come into play earlier, as Offred relates what they had been taught in the “Re-education center” (also notice the ‘red’ in the pronunciation of ‘re-ed’) from propaganda films that they had been shown:

Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out (p. 128).

Serena Joy becomes Offred’s castrator in the images conveyed of Serena Joy gardening, and cutting the tulips.

One day I came upon Serena Joy, kneeling on a cushion in the garden, her cane beside her on the grass. She was snipping off the seed pods with a pair of shears…She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis creeping up? Or some blitzreig, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body (p.161).

Karen Stein believes that not only have the handmaid’s lost control over their discourse, so have the women of the ruling class – Serena Joy was once a public speaker advocating women’s place in the home, and now that she has what she wanted, she has no power in the society (except over other women in the society), and can no longer speak (1992, p.262). This is the same with the Aunts as well – the women keep with the ruling hegemony that gives them small powers so that they can accept the role that they are playing in agreeing with the ideology and language that oppresses women.

Rich makes the statement: ‘Whenever people are struggling against subjection, the specific subjection of women, through our location in a female body, from now on, it has to be addressed’ (1997, p.268). Offred’s narrative then, critiques and addresses a patriarchy that denies women control of language and their bodies, denies them the opportunity to speak out against society’s construction of them, and which does not enable women to construct a subjective self in their own reality. By telling her story, and playing with language, Offred begins reconstructing her ‘self’ through her language, to undermine the social order that oppresses her. The Handmaid’s Tale’s message in a dystopic context is that no woman can afford not be vigilant and monitor the leaders of her culture, because usually the dominant culture is hierarchically designed to not benefit certain groups , and, if this culture is patriarchal, as most are, women’s interests will be
subverted to keep with the status quo of this patriarchy. Atwood’s novel is a disturbing look into a not so distant dystopian future, and causes women to ask how something such as this can happen, but realise also, just how easily it can.

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