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Language and Authority: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Power Structures in “The Hand’s maid Tale” by Margaret Atwood.

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Abstract

The current paper carries out a critical discourse analysis of the dominant language in Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale”, which are controlled by the themes of power, control, and abuse. The researcher will analyze the discourse in two different methods to convey the messages of this totalitarian and patriarchal society of Gilead. The data chosen for analysis is macro and micro. The macro is represented by long extracts from the novel and the situation it represents, while the micro is represented by quotes as part of the discourse said by main characters in the tale that reflects or underlines the themes of the narration. The aim of the study is to reveal how language serve as both a tool of oppression and means of resistance in “Handmaid’s Tale” through a detailed analysis of key dialogue, narrative techniques, and character interactions. However, the problem of the study is highlighted with the power of manipulation language might impose on the

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mass. This is evident in the findings underscore the significant linguistic strategies in shaping collective identities and resilience in fictional world and contemporary society.

Keywords: authority, resilience, CDA, women, social norms, patriarchy

اللغة والسلطة: تحليل نقدي للخطاب حول تراكم القوة في رواية "حكاية الخادمة" لمارغريت

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المستخلص

تتناول الورقة الحالية تحليلاً نقدياً للخطاب السائد في رواية "حكاية الخادمة" لمارغريت أوتود، والتي تسيطر عليها موضوعات القوة والسيطرة والإساءة. وسيقوم الباحث بتحليل الخطاب بطريقتين مختلفتين لنقل رسائل هذا المجتمع الشمولي الأبوي في مجتمع Gilead. البيانات المختارة للتحليل هي بيانات كلية وأخرى جزئية. الهدف من الدراسة هو الكشف عن كيفية استخدام اللغة كأداة للقمع ووسيلة للمقاومة في "حكاية الخادمة" من خلال تحليل مفصل للحوار الرئيسي وتقنيات السرد والتفاعلات الشخصية. من خلال تحليل مفصل للحوار الرئيسي وتقنيات السرد وتفاعلات الشخصيات، تفترض الدراسة أن اللغة تعمل كأداة للقمع ووسيلة للمقاومة. وتؤكد النتائج على الاستراتيجيات اللغوية المهمة في تشكيل الهويات الجماعية والمرونة في العالم الخيالي والمجتمع المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السلطة، المرونة، CDA، المرأة، المعايير الاجتماعية، النظام الأبوي

1. INTRODUCTION

In Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel "The Handmaid's Tale," power structures play a crucial role in shaping the society of Gilead. Exploring various forms of power at play within the novel and examining how they influence social norms, lives of the characters, and the functioning of the society as a whole- this process will be carried on through the analysis of the language and the structure used in the novel. By delving into the dynamics of power in "The Handmaid's Tale," we can gain valuable insights into the

nature of authority, control, and resistance in oppressive regimes and how language is the main tool to apply authority.

2. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Fairclough (2013) defines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between language and social power in various contexts. It seeks to understand how discourse shapes and is shaped by social structures, ideologies, and power dynamics. CDA suggests that language is not only a tool for communication but also a mean of social practice that can reinforce or challenge power relations.

According to Wodak and Meyer (2014) CDA involves a systematic analysis of texts, spoken or written, to uncover the underlying ideologies and power relations it conveys, it also emphasizes the importance of context, considering factors such as historical background, social practices, and institutional frameworks that influence discourse production and interpretation. This means that CDA aims to show the ways language is used in specific contexts, to reveal how discourse contributes to the maintenance or transformation of social inequalities.

2.1 Power Structures in Gilead

Gilead is a totalitarian society where power is concentrated in the hands of a few elite individuals, particularly the Commanders and the Aunts. The Commanders wield political and economic power, while the Aunts enforce strict social control over the Handmaids. Through a close reading of the novel, we can see how these power structures are maintained through mechanisms such as surveillance, indoctrination, and violence.

2.2 Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood, born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada, is a prominent writer, poet, and literary critic known for her multifaceted contributions to literature. Her works often explore themes of feminism, identity, and environmental issues, with notable titles including *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. Atwood's narrative style is characterized by complex storytelling and a deep engagement with mythological and historical contexts, reflecting her innovative approach to literature (Naydenova, 2024). Atwood's works, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, critique societal constraints on women, showcasing her commitment to feminist themes. Atwood employs multi-layered narratives that delve into human memory and identity, allowing characters to reflect on their pasts in a relatable manner (Anita, 2023). Moreover, Atwood's influence extends beyond literature as she has won numerous awards, including the Booker Prize, and her works have sparked significant discussions on gender and environmental issues (Kang & Duan, 2023).

2.3 The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale, a dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood, is set in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, where a theocratic regime enforces strict gender roles and religious doctrines. The narrative follows the life of Offred, a Handmaid whose sole purpose is to bear children for the ruling class. The novel explores themes of oppression, identity loss, and resistance, making it a poignant commentary on gender and power dynamics, where Gilead replaces the former United States, emerging from a coup due to

declining birth rates (Schäffer, 2024). Furthermore, this society is structured around a rigid class system, with women categorized based on fertility and adherence to the regime (Turki & Abdulrazzaq, 2023), that is, the regime employs a selective interpretation of biblical texts to justify the subjugation of women, stripping them of autonomy and identity (Reynolds, 2024). Thus, Handmaids, are reduced to their reproductive capabilities, highlighting the loss of individuality and the pervasive surveillance they endure (Omarova & Dzhigerova, 2024). Despite the oppressive environment, female characters exhibit acts of resistance, underscoring the novel's enduring relevance in discussions about gender equality and rights (Reynolds, 2024), the narrative serves as a cautionary tale against religious extremism and the dangers of patriarchal control.

2.4 The Genre of “The Handmaid’s Tale”

The genre of "The Handmaid's Tale" can be primarily classified as dystopian fiction, characterized by its exploration of themes such as gender oppression, totalitarianism, and the manipulation of religious narratives. This genre serves as a critical lens through which the societal implications of extreme patriarchal control are examined, particularly in the context of women's rights and reproductive autonomy even the narrative setting in the Republic of Gilead, represents a totalitarian regime that enforces strict gender roles and uses biblical texts to justify oppression (Reynolds, 2024). The series critiques the intersection of religion and gender, illustrating how religious extremism can lead to the subjugation of women, it also portrays acts of resistance by female characters, emphasizing the psychological and social impacts of such oppression as the narrative can also be interpreted through the katabasis trope, where Offred's journey reflects a descent into a dystopian future rather than a mythical underworld (Nešić & Kaličanin, 2023).

3. Framework of Analysis

Bezar et al. (2023) presents Fairclough’s three dimensional framework as an analysis tool that examines how language is used in texts to shape and maintain power dynamics in society. The strategy will be micro, that’s focusing on simple structures to analyze the language that uncovers the underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and social structure. Insights are gained on how language:

- 1- Stressing on the stability of beliefs and social norms
- 2- Shaping beliefs and social norms
- 3- Emphasizing weakness of women
- 4- Emphasizing resilience and resistance of women

Through these three concepts “The Handmaid’s Tale” will be analyzed showing all levels of discourse structures and the meaning it conveys as emphasized or de-emphasized. The macro analysis will be handled from extracts and large paragraphs from the narrative while the micro analysis will focus on words and phrases that shows these meanings and emphasis. This framework will be adopted test the paper’s hypothesis language in social context acts as the power of manipulation which manipulates the mass.

4. MODEL OF ANALYSIS

There are various linguistic features that Atwood resides for in highlighting the themes and meaning of power and control in “The Handmaid’s Tale” through which the analysis of the discourse will be carried out. Thus, the researcher will adopt the functional model of analysis that emphasizes the relationship between language and its social functions, and investigates how language reflects human cognition and conceptualization (Borjars, 2020).

1- Language of control:

The regime in Gilead uses restrictive language to limit freedom. Phrases like “Blessed be the fruit” and “Under His Eyes” are examples of how language is co-opted to reinforce theocratic ideologies. The repetition of these phrases creates a sense of constant surveillance and control. The language imposed on the crowd highlights how certain discourse can shape the way the crowd perceive things in a way of brainwashing the crowd.

2- Metaphors and Similes

Atwood employs metaphors to illustrate the oppression of women. For instance, Offred often compares her life to that of a “prisoner” or a “doll”, emphasizing her lack of agency and the infertility of women. This discourse implies the resilience of women towards the oppression of society.

3- Narrative Voice

The first-person narrative allows readers to experience Offred’s internal struggles, making her resistant to the regime’s power more poignant. Furthermore, her reflections on her past life, filled with vivid imagery and emotional language, highlight the stark contrast between her memories and her current existence. The narrative voice used as a powerful tool of identification for the reader suggesting a freer life that was snatched from the speaker.

4- Dichotomy of Language

The use of formal, bureaucratic language in the laws and announcements of Gilead contrasts sharply with the intimate, personal language used by Offred when she reflects on her experiences. Thus, this juxtaposition emphasizes the disconnect between the imposed order and the individual’s reality. Again, the discourse here is an implication to the resilience of women towards the imposed laws and their weak powers that are not able to change or rebel creating a constant inner struggle.

5- Symbolism and Irony:

The irony starts with the title and controls the whole tale as the term “handmaid” itself is concentrated irony, as it suggests a position of service while highlighting the suppression of women. This duality in language reflects the complexities of power dynamics in Gilead.

The analysis of language and authority in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the intricate power structures that govern the dystopian society of Gilead. Language serves as both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance, highlighting the dynamics of control and subjugation faced by women. The following sections explore the mechanisms of power, the role of language, and the acts of resistance within the narrative.

5.1 Mechanisms of Power

Gilead's regime employs language to enforce patriarchal control, reducing women to their reproductive roles through religious and ideological manipulation (Öykü, 2024). Surveillance and ritualized violence are utilized to maintain authority, creating an environment of fear and compliance (Zhao, 2020). Thus, language becomes a mean to control and shape the behaviors of the mass when used by authorities and , on the contrary, a mean to reveal weakness and attempts to be resilient when used by the handmaid.

5.2 Language as a Tool of Control

The state manipulates discourse to shape societal norms, reflecting Foucault's theories on power and language (Zanardi, 2021). Language is weaponized to suppress dissent, yet it also becomes a medium for resistance, as characters like Offred navigate their identities through subversive speech ("Reframing the Pillars of Power: The Incarnation of Language and Pleasure in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", 2022).

5.3 Acts of Resistance

Female characters engage in small acts of defiance, reclaiming autonomy and challenging the oppressive structures of Gilead (Öykü, 2024). The narrative illustrates that resistance persists even in totalitarian regimes, showcasing the resilience of the human spirit ("Reframing the Pillars of Power: The Incarnation of Language and Pleasure in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*", 2022).

While Atwood's portrayal of Gilead serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of authoritarianism, it also invites reflection on contemporary issues of gender inequality and the ongoing struggle for bodily autonomy. The interplay of language and power remains relevant in discussions of modern societal structures.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quotes reflecting weakness and resilience

Extract 1

"The Commander, last night, fingers together, looking at me as I sat rubbing oily lotion into my hands. Odd, I thought about asking him for a cigarette, but decided against it. I know enough not to ask for too much at once. I don't want him to think I'm using him. Also I don't want to interrupt him. Last night he had a drink, Scotch and water. He's taken to drinking in my presence, to unwind after the day, he says. I'm to gather he is under pressure. He never offers me any, though, and I don't ask: we both know what my body is for. When I kiss him goodnight, as if I mean it, his breath smells of alcohol, and I breathe it in like smoke. I admit I relish it, this lick of dissipation" (185).

The most evident example of power in "*The Handmaid's Tale*" is the Ceremony, where the Commanders assert their dominance over the Handmaids by ritualizing sexual intercourse. This ceremony serves to reinforce the subordinate position of the Handmaids and underline the Commanders' control over their bodies.

In this extract the **irony** relies in the fact that the handmaid thinks she might be using the commander while in fact, he is using her body all the time. Atwood uses **formal**

language like “relish”, “dissipation”, to ironically give value to a demeaning act that might be equally compared with rape nowadays. Moreover, when the handmaid says “as if I mean it”, this reflects her weakness by being unable to utter her true self. Her resilience is in secrecy, within her inner use of words.

On the other hand, not only in this extract, the smoke **symbolism** and the cigarette prevails the narrative. Smoke often represents the oppressive atmosphere of Gilead. It underscores the suffocating nature of the regime, indicating the loss of freedom and individuality. The haze of smoke reflects the pervasive surveillance and the threat of punishment that will be discussed in the following extract usually carried out by Aunt Lydia.

The ritual of the Ceremony, where Handmaids are forced to engage in sexual intercourse for procreation, is a stark example of ritualized violence. It dehumanizes women, reducing them to mere vessels for reproduction. The ritual is performed under the guise of religious duty, masking the brutality of the act and reinforcing patriarchal control over women's bodies. Again, religious duties are used as a mean to control the mass by fearing the creator, where ironically even the fear is manipulated and shifted towards those in power.

Extract 2

Another example is the character of Aunt Lydia, who uses a combination of fear tactics and propaganda to maintain discipline among the Handmaids. By controlling information and manipulating language, Aunt Lydia exerts power over the minds of the women under her supervision.

“I try to conjure, to raise my own spirits, from wherever they are. I need to remember what they look like. I try to hold them still behind my eyes, their faces, like pictures in an album. But they won't stay still for me, they move, there's a smile and it's gone, their features curl and bend as if the paper's burning, blackness eats them. A glimpse, a pale shimmer on the air; a glow, aurora, dance of electrons, then a face again, faces. But they fade, though I stretch out my arms towards them, they slip away from me, ghosts at daybreak. Back to wherever they are. Stay with me, I want to say. But they won't. It's my fault. I am forgetting too much... No longer kneeling at the foot of the bed, knees on the hard wood of the gym floor, Aunt Elizabeth standing by the double doors, arms folded, cattle prod hung on her belt, while Aunt Lydia strides along the rows of kneeling nightgowned women, hitting our backs or feet or bums or arms lightly, just a flick, a tap, with her wooden pointer if we slouch or slacken. She wanted our heads bowed just right, our toes together and pointed, our elbows at the proper angle. Part of her interest in this was aesthetic: she liked the look of the thing. She wanted us to look like something Anglo-Saxon, carved on a tomb; or Christmas cardangels, regimented in our robes of purity. But she knew too the spiritual value of bodily rigidity, of muscle strain: a little pain cleans out the mind, she'd say (Atwood: 173)... Love, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around here, girls. Wagging her finger at us. Love is not the point (Atwood:197).

This extract mirrors the act of trying to “raise my own spirits” and the references to faces suggest a struggle with identity and self-perception. Mirrors often symbolize self-reflection and truth, symbolizing the narrators internal conflict. On the other hand, the gym could symbolize a space of transformation or a former life, where freedom and physicality were possible. Its current state reflects the loss of autonomy and the change in

societal roles. The characters embody different aspects of female experience under a repressive regime, mainly represented by Aunt Lydia who enforces the repressive social norms. The language used in this extract reflects how women are objectified being carved or hushed- controlled in every way- to please those in authority.

The imagery is represented in phrases like, “pictures in an album” and “a face shimmer in the air” create vivid representations, evoking nostalgia and loss. Moreover, the simile in the comparison of faces invokes a sense of detachment, suggesting that the characters have become mere representations rather than fully realized individuals. The characters are portrayed as weak and controlled and their power to be resilient or face is not enough.

Extract 3

“But depend on it, there's something in it for him. Everyone's on the take, one way or another. Extra cigarettes? Extra freedoms, not allowed to the general run? Anyway, what can he prove? It's his word against the Commander's, unless he wants to head a posse. Kick in the door, and what did I tell you? Caught in the act, sinfully Scrabbling. Quick, eat those words. Maybe he just likes the satisfaction of knowing something secret. Of having something on me, as they used to say. It's the kind of power you can use only once.” (163)

The extract discusses the struggle for power and the futility of trying to assert oneself in a controlled environment. The commander’s existence signifies the hierarchal structure of the society. The phrase “what can he prove?” underscores the limitations put on individuals, especially women, in a patriarchal society. The rhetoric question: “But depend on it, there’s something in it for him.”, invites readers to speculate more and wonder about the real motives of the commander engaging the reader in the manipulative and distrust atmosphere of the novel. “Scrabbling” is a metaphor for the frantic desperate actions and the struggle in an oppressive system.

Extract 4

“t's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. lie fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. Then comes the moldy old Rachel anil Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high school cafeteria, eating porridge with cream and brown sugar. You're getting the best, you know, said Aunt Lydia. There's a war on, things are rationed. You are spoiled girls, she twinkled, as if rebuking a kitten. Naughty puss” (76).

The most evident language used here in mentioning ‘Adam’, as the metaphor represents a biblical allusion on the themes of creation, underscoring the expectations of women as bearers of life and this role being demeaned and controlled by the regime. The narrator’s reflection on their own existence hints at the tension between individual desires and societal expectations. By saying: “I am God’s seed”, the narrator personifies with the

abstract concepts emphasizing their role in the cycle of reproduction. The juxtaposition of childhood innocence with weight of adult responsibilities signifying the loss of freedom and the burdens placed on women.

Extract 5

"They were all there, the women in white, the men in black. I could see the gallows in the distance." (223).

Public executions serve as a means of enforcing authority through fear. The spectacle of violence is meant to deter dissent and establish the regime's dominance. The visible punishment of those who defy the laws reinforces the idea that rebellion will lead to death, ensuring a culture of obedience among the populace.

Quotes that reflecting power over the mass

The quotes below highlight the oppressive ideology and the manipulation of language and beliefs in the regime. Together, these quotes reveal how the regime in "The Handmaid's Tale" uses language, ideology, and the guise of religious morality to enforce control and suppress dissent.

1. "Blessed are the meek." (12)

This quote reflects the regime's use of religious language to promote submission and obedience among the populace. By elevating the meek, the rulers imply that passivity and compliance are virtuous, reinforcing the status quo and discouraging rebellion. The Aunts (specifically Aunt Lydia) often use this phrase to instill submissiveness in the Handmaids.

2. "Freedom, like everything else, is relative."(159)

This statement underscores the regime's manipulation of the concept of freedom. It suggests that freedom is not absolute but defined by the ruling elite. In Gilead, freedom is curtailed for many, but the rulers may consider their own power and privileges as a form of freedom, illustrating the hypocrisy of totalitarian governance. Offred reflects on this idea, expressing her understanding of the regime's manipulation of the concept of freedom.

3. "Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some." (211)

This quote reveals the inherent inequality within the regime's claims of improvement. It acknowledges that while certain groups (the elite) may benefit from changes, others (like the Handmaids) will suffer. This highlights the totalitarian regime's manipulation of progress to justify oppression and maintain control. This is a statement made by the character of the Commander, highlighting the regime's inherent inequalities.

4. "Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it." (32)

This statement emphasizes the deliberate choice to overlook the injustices and atrocities committed by the regime. It suggests that complicity requires effort, indicating that many in the society are aware of the oppression but choose to

remain silent or passive. This reflects the psychological manipulation employed by totalitarian regimes to maintain power. Offred reflects on this while contemplating the societal dynamics and the complicity of individuals in the regime.

5. "Blessed be the fruit." / "May the Lord open." (253)

These greetings reflect the strict societal roles assigned to women, emphasizing their primary function of reproduction. Ofglen announces this greeting to Offred after being brainwashed and reminded of their only purpose of existence rather than making friends on one another.

6. "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum." (259)

This Latin phrase translates to "Don't let the bastards grind you down." It serves as a form of resistance but also highlights how language can be subverted within a patriarchal context. Offred showing resistance to the enslavement of women preferring to shock herself to death and resisting to criminal thoughts to be relieved from misery.

7. "Women can't hold property." (159)

This statement underscores the institutionalized disenfranchisement of women, reflecting how language reinforces legal and social restrictions.

Quotes reflecting Surveillance: The Eyes

1. "The Eyes of God run over all the Earth." (172)

This phrase signifies the omnipresent surveillance of the regime. The "Eyes" symbolize the secret police, creating a climate of fear among citizens. The constant threat of being watched ensures compliance and discourages rebellion, reinforcing the power of the ruling authority. The symbolism here uncovers the devilish control of the regime and reflects a world of hell.

2. "Under His Eyes" (37) (256)

Ironically, this phrase is used as a farewell among characters, while it should refer to the protection of God, on the contrary, it serves as a reminder to every one of the constant surveillance by the regime. It manipulates social norms by instilling a sense of collective guilt and fear, making individuals police each other's behavior in alignment with the expectations of Gilead's oppressive structure.

7.CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the power structures depicted in "The Handmaid's Tale" shed light on the mechanisms through which authority is established and maintained in oppressive societies. By critically analyzing these power dynamics, literature can deepen the understanding of the complexities of domination, resistance, and agency in the face of totalitarianism. The insights gained from this analysis can inform discussions on governance, social control, and human rights in both fictional and real-world contexts. It is evident then that discourse can be used as a power to control and manipulate in social

contexts, implanting certain beliefs and threatening with aggressive consequences or punishments.

The figures of speech and the language analyzed emphasized the weakness of women in facing the patriarchal society -and the different ways of useless resilience and resistance women resides for replacing their belief in the almighty with their belief of fear. Language, thus, becomes a tool used by the dystopian society to shape beliefs and social norms manipulating citizens to comply to their rules.

Furthermore, themes of identity, memory, and the impact of a repressive society can as well be analyzed as the symbolism and the figurative language underscores the internal struggle of the narrator. This tale is a symbol for a world that suppresses its true innocent self to serve demeaning devilish schemes. The contrast between the past and the present in this tale is also significant as the roles of the women that highlights the broader commentary on gender and power in the novel.

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