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**The Language Of Naming, Silence, And Control: A Postmodern
Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis Of Handmaid'S Tale**



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Abstract

This study examines the discursive process of naming, silencing and control in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* by applying the Postmodern Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It draws on poststructuralist feminist ideas, such as Butler's notion of gender performativity and Foucault's theory of discourse and power, and is grounded in Norman Fairclough's model of CDA which has three dimensions: the social, the cultural, and the linguistic. The study uses a qualitative approach, examining certain textual excerpts from the novel based on the following aspects: naming practice, limited communication, religious discourse, surveillance language, and narrative resistance. The analysis is organized at three levels: Textual, Discursive and Social level, the goal being to reveal the way the linguistic decision processes reflect and perpetuate the power relations of patriarchy. The results show that naming is a technique of erasure and ownership, that silence is a technique of imposed control and an internalized technique of control, and that religious discourse is a technique of legitimation which seeks to naturalise gender oppression. Additionally, surveillance discourse fosters self-regulation and mental control, and the power of narration becomes a subtle weapon of insurrection against hegemonic forms of ideology. The study finds that use of language in *The Handmaid's Tale* is both oppressive and resistant, revealing an unstable nature of power and identity in a patriarchal system. The research also offers insights for feminist literary criticism and CDA by revealing the importance of the role of discourse in shaping gendered subjectivities and maintaining the ideological control and the possibility of the discursive to question and challenge oppressive structures.

Keywords: Postmodern Feminist CDA, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Discourse and Power, Gender Performativity, Naming and Silencing, Surveillance and Control through Language, Narrative Resistance.

Introduction

Language is not a neutral medium of communication, it is an important tool that is used to build, sustain, and contest the social realities. Language may be a tool of domination and control in patriarchal society, shaping gender roles, gender action and justifying gendered power differences. For years, feminist academics have pointed out that the use of language reinforces systems of oppression and oppressor silence gender hierarchies as normal and invisible (Cameron, 2003; Mills, 2008). Literary discourses are thus ripe for analysis in

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terms of the construction and maintenance of gendered power systems. One of the most important feminist dystopian works is Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The novel is set in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, where women are systematically denied their rights, identities and autonomy. Gilead makes women objects of reproduction and tools of patriarchal control; rigid social divisions, state controlled language and institutionalized silence are the means by which this is accomplished. The main character Offred finds herself in a world where language stands as an opposition and oppression to her. Her story of naming and silencing, of discursive controls and the enforcement of authoritarian power is the story of individual subjectivities. The themes of naming, silence and control play a major role in the novel. Handmaids lose their names, receiving instead a patronymic name – for instance, "Offred," which means that the Handmaid is owned by the male Commander "Offred." It is a linguistic practice which exemplifies a social construction of identity in a discourse and which shows the power of language as a subjugating instrument. At the same time, women are denied opportunities of free expression, of being able to read and write, and of participating in public life, which leaves them in a state of enforced silence, thus further marginalizing them. The restrictions are representative of the connection between discourse and power as established by the poststructuralist theorists, especially Michel Foucault (1972), who would state that power is exercised in the framework of knowledge and language. A postmodern feminist approach is especially relevant for the analysis of these matters since it is based on the notion that there is not a universal conception of womanhood and that gender identity is socially constructed. Postmodern feminism is concerned with the plurality of female experiences, and examines the way in which language creates gendered subjectivities (Butler, 1990). In this context, the book *The Handmaid's Tale* is a critique of patriarchy, a critique that focuses on how language creates bodies, identities and social relations. The study of these dynamics is best facilitated by the use of a methodology, critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA studies the connection among language, ideology and power and uncovers the way in which discourse is a factor in social inequality (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 2008). The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the function of naming practices, enforced silence and linguistic control in the novel in the construction and maintenance of the patriarchal authority by integrating CDA with postmodern feminist theory. The importance of this work can be seen from the point of view of feminist literary criticism and the study of discourse. Previous research has focused on *The Handmaid's Tale* as a text of oppression and resistance, and on gender in

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The Handmaid's Tale, but not as much attention has been paid to the interconnected roles of names, silences and control in the study, from a postmodern feminist CDA perspective. This research aims, therefore, to bridge this void by studying and discussing the discursive techniques that are employed to assert or challenge power in Atwood's dystopian story.

Literature Review

Gender and language have been one of the salient issues in feminist studies. Mainly feminist linguists argued that the language system mirrors the male point of view and that it is the male experiences which are privileged while women's experiences are de-legitimized (Lakoff, 1975). Language is not only a representation of reality, but a creation of reality and a power dynamic. Camden (2003) suggests that language is a language of the oppressing power that helps to sustain gender inequalities by limiting other points of view and by reinforcing dominant discourses.

It was taken to the extreme by poststructuralist feminist theories that emphasized the fluidity of the gender and their social nature of production. They do not consider gender as a biological given but as a category of discourse which is reiterated in social performances (Butler, 1990). So, language area is one of the significant areas of negotiation, contestation and regulation of identities. In literary studies, feminist discourse analysis has been used to analyse texts to identify the reinforcement or opposition to patriarchy. Literary narratives may often reveal the subtle mechanisms with which gendered power works, as Mills (2008) argues. This is particularly true in dystopian texts in which language can be frequently used as a political instrument.

Postmodern feminist was a response to the essentialist approach to women that emerged during other feminist movements. The view that identities do not have a natural or fixed character, but are formed through language, discourse, and social practices is another conviction of scholars such as Butler (1990), Kristeva (1986), and Irigaray (1985). However, Butler's theory of performativity is most applicable to the Handmaid's Tale as it allows for an understanding of identity formation. Butler (1990) argues that gender is created by repeated performances that enact the social expectations. Women in Gilead have certain functions and identities: Handmaids, Wives, Marthas and Aunts. The categories represent processes that are part of institutional discourse in the production and reproduction of gendered subjectivities.

There is a critique of universal narratives in Postmodern Feminism, one that is concerned with fragmentation, multiplicity and difference. This view is similar to Atwood's portrayal of women who are different based on their social roles.

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The novel's disintegration and reliance on personal testimony oppose the totalizing ideas of women's identity and highlight women's complexities.

Discourse Analysis and Ideology

The Critical Discourse Analysis is a study of how discourse is involved in the process of creating and maintaining social power. Fairclough (1989) regards discourse as social activity, as a component of a broader set of ideology and institutional arena. CDA aims at revealing the implicit ideas and power dynamics in linguistic representations. Van Dijk's (2008) attention of the importance of discourse as a dominant mechanism because it gives access to knowledge and communication is important. The dominant group develops an ideology, which is established as common sense and is legitimate to inequality. Authoritarian societies employ discourse to control their societies by setting rules for beliefs and behaviours.

CDA is also shaped by Foucault's (1972) concept of discourse that involves the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault's notion of power is grounded in a discursive regime that produces what can be said, who can say it and how the knowledge is produced. It is particularly true of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is the tale of a state controlling language, literacy and communication.

There's a strong sense of naming, identity, experience in the Handmaid's Tale. Naming and Identity in the Handmaid's Tale

One of the most apparent elements of discursive control in Atwood's novel is named. The scholars have noted that the Handmaids get their new names, which is actually a way to de-personalise the individual and to have the father's control over the woman's identity (Howells, 2006). Women are the property of men - their names are Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren etc., indicating MEN are proprietors of women. According to Bouson (1993), the anonymity of the names is indicative of other forms of dehumanisation and objectification. Renaming the state turns women into the resources for reproduction and not into subjects. It also reinforces the status hierarchy and the definition of women as linked to men is fixed. In postmodern feminist understandings, naming is a discursive process of the production of identities. Since names are not meaningful per se, they highlight the process of identity construction with language. The reminder of her old name is a gesture of defying imposed subjectivities and a reminder of a struggle that continues for self-definition.

The foundation for human rights, anti-imperialist struggle and liberation

The meaning of silence is a complex issue in feminist theory. Traditionally, women have been seen as silent, not as part of the public sphere of discussion and decision making (Spender, 1980). Women are typically silenced in

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patriarchal societies, and therefore are marginalized and invisible. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the duty of silence is legally imposed by restricting reading, writing and communication. Women's independent opinions are discouraged and they are under watch which restricts their freedom of expression. These are some examples of Foucault's (1977) 'disciplinary power'. Feminist scholars, however, also identify silence as a possible means of resistance. According to Jaworski (1993), silence also can be a strategic approach, allowing people to struggle against the dominant discourses without any direct confrontation. This is clearly seen in Offred's inner voice. She's silent on her lips, but not silent in her mind: she remembers, she tells, she thinks. Her narrative becomes a rebellion against the regime's control over meaning.

Language and Social Control in Dystopian Literature

Language is commonly seen as a weapon of political control in dystopian literature. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the use of language is an instrument to control thought and to achieve authoritarians rule. In like fashion, Atwood paints a picture of a society in which religion and ideology control social behavior. As Booker (1994) implies, dystopian works manifest the interplay of language and power by illustrating the impact of discourse on reality. In *Gilead*, Biblical language is used to legitimise oppression of women and control of reproduction. Ideological conformity is encouraged, dissent is discouraged with official slogans, rituals and greetings. Like much of the society, there is a control on language in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which can be a symptom of the other forms of control such as censorship, surveillance and ideological manipulation. Systems of control of language and of individual autonomy are attacked in the novel through portraying their effects. The novel condemns systems of control with their depiction, such as systems of linguistic control.

Research Gap

Although a number of studies have examined the issue of gender oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the issue of gender resistance and identity, relatively few studies have explored the interconnections of naming, silence and control in the framework of postmodern feminist theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Research on preexisting scholarship typically focuses on one or two aspects of the language or power as opposed to the other. The current scholarship generally concentrates on the parts of language and/or power without considering how the latter two are related to one another, in terms of the building of patriarchal authority. Hence in this study, the aim is to fill this gap by analyzing the discourse of this novel by applying postmodern feminist CDA approach.

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Methodology

The current research uses the qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) in a postmodern feminist perspective to analyze the linguistic construction of identity, power and gender relations in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). As it facilitates the analysis of the language, ideology and power relations in literary discourse, a qualitative approach is appropriate. From a theoretical perspective, the study is based on the Three-Dimensional Model of CDA (textual analysis, discursive practice and social practice) propounded by Norman Fairclough (1989), and on key concepts of postmodern feminist theory (Butler's theory of gender performativity, Foucault's theory of discourse-power relationship and poststructural theory of identity construction). These are supplementary methods to be able to analyze the role of language in the construction of gender identities, in the reinforcement of patriarchy and social behavior. The primary source of data is Atwood's book *The Handmaid's Tale* and the analysis will focus on passages and conversations, descriptions of the story, naming practices and moments of silence that reveal themes of identity, control, oppression, and resistance.

The purposive sampling is used to identify text segments that resonate with the research purposes, like references to naming, identity, instances of silence or limited communication, statements of institutional and/or ideological discourse, and stories of resistance and self-expression, are all identified in a qualitative content analysis. Excerpts are then selected and systematically categorized according to their thematic relevance and analyzed from a Fairclough's three dimensional framework. The linguistic clues to the idea of power and construction of identity will be sought at the textual level, through: word choice, naming conventions, the use of pronouns, the use of modality, repetition of phrases, the use of metaphors and narrative structures. The discursive level emphasizes the constructions, dissemination and understandings of Gilead's discourse, for example, as it is rhetorically manipulated by means of religion, as it is propagated by means of state propaganda, or as it is communicated through barriers. The findings of social practices are placed in a broader socio-cultural and ideological context to demonstrate the reenactment of the system of patriarchy, gender hierarchy and social control in discourse. Themes that are found are seen in a postmodern feminist point of view of subjectivity, identity and resistance. Interpretations are supported by direct evidence from the text and theoretical approaches, such as CDA, feminist linguistics, and postmodern feminist theory, to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis, and are triangulated. It is a study of a published text and not involving human participants so there are no

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anticipated ethical risks; all quotations, ideas and references are appropriately identified according to APA 7th edition guidelines.

Analysis and Discussion

Following is the detailed Analysis and discussion as per the theoretical framework and tool of Analysis grounded in the aforementioned cited literature.

"Naming" as a Discursive Strategy of Identity Erasure and Patriarchal Ownership

The first obvious case of the patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the renaming of women, particularly Handmaids, by their assigned Commanders. The protagonist's name, Offred simply means "Of Fred", meaning that it suggests something that's owned, not something that's individual, or autonomous. A naming practice which serves as a powerful discursive tool with the power to destroy individual stories and to create other stories which represent the state ideology. It is clear that Offred has lost her identity when she uses the words, "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, but it's forbidden" (Atwood, 1985). The word forbidden is in a language that can imply the power of Gilead's social structure; the use of one's original name is now forbidden under that structure. This process involves the individualized consciousness as well as the communication process itself being transformed through the system of language.

Using a text analysis, Fairclough can show how the possessive naming structure can help to objectify women as commodities rather than persons, whose value is defined by the women's ability to reproduce, not by the individual. These names are continually reproduced in institutional encounters, social rituals and everyday speech, thus maintaining the ideology of male ownership and female subordination. The naming system is a social practice in that it is a part of larger patriarchal practices, which in the historical context have given meaning to women in terms of their relationship to men. This practice is a good example of Butler's idea of the socially and linguistically constructed nature of identities from a postmodern feminist standpoint. The desire - and longing - for Offred's lost name represents resistance against the state's monopoly of identity construction. The results show that naming in the Gilead is an ideological instrument that helps to control the body, memory and subjectivity of women and normalizes gender oppression.

Silence as a Means of Oppression and Resistance

Silence appears to be another important discursive strategy that is used and sustained in Gilead as a way to exercise and maintain power. Women are systematically excluded from literacy, denied the freedom of communication,

and are constantly monitored, ultimate silence is enforced and internalized. This way, the protagonist is in character when she recalls how they learned to "whisper almost without sound" (Atwood, 1985). It implies that silence is not a natural response, but rather a learnt one, as the result of ongoing disciplinary practices. The verb "learned" refers to the normalisation of silence as an acceptable way to act and the phrase "without sound" highlights the extent of oppression of women and silence. In this textual analysis, silence can be analyzed as a linguistic absence that still is able to convey power relations and ideological constraints. At the communicative level, the interaction of women is highly monitored and regulated, and they can only express other opinions and organise collective resistance to some extent.

The state has a significant impact on discourse by deciding who can talk, what can be talked about, and when it is possible to talk. On a more social level, the fact that women are silenced is an indicator of the exclusion and marginalization of women's voices in political, educational and cultural sphere throughout history. But there's also a space of silence in the novel that's a space of resistance. Offred's monologue is the way she is able to hold onto memories, to challenge the authority, and to retain her sense of self. A Foucauldian perspective on silence is the way disciplinary power functions: individuals take responsibility for themselves, they master their behavior that they know will be monitored and disciplined. But silence, as a postmodern feminist discourse, does not simply represent oppression, it also becomes a strategic position when marginalized actors assert and contest the dominant discourses and narratives when negotiating identity. It is thus the novel's silence as a form of control and as a silent protest.

Religious Discourse and the Legitimation of Patriarchal Authority

A tool that is incredibly helpful to the Republic of Gilead in enforcing and maintaining gender oppression is the use of religious language. Women are continually supported by the Biblical scriptures to justify their subordination and to validate government of women as godly. Phrases such as "Blessed be the fruit" are everywhere in speech and are used to illustrate the fact that the purpose of a woman's life is to become a mother. The metaphor of the word fruit is used to denigrate women to mere parts and makes fertility their only attribute. The study of the texts shows how the frequent use of religious-sounding terms demonstrates how language can be a normalizing device for particular understandings and assumptions of the language that are taken to be truths. These are enacted at the discursive level in the form of ceremonies, education and social interactions, and spread throughout the society as dominant beliefs. Citizens take these discourses on board, and play an active

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role in reproducing them, with sometimes unaware oppressive meanings. From the social practice perspective, religious discourse occurs in a broader socio-political context wherein religion is deployed to legitimize gender inequalities and authoritarian rule. Foucault's analysis of the system of knowledge and power that is discourse is relevant here; not only can it be said, but it cannot be said, and Gilead runs interpretation. The postmodern feminist theory also reveals that the regime's definition of womanhood is unique and crucial one which centres only on the issue of reproduction. The male/normal is Gilead's norm, its truths, and obliterates other identities, other readings of gender. The analysis demonstrates that religious language is not simply ideological, but also is working as an instrument of articulation and consolidation of the power of the fathers.

Surveillance, Language and the Internalization of Control

Among the other important things that we see in the discourse of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is the fact that there is a lot of surveillance—more than just looking at people, it's also about language control, and psychological control. The words such as "Under His Eye" are continually reminders that people are under scrutiny and being judged on an ideology being imposed by the state. This is a statement with a lot of meanings regarding authority and submission. If the person or object of surveillance is called by the title of "Eye", the nature of the figure changes and it becomes all encompassing and almost divine because it can't be escaped and observation is absolute. These expressions in Fairclough's deconstruction of the text exemplify how language enables the creation of a sense of normalcy for an authority by bringing in the process of monitoring into everyday discourse. As a discursive practice, citizens routinely exchange these greetings, thus reproducing disciplinary practices. Surveillance becomes embedded in everyday interactions and it is difficult to draw a line between a voluntary action and compliance.

The discourse of surveillance is also to be interpreted as a panoptic device on the macro social level, whereby individuals start monitoring and regulating themselves without being directly coerced. This can be understood from Foucault's theory of panopticism which states that the most effective power is when it is internalized in the power-ed themselves. Gilead women change their voices, behavior and attitudes because they feel like they are constantly being monitored. The internalisation of control, as a postmodern feminist construct, is a case in point of the creation of subjectivity and the restriction of options in expression through discourse. This is a novel that not only tells of surveillance as a political tool, but as a language and a psyche, as a means of maintaining and continuing the power of patriarchy.

Narrative Resistance and Reclaiming Identity through Language

Despite all these systems of control, it's evident that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a work of language that can also challenge oppressive systems and provide resistance. Offred's narrative is a discourse against discourse, a counter-discourse that contest the official constructions of reality and restores other modes of understanding reality. She creates fragments of herself by means of telling stories, memory, reflection, which the state attempts to wipe away. Her answer to them is an act of agency: 'I intend to survive,' which is very different from what is expected of Handmaids. The verb "intend" implies that she is determined, independent and does something with awareness that goes against the dominant discourse of the institution; she is aware of what she is doing and defies the institution to define her completely. In the world of the text these sayings have witnessed the constant presence of the individual subjectivity, even when it is being dominated. Offred's narrative is also a feminist criticism of the dominant ideology because from her point of view, she uncovers the flaws in the official Gilead rhetoric. Her narrative is an alternate form of knowledge production, where silenced experiences emerge. From the perspective of social practice, her story makes it clear that the systems of power are never fixed or final in nature, as individuals always interact, re-imagine, and challenge imposed identities. The postmodern feminist theory emphasizes multiple meanings and the mutability of identity, which will state that no discourse can fully determine human subjectivity. Offred's memories, her thinking, her telling of stories reveal how much the patriarchy system falls short of being controlled and the ability to resist. She is reclaiming agency and challenging regime ideology by recording individual experiences and alternate understandings. Language is, therefore, a tool of subjugation, and also a liberating, defining, and survival tool in the novel.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine the role of language in naming, silencing and controlling as introduced by the Postmodern Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CFAD), which were developed by Fairclough's three-dimensional model and the key poststructuralist feminist theories in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Results show that the discourse in Gilead is not just a means of communication but also a system of ideologically dominant structures that create and manage gendered subjectivities. Naming practices like renaming Handmaids (e.g., Offred) are a very strong linguistic tool for erasing individual identity and imposing ownership, which makes women into state-controlled bodies and their bodies become the state's means of production.

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Similarly, imposed silence is a real and symbolic form of oppression; women lack access to education, are unable to speak out, and must self-censor in an environment of constant surveillance. This control is further reinforced through religious discourse that normalizes the subordination of women, defers to patriarchy based on selective biblical interpretation, and the use of statements that are based on surveillance that add one definition of internalized discipline and psychological control, such as "Under His Eye". But the study reveals that there is also resistance, in the instability of language, as Offred's narrative, memory reconstruction and internal monologue demonstrate: Under extreme authoritarianism, identity can never be eradicated. By combining CDA with postmodern feminist theory, it becomes clear that power in Gilead is enacted in the discursive, the social and the textual at the same time, but never in isolation and, as there are other meanings and counter-narratives circulating in individual consciousness and lived experience, it is never final. The novel portrays the double nature of the language, as it can oppress, and as it can give life, expression, and disrupts ideology.

Recommendations

It is suggested that for the future, C.D.A can be extended to more dystopian and feminist literature works as it will provide more understandings regarding the construction of language to establish a system of gendered power in different cultural and ideological context. This comparison may provide more general understandings of the way the language is used in the control of the text in different genres and eras; it could also be compared to other dystopian texts such as Orwell's 1984 or modern feminist literature. Future research should be based on multimodal discourse analysis, as the visual and the auditory modes of discourse offer other layers of linguistic structure that either support or contradict the linguistic structures in the written text, particularly in analysis of adaptation in novel, film and television formats.

Moreover, there is an opportunity to add intersectional feminist approaches to the analysis in addition to postmodern feminist theory, to explore the intersections of race, class, and sexuality with gendered discourse and how these produce subjectivities in oppressive systems. Literary curricula should also incorporate perspectives of critical discourse into the study of dystopian literature to enable students to critically analyze how language constructs ideology, identity and power in fictional texts and in reality, from an educational point of view. Finally, the study suggests that it is imperative that the study of language as a tool of oppression and resistance be continued, as insight in such aspects is essential to understanding the workings of discourse

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in other socio-political situations than literature, such as in media, politics and institutional communication.

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