

Ideological Representation of Women's Oppression in *Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*– A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The abuse of women is an issue that persists throughout the ages till the present time because people are still living in a world of a dominated idea which is known as man is the self and woman is the other. So the objective of this research paper is to argue this global issue using Van Dijk's Ideological Square (1998) as a framework so as to examine the ideologies that underline the use of language in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is hypothesized that the ideology of oppression is exposed in the novel throughout using the ideological strategies of positive- self presentation and negative-other presentation. Ultimately, it concludes that the novelist employs both, male and female, characters to consistently ridicule and offer negative coverage about women and to increasingly align and offer favorable comments about men to present the world of patriarchy from a different perspective.

Key Words: Ideology, Critical Discourse Analysis, oppression, Van Dijk's ideological Square, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Type of Study: Research paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Discourse: is defined as a chunk that goes beyond the sentence, but this does not mean that all chunks of language can fall within the scope of this definition. In fact, larger units such as paragraphs, conversations and interviews all appear to come under the rubric of 'discourse' because they are in themselves entirely linguistic performances. (Schiffrin, 2006: 171).

1.1.1 Critical discourse analysis (Henceforth CDA): is defined as a method or perspective that “primarily studies the way social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by texts and talk in social and political context.”(Van Dijk, 2011 p: 466). Critical discourse analysts take clear positions in these

dissident studies, and they want to explain, reveal and eventually combat social injustice.

1.1.2 Aims of CDA and Literary Texts

CDA aims to uncover the hidden manipulation and deception of discourse which are imperceptible by readers. Thus, CDA transfers these into the critical consciousness and discovers how language is used for the interests of one group at the expense of another. This is quite obvious in the case of sexism where language is used for the interests of men against women (Fairclough 1992: 6).

Van Dijk (1983: 176) mentions that in analyzing any literary text, novel, novella, short story, and poem, four points should take into account. They are as follows:

- Who can tell
- To whom
- Under what circumstances
- How in particular culture, greetings, rituals or speech events are taking place.

It is understood that novels are one kind of discourses that must be studied critically using CDA as a tool of analysis.

1.1.3 The Concept of Ideology

It is one of the most fundamental and vital issues in studying CDA. Fairclough (1992: 87) understands ideologies to be Connotations and constructions of reality (physical world, social relations, social identities) developed into various aspects of the forms of discursive activities and leading to the creation, replication or transformation of dominance relations.

2. Literature Review

Oppression is a major theme in Atwood's novels and it can clearly be seen in her writings. She opposes women's inferior social status. Atwood's gender depictions expose women's abuse and oppression particularly the body of women. She depicts in her novels the pain of her female characters restricted to their feminine roles. Atwood establishes an oppressive world, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which she criticizes the role of oppression in daily culture. The stylistic writing methods used by Atwood help the reader describe the oppression in each character, and the narrator's inner thoughts expose the connection between individual oppression and group oppression.

Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the links between systematic oppression and internalized oppression by using short phrases in the narrator's inner monologue. The three kinds of oppression, individual, institutional, societal or cultural, are depicted in the chosen novel. (Jackson and Griffin, 2010: 87).

2.1 The Uniqueness of this Study

It is true that there are other researches on CDA of different kind of literature and political speeches, but no study has done before having CDA as a framework in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

3. Research Methodology

Research data can be quantitatively or qualitatively analyzed or both. Qualitative research is the collection; examination and interpretation of data through observation of what people do and say. It is much more subjective than quantitative research and employs very different methods of information gathering, primarily individual in-depth interviews and focus groups (Briggs, 2006:58). This form of this research is of an exploratory and open-ended nature.

3.1 Data Collection and the Model of Analysis

Since novels, short stories and poems are regarded as discourse (Cook, 1990: 96). So the data of present study is a novel named *The Handmaid's Tale*. The speeches of the main characters, namely, **Offred, the Commander, Aunt Lydia, and Serena Joy** are collected and used as data for the analysis.

3.2. Ideological Square

Ideological Square is one of the vital features of van Dijk's (1998:167) socio-cognitive approach. It is concerned with the strategies followed by different social groups to present themselves positively and to present others negatively.

Van Dijk (2000: 72) puts into words the four principles which permit subtle ideological analysis to express various ideological attitudes. They are clarified in emphasizing positive things about Us and negative things about Them. Moreover, de-emphasizing negative things about Us and positive things about Them.

The negative other-presentation indicates that no negative saying should be addressed to Us and no positive saying should be addressed to Them (ibid.). This means that in a social context, the term *Us* often points to positive terms and values, while the term *Them* refers to hostility, rejection, and other negative positions. The present study conducts these two strategies to reveal the ideology of oppression.

4. Data Analysis

The whole discourse by the narrator, **Offred**, manifests the ideology of women's oppression in such a patriarchal futuristic society as she emphasizes men' power and de-emphasize their weakness, emphasizes women's inability and de-emphasize their power to show the world the social status of women in a dystopian future where women are deprived of their own independence and forced to leave their jobs. More specifically, her discourse is narrated

in a way that makes little of women and mitigates their goods and raises men's position and mitigates their evils in an aim to present women's submission under the theocratic, patriarchal and tyrannical system.

The follow up extract which is said by the narrator shows her ideology of representing the system of polarization that is imposed by Gilead between women and men as in: *“Sterile, there is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law”* (P: 79). Here, the narrator sheds light upon Gilead's law which is constructed ideologically to show the positivity of the in-group (the masculine ruling elite) and the negativity of the out-group (feminine class). She emphasizes on the negative word 'sterile' which isn't ascribed to men even though it is a condition that may exist in man's body that will in turn obstructs offspring.

Offred, in her speech above, reveals the ideological structure of Gilead's law that views women (the out-group) negatively and men (the in- group) positively as woman is the main source of procreation and her futility will lead to global catastrophe, so it is stated officially that there are individual differences between women as some of them are barren and some are fruitful, but it exempts men from being the reason behind infertility and forbids any word that might offend male fertility. The racist distinction that is formulated in the law of this post-modern era (the Republic of Gilead) between men and women reflects the ideology of racism and patriarchy that dominate most constitutional laws in some contemporary countries, for instance, the Iraqi punishments law that legislates in 1969 and that which contains double- standard in dealing with the Iraqi human and emphasizes the patriarchy of the society. The punishment of the murder, which is done by the husband to his wife for committing adultery, is prison for three years ago. On the contrary, the punishment of the same murder for the same reason (adultery), but by the wife to her husband is either execution or prison for ever and this means that the Iraqi constitution gives the right for the husband to kill his prostituted wife for a humble and simple punishment while it doesn't give the wife this right, indeed this leads to discover the ideology of patriarchy that is still dominated in the Iraqi society. The dystopian society that is drawn by Atwood offers a new lens through which one can look at what kind of system surrounding her/him.

Aunt Lydia is one of the major female characters who play a vital role in establishing this tyrannical and oppressive system of Gilead in this novel. She keeps on insulting pre- Gileaden women and their former way of life as an out-group and praising the handmaids as an in-group being the needful resource for the sake of

surviving this new world. Thus, she states that independent and free women are the fundamental reason behind the plague of infertility. She describes them as sluts and dirty women so as to show their bad characteristics and their wrong way of life and after that she continues to describe the handmaids positively being an obedient women and law-abiding. In addition, she distinguishes the handmaids from other women by viewing them as special for having the boon that isn't owned by other women which discovers all in all her ideology of manipulation as in her speech below:

“They made such a mess of everything. They filled the air with chemicals and radiation and poison! So, God whipped up a special plague. The plague of infertility... as birthrates fell, they made things worse. They were dirty women. They were sluts. But you are special girls. Fertility is a gift given right from God.” (P: 98)

Aunt Lydia's discourse about the concept freedom is polarized into two kinds, the good one given by her in-group (the patriarchal regime) which is called *freedom from* and the bad one given by the out-group (the former policies) which is called *freedom to*. Actually, the concept of freedom is skillfully manipulated as she transforms one's correct meaning with the other meaning. The difference lies in the meaning of these two kinds from the dominated group's point of view, the first one (freedom from) is interpreted to mean security, protection, women cannot be raped, sexually harassed and even killed while the second kind (freedom to) which means precisely the free choice of an individual to do what his/her wishes. The kind which is totally forbidden for women in Gilead to conduct it as in: ***“There is more than one kind of freedom, freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it”***. (P: 27), which reveals her ideology of recalibration and intellectual transfer as she teaches the handmaids the ideological negative kind of freedom positively and the other positive kind negatively.

The Commander, **Mr. Waterford**, is one of the main dictators who play an instrumental role in Gilead's founding and the one who represents all other commanders of the government. It is discovered that in all his discourses, whether publically or secretly, he is trying to raise men up and push women down which in turn leads the analyst researcher to reveal his ideology of patriarchy and gender inequality. Thus, applying van Dijk's conceptual square on his speeches uncovers his intentions to make femininity in the negative side and masculinity in the positive side as in: ***“No woman was ever rich enough, young enough, pretty enough, good enough”*** (P: 12). In this speech, he is de-emphasizing women's value as typical and primary members in any society and understating their perfection, beauty, as well as their

goodness implying indirectly that they are dependent creatures and unable to stand alone by themselves and that they will be always in need for a man to steady themselves.

The Commander keeps on describing women negatively being the out-group asserting that men being the in- group are the victims of all their machination and wrongs and that women are the main reason behind their miseries as in: “*You are the misery of all men. All of you*” (P: 201). In fact, his statement reveals one of the characteristics of patriarchy that most professional or ordinary men holds and keeps to use it until this present time.

In addition, he claims publically that God favors Adam, who represents all male gender, to be created first which means HE gives him the priority of living as well as the right to disposal, but HE puts women back as an entertainment to men in a way which means that men (the in-group) are superior and women (the out-group) are inferior as in: “*For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression*” (P: 114). He also continues to interpret the divine verses incorrectly to prove his ideology of patriarchy as he states that Adam doesn’t trespass but Eve does, and as a result she deserves to carry the burden of life. The mistaken interpretation which is considered as a religious pretext for most men to prove that patriarchy is a predetermined social organization.

The Commander, as all other patriarchal ones, views women (the out-group) as weak and unable to achieve difficult missions or think wisely as in: “*Women can't add. For them, one and one and one and one don't make four. For them, just one and one and one and one.*”(P: 181). In this speech, he mitigates indirectly woman’s importance in the society.

Serena Joy, the commander’s wife, has a great contribution in establishing the Republic of Gilead throughout her support for traditional values that emphasizes **sanctity** of the home and that women must stay at home to supply many family issues. In fact, her views of anti- feminism lead her to lose her entity, independence and comfort as human being in the society. Although she plans to employ the handmaids for such experience, she keeps on insulting them and de- emphasizing their sacrifices as in: “*Agreed to it right away, really she didn't care; anything with two legs and a good you-know-what was fine with her. They aren't squeamish; they don't have the same feelings we do.*”(P: 209). In this speech, **Serena Joy** describes the handmaids negatively as being indecent, prostitute women when she emphasizes on their bad action of having a controlled gender relation with more than one man each time. On the contrary, she ends up comparing her in-group (the wives of the commanders) and viewing

them as squeamish and sensitive with the out- group (the handmaids) and who are not prudish and dishonest.

Serena Joy understates also the handmaids' position when she describes them as cheap women and that they sell their honor in exchange for trivial things like a cigarette as in: "*cheap. They'll spread their legs for anyone. All you need to give them a cigarette*" (P: 255). She ignores their positive actions and how they suffer severe and harsh laws. In fact, **Serena Joy** blames the handmaids for their bad actions which she claims for, as a way of distinguishing herself and other wives from the ugliness of this function. These speeches reveal her ideology of revenge, ostentation at the outcome of being restricted to the home and unable to do useful thing.

5. The Results and Discussion

The speeches of the major characters of the novel under study are polarized to positive-self presentation and negative-other presentation. According to **Offred**, the narrator, she uses them to show the world the patriarchy of constitutional laws of most countries all over the world and how woman is being underestimated and man is being estimated. As for the other three ones, as dictators, they use this strategy to convince and manipulate others to follow and obey them. They control people not only by physical force but also by using discursive strategies of mind control. These strategies are found on the micro and macro level. These two levels are highly correlated and are used mostly by religious or political men in general to persuade people to accept the dictator's enemies as their enemies and the dictator's allies as their allies. This level of analysis is the most significant level in the current study because it illustrates how the micro and the macro levels can work interactively to present gender inequality, women oppression and dictatorship.

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