

Foucauldian Study of Discourse-Resistance Nexus: The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the discourse of resistance in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by drawing on Foucault's insights into power and Belsey's method of textual analysis. In Foucault's framework, power is not a static entity but a dynamic process, inherently producing resistance within its structure. Resistance, therefore, is not an external force acting against power but is intricately woven into the power dynamics themselves. Belsey's approach to textual analysis further supports this perspective by revealing how linguistic manipulation shapes the relationships between central and peripheral characters. By analyzing the inherent contradictions within the seemingly rigid discourse of Gilead, this study shows how acts of resistance are embedded within the power-laden interactions between characters. For example, the recurring phrase "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*"—translated as "Don't let the bastards grind you down"—serves as a symbol of linguistic subversion, subtly undermining the dominant narrative. The analysis focuses on key scenes where power and resistance intersect, particularly through the contrasting interactions between characters like Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy. Through Belsey's textual analysis, this paper demonstrates how *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays resistance not as a mere opposition to authority but as a continuous and dynamic process ingrained in the discourse of power.

KEYWORDS: Power, Dystopian Fiction, The Handmaid's Tale, Resistance, Foucauldian Study

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the discourse of resistance in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by drawing on Foucault's insights into power and Belsey's method of textual analysis. In Foucault's framework, power is not a static entity but a dynamic process, inherently producing resistance within its structure. Resistance, therefore, is not an external force acting against power but is intricately woven into the power dynamics themselves. Belsey's approach to textual analysis further supports this perspective by revealing how linguistic manipulation shapes the relationships between central and peripheral characters. By analyzing the inherent contradictions within the seemingly rigid discourse of Gilead, this study reveals how acts of resistance are embedded within the power-laden interactions between characters. For example, the recurring phrase "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*"—translated as "Don't let the bastards grind you down"—serves as a symbol of linguistic subversion, subtly undermining the dominant narrative. The analysis focuses on key scenes where power and resistance intersect, particularly through the contrasting interactions between characters like Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy. Through Belsey's textual analysis, this paper demonstrates how *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays resistance not as a mere opposition to authority but as a continuous and dynamic process ingrained in the discourse of power.

Margaret Atwood (1939) is a Canadian writer who has published more than 45 literary works, including poems and novels. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is one of her famous works; The book portrays a fictional totalitarian society known as Gilliard. The structure of this society is reduced to its essential functions. Due to the low rate of birth in Gilliard, the system assigned an indoctrinated nurse (Ant Lydia) to force fertile women (The Handmaids) to bear children for the high-ranked members in Gilliard society with a subjected ritual. The story is narrated by Offred, one of the Handmaids who is assigned to the Commander and his wife. Through Offred's character, readers are introduced to the system of Gilead, which restricts everyone, except a few members who hold power over women. Most of the set rules dehumanize every single aspect of human life by manipulating the facts, language, behavior, and female agency. To survive, Offred had to recompose herself to fit into the rules of Gilliard, but she discovers that the Handmaids, commanders, and wives have developed a hidden way to manipulate the system to survive. Persistence under such a social structure implies a tendency for reticence.

This paper focuses on the Foucauldian study of Discourse Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, analyzing the speech of both the powerful and the powerless. It differs from the traditional Marxist and Feminist critique of power. It aims to investigate the cracks within discourse and establishes that discourse is a transmitter of power and a resister. Nothing is

Foucauldian Study of Discourse-Resistance Nexus: The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

beyond discourse, and power is exercised as well as resisted through discourse. Marxist and feminist discourse assert that power is always repressive, but Foucault believes that power is productive and itself produces resistance. The production of resistance among characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* is examined in this paper to demonstrate that where there is power, there is resistance. Foucault's ideas of power, discourse, and resistance are employed to undertake a textual analysis of the novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tracing the studies conducted on this novel, a significant amount of research has been done on the theme of power and its impact in dystopian narratives. Many scholars compare it to different dystopian novels, such as 1984, by George Orwell. In the article "The Handmaid's Tale: Echoes of Orwell", the writer draws the similarities between the two totalitarian regimes and characters' destinies. But what sets Atwood's novel apart from Orwell's is that the system in *The Handmaid's Tale* is set to control women. Additionally, the article overlooks that the novel is narrated in the first-person, which opens possibilities for resistance and survival in contrast to the third-person narrator. Further conducted studies focused on the limitation force on women in the narrative such as "Dark Knowledge in *The Handmaid's Tale*" by Jeanne Campbell Reesman, "*The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia" by David Ketterer, and "Breaking Silence in Feminist Dystopias". Most of these articles has a feminist reading for the novel which shows oppression. However, the critique of feminism ignores the theme of resistance and its relation to power it only focuses on the use of language and behavior in oppressive manner. Moreover, both Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson examined in their article "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*". The relationship between power and identity views resistance as a form of expressing individualism, rather than as a result or product of power. The act of resistance is not only confined to the handmaidens but also to different members of society who use the same tools of power to break the rules.

Theory:

Power and resistance have different approaches to examining them; major studies of power and resistance discourse are reminiscent of Marxist and feminist critiques, which view power as always repressive. However, Foucault argues that power is a process that produces resistance. In *History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault questions: "If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe we should manage to obey it?" (p. 36). He also stresses this concept in his book *Abnormal* (2003), explaining power is productive and regards repression only as a "secondary effect with regard to its central, creative and productive mechanisms" (p. 52). Contrary to Marxist and feminist perceptions of power, which view power as a static entity, Foucault conceptualizes power as a dynamic strategy in which both the powerful and the powerless continually engage in negotiation. From Foucault's perspective, power allows a space to target individuals and constantly leads to resisting behavior; it is an exercise process that requires legitimacy through speech. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), he refers to discourse as "the general domain of all statements and simultaneously propounds that no discourse can claim absolute spontaneity and regularity" (p. 80).

He illustrated that most oppressive regimes claim plain, organized language, which is not possible. He also states that power starts with language, for examining the language of the system is crucial. "Discourse is a political construction, and one must examine it in the exact specificity of its occurrence" (p. 28). Achieving power starts with the means of communication, shifting behaviors, and structuring obedience; that is how the discourse of power is set.

Belsey's textual analysis is used to apply Foucault's concept of power-resistance in this paper. Belsey, in her essay *Textual Analysis as a Research Method* (2005), asserts that when a reader engages in textual analysis, they generate additional invisible meanings in addition to grasping the available meanings of the text. The available scholarship on *The Handmaid's Tale* is either unmindful of the political dimensions of the novel or applies Foucault's ideas on madness and sexuality without taking much notice of the hidden aspects of resistance in the power structure of the story. The employment of textual analysis in this paper examines Foucault's concept of power-resistance to validate that power can be resisted by the very tools that are used to maintain its control. This paper differs in its investigation in the way it views the relation of power, resistance, and language. Therefore, this research analyses the following issues: the use of language as a tool in preserving the discourse of power and the shifts of linguistic power into means of resistance. It also explains why linguistic manipulation plays a significant role in resisting the system.

Textual analysis

Language as a tool of oppression:

Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." (1976, p.95). Every act of resistance reveals that power is a dynamic process entangled in a web of social relations. The powerful is not as independent in its choices as it appears to be, because power is driven by its discourse, which carries inherent incongruities beneath its seemingly congruent facade. Gilliard limits the language used to reconstruct the ideology of its population and force its values. In the following quote Aunt Lydia, one of the members of Gilliard regime delivers a speech about the concept of freedom in Gilliard and freedom outside Gilliard. "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. 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." (Atwood, 1995, p.21). Her speech implies that freedom can mean chaos in

Foucauldian Study of Discourse-Resistance Nexus: The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

the days of anarchy, while in Gilliard it consists of order given to the people. Aunt Lydia mirrors the regime by framing the concept of freedom into two distorted definitions, in order to reinstall the regime ideology and recreate an obedience maid. In this way language is used as a tool of oppression in the novel, the system reduces the use of language into three categories that represent the active roles in the systems. These categories are restrictive vocabulary, ritualistic phrases, and religious terminology, used by the aunts, the wives and the commanders. On the other hand, silence structures the functions of Martha's and the handmaids. Since a handmaid secretly narrates the story, the act of storytelling becomes an act of resistance, when tracing the use of language in the novel, the handmaids recompose the same language the regime uses to communicate with each other. "We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness, we could stretch out our arms when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads at on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed" (1995, p.12). With the limitation Gilliard created to prevent communication between the handmaids, they developed their own communication system to exchange information. The handmaids developed a hidden way to manipulate the system to survive. Persistence under such a social structure implies a tendency for reticence as James Scott argued in his work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

"The public transcripts or dominant discourses both groups construct. Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly allowed. a comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of both hidden transcripts to the public transcripts of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination, (xii)" (Scott,1990).

In Foucauldian terms, Aunt Lydia's discourse doesn't simply repress the Handmaids; it constitutes their understanding of the world and their place within it. Through redefining (freedom) the regime produces a docile body that internalizes its subjugation. Also, silence was forced on the Handmaidens to prevent any way of communication, but the Handmaidens used the same tool (silence) that was forced by the powerful part as a tool of resistance. Another technique used as a tool of resistance and oppression is word manipulation. This concept appears in Gilliard media to control the narrative: "Power and knowledge directly imply one another... There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge. "Foucault, "Discipline and Punish" (1975), p. 27

Word manipulation

Word manipulation may not be immediately apparent, particularly to those outside a specific group. In her book *Textual Analysis as a Research Method*, Belsey argues, "Meaning, then, subsists in the relations between people, inscribed in sounds or images. It has its own materiality: meaning intervenes in the world, defining our understanding of values, requiring us to obey rules and, indeed, calling us to arms. But because it never appears in itself, as pure intelligibility, as idea, but is always inscribed in the signifier, in the sound or the image, meaning is never fixed, single or final. The signifier, Jacques Derrida insists, supplants any imagined idea, takes its place. What we have is always the signifier, never what it signifies". (Belsey 163). The meaning is concerned with a certain linguistic code that is approved by a certain group, so that an outsider cannot understand the hidden idea behind the expressed sound. Although in Gilliard there are specific words for greetings between the handmaidens, such as (Bless the Fruit, Ofglen indicates a phrase in her conversation with Offred as a hint, saying, "It's a beautiful May Day," Ofglen says. I feel rather than see her head turn towards me, waiting for a reply. "Yes," I say. "Praise be," I add as an afterthought. Mayday used to be a distress signal, a long time ago, in one of those wars we studied in high school." (Atwood,1995, p.53). The use of May Day on a linguistic surface seems innocent, as a praise for a sunny day. However, it implies a historical signification for rebellion. The previous text shows that the application of the language as a tool to enslave the maids themselves is a tool that penetrates the system to be an escape and a means of resistance. Power, being a dynamic process rather than a static product, continually shifts its location. By applying the Foucauldian notion, a new perspective emerges, and it reveals that neither the handmaids nor the members of the system are autocratic. Ofglen used the term "May Day" to test Offred and hint at the escape of another Handmaid. This term does not belong to Gilead linguistic code; it seems to be a complement to the weather. However, this subtle linguistic code is indicative of how words can be manipulated to serve dual purposes: on one hand, reinforcing the regime's-imposed norms, and on the other, creating a secretive language of defiance among the handmaids. From a Foucauldian perspective, this manipulation of language highlights that power is not a static possession but a dynamic process, constantly shifting between those who hold power and those who are oppressed. In this context, the use of "May Day" highlights how the handmaids subvert the language intended to control them, transforming it into a means of solidarity and resistance. This subtle yet powerful duality in language use, where ordinary expressions veil subversive meanings, paves the way for a deeper examination of how linguistic play becomes a mode of resistance. While phrases like "May Day" operate through ambiguity and contextual disguise, other forms of wordplay in *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrate a more direct, albeit covert, defiance. These textual interventions, often embedded within private or liminal spaces, reveal the strategic manipulation of language not only to survive within the regime but to psychologically and ideologically resist it. The transition from coded greetings to carved inscriptions signals an evolution from external, cautious rebellion to internal, sustained resistance. This sets the stage for exploring how seemingly nonsensical or playful language—such as the mock Latin

Foucauldian Study of Discourse-Resistance Nexus: The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

phrase “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”—functions as a more intimate and enduring emblem of defiance, exposing the vulnerabilities within Gilead's discursive power.

One significant example is the phrase “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”, carved by a former Handmaid and later discovered by Offred, a Latin phrase that embodies a rebellious spirit, signifying defiance against the regime. As Foucault asserts in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, “Power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to an ability to hide its own mechanisms.” (1978, p.86). The existence of this phrase within the Commander's household space, supposedly under strict control, demonstrates how resistance is not entirely eradicated but subtly embedded within the power structure itself. Offred's act of internalizing this message marks a reclaiming of autonomy, fostering a private rebellion within the confines of public obedience. Through Belsey's textual analysis, this linguistic act becomes a focal point for understanding how language, far from being merely a neutral medium, becomes a battlefield for power and resistance. Thus, the simple act of preserving a secret message within the rigid language system of Gilead exposes the inherent contradictions of a supposedly omnipotent power structure.

CONCLUSION

In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), power seeks to suppress human will, as it is rooted in the norms, institutions, and knowledge that shape human beliefs. It creates possibilities for resistance. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, power seeks to suppress human will, as it is rooted in the norms, institutions, and knowledge that shape human beliefs. Yet, as Foucault emphasizes, where there is power, there is always the possibility of resistance. The regime of Gilead functions through tightly controlled discourse—ritualized greetings, redefined biblical language, and erased personal identity—demonstrating how power becomes internalized through language and social structure. However, these same mechanisms give rise to subversive counter-discourses. Through Belsey's method of textual analysis, it becomes clear that resistance is embedded in the characters' linguistic choices: Offred's inner narration, hidden revolutionary slogans, and even the silences between women speak volumes. These acts, though often covert, expose the instability of Gilead's control. Foucault's framework reveals that power is not a fixed entity possessed by the rulers, but a relational force that circulates through every aspect of life, consistently generating its counterforce. Thus, Atwood's novel becomes not only a narrative of dystopian control but also a study in the ways individuals manipulate language to assert agency, preserve memory, and resist domination.

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