

Narration in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Reconstructing Female Subjectivity in the Language of Marginalized Protagonist

Samira Haghi^۱, Mahmoud Reza Ghorban Sabbagh^۲, Zohre Taebi^۳

^۱-M.A student of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran.

^۲-Assistant Professor, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. Corresponding author

^۳-Assistant Professor, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran.

Abstract

The Handmaid's Tale (۱۹۸۵), a novel by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, explores the notion of female body in the context of a dystopian society of Gilead, a totalitarian theocracy where women are essentially defined by their reproduction ability. The handmaid's body is constantly controlled and exploited by different means of power. In addition to censoring the body, the female voice is censored and muted in this theocracy. The protagonist, Offred, narrates the story of her experience and also her defiance against Gilead's rigid rules which act as a form of resistance. The first person point of view has been analyzed in this paper based on Rimmon-Kenan's theory (۱۹۸۳/۲۰۰۲) and Simpson's modal grammar of point of view (۱۹۹۳). This study explores different situations in which Offred resists Gilead's power. Employing narratology and modality helps us to understand Offred's characterization and her passivity or activity in her liberation. This paper attempts to represent that Offred's narration as a form of resistance can be regarded as a manifestation of her power over oppressive monologic system of Gilead, but her limitation in performing actual actions in liberating herself makes her a passive character throughout the novel.

Keywords: "*The Handmaid's Tale*", "narratology", "point of view", "resistance", "power relation"

۱. Introduction

The handmaids' body is defined and controlled by the totalitarian regime of Gilead in different aspects of their life. The handmaids are deprived of any rights and the state does not allow any agency to them, thus the body becomes the oppressed object which can be appropriated by the patriarchal society. In addition to censoring the body, the female voice is censored and muted in this theocracy. As a monologic patriarchal system, Gilead has defined only one discourse and required the inhabitants to follow its rigid rules. Offred's narrating the story in her own marginalized point of view can be considered as a resistance to Gilead's power of suppression and by remembering her past, her narration also acts as an attempt to create or retrieve a sense of subjecthood in her life. Narratology and point of view can be a helpful means to reveal Offred's characterization and explore the amount of her activity or passivity in fulfilling the thoughts expressed in her narrative. This paper attempts to explore Offred's first person point of view, the contemplated and performed actions, and consequently the way these contribute to her characterization. In this study, theories on narratology are used as the main framework and Simpson's study on point of view and modality in his book *Language, Ideology and Point of View* (۱۹۹۳) is employed for the analysis of certain events to shed further light on Offred's passivity or activity as the narrator of her own story.

۱,۱ The Handmaid's Tale: Some Introductory Notes

The Handmaid's Tale (۱۹۸۵) represents a dystopian society of Gilead that has replaced the United States. In this Christian totalitarian theocracy, due to the decrease in reproduction rate, women are taken as sex slaves to produce children for the higher classes, i.e. Commanders and their barren wives. The handmaid's body is highly controlled and any oppression is justified by religious doctrines. The events are narrated by the protagonist, Offred, a fertile handmaid who has been forced to bear children for the barren elite. Reflecting on her past and present situation, Offred attempts to resist the limitation on her freedom. Atwood offers a political stance in representing a misogynist society in which women have lost their freedom and identity and been deprived of their rights of occupation, owning properties and even possessing their bodies. The handmaids are led to live a life which is based on conformity, censorship, terror and corruption. The totalitarian society of Gilead uses Christian principles especially those of the Old Testament as a justification to repression and social reforms. The handmaids are kept under constant surveillance as sex slaves and their primary mission is producing offspring for the Commanders. The reproduction role defines the identities of these women in such a way that infertility makes them "Unwoman".

۱,۲ Narration and Action

The term narration is defined by Rimmon-Kenan (۱۹۸۳/۲۰۰۲) as "(۱) a *communication* process in which the narrative as message is transmitted by addresser to addressee and (۲) the verbal nature of the medium used to transmit the message" (p. ۲). Following Genette, Rimmon-Kenan explains "focalization" as the presentation of text through the mediation of "some prism", "perspective", "angle of vision", verbalized by the narrator. A narrative agent can be both the one who sees and speaks the events of the

story (pp. ۷۲-۷۳). External focalization is expressed through the vehicle of “narrator-focalizer” since it is close to the narrating agent. Internal focalization narrates the story from the inside of events and takes the form of “character-focalizer” (p. ۷۵). *The Handmaid’s Tale* is narrated from the first person point of view of the protagonist, Offred. She narrates the events from within her consciousness and what is presented is her account of the whole story. The reliability of her account is questioned in the Historical Notes added at the end of the last chapter. Historical Notes deals with a gathering which is actually an academic conference held years after the survival of Offred’s transcripts. Rimmon-Kennan states that the reliable narrator is the one whose rendering and commenting on the story is supposed to be taken by the reader “as an authoritative account of the fictional truth”. In contrast, an unreliable narrator evoke suspicion in the reader to trust his/her account of the story or commentary on it. There are different degrees and signs of unreliability: “the main sources of unreliability are the narrator’s limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme” (p. ۱۰۱).

Unreliability is thus seen mostly in the narratives with subjective point of view like first person. In Stanzel’s narrative types (۱۹۷۹), first-person narrative is explained as “restricted to a personal subjective, and limited point of view” with no direct access to the events that narrator does not directly involve or witness, and also with no access to the minds of other characters. This limited point of view causes the readers to treat them “as yet-to-be-validated testimony of uncertain reliability” (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, ۲۰۰۵, p. ۳۶۴). Linguistic patterns can reveal the narrator’s unreliability in narrating the story. For instance, use of some certain stylistic occurrence like “speaker oriented” expressions can be considered as the “pragmatic indications of unreliability” (Nünning, ۲۰۰۵, p. ۱۰۳). The recurrent use of speaker-oriented expressions like “I” and “expressions of subjectivity” in general can indicate an unreliable narrator since they represent the narrator’s “emotional involvement” (p. ۱۰۴).

The story is told from Offred’s point of view and basically there are a lot of events in which she herself participates in or contemplates on, but most of the time actions remain in her mind and do not take an actual form of performance. There are many events in which she is uncertain of its truth and most of the time she cannot understand what exactly happens around her. The first person point of view is expected to give us a clear sense of events, but here it is shadowed with uncertainty, thus it questions the very account of narrative and represents the narrator’s limited knowledge, confusion and estrangement. As Rimmon-Kennan states, character’s trait can be implied by “one-time actions” and “habitual ones”. One-time actions are considered as turning point since they represent the dynamicity of the character. Habitual actions, on the other hand, reveal the static aspects of the character and have “comic or ironic effect”. Both of these actions can belong to three categories which can have symbolic significance: “act of commission (i.e. something performed by the character), act of omission (something which the character should, but does not do), and contemplated act (an unrealized plan or intention of the character)”. If the contemplated actions happen recurrently and become habitual, “the character’s passivity or shrinking from action may be implied” (pp. ۶۱-۶۲).

Acts of commission in Offred are those actions she performs based on what is expected from her. For instance, her presence in Gilead is for breeding purpose, so she submits herself to act as is required. She states: “... I resign my body freely, to the uses of others” (Atwood, ۱۹۸۵, p. ۲۹۸). There are some actions that Offred thinks she should do but she doesn’t. This act of omission can be seen in her failed attempt in stealing things: “I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance. I should have stolen a knife from the kitchen, found some way to the sewing scissors... the world is full of weapons ... I should have paid attention (p. ۱۱۳). The contemplated act is perceived mostly in Offred’s

plan to find a possible way to escape but finally is unable to put it into action. For instance, when she is arrested, she thinks about the possible things she could do in order to free herself:

“I could set fire to the house, [...] I could tear my bedsheet into strips and twist it into a rope [...] I could noose the bedsheet round my neck, [...] choke myself off. I could hide behind the door, wait until she comes, [...] knock her down [...]. (Atwood, pp. ۳۰۳-۳۰۴)

Offred's actions throughout the story can be divided into three kinds: the actions in which she is the initiator, those actions of which she is merely the receiver and is not directly involved, and the meditated actions which remain only in her mind and do not take an external form. The actions she initiates are mostly petty and inconsequential; like her attempt to steal something, taking butter to moisten her hand, communicating small talks with other handmaids, and her surreptitious looks she casts at Nick. But those actions in which she is more actively involved are playing Scrabble in her secret meeting with the Commander, attending Jezebel and also writing as a form of resistance. In the latter actions the amount of power she has and also the degree of her involvement should not be neglected. Finally, the potential actions she wants to perform but remains in her mind are considered as her contemplated actions and their recurrence represents her passivity.

As in most parts of the story, Offred's actions involve her body in some way. She uses her body and words as powerful weapons resisting the Gilead's rigid rules. She has an obsession with her body; she wants to feel and taste everything with it. She uses her body as a seductive means in front of Guards or wishes to fulfil its need by having sexual relationship with Nick. In her playing Scrabble, she wants to taste every word, and in her narrating the story she puts her body as the focal point of sensing and perceiving things. In all these cases, Offred's word is not separated from her body. She is trying to express herself through assigning agency to both her body and her words. Some critics believe that Offred's resistance in these forms is not considered a powerful way of asserting herself. Although on many occasions she is manipulating Commander's status or breaking Gilead's rules, she is doing all in the limited space and amount which are inherently at the service of the state and consequently define her by her body. The following section discusses different views regarding the possibility of Offred's speech as a sign of resisting the patriarchal, hierarchal and totalitarian state of Gilead.

۱،۲،۱ Narrative Voice as a Possible Form of Resistance

Offred's language as a form of resistance has been explored by many critics. Silencing her female voice, censoring the oral account of her story, misinterpreting her language and effacing her identity are some means of oppressing her female marginalized narrative in the story. The following section explores the studies done so far regarding the possibility of female language as a source of power and resistance to oppression and also a way of self-expression and retrieving subjectivity by bringing the past and present together.

The patriarchal history of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* is narrated from the perspective of one of the female slave, Offred. She retrospectively narrates her experience of victimization in Gilead's regime. Gilead's singular meaning system prevents the inhabitants from creating or maintaining their own modes of thought. It legitimates its discourse and practices in the name of religious and reformative social doctrines. The totalitarian theocracy of Gilead forces everyone “to submit to the power of one

(moral) law, one true religion, one language code”, in which “homogenous, univocal signs” indoctrinate universal truth and makes any plurality of experience and discourse impossible (Staels, ۱۹۹۵, p. ۴۵۷). Gilead exercises power by creating a language of its own. It assigns new names for the women and defines them according to their commodified relationship with their Commanders. In addition to its monologic rules, this totalitarian regime manipulates the past and dominates the present and the future. “Resistance to the totalitarian regime seems ... to consist largely in the obsessive search for fragmentary traces of the past as manifested in memory, language, gesture, and materiality” (Finigan, ۲۰۱۱, p. ۴۴۸). Offred’s reflection of the past and her attempt to preserve it acts as a resistance to Gilead’s effacing of the past and defining a new present and future for people.

Gilead forbids any personal discourse; however, the suppression of freedom causes resistance among the individuals. By breaking the rules and articulating her suppressed desire, Offred evokes new meanings and produces insights which are not allowed by Gilead’s totalitarian system. In this sense, she “give[s] voice to an alternative perspective and an alternative discourse that continuously cut through the rigid logocentric texture of the superstructure” (Steals, p. ۴۵۹). The kind of resistance in this highly controlled regime takes a rather secret form; every inhabitant tries to produce “hidden transcripts” to communicate or assert a sense of subjectivity. The elite attend Jezebel nightclub and flout Gilead’s puritanical norms. For the subordinates, these hidden transcripts perform “as indirect forms of resistance” (Dodson, ۱۹۹۷, p. ۵۸). For instance, their gossips, small speech while cooking, shopping, or attending the public gatherings signify their attempts to communicate and resist the prohibitions. Using the butter as a substance to keep her skin soft is a trick Offred learns in The Red Center. She believes this will be useful when they get out and be touched again, “we have ceremonies of our own, private ones” (Atwood, p. ۱۰۷), she states. Offred describes all these hidden self-expressions in her narrative and tries to regenerate past habits in the suffocated present by creating her own persona. She wishes to talk and “commit the act of touch” (Atwood, p. ۲۱). She whispers with other handmaids or takes their hands, she secretly talks to Moira in lavatory or exchange her name with other handmaids before sleeping. But this coded and minimalist language Offred uses cannot construct a stable form for her narration. This failed secret transcript cannot create a solid persona for her. She comments on the kind of communication she has with others and considers it as “amputated speech”, not a real talk:

After this ritual viewing we continue on our way, heading as usual for some open space we can cross so we can talk. If you can call it talking, these clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It's more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech. (Atwood, p. ۲۱)

The fragmentary speech used by the handmaids signify their limited marginalized space to express themselves. Offred expresses her voice in an Underground Female Road which is symbolically associated with the alienated space in the margin. By focusing on the handmaid’s personal marginalized discourse, the novel both reports and challenges Gilead’s monological meaning system. Offred’s narration “move[s] beyond the historical facts of Gilead, beyond the frontiers of Gilead's meaning system and, finally, beyond the identity of Handmaid-slave that the colonizing power imposed on her” (Staels, p. ۴۵۹). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood employs an equivocal and complex narration through intertextuality and using different kinds of texts in Western culture. The intertextual essence of the novel invites the reader to think about various possibilities of the tale instead of looking for one fixed reality

like futile attempt and limited view of Gilead itself. Exploring the narrative voice, Garlick (۱۹۹۲) focuses on the power and inadequacy of language represented in the novel, and considers “lack of authenticity” and the “necessity of creating” as a representation of a world with lost values and evasive history (pp. ۱۶۲-۱۶۳). The novel further illustrates how centering the subversive female voice can asserts the strength of narration despite its unreliability.

۱,۲,۲ Language as a Means of Reconstructing a Subjecthood

Atwood exposes the limitation of male narrative and monologic discourse by tracing back the previously marginalized voices and thus revealing the heteroglossia present in her narrative. In this sense, language can act as a powerful device in reconstructing a dominant discourse and asserting feminine subjectivity in narrating their experience. The slave narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* reappropriates feminine subjectivity and reshapes the dominant language of a patriarchal culture by “renegotiating female representability”. Offred questions and renegotiates the notion of subjectivity in a plural and competing discourses. The heteroglossia existing in Atwood's novel “break[s] up unified projected worlds into worlds of discourse where language is ex/changed with a female subjectivity that resists the reconciliation of opposites by breaking up the oppositions and insisting on the exposure of antagonistic Voices” (Nelson-Born, ۱۹۹۶, pp. ۲-۳). The slave narrative constructed by Atwood thus disrupts this hierarchal narrative models which oppresses and alienates her. Telling story helps the handmaid to overcome anonymity and alienation and ultimately helps her to liberate from the restrictions, although its validity and subjecthood is later on questioned by the academic discourse. By shifting the narrative structure to a marginalized point of view, Atwood decenters the totalitarian power and questions the hierarchal narrative structure. In this sense, she controls both the telling of the story (narration) and the point of view of the story (focalization) (p. ۴). Offred does not want to tell the story of her capture from a male point of view or according to male version. She says: “I don't want to be telling *this* story” (Atwood, p. ۲۳۷). By dissolving a monological discourse, Atwood creates a space through which female experience can be represented in its own shape.

Offred can manipulate language and uses its potential in order to define her own subjectivity which consequently helps her to act as a subversive agent against the oppressive agency of Gilead system. Gilead excludes all agency functions of individuals and personal rights and reduces the individuals to mere passive recipients of its totalitarian rule. “The active, is it a tense?” (Atwood, p. ۱۰۸), Offred wonders. She breaks through Gilead's authoritative laws by expressing her body and her thought. Gilead censors any attempt to self-expression, but Offred defies these rules by giving voice to the muted discourse. She remembers the past, the time when she could freely use words and communicate with others. She speaks in her original name and repeatedly asserts her identity and in this sense attempts to revive her past life and maintain her subjectivity. By reconstructing the experience in her own language, Offred attempts to cross the boundaries of past and present and liberate herself from the trap of her marginalized limited space. As she states:

I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. (p. ۹۴)

Offred's memories acts as an attempt to revive the past in the present and resist Gilead's plan in abolishing the past. Offred's struggle to communicate by reading, playing or lovemaking represents her act of preserving the lost traditions of the past. For her, narrating acts as a way of survival and resurrection of the missing and lost part of herself and collecting the fragments to a whole unity. Offred's narrative voice "disembodies her"; it makes her "liberated from her flesh" and acts as an escape or transcendence of body and self into stronger forms (Cooper, ۱۹۹۷, p. ۹۹). Her desire to feel someone beside her activates "her silenced inner body" and in this way, "she asserts her will to be visible"; or in playing Scrabble game with the Commander, Offred tries to "unite the word and the flesh" by reading and feeling every single word, and thus "bridge the gap between language and feelings" (Staels, pp. ۴۶۰-۴۶۱). Offred's poetic and heterogeneous discourse revitalizes the potential of language in expressing inner life which has been lost in the transparent discourse of Gilead. Offred's narrative is like a movie that represents the past but cannot bring the exact events: "... a movie about the past is not the same as the past" (Atwood, p. ۲۴۷), she asserts.

Offred's attempt to record her past and present as a way of resistance is not as strong as it should be. Her remembering is fragmented and solitary and does not include or stir more public resistance. Her failed attempt is revealed in the Historical Notes, when the future audience cannot understand her word which is survived in incomplete tapes, and by neglecting the truth of her experience, they finally silence her speech once again. The fragmented stories she narrates is "like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force" (Atwood, p. ۲۷۹) and could not represent collective hidden transcripts. Her self-expressive narrative which she constructs in isolation acts as a silent revolt to Gilead's crime and cannot be compared to Moira or her mother's active resistance. But with all the limitation posed on her speech, she knows the potential of language power and uses it to give voice to her suppression, however personal and limited.

۱,۲,۳ Historical Notes: A Return to Gilead's Marginalization of Female Voice

Offred's language as the narrator has been analyzed and questioned in the final chapter entitled "Historical Notes". Spoken text narrated by Offred is actually a transcribed version of her story. Transcribing Offred's story from an oral form to a written medium by the academics creates a suspicion that more possible horrors could have been told by Offred but they were deleted from the original manuscript. Furthermore, the transcribed form of story questions the validity of the meaning of present discourse since it is prone to subjective interpretation and judgmental change. Offred states that the story she is telling is a reconstruction, not a factual report: "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction" (Atwood, p. ۱۴۴). Therefore, the exact truth of her experience cannot be retraced, but the academics attempt to find the real meaning of her tale. The Historical Notes deny any identity for the anonymous narrator. The criticism made in the Historical Notes points to the importance of realistic and certain description which is lacking in Offred's narrative. The beginning of narration happens in 'Night' episode, where "the narrative begins to enter the doubled world of contingency and doubt" (Garlick, p. ۱۶۹): "But the night is my time out. Where should I go?" (Atwood, p. ۴۷), "But then what happens, but then what happens?" (Atwood, p. ۴۹). The story ends again with the 'Night' chapter and Offred finishes the narration in confusion: "And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (Atwood, p. ۳۰۷).

The confusion in narrating the story leads the academics to question the reliability of the handmaid's tale. The text itself makes us question the historicity and validity of its voice. In narrating

her experiences, Offred points to the fact that: “I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it” and “It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head; as I go along” (Atwood, p. ۴۹). Offred describes the events in the present tense and this “discourages us from seeing her narrative as fixed, final, and an anterior; it is, instead, ongoing, and it unfolds for us as it does for her” (Grace, ۱۹۹۸, p. ۴۸۴). In narrating her story, she does not use a reassuring tone; most of the times we are in the dark what really happened. For instance, after her sexual intercourse with Nick, she explains: “I'm not sure how it happened not exactly” (Atwood, p. ۲۷۵). In the end, it is not clear what happened to her. The way Offred narrates her experience is subjective, experiential and reflectional of her thoughts and perspectives, rather than an objective historical report of the exact incidents. Her account stresses the impossibility of reaching a fixed meaning or comprehensive understanding and in this way challenges the notion of the historical truth. The academics focus on the objective rendering of the events, but by criticizing the handmaid's narrative in their own prejudiced way, they create another form of subjectivity in history. The true objective language they confirm is not even present in Gilead's system. For instance, Offred criticizes the language of newspapers for reporting news without believable contexts:

The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, [...] they were awful without being believable [...] We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories. (Atwood, pp. ۶۶-۶۷)

This shows how female experience is excluded or expressed partially, so the reality of the texts remains outside and the news could only portray fragments of stories not the exact account of the whole events.

In addition to representing Offred as an unreliable narrator, the academics marginalizes the subjective female speech and overlooks the narrator's self-affirmation in her poetic language. The academics neglect the existence of Offred as the reliable narrator and consider her experience as a simple tale. Consequently, Offred's wish for the ideal implied listener remains unfulfilled. She can even predict it while telling her story, although she insists on telling it anyway: “I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't” (Atwood, p. ۵۰). The academics name the story of Offred's suppression a *Handmaids Tale*, a name which reminds one of the Chaucer's fictions written by him, who is a male author. They also reduce the whole account of her experience to a “manageable fiction”, “a text”. As a pure text, Offred's story then ceases to be a valid account of the past and she herself is cut off as an original generator of the narrative. “With no authorial center, thus Offred's text ceases to be hers the moment it is uttered” (Johnson, ۱۹۹۶, p. ۵۰).

The academics' criticism is considered as a return or continuation of Gilead's rationalism and monologic mode of thought. They try to find the real singular meaning of the text and arrive at the objective truth of the tale, but in this sense, they overshadow Offred's subjectivity in generating meaning and narrative of her own. “The desire of the scholars for univocal, transparent meaning ironically mirrors the authoritative word of Gilead”, and the attempt to locate “a metaphysics of truth is equivalent to Gilead's dogmatism and its illusions of stable, given” repeats the Gilead's logocentric and essentialist system of language and thought (Staels, p. ۴۵۶). Historical Notes is an evidence of the fact that “history,

in written form, has most frequently censored the experience of the Other for the purposes of the One” (Dodson, p. ۸۳). Offred’s voice is once again muted by the academics’ ignorance of her existence as the narrator of the whole experience. The anonymity assigned to the handmaids by effacing their body by covering is further shown in an attempt to silence their voice. Interpreting Offred’s story by male voices in Historical Notes signifies the fact that “colonization of Offred’s body can be linked with the colonization of her voice” (p.۸۳). Actually, as her body is violated, oppressed and fragmented by Gilead regime, her speech is misinterpreted and her voice is silenced by the academics both with the same reasons.

Although the handmaid’s “limping and mutilated” story has been overlooked by the listeners, “her story” survived despite all the limitation she faced during her suffocating situation in Gilead. She uses the power of language in expressing her subjectivity and resistance “realizing that she speaks a story from which she had distanced herself before the regime colonized her body” (Dodson, p. ۸۳). Offred’s narrative stands as a struggle to change the dominant perspective to a marginalized point of view. Her story creates a possibility to see the dystopian society of Gilead from a female perspective and asserts the fact that regaining agency and liberation can be found even in a limited form.

۱, ۲, ۴ Resistance or Submission: Exploring the Possibility of Power Transition

Some critics believe that any attempt to resistance in Gilead’s theocracy is actually considered as a complicity and support for the system. Gilead’s totalitarian regime is based on rigid rules which degrade female to mere object of reproduction and control their social world by fragmenting and isolating them. Offred’s attempt to create a sense of identity by communicating with others has actually resulted in complicity with the regime. Gilead’s pervasive power in every aspects of its inhabitant’s action and thought “neutralizes [any resistance] into a support for the system” and the internalization of this power makes them “unindicted co-conspirators in their own oppression” (Stillman & Johnson, ۱۹۹۴, p.۷۰). Offred’s transgressions of Gilead’s rules can be considered as her way of resisting the power inflicted on her, but actually they involve her into the system of corruption that characterizes Gilead’s power. For instance, when she enjoys the power of her body to provoke young guards, she is in fact succumbing to Gilead’s requirement and the very rule which defines her identity by her body. Her sexual relationship with Nick is actually a response to Serena Joy’s wish to use her body as a means of reproduction. Also, her secret meetings with the Commander is considered as following his orders. Offred’s enduring transgression may be evident in telling the story of her experience, but her attempt to resist the power inflictions seems to get nowhere. As stated earlier, Historical Notes can be considered as a manifestation of continuation of Gilead’s corruption and ideology in the future.

It seems that Offred has grown accustomed to her life in Gilead and does nothing to change it. For instance, after her intercourse with Nick, she gives up the thought of escape: "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom (Atwood, p.۲۸۳). Before that, she had been thinking about the ways she could liberate herself, but in the end she does nothing to achieve them. Offred’s mere contemplations and inability to perform an actual resistance put her in contrast with Moira and her mother. She resigns herself according to the expectations of others and this emphasizes her passivity throughout the whole narrative. When she realizes that Offglen, her companion handmaid in shopping, is gone, she fears and reminds herself that she should be more careful in not taking more risks. She feels she can be caught at any moment, and if it happens, she won’t resist the state:

Moira was right about me. I'll say anything they like, I'll incriminate anyone. It's true, the first scream, whimper even, and I'll turn to jelly, I'll confess to any crime, I'll end up hanging from a hook on the Wall. Keep your head down, I used to tell myself, and see it through. (Atwood, p. ۲۹۷)

Having realized that she is finally safe, Offred says: "I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power" (Atwood, p. ۲۹۸). Offred's submission to the state's power is also evident in her inability to act effectively. She thinks of her mother and Moira in a heroic way. They could perform actions which was unlikely for her to do. In contrast to women of her life, she is just able to dream or imagine things without being able to turn them into possible collective actions which consequently resist Gilead. It seems that Offred has internalized Gilead's power and is acting according to its requirements because she knows it is the force of superstructure that finally wins.

۶. Simpson's Modal Grammar of Point of View in First Person Narrative

Different kinds of point of view represent many aspects of the narration. Use of certain modality structures can be a good device to reveal some characteristics of the text and its narrator. The term modality refers to "a speaker's attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of a proposition expressed by a sentence. It also extends to their attitude towards the situation or event described by a sentence" and further refers to Fowler identification of grammatical means of conveying modality including "modal auxiliaries, modal adverbs (or sentence adverbs), evaluative adjectives and adverbs, generic sentences and verbs of knowledge, prediction and evaluation" (Simpson, ۱۹۹۳, pp. ۴۳-۴۴). There are four modal systems in English: "deontic" modality which is concerned with the degree of duty and obligation in a speaker's attitude in performing actions. It consists of permission, obligation and requirement as in verbs *should, must, ought to*. etc. "Boulomaic" modality is closely related to deontic modality and expresses a speaker's desire, wishes and hopes in performing certain actions, as in verbs: *want, wish, regret*, etc. In addition to lexical modal verbs, these modalities can be also expressed in the form of adjectival and participial constructions of 'BE... TO' or 'BE ...THAT' or modal adverbs. "Epistemic" system of modality focuses on the certainty or lack of certainty in the truth of an expression and "is possibly the most important regarding the analysis of point of view in fiction" (p. ۴۴). Epistemic modality is expressed by modal lexical verbs structure like *think, suppose, believe*, modal adjectives like *certain, doubtful, probable*, etc. or modal adverbs like *perhaps, maybe, probably, possibly, supposedly*, etc. "Perception" modality is considered as the subsystem of epistemic modality and concerns with the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the propositions which are based on human perceptions.

Simpson's development of a modal grammar of point of view in fictional narrative is "an attempt to extend Fowler's work and thereby offer a more nuanced framework that provides both accurate categorisation of point of view effects and a means of identifying the linguistic techniques that typify each of these categories" (Neary, ۲۰۱۴, p. ۱۸۲). Simpson employs the modal systems as a "support for the framework of point of view"; he argues that "the modal systems are distributed unevenly across the point of view categories and that certain modalities are specific to, or at least dominant in, particular categories (Simpson, p. ۵۱). In his modal grammar of point of view, he distinguishes between "category

A” narratives and “category B” narratives. Category A narratives are those which are narrated in the first person point of view of a person who is also the participant character and narrates the story from within his/her consciousness. Category B narratives, on the other hand, are positioned outside the character’s consciousness and are mostly narrated in third person point of view. Both categories are further classified as having *positive, negative or neutral* shadings based on the system of modality they employ in their narration. Since *The Handmaid’s Tale* is narrated by the first person point of view of Offred who is also the character of the story, the focus of this part would be on the category A.

Category A narratives, “A *positive (A+ve)*” is referred to as “positive shading” and is recognized by the use of *verba sentiendi* (verbs that denote feelings) and evaluative adjectives and adverbs. In this type of narrative, the deontic and boulamaic modalities in expressing desires, duties and obligations are foregrounded. The epistemic and perception modalities are rare or uncommon in this kind and “the resulting narrative is more co-operatively orientated towards the reader” (p.۵۲). This affects the psychological closeness of the narrator in perceiving the actions and events. In category A narratives, “A *negative (A-ve)*”, epistemic and perception modalities are foregrounded, and comparative structures like *as if, it seems*, etc. are used in perceiving the events. The “negative shading” of this narrative type represents “the bewilderment and estrangement derives from within a participating character’s consciousness” and his/her uncertainty in perceiving the characters or events (p.۵۳). The state of uncertainty in the narrative will further results in rendering the events in a less real mode and hence potentially confuses the reader. Using epistemic and perception modalities “can result in a destabilization of the facticity of events and actions” and the result will be effective especially when transition from A+ve to A-ve mode happens (Neary, p. ۱۸۴).

۳. Application of Modal Grammar of Point of View in Offred’s First Person Narrative

The narrative pattern in the novel consists of three parts: Offred’s first person point of view narrating the story from her present time in the dystopian Gilead society, her analeptic flashbacks of past experiences before she is taken away from her family, again in first person point of view, and finally the historical notes which stands outside Offred’s story (after the survival of her transcripts) and is narrated by two academics interpreting the reliability of her accounts. Since the present time foregrounds Offred’s relationship with others and her characteristics are more visible in her present situation, her experience in Gilead as the main part of her story will be the focus of current discussion in the following section.

Offred’s language in narrating the story is marked with her own understanding of the events, and is thus examined under the category A. As stated earlier, the actions she performs can be seen in three types, the petty actions of which she is the initiator, the more active performing which she is not the initiator, and the mediated unperformed action which remained in her mind throughout the story. Different occasions on which these actions are seen in Offred’s narrative have been selected in order to explore how use of certain modality structures in different shadings contribute to the character’s involvement and knowledge of the events.

Example ۱: In returning my pass, the one with the peach-colored mustache bends his head to try to get a look at my face. I raise my head a little, to help him, and he sees my eyes and I see his, and he blushes [...] His skin is pale [...] Nevertheless, *I think of placing my hand on it, this exposed face*. He is the one who turns away. *What if I were to come at night, when he’s on duty alone—though he would never be*

allowed such solitude—and permit him beyond my white wings? What if I were to peel off my red shroud and show myself to him, to them, by the uncertain light of the lanterns? This is what they must think about sometimes, as they stand endlessly beside this barrier. (p. ۳۱)

While crossing the guards on her way, Offred feels their gaze on her body and wants to attract their attention. By moving her hip like a dog, she feels power within herself. She thinks she is doing an action which can affect the guards and asserts her existence. Regardless of what she thinks, the action she performs here is petty. Although her body is used as an empowering force, as an initiator of the action, it defines her based on Gilead's requirements. She is merely identified by her body, and its functions entertain the state. Furthermore, it seems she is succumbing to the rules which define her body in its seductive and objective terms. Use of epistemic modalities like: "*I think of...*" and conditional structures "*what if...*" represent the negative shading of the narrative and passivity of the character in performing the actual actions and hence questions her true power in acting or affecting others.

Example ۲: *I would like to steal something from this room. I would like to take some small thing, [...] hide it in the folds of my dress or in my zippered sleeve, [...] Every once in a while, I would take it out and look at it. It would make me feel that I have power. But such a feeling would be an illusion, and too risky. My hands stay where they are, folded in my lap. (p. ۹۰)*

I've been wasting my time. I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance. I should have stolen a knife from the kitchen, found some way to the sewing scissors. [...] I should have paid attention. (p. ۱۱۳)

The desire to steal something is repeated recurrently in the novel, but the act of stealing remains unfinished or is not performed at all. By stealing something, Offred can feel a sense of possessing and empowerment, but she knows: "such a feeling would be an illusion". The objects she desires to steal are petty, but she thinks taking them means that she is doing something by her own and by having them she can create a subjectivity of her own. The recurrent emphasis on stealing something is expressed by the boulemaic or deontic modalities used in the text in the positive shading, but her failure to do so and her inaction is revealed in the preceding sections, in her own language: "What I would like to steal is a knife, from the kitchen, but I'm not ready for that", and also in the unfulfilled obligation: "I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance".

Example ۳: *I think about how I could take the back of the toilet apart, [...] so Cora outside on the chair would not hear me. I could get the sharp lever out and hide it in my sleeve, and smuggle it into the Commander's study, [...] I think about how I could approach the Commander, to kiss him, here alone, and take off his jacket, as if to allow or invite something further, some approach to true love, and put my arms around him and slip the lever out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands. In fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction. (pp. ۱۴۹-۱۵۰)*

Although Offred's participation in the Scrabble game reveals her involvement in some actions, she is not the initiator of them. She is playing with the Commander because he asks her to do so. Sometimes she takes control of the game, but actually she is not playing the main role. In her secret meetings with the Commander, she thinks about several action she could take. She narrates all with epistemic modality and the words which denotes negative shadings like: *as if, maybe*, etc. All these actions remain in her mind and later on she asserts that she couldn't perform any of them.

۴. Conclusion

This study has focused on the novel's language in representing the essence of Offred's voice and her characterization as the first person narrator. Narrated from the marginalized point of view of a female character, the story stands as a way of transgressing Gilead's rules and resistance to the totalitarian oppression. As discussed, Offred's attempt to preserve the past and record the present signify her narrative resistance to Gilead's power. Misinterpreting and questioning Offred's subjectivity in Historical Notes shows that censoring of female body in Gilead has continued in future to censoring of her voice and identity as a whole. Offred's account of events in a heteroglossic nature is put in contrast to the academics' futile attempt to find a singular fixed meaning of reality. In narrating her story, Offred describes some actions which she could or could not perform. Analyzing different occasions (which are considered as a violation or resistance to the state) based on modality system revealed her passive attitude toward them. The selected examples on her failed attempt to escape or steal something, her illusionary power of her seductive body and her relationships with Nick and the Commander show that most of her desired actions remain in her thought and could not take an actual form of resistance. Her way of narrating these actions consists of either epistemic modalities which denote her uncertainty, confusion and estrangement from the events, or deontic and boulamaic modalities which inherently represent her obligation or wishes but finally result in her passivity because of her inability to turn the contemplated desires to be materialized. The actions she succeeds to perform are, nonetheless, petty, inconsequential and hence does not affect anyone. Despite all the suppression and censorship, Offred's narrative survives, but the desired actions which she thought she would perform only remain in the past and do not shape any actual resistance in future.

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