



# Female Identity In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) And Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things* (1997).

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**Abstract:** This research article examines the intricate portrayals of female identity and oppression in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Both novels serve as critical commentaries on the systemic constraints imposed by patriarchal structures and societal expectations that strip women of their autonomy. Atwood's dystopian narrative presents a future where women's bodies are commodified and controlled by a totalitarian regime, exemplified through the character of Offred, who struggles with her identity amidst extreme oppression and the loss of personal agency. Conversely, Roy's narrative unfolds in postcolonial India, focusing on Ammu and her twins, Estha and Rahel, as they navigate the rigid caste and gender norms that dictate their lives, revealing the complexities of love and familial bonds in a repressive society.

The analysis highlights the significance of female solidarity and the internalized misogyny that complicates women's struggles for agency, demonstrating how women can both resist and perpetuate their own oppression. Through their respective journeys, both authors illustrate the transformative power of love and connection in reclaiming identity and resisting societal constraints. The paper argues that true empowerment lies in challenging patriarchal norms and embracing individuality, regardless of the cultural and historical legacies that shape women's experiences. Ultimately, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The God of Small Things* underscore the ongoing fight for gender equality and the necessity of recognizing diverse identities within feminist discourse, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of women's experiences in literature and society.

**Index Terms - Female Identity, Patriarchy, Oppression, Solidarity, Feminism**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a movement that emerged as a response to the systemic oppression of women. Literature serves as a reflection of female struggles against oppression. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopian society where the state controls women's bodies. *The God of Small Things* shows how societal and familial expectations suppress female agency. Both novels illustrate how autonomy is systematically stripped from women through patriarchal norms. In a postcolonial setting, female identity is complex and ever-changing. It necessitates a sophisticated comprehension of power dynamics, cultural variety, historical legacies, and the continuous fight for autonomy and self-determination.

### Female Identity

The critical discourses of feminism and postcolonialism have enhanced our comprehension and capacity for explanation of international relations. It may be argued that the ability of these two theoretical approaches to accept the variety and unpredictable nature of international political and social life has increased dramatically. Understandings of gender and social roles have been profoundly impacted by feminist movements, which have developed in waves. The first wave, which was mainly concerned with legal rights, appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and promoted women's property ownership and suffrage. The second wave, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, expanded the agenda to cover topics like employment equality, reproductive rights, and opposing patriarchal systems. The third wave, which started in the 1990s, is distinguished by its variety and emphasis on intersectionality, acknowledging how gender intersects with other identities such as sexual orientation, race, and class.

As Leela Gandhi notes, it is the encounter with feminism that encourages postcolonialism to 'produce a more critical and self-reflexive account of cultural nationalism' (1 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New Delhi: OUP, 1998. p 102.) However, postcolonialism provides feminism with the conceptual tools it needs to reject universalisms about the gendered realities of both men and women and to recognize diverse locations of oppression.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) discusses the intricate relationship between gender, identity, and societal norms, primarily focusing on the concept of gender performativity. Butler argues that individuals enact their gender through repeated behaviours and expressions, which are influenced by societal norms. She states that "Femininity becomes a mask that dominates/resolves a masculine identification, for a masculine identification would, within the presumed heterosexual matrix of desire, produce a desire for a female object, the Phallus; hence, the donning of femininity as mask may reveal a refusal of a female homosexuality and, at the same time, the hyperbolic incorporation of that female Other who is refused." (Butler, 1990, P.68).

### Postcolonialism and Feminism

Robert J.C. Young, in his book *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (2001), discusses postcolonial theory and its historical context. The text explores the complexities of postcolonialism as a critical framework that analyzes the cultural, political, and social ramifications of colonialism and imperialism on formerly colonized nations and peoples. The Introduction of the text sets the stage for understanding postcolonialism not merely as a reaction to colonial rule but as an ongoing discourse that interrogates the legacies of colonial histories and their influence on contemporary identities and power structures. Young discusses the evolution of postcolonial thought, engaging with key theorists and movements that have shaped the field while also addressing the intersections of race, gender, and class within postcolonial contexts.

He states that "Postcolonial theory always intermingles the past with the present, why it is directed towards the active transformations of the present out of the clutches of the past." (Young, 2001, P.4) and he also discusses that postcolonial history "The postcolonial does not privilege the colonial. It is concerned with colonial history only to the extent that that history has determined the configurations and power structures of the present." (Young, 2001, P.4).

Robert J. Young also provides an examination of feminism in the postcolonial era, emphasizing the intersection of gender and colonial histories. He articulates that postcolonial feminism critiques both traditional feminist movements and colonial narratives, highlighting how these frameworks often overlook the specific experiences of women in formerly colonized societies. Young states, "Postcolonial feminism critiques both traditional feminist movements and colonial narratives" (Young, 2001, P.360).

This critique is essential for understanding the dual oppression faced by women, who navigate both patriarchal structures and the legacies of colonialism. Young further emphasizes the importance of recognizing the agency of women in anti-colonial movements. He notes that their participation has been crucial in shaping political and social landscapes, asserting that "women's role in anti-colonial movements is crucial in shaping political and social landscapes" (Young, 2001, P.362). This acknowledgement of women's contributions challenges the narrative that often marginalizes their experiences and highlights the transformative potential of their activism. Moreover, Young advocates for a more inclusive understanding of feminism that incorporates the voices and experiences of marginalized women. He argues that "postcolonial feminism seeks to highlight the voices and experiences of those often overlooked" (Young, 2001, P.361). This inclusivity is vital for addressing the complexities of identity and culture in postcolonial contexts, ensuring that feminist discourse is representative of diverse experiences.

Finally, Young discusses the impact of anti-colonial struggles on gender roles, suggesting that these movements have significant implications for women's rights and societal structures. He states, "The liberating effect of anti-colonial struggle has significant implications for gender role transformation" (Young,2001, P.373). This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of gender and colonial histories, advocating for a feminist framework that is responsive to the realities of postcolonial societies.

## II. The Handmaid's Tale (1985)

Margaret Atwood is one of the most important writers of modern times, best known for her wide range of work that includes novels, poetry, essays, and criticism. Born in Ottawa, Canada, in 1939, she grew up in the Ontario and Quebec north country, an experience that would greatly influence her outlook on nature and the relationship of humans to it. Her literary output is characterized by a close examination of issues like gender, identity, power relations, and the environment. Her dystopian fiction, in particular. Apart from her fiction, Atwood's commitment to social and political causes is witnessed through her non-fiction output and public activism. She has earned many high-profile awards over her career, establishing herself as a prominent literary figure.

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) written by Margaret Atwood, is a dystopian novel set in a near-future society known as Gilead, which has emerged in the wake of environmental disasters and societal collapse. The story is narrated by Offred, a Handmaid whose sole purpose is to bear children for the ruling elite, reflecting the extreme subjugation of women in this totalitarian regime. Atwood's narrative delves into themes of power, gender, and identity, exploring how a patriarchal society can strip individuals of their autonomy and humanity. The novel is structured as a series of flashbacks and present-day experiences, allowing readers to witness Offred's memories of her previous life, filled with love, freedom, and personal agency. As she navigates the oppressive rules of Gilead, Offred grapples with her sense of self and the hope for a better future. Through her eyes, Atwood critiques the dangers of fanaticism and the loss of individual rights, making *The Handmaid's Tale* a powerful commentary on the fragility of freedom and the resilience of the human spirit. The book serves as both a cautionary tale and a call to action, urging readers to reflect on the importance of agency and the fight against oppression.

Applying feminist theory to *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals how Margaret Atwood critiques patriarchal structures and explores the implications of gender oppression. Feminist theory emphasizes the social, political, and economic inequalities faced by women, and Atwood's novel serves as a powerful commentary on these issues through its depiction of a dystopian society where women's identities and rights are systematically stripped away.

One of the central tenets of feminist theory is the examination of how language and power intersect to reinforce gender roles. As Judith Butler states, "Language works neither magically nor inexorably: there is a plasticity of the real to language; language has a plastic action upon the real" (Butler,1990, P.33). In Gilead, language is weaponized to control women and maintain the patriarchal order. The use of phrases like "Blessed be the fruit" and "Under His Eye" serves to remind women of their subservient roles and the constant surveillance they are under. Offred reflects on this manipulation of language, stating, "I know why we're here. We're here to be a resource" (Atwood,1985, P.136). This quote underscores how women are reduced to their reproductive capabilities, illustrating the dehumanizing effects of a society that prioritizes control over individuality.

Feminist theory also emphasizes the importance of female solidarity and the power of collective resistance. Throughout the novel, Offred's relationships with other women, such as Moira and Ofglen, highlight the potential for solidarity in the face of oppression. "The power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression" (Butler,1990, P.33). Moira, in particular, embodies a rebellious spirit that inspires Offred. Offred describes her as "Moira was our fantasy" (Atwood,1985, P.149), indicating that Moira represents hope and defiance against the oppressive regime. This connection between women serves as a crucial element of resistance, suggesting that solidarity can empower women to reclaim their identities and challenge patriarchal structures.

Moreover, the theme of motherhood and its implications for female identity are significant in the context of feminist theory. “The law that refuses the girl’s desire for both her mother and father requires that she take up the emblem of maternity and perpetuate the rules of kinship” (Butler,1990, P.150). In Gilead, motherhood is commodified, and women are valued primarily for their ability to bear children. Offred’s reflections on her daughter and her past life reveal the emotional toll of this commodification. She recalls, “I want to be with her. I want to be with her” (Atwood,1985, P.60), expressing the deep longing for connection and the pain of separation.

This longing highlights the emotional complexities of motherhood in a society that reduces women to mere vessels, emphasizing the need for a feminist critique of how motherhood is constructed and valued. Atwood also critiques the notion of female complicity in patriarchal systems through characters like Serena Joy, the Wife of the Commander. Serena embodies the internalized misogyny that can occur when women uphold patriarchal values to gain power within the system. Offred observes, “She’s not a person, she’s a Wife” (Atwood,1985, P.134), illustrating how even women in positions of power are still subjugated by the overarching patriarchal structure. This dynamic reflects feminist theory’s exploration of how women can perpetuate their oppression, often at the expense of other women.

Feminist theory in the novel reveals the intricate ways in which Atwood critiques patriarchal structures and explores the complexities of female identity in a dystopian context. Through the manipulation of language, the importance of female solidarity, the commodification of motherhood, and the dynamics of power among women, Atwood’s novel serves as a powerful commentary on the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the reclamation of female identity.

### III. *The God of Small Things* (1997)

Arundhati Roy is a prominent Indian author and activist whose works are known for their incisive social commentary and lyrical prose. Born in Shillong, Meghalaya, in 1961, she initially pursued a career in architecture before turning to writing. Her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, catapulted her to international acclaim, winning the 1997 Booker Prize.

Roy’s writing extends beyond fiction, encompassing essays and political activism that address issues of environmentalism, social justice, and political dissent. She has consistently challenged prevailing power structures and advocated for marginalized communities, often voicing strong criticisms of government policies and corporate influence. Her work is characterized by a deep commitment to human rights and a willingness to engage with complex and controversial topics. Feminism, as a movement and theoretical framework, seeks to address and challenge the inequalities and injustices faced by women in society. It advocates for women’s rights, autonomy, and the dismantling of patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender discrimination. In literature, feminist theory examines how texts reflect, reinforce, or resist societal norms regarding gender roles and the experiences of women.

In Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, feminism is intricately woven into the narrative, highlighting the struggles of women against oppressive societal norms. The novel centres on the lives of Ammu and her twins, Estha and Rahel, exploring their experiences within a rigidly patriarchal society in Kerala, India. Ammu’s quest for love and independence serves as a poignant critique of the constraints placed on women, as she grapples with the expectations of family and society.

Roy’s portrayal of female characters reveals the complexities of their identities and the impact of societal pressures. Where Judith Butler states “If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way.” (Butler,1990, P.10) For instance, Ammu’s relationship with Velutha challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the consequences of defying societal expectations.

The novel also examines internalized misogyny, “The power that sciences and institutions can effect a physical and material violence against the bodies they claim to organize and interpret.” (Butler,1990, P.150) is presented in characters like Baby Kochamma, who perpetuates patriarchal values, demonstrating how women can sometimes become complicit in their oppression.

In the novel Roy intricately explores the theme of feminist identity through the experiences of her female characters, particularly Ammu and the twins, Estha and Rahel. Ammu’s struggle for identity is central to the narrative. As a divorced woman in a conservative society, she faces immense stigma and is often marginalized. Her desire for love and autonomy is expressed when she states, “I want to be able to love and

be loved” (Roy,1997, P.25). This longing reflects her quest for a personal identity that transcends societal labels and expectations. Ammu’s relationship with Velutha becomes a pivotal moment in her journey toward self-assertion, as it represents her defiance against the rigid caste and gender norms that seek to confine her.

The twins, Estha and Rahel, also struggle with their identities in a world that imposes strict definitions of gender roles. Judith Butler’s description of gender roles states that “The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.” (Butler,1990.P.10) Their bond serves as a source of strength and resilience, allowing them to navigate the trauma of their upbringing. The quote, “They were two halves of a single whole” (Roy,1997, P.102), emphasizes their interconnectedness and the importance of female solidarity in shaping their identities. This connection provides them with a sense of belonging and support in a society that often alienates them. Roy also critiques the internalized misogyny that affects women’s identities through the character of Baby Kochamma. Her manipulation of Ammu and the twins illustrates how women can perpetuate patriarchal values. Baby Kochamma’s statement, “Your lovely little cousin’s body is lying in the drawing room. The fish have eaten out her eyes” (Roy,1997,P.148), serves as a reminder of the guilt and shame that can be used to control women’s actions. This dynamic highlights the complexities of female identity, as women navigate both external societal pressures and internalized beliefs.

Ammu’s identity is profoundly affected by her status as a divorced woman in a society that stigmatizes her choices. Her struggle for autonomy is poignantly captured in her assertion, “Love and the law were not the same thing” (Roy,1997,P.167). This statement underscores her realization that societal norms often conflict with personal desires, highlighting the tension between her quest for love and the legal and cultural constraints that seek to define her worth. Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, a man from a lower caste, becomes a radical act of defiance against the oppressive structures that dictate her life. Their love, though fleeting, symbolizes a moment of liberation and self-assertion for Ammu, as she momentarily escapes the confines of her societal identity.

The twins, Estha and Rahel, also navigate their identities in a world that imposes rigid gender roles. Their bond is a sanctuary from the external pressures they face, allowing them to explore their individuality. The quote, “They were each other’s” (Roy,1997,P.102), emphasizes the depth of their connection and the way it shapes their identities. This relationship serves as a counter-narrative to the isolation often experienced by women in patriarchal societies, illustrating how solidarity can empower individuals to resist societal expectations.

Moreover, the novel addresses the intersectionality of gender and caste, showcasing how these identities are intertwined. Velutha’s character represents the marginalized, and his relationship with Ammu challenges the caste system’s rigid boundaries. Ammu’s love for Velutha is a powerful assertion of her identity, as it defies the societal expectations that seek to keep them apart. The quote, “He was her most beloved friend” (Roy,1997, P.102), encapsulates the depth of their connection and the transformative power of love in shaping identity.

*The God of Small Things* offers a wide exploration of feminist identity, illustrating the struggles and triumphs of women as they navigate the complexities of love, societal expectations, and personal agency. Through Ammu’s journey, the twins’ bond, and the critique of internalized misogyny, Roy emphasizes the importance of reclaiming identity and the power of female solidarity in resisting patriarchal constraints. The narrative advocates for the recognition of women’s agency and the right to define one’s own identity, making it a significant contribution to feminist literature. The novel ultimately suggests that true empowerment lies in the ability to challenge societal norms and embrace one’s individuality, regardless of the constraints imposed by gender and caste.

#### IV. Conclusion

Both Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) offer powerful explorations of female identity within oppressive societal structures. Through their distinct narratives, these authors demonstrate how patriarchal norms and societal expectations systematically strip women of their autonomy.

Atwood's dystopian Gilead serves as a stark warning, highlighting the dangers of extreme control and the weaponization of language to enforce gender roles. The Handmaids' forced submission and the commodification of their bodies illustrate the dehumanizing effects of a system that prioritizes control over individuality. Conversely, Roy's portrayal of Ammu's struggle in postcolonial India reveals the complex interplay of caste, class, and gender in limiting women's agency. Ammu's defiance and her pursuit of love and autonomy challenge the rigid social codes that dictate women's lives.

Both novels emphasize the significance of female solidarity and resistance. Despite the oppressive environments they inhabit, the characters find strength in their connections with other women. The power of these bonds underscores the potential for collective action in the face of adversity. Furthermore, the authors critique the internalization of misogyny, demonstrating how women can perpetuate their own oppression by upholding patriarchal values.

Ultimately, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The God of Small Things* serve as compelling critiques of the forces that seek to control and define women's identities. They highlight the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of reclaiming agency in the face of systemic oppression. These narratives emphasize that true empowerment lies in challenging societal norms and embracing individuality, regardless of the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures.

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