

The Multilayered Subjectivity of Aunt Lydia in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale* and *The Testaments*

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Abstract: This article discusses the multilayered subjectivity and identity of Aunt Lydia in Margaret Atwood's novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019). The study aims to reveal the complexity and paradoxical nature of Aunt Lydia's character through the perspective of feminist literary criticism. The analysis focuses on the intrinsic aspects of identity, subjectivity, and characterization represented through Aunt Lydia, while also examining the extrinsic context related to Margaret Atwood's perspectives on feminism and social issues. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method and applies feminist literary criticism, particularly poststructuralist feminist theories concerning identity and subjectivity. The findings show that Aunt Lydia is portrayed as a paradoxical figure with multilayered personality traits and subjectivity associated with third-wave feminism and post feminism. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia is depicted as an anti-feminist figure from a second wave feminist perspective, however, in *The Testaments*, she is represented as a character with fragmented identities and contradictory subjectivities. Through Aunt Lydia's characterization, Atwood challenges restrictive feminist categorizations and reject being confined to a single feminist perspective.

Keywords: Aunt Lydia, Multilayered Subjectivity, Feminist Literary Criticism, Post Feminism, Margaret Atwood.

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is widely recognized as a Canadian novelist and poet who has written more than twenty books, including poetry, nonfiction, fiction, children's literature, and short stories. Her literary works encompass various genres and themes, ranging from dystopian fiction, realism, experimental literature, and detective fiction to political, environmental, gender, and socio-cultural issues (Macpherson, 2010; Arniati et al., 2019; Abbas et al., 2023; Irmayani et al., 2024). These diverse themes frequently portray women as a central character with complex and multifaced identities. *The Testaments* (2019) is the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), continuing the story of dystopian state of Gilead (Gündüz, 2022). More than thirty years after the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood revisits the authoritarian regime of Gilead and further explores the oppression experienced by women under patriarchal rule.

In the world of Gilead, women are systematically subordinated within a patriarchal totalitarian system that restricts their social roles and autonomy (Rasyid & Sahraeny, 2020). Women are exploited not only as inferior members of society but also a reproductive instruments controlled by the state (Arbaoui, 2018). Such oppression ultimately deprives women of their identity and sense of self (Mirzayee, 2025). While *The Handmaid Tale* primarily focuses on Offred as the central character. *The Testaments* expands the narrative perspective through three female characters: Agnes, Jemima, Nicole, and Aunt Lydia. Among these characters, Aunt Lydia emerges as one of the most intriguing and complex figures. Her existence in both novels portrays multiple roles within the Gileadean system, positioning her simultaneously as an oppressor, survivor, strategist, and resistant subject. This multiplicity of roles influences Aunt Lydia's construction of identity and subjectivity,

making her character debatable within feminist discourse, particularly between second wave feminism, third wave feminism and postfeminist perspectives. In *The Handmaid Tales* Aunt Lydia is commonly portrayed as a representative of patriarchal oppression who reinforces the subjugation of women. However, *The Testaments* presents her with greater complexity by revealing her hidden motives, resistance, and strategic manipulation of power.

Numerous studies have examined Margaret Atwood's novels, particularly *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, focusing on themes such as identity, oppression, feminism, and women's struggle to regain identity and selfhood through characters such as Offred (Mirzayee, 2025), (Vinoth & Vijayakumar, 2023), self-communication and subject formation (Dhungana, 2023), and paradoxical oppression within patriarchal systems. These studies generally emphasize the concept of women as an autonomous and rational subject associated with second wave feminist perspectives (Tolan, 2004), in which women are viewed as autonomous and rational human beings capable of constructing their own identities. In this context, subjectivity refers to the conscious thoughts and feelings through which individuals develop their sense of self (Weedon, in Eagleton, 2003:112).

Meanwhile the previous studies on Atwood's *The Testaments* reveal new perspectives regarding fragmented subjectivity and female identity. Gündüz (2022) discusses the fractured subjectivity experienced by the main characters, while Weiss (2023) examines the performance of dual gender roles represented through Aunt Lydia's character. These perspectives are closely related to third wave feminism and postfeminist discourse, which emphasize diversity, multiplicity, and fluid identity (Waugh, 2012:169). Wallace (2009) argues that the diversity of female identities portrayed in Atwood's novels aligns more closely with third wave feminism, particularly post feminism. Considering these previous studies, this article further explores Aunt Lydia's character in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* as a representation of the debate between second wave and third wave feminism. Aunt Lydia's contradictory identity and multilayered subjectivity ultimately should be understood more as a realist narrative rather than strictly feminist text (Tolan, 2004).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Woman's subjectivity and identity are central issues in feminism, which reject the assumption that women's identity and subjectivity are naturally given. Instead, feminism argues that women's identity and subjectivity are socially constructed under the hegemony of patriarchal culture (Einspahr, 2010; Abbas et al., 2024; Tenrisanna et al., 2024; Junaid et al., 2024). According to Beauvoir (as cited in Walters, 2005, p. 98), women have historically been denied the status of full human beings capable of creating, inventing, comprehending themselves as subjects, and understanding the meaning of life. In the context of second wave feminism, subjectivity emphasizes that women can attain their identity through the free development of their rationality (Weedon, as cited in Eagleton, 2003, p. 128). Meanwhile, third wave feminism significantly shifts the understanding of subjectivity and identity through the influence of post structuralist and postmodern feminist theories. These perspectives argue that subjectivity is historically produced and continuously shaped by changes within various discursive fields (Weedon, as cited in Hall, 2004, p. 101).

One of the prominent figures in feminist poststructuralism is Judith Butler. Butler (1990, p. 13) argues that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gender category." Influenced by Foucault's theory of discourse, Butler (1993, pp.1-2) further explains that discourse defines, constructs, and produces bodies as objects of knowledge. In the sense, sex is not only understood as a biological norm but also as part of regulatory practices that construct and discipline the body. Furthermore, Butler's concept of subjectivity and identity suggests that identity is formed through repeated social performances that are internalized by individuals. This process is conceptualized through Butler's notion of performativity (Weedon, 2004, p. 6).

III. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research method within the framework of feminist literary criticism. The primary sources of data are Margaret Atwood's novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985/2017) and *The Testaments* (2019), with a particular focus on the character of Aunt Lydia. The analysis combines intrinsic and extrinsic approaches. The intrinsic approach examines characterization, narrative structure, identity construction, subjectivity, dialogue, and Aunt Lydia's interactions within the patriarchal system of Gilead. Meanwhile, the extrinsic approach explores Margaret Atwood's perspective on feminism, women's issues, post feminism, and social criticism through relevant interviews, essays, and scholarly discussions.

The data were collected through close reading, note-taking, and textual categorization techniques. Selected quotations, narrative descriptions, and dialogues related to identity and subjectivity were categorized and interpreted using feminist literary criticism, particularly Judith Butler's theory of performativity, and post structuralist feminism. The data analysis was conducted through several stages, including data reduction, classification, and interpretation. To strengthen the validity of the interpretation, the study also applied theoretical triangulation by comparing feminist perspectives and scholarly sources related identity, subjectivity, and feminist discourse.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Handmaid's Tale set in the dystopian Republic of Gilead and focuses on the life of Offred as the main character. Offred is a woman assigned to a "barrack" or camp to become a handmaid, whose role is to serve Commanders sexually for reproductive purposes. As explained in the previous chapter, the decline in the human population after the war led to the establishment of the Republic of Gilead, which seeks to increase the population by controlling fertile women and placing them in a reproductive system. This system reduces women not as human beings, but as objects used for specific purpose. To maintain this system, Gilead employs women responsible for educating and indoctrinating the Handmaids, known as "The Aunts," one of whom is Aunt Lydia. Although Aunt Lydia is less explored in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the role in maintaining the Gilead system story's background imaginatively in the Republic of Gilead which focused on the Offered life as main character. Offred is woman who sent to in "barrack" or camp to be handmaid, where her job is to serve sexually of the commander for having baby. As it is stated in the previous chapter the deficit of human population after war, has created such Republic to find the way for increase the population by mobilizing the health women to be sent in barrack for baby production system. Thus, this is at least redefining the woman not as human, but as stuff or thing that can be used for certain purpose. To ensure this system run perfectly, Gilead employ women who responsible in educating and indoctrinating the handmaids, called "The Aunt" where one of them is Lydia or "The Aunt Lydia". Despite she less explored in *The Handmaid's Tales*, but her role in maintaining the Gilead system is highly significant, particularly through her propaganda against liberal society. The following quotation illustrates the social order before and after the rise republic of Gilead.

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 ...

We seemed to be able to choose, then. We were a society of dying, saint Aunt Lydia, off too much choice. (TMT, 24)

This quotation reflects how Gilead reconstructs the concept of freedom through ideological discourse. Aunt Lydia redefines freedom not as individual autonomy, but as protection from social chaos and moral danger. From a post structuralist feminist perspective, this demonstrates how patriarchal discourse manipulates language to normalize women's oppression. Aunt Lydia functions as an ideological agent who internalizes and reproduces the regime's values. However, her later transformation in *The Testaments* reveals the instability of this imposed identity, supporting Butler's

argument that identity is performative and continuously negotiated through discourse and power relations.

Aunt Lydia serves as the warden of the Red Center and administrator of Ardua Hall. She is portrayed as a supporter of the patriarchal system, particularly the Gilead Regime, which exploits women cruelly. Aunt Lydia is depicted as an anti-feminist figure with strong authority and influence in enforcing Gilead's doctrines upon women, especially the Handmaids. She is also responsible for supervising the ritualized sexual practices between Commanders and Handmaids. In *The Testaments*, however, Aunt Lydia is portrayed as a paradoxical and contradictory character. On one hand, she presents herself as a loyal supporter of the Gilead system and one of the key figures behind the women's institutional structure in Gilead. On the other hand, she strategically uses her authority to undermine the regime by smuggling confidential documents exposing Gilead's crimes and protecting key witnesses, including Agnes and Baby Nicole. Furthermore, *The Testaments* reveals the rise of Gilead's authoritarian power after overthrowing the previous liberal government. Under the justification of religion, the regime restructures social hierarchy based on gender and establishes a rigid patriarchal system that controls women's bodies, identities, and freedom.

Aunt Lydia, through her dairy notes reveals the background she became an Aunt as well as the internal conflicts between her desire to survive within the regime and her ambition to take revenge on the Gilead system. The following paragraphs discuss Aunt Lydia's identity and the events surrounding her that shape her inner conflict. This internal conflict that also reveals her position as a woman and as a subject.

Did I weep? Yes: tears came out of my two visible eyes, my moist weeping human eyes. But I had a third eye, in the middle of my forehead. I could feel it: it was cold, like a stone. It did not weep: it saw. And behind it someone was thinking: *I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it* (TT, 149)

The metaphor of the "third eye" symbolized Lydia's dual consciousness and fragmented subjectivity. Although she outwardly performs obedience to the regime, internally she develops resistance and critical awareness. This paradox illustrates Butler's concept of performativity, in which identity is not fixed but repeatedly constructed through social performance. Lydia's outward identity as "Aunt Lydia" become a strategic performance for survival, while her internal self continuously resists patriarchal domination.

Before the Gilead regime overthrew the previous government, Aunt Lydia worked as a judge. This position indicates that her identity and subjectivity reflected qualities traditionally associated with masculine values, such as intelligence, rationality, autonomy, and access to public affairs. Despite experiencing psychological and physical torture under the Gilead regime, Lydia does not lose her mentality or sense of self. On the contrary, these traumatic experiences strengthen her determination to seek revenge against the regime from within. Therefore, Lydia strategically modifies her identity in order to fulfill the regime's expectations by proving her capability in establishing and managing the women's system in Gilead, particularly the Handmaid system. Moreover, because Gilead depends on her authority and competence, she is able to attain an important position within the regime. This position given her broad access to Gilead's institutions and grants her significant power, enabling her to carefully arrange plans to undermine the regime internally.

But there are three other reasons for my political longevity. First, the regime needs me. I control the women's side of their enterprise with an iron fist in a leather glove in a woollen mitten, and I keep things orderly: like a harem eunuch, I am uniquely placed to do so. Second, I know too much about the leaders—too much dirt—and they are uncertain as to what I may have done with it in the way of documentation. If they string me up,

will that dirt somehow be leaked? They might well suspect I've taken backup precautions, and they would be right. Third, I'm discreet. Each one of the top men has always felt that his secrets are safe with me; but —as I've made obliquely clear—only so long as I myself am safe. (TT,62)

This quotation reveals that Aunt Lydia's authority is rooted not only in loyalty to Gilead but also in her strategic manipulation of knowledge and secrecy. Her access to confidential information allows her to negotiate power within a patriarchal structure that normally excludes women from political authority. Therefore, Lydia simultaneously occupies the position of both oppressor and oppressed subject. This contradictory position reflects the multilayered nature of female subjectivity within authoritarian systems.

Aunt Lydia's case provides an important example for feminist analysis, particularly in relation to women's personality, identity, and subjectivity. The study of subjectivity and identity seeks to answer questions concerning the concept of the "self" or the "I." Identity represents the processes through which discursively constructed subject positions are adopted by individuals through emotional investments and personal identifications (Barker, 2012, p. 220). Meanwhile, subjectivity can be understood as a dialogical and changing identity, characterized by unity within multiplicity (Zima, 2015:28), or as the thinking and feeling entity, the mind, ego and the conscious self (Weedon in Eagleton, 2003:112). Therefore, Subjectivity and identity become important issues in the search for a "true" female identity and the possibility for women to establish themselves as autonomous selves. Weedon argues that subjectivity, as it occurs in feminist theory, variously refers to the conscious thoughts and feelings of the individual, her sense of self and, in psychoanalytic and post-structuralist contexts, it encompasses unconscious meanings, wishes and desires. In addition to 'subject' and 'subjectivity', the terms 'experience' and 'identity' occur regularly in feminist discussion (in Eagleton, 2003: 112). The multilayered identity and subjectivity of Aunt Lydia reflect what Judith Butler describes as "performativity," in which identity is constructed through social and discursive formations. The title "Aunt Lydia" represents the identity imposed by the Gilead regime to maintain its system successfully, whereas "Lydia" symbolizes the suppressed identity that continuously resists the regime internally.

From a poststructuralist feminist perspective, Aunt Lydia represents a discursive or performed identity. According to Butler (as cited in Weiss, 2023), gender should not be understood as a stable identity or fixed locus of agency from which actions originate. Similarly, Barker (2012, p. 229) argues that identity, womanhood, feminism, history, and collectivity are discursive constructions that remain unstable and are only temporarily stabilized through social practices.

The feminine subject is fragmented, dispersed, in attempt to rupture or deconstruct the fixed ego form doubly in alienation (Waugh, 1989: 169).

As part of her survival strategy, Aunt Lydia accepts the role of the main "administrator," performing the identity expected by the regime. She becomes responsible for managing the Handmaid system, supervising the ceremonial sexual rituals between Handmaids and Commanders, and overseeing the indoctrination process within Gilead. However, this identity functions merely as an external performance. Internally, she rejects the identity performance upon her and secretly arranges plans to destroy both the role and the Gilead system itself. Aunt Lydia's split identity and subjectivity support Hall's argument (2004, p.101) that subjects are constructed through social discourse. Nevertheless, individuals still possess the capacity to think, feel, resist, innovate, and critically reflect upon the discourses that position them within society.

The Handmaid's Tale represents the perspective of second wave feminism, particularly through its emphasis on women's subjectivity and identity. In contrast, *The Testaments*, especially through the character of Aunt Lydia, reveals the multilayered and fragmented nature of identity associated with second wave feminism (Tolan, 2004) or third wave feminism (Waugh, 2012; Wallace, 2009) can be understood by considering the different feminist perspectives reflected

throughout Atwood's writings. Margaret Atwood has produced more than fifty works across various genres, including fiction, short stories, poetry, non fiction, children's literature, graphic novels, television scripts, and theatre. Regarding Atwood's literary style, Hutcheon argues (as cited in Lane, 2011, p. 181):

Atwood's writing is subsequently subversive, playfully destabilizing the certainties of realism and popular genres such as the romance, but as with so many other postmodern novels, her writing also destabilizes more traditional notions of subjectivity, found in biographical, autobiographical or historical narratives.

Despite her close association with feminist movements, Atwood refuses to label her work strictly as feminist literature. As cited by Tolan (2004), Atwood states, "I don't consider it feminism, I just consider it social realist." Nevertheless, Atwood's works are strongly connected to women's issues and feminist concerns, particularly in relation to identity, subjectivity, and social oppression. Kusnicky (2017, p.10) argues that Atwood grew alongside contemporary women's movements, which influenced her portrayal of changing female subjectivities over time. Consequently, both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* present women's identity and subjectivity through various forms and characters. As a realist writer, Atwood portrays female characters and identities in ways that reflect the realities experienced by women in Society. Although Atwood rejects the feminist label for her writing, her literary works over the past five decades consistently engage with questions of women's identity and subjectivity. Therefore, her works maintain a strong dialectical relationship with feminist theory, ranging from second wave feminism to third wave and postmodern feminist perspectives. At the same time, her novels also reflect broader concerns regarding humanity, power, oppression, and social control in general.

V. CONCLUSION

Aunt Lydia emerges as one of the most significant characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. As a powerful woman within the Gileadean regime, she initially plays an important role in establishing and maintaining the Handmaid system. Through Aunt Lydia's character, Atwood portrays the paradoxical identity and subjectivity of women within a patriarchal totalitarian society. Through her journal, Aunt Lydia reveals her changing perspective toward the Gilead system as she gradually realizes that the regime exploits women as commodities. In short, Aunt Lydia not only represents a figure who actively supports and participates in the establishment of the Gilead Regime, but also embodies a subject who silently resists the system from within. Her paradoxical consciousness and fragmented identity reflect the complexity of women's subjectivity within oppressive social structures. Furthermore, this paradox demonstrates that Atwood's novels cannot be confined to a single feminist perspective or theory. Instead, her works explore broader issues of identity, power, oppression, and humanity. This also supports Atwood's own claim that her writing should be regarded more as social realism than exclusively as feminist literature.

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Conflict of Interest

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