

# GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION EXPERIENCED BY THE MAIN CHARACTER IN *HANDMAID'S TALE* BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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## ABSTRACT

The Handmaid Tale is a literary work created by Margaret Atwood in 1985. This novel tells of a woman named Offred who lives in a dystopian country called the Republic of Gilead. She experienced various forms of gender discrimination. This novel reflects criticism of forms of gender discrimination where women are treated inhumanely and do not have freedom in their lives. Two research questions are addressed in this study. The first question aims to find out the forms of gender discrimination experienced by Offred. The second question aims to find out how the main character deals with the gender discrimination she experiences. The research method used in this research is qualitative. Sources of this research include novels, books, and journals. Three feminist theories are used in this study to analyze and answer research questions: Rivkin and Ryan, Simone de Beauvoir, and Laura Mulvey. This research's impact is encouraging women to engage in critical thinking and not make themselves objects to men. In conducting this study, the researcher identified various forms of gender discrimination that contribute to the development of the main character.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, feminism, gender roles

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## INTRODUCTION

This study is to show how novels can be used as social critiques of gender discrimination. The tradition of gender discrimination has existed for quite a long time, especially in countries that still adhere to a patriarchal tradition. There are many forms of gender discrimination, including the fact that women cannot get higher education, sexual harassment, violence against women, sexual assault, and multiple burdens. This condition is harmful to women's rights and must be eliminated immediately. Despite

many criticisms and demonstrations, women continue to be discriminated against in some countries.

Discrimination against women has long been regarded as a major problem that feminists have continued to resist in their efforts to obtain their rights and equality. According to Suardi in the Journal *Social Implications Of Gender Discrimination* (2016), Gender discrimination is influenced by factors from **biological construction** (men are considered to be physically stronger than women), **patriarchal cultural construction** (men are regarded as priority successors to the clan and women are treated as second-class or subordinate groups) and **religious construction** (In the Muslim religion, men are considered as leaders (faith) who lead women, so women must obey the words of their husband)

The concept of gender discrimination was defined by DiThomaso (1989) in Sharyn (2004) as unequal rewards obtained by men and women due to their gender. Meanwhile, Roeske and Plek (1983) in Sharyn (2004) state the definition of gender discrimination occurs when an individual has limited access to resources due to their gender. An individual may experience interference when accessing these resources. Gender discrimination is still correlated with sexism.

*The second sex* book by Beauvoir (2011) addresses the discrimination and oppression of women. The patriarchal system especially social institutions and families oppresses women from a biological perspective due to women's reproductive capacity and sexuality. Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) women are considered sexual objects and must be treated as such to be regarded as functions that have use value.

Discrimination against gender is also related to roles assigned to women and men. Amy M. Blackstone (2003) describes gender roles as those roles that men and women are assigned based on their gender, culture, and general belief. Traditional gender roles define masculinity and femininity in women and men. In traditional gender roles, women have reproductive roles and do domestic work. According to Picher & Whelehan (2013, p. 31), industrialization and the domestic division of labor under the conventional concept have dictated that men are primarily responsible for providing household finances and women are primarily responsible for managing the household.

A novel is a literary work that describes a critique of social issues. On the other hand, literary works can describe the state of society but at the same time, society can also contribute to and influence the creation of literary works. *The Handmaid's Tale*, written by Atwood, illustrates the issue of gender discrimination against women. Gender discrimination still occurs today in various parts of the world, including Indonesia. The country in which the researcher was born and raised.

The following data shows that gender discrimination is still relevant today. Based on UNICEF data, as many as 129 million girls are out of school. In countries facing conflicts, such as wars and pandemics, girls drop out twice as often. In addition to poverty and child marriage, gender-based violence contributes to this problem. According to the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law 2022 report. In 86 countries, women are prohibited from working, and in 95 countries, women are not paid equally to men.

Abortion is legal in only 119 countries under certain conditions. In 24 countries, women need permission from their husbands to work and have a career. As many as 47% of the world's people believe that men can make better decisions than women. The reason is that men tend to use logic and women tend to use feelings. Around the world, approximately 22% of girls between the ages of 15-19 have no education, employment, or training (NEET), compared to only 12% of adolescent boys aged 15-19 who do not have any education, employment, or training.

Similar cases of gender discrimination were found in Indonesia, where gender-based violence tended to rise during COVID-19. Based on Perempuan Statistics, domestic violence has risen eight times to 63%, resulting in 299,911 cases of crimes against women in 2020. The trend of increasing cases of rape and harassment in the period 2016-2021 increased by 31%. According to Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) in Tribun News, the number of child marriages that occurred in 2020 was 10.18%, mostly in rural areas. This is due to many girls dropping out of school and poor economic conditions.

This study aims to analyze the issue of feminism related to gender discrimination. Firstly, the researcher will analyze the forms of gender discrimination that are reflected

in the novel. Secondly, the researcher will examine the characters' development toward discrimination.

### **Literature Review**

Delmar (p.5) in Eka Wilani (2017) Women are discriminated against because of their gender. In that situation, women's rights and needs are neglected. To be able to fulfill their rights and needs, a radical feminist movement is needed. Bell Hooks (2000 p.1), feminism is a movement to end acts of sexism, exploitation, and discrimination against women. Many people have the wrong view of feminism because feminism is seen as anti-male. This misunderstanding arises when people see the point of view of feminism through the patriarchal mass media.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are depicted as having a lower status than men. Women are considered slaves by men. According to Rivkin and Ryan (2017), women's voices are silenced to satisfy men's needs. This is because it is women who do not possess the authority to fight for their rights and are unable to speak out for themselves. In the Republic of Gilead, women's voices are silenced to ensure they are unable to stand up against the government; if a woman spoke up, she would be put to death.

Beauvoir views a woman's body as a prison. In maternity, women are defined based on their biology and reproductive capacity. A system dominated by men considers women not to be humans but a mechanism that requires them to submit to and serve men. Due to this condition, men have benefited, whereas women have suffered disadvantages, including discrimination and oppression.

"Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones" (Beauvoir 2011. p.25)

Men view women as sexual objects in the gaze of the Male Gaze theory. Women are seen as passive parties because women are perceived as sexual objects by heterosexual men who look at them. As opposed to women, men are considered active parties. They will project a woman's body in accordance with the fantasy they have in their minds.

(Mulvey, 1989: 19). In the eyes of men, women are only objects of lustful male desire without consideration for their personalities.

**The researcher applied feminist theory to three studies related to the topic of gender discrimination.** The first study is a publication by Andra & Diana in the UNESU journal entitled *Handmaid as The Object of Sexism in Gilead Society: A feminist Analysis in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid Tale*. This journal has one research objective, which is to examine how handmaids have become objects of sexism in Gilead society. This study applies feminist theory to examine sexism. The findings of this study indicate that sexism can oppress women in many ways and can be used as a system that regulates women's lives. Also, the handmaids demonstrated resistance to the oppression they endured.

The second study is a study by Bahman and Shirin (2019) entitled "*Women's Oppressed and Disfigured Life in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*" which was published in the international journal of the Australian International Academic Centre (AIAC). The objective of this journal is to find out the forms of oppression against women. The findings of this study indicate that Offred experienced sexual harassment, women's subordination, and exploitation of women.

The third study is a publication by Scholastica in the UNESU Journal entitled *Offred's Resistance Against Oppression in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* (2019) by Skolastika. One of the objectives of this study is to analyze the way in which the main character, Offred, becomes a radical person. Based on this study, Offred is hostile to the Republic of Gilead for two reasons: the Republic of Gilead imposes strict regulations that restrict freedom. Secondly, Offred is exploited by the Republic of Gilead by conceiving babies in order to increase the population of the Republic.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a feminist analysis. Researchers will use the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as the main source for this study. Secondary sources that will be examined in this study are journals and books that are related to feminism and gender discrimination. The data analyzed in this study are in the form of excerpts taken from the novel *The*

Handmaid's Tale. Researchers will use qualitative research methods by color-coding the excerpts.

The purpose of coding is to obtain excerpts that indicate forms of gender discrimination. Data analysis will use the method of coding such as selecting and grouping excerpts based on two research questions. Firstly, the data are in the form of excerpts that focus on forms of gender discrimination. Secondly, the data taken is in the form of excerpts related to the development of Offred's feelings about gender discrimination. After the data are selected and grouped, the data will be synthesized.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Data Collection

To collect data for this research, the researcher will use qualitative methods to select and group excerpts from the novel according to color coding. Color coding will function to represent the types of gender discrimination experienced by the main character which is grouped into six colors as formulated below.

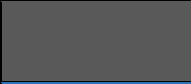







Color	Code	Meaning	Gender discrimination
	#3A3B3C	Dark grey	Women Voice Issues
	#003366	Blue	Domestic Roles Issues
	#000000	Black	Reproductive Right Issues
	#C00000	Red	Sexual Oppression Issues
	#FFFFFF	White	Female Education Issues
	#7300AB	Dark Purple	Institutional oppression
	#FF6600	Orange	Victim Blaming
	#96B00	Brown	Women Objectification

Table 1. Color coding formula

## **2. Gender-Based Discrimination**

### **2.1. Women Voices Issues**

Offred is a woman who lives in a dystopian country called the Republic of Gilead. Before becoming a handmaid, Offred underwent training at the Red Center to prepare her to become a handmaid. Gilead prohibited exchanging personal information, such as real names, so women could only speak in whispers. The exchange of information is against Gilead's laws and women must always remain silent. According to Rivkin and Ryan (2017 p.765) In a patriarchal system, men gain power and authority. Their actions can silence women's voices and distort their lives.

"We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way, we exchanged names" (Atwood, 2019, p. 15)

### **2.2. Domestic Roles Issues**

For the next few months, handmaids can take care of the babies they give birth to by feeding their breast milk to their newborn children. After that, the handmaids will be employed by another commander. Handmaids who have successfully given birth will not be considered unwoman, the lowest social class of women employed in polluted and nuclear-contaminated colonies. According to Rivkin & Ryan (2017 p.767), women have an unbreakable bond with their children psychologically and physically.

"She'll be allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months, they believe in mother's milk. After that, she'll be transferred" (Atwood, 2019, p. 190)

### **2.3. Reproductive Issues**

The commander's wives believe that the situation has worsened. Beauty products such as lotion, make-up, and perfume are prohibited items used by handmaids. These prohibition rules are decreed by commanders' wives. The commander's wives do not want to see the handmaids look beautiful. Whether the handmaids' faces or skins are not pretty, all they care about is exploiting the womb of the handmaid. Women are seen by men as simple words that can be referred to as "wombs" or "ovaries". Beauvoir (2011 p. 41)

"We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, [...] like the shell of a nut." (Atwood, 2019, p. 146)

#### **2.4. Sexual Oppression Issues**

Offred catches the attention of the commander when she reads a novel in front of him, and he becomes interested in her. There is a feeling of sexual interest between Offred and the commander, and he feels uncomfortable when the commander looks at him. Hopefully, the commander can divert his attention to other activities. As described by Mulvey (1989: 59) defines scopophilia as the state of being able to experience pleasure from the act of seeing.

"This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it. I wish he would turn his back, stroll around the room, read something himself". (Atwood, 2019, p. 269)

#### **2.5. Female Education Issues**

During moments of despair, Offred wants to tell her own story and recount her experiences during her time in Gilead's government. Although Offred is not allowed to write anything, she has something on her mind that she can share with others. Offred tells the story of her life. Offred wants people who hear her story to believe that she is alive and that she is struggling to live her life. Women are not allowed to receive an education. Therefore, women can find protection from their stories in the form of letters and sentimental fiction (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017 p. 766)

"Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone" (Atwood, 2019, p.67)

#### **2.6. Institutional Oppression**

At the beginning of the formation of the Gilead government, Offred felt something strange when she was at work. The director of the library where Offred worked for no apparent reason, sent her home along with all female employees that day. Offred's workplace is heavily guarded by security guards. At first, Offred and the other female employees did not understand why they were fired. According to Rivkin and Ryan (2017:767), men are perceived as being more ethical in patriarchal societies when



making political decisions and dealing with political issues. Contrary to this, women are more ethical in their domestic roles.

"I've been fired, I told Moira when I got her on the phone. She said she would come over." (Atwood, 2019 p. 260)

### **2.7. Victim Blaming**

As a result of examining Offred's body, a doctor concluded that the commanders were infertile and were not capable of producing children. The Gilead government has prohibited the use of the word "barren" for men. Generally, the term "barren" is used only to refer to infertile women who are not able to bear children. Barren should only be used in reference to women, not men.

"I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law." Atwood, 2019, p.95)

### **2.8. Women Objectification**

Commander invites Offred to visit Jezebel at night without Serena's permission. Jezebel is a place of prostitution operated by the Republic of Gilead. The wives of commanders are not permitted into Jezebel. To enter Jezebel, the commander places a purple tag on Offred's wrist. This purple label illustrates that women are sexual objects owned by men. The relationship between Offred and the commander can be described as a master-slave relationship. According to Beauvoir (2011 p. 171), the master is the one who has the power to satisfy his needs. In terms of safety and fear, the slave depends on his master.

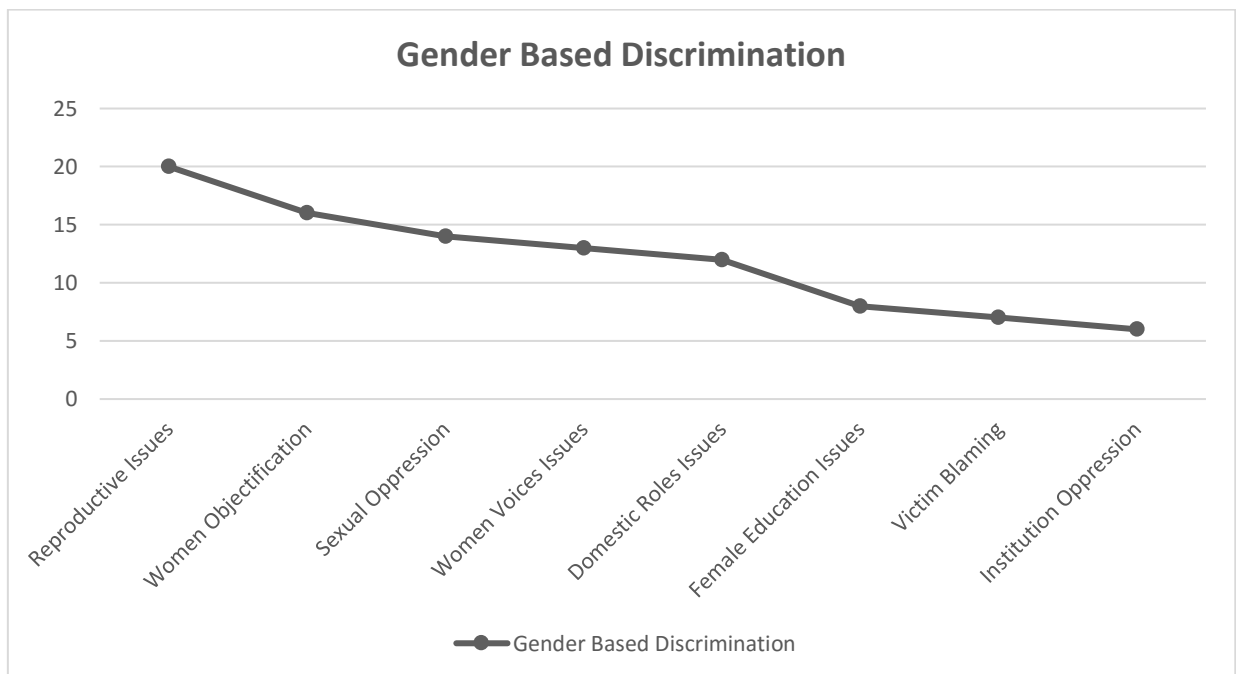
"He slips around my wrist a tag, purple, on an elastic band, like the tags for airport luggage. "If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental," (Atwood, 2019, p. 338)

Based on data analyzed using the Color-Coding method, researchers found forms of gender discrimination experienced by Offred. The forms of gender discrimination found were *women's voices issues, domestic roles issues, reproductive issues, sexual*

*oppression issues, female education issues, institution oppression, victim blaming, and women objectification.* This table is summarized below.

No	Gender-based Discrimination	Frequency Excerpt
1	Reproductive Issues	20
2	Women Objectification	16
3	Sexual Oppression	14
4	Women Voices Issues	13
5	Domestic Roles Issues	12
6	Female Education Issues	8
7	Victim Blaming	7
8	Institutional Oppression	6
	Total	96

**Table 2. The form of gender-based discrimination**



**Line Chart 1: Gender-Based Discrimination**

### **3. Main Character's Development to Face The Oppression**

This section addresses the second research question concerning Offred's development when she is discriminated against because of her gender.

#### **3.1. Being a Submissive Person**

In the novel, women who are still fertile are employed as handmaids, but if the woman refuses, she will get the death penalty. At Offred's first encounter with the commandant's house, Offred is careful not to break any Gilead rules. It is difficult for her to express her thoughts and freedom. She was reluctant to build connections with others and refused to express love and honesty because she consider herself an object not as human. She had to let go of her pent-up desire to be a human to survive.

"I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last."  
(Atwood, 2019, p. 20)

#### **3.2. The Human Desire Emergence**

In the morning, Offred saw Martha named Rita making bread for her breakfast. As a human, she wants to be friends and connected with Rita so they can talk and understand each other. Offred's desire begins to surface when she wishes to touch the bread made by Rita. She imagines she is Rita who can touch bread dough. This shows that Offred is depressed when she cannot express herself. Despite her desire, Offred suppresses it and continues with her daily routine. She realizes she wants to have the freedom to be able to make friends and communicate with other people. Her desire to touch bread dough symbolizes her human identity.

"I would help Rita to make the bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch" (Atwood, 2019, P. 32)

### **3.3. The Main Character Change**

During her time as a handmaid, Offred hoped that her husband Luke would treat and love her well. Offred began to show a change in character after the monthly ceremony when she wandered around the house at night which was strictly prohibited by Gilead regulations. When Offred passes a mirror, the mirror reflects Offred's face and flowing hair. There was a sense that Offred was disregarding the rules more and more. It is apparent that Offred's character changes when she feels free to do things of her own volition.

"I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. (Atwood, 2019, p. 148)"

### **3.4. The Resistance**

Offred began to demonstrate some resistance. She violated the rules, tried to manipulate the commander, etc. She did this in order to obtain her own freedom, believing that one day she would be able to regain it.

#### **3.4.1 Rules Violation**

It is prohibited for women, including handmaids, to engage in reading activities. One day Offred was sitting by the window. Offred saw an unsightly pillow with a cover that displayed the word "Faith" in a square frame surrounded by lilies. Faith's words were embroidered on the pillow, and Offred took advantage of the opportunity to read them. Offred has taken advantage of the opportunity to commit willful infractions.

"I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH. It's the only thing they've given me to read. If I were caught doing it, would it count? I didn't put the cushion here myself." (Atwood, 2019, p. 91)

#### **3.4.2 Manipulation by The Commander**

At first, Offred was confused as to why the commander suddenly wanted to meet her at night. She thought that refusing the commander's request would be terrible, but she also considered the serious consequences of getting caught. Her fate would depend on Serena's kindness. Offred doesn't know who the real power holders are. Her objective

is to exploit the commander's weaknesses and manipulate them in order to find a way out or to obtain various pieces of information she needs.

"But there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It's this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It's like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear" (Atwood, 2019, p. 204)

### 3.4.3 Main Character's Identity Retention

The handmaids of Gilead use the name of their commander. Just like Offred and the other handmaids. The prefix "Of-" means belonging, and Fred is the name of the male commander, Fred. Since handmaids were considered objects of ownership, the Gilead government changed their identities and names. Before becoming a handmaid, Offred's real name was June, but Offred refuses her adopted nickname. She still remembers her former name. Offered refuses to be used as an object of ownership.

"My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter [...] I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure" (Atwood, 2019, p. 128)

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the researcher examined eight forms of gender-based discrimination. The first form of discrimination is **reproductive issues**. Her fertile uterus is the only reason why Offred is considered an object of production. The second form of discrimination is the **objectification of women**, in which Offred is only seen as the commander's object of possession for the purpose of displaying power. The third form of discrimination is **sexual oppression**. The commander asks Offred to sleep with him, and she is unable to refuse.

The fourth form of discrimination is the **voice of women's issues**. Whenever Offred receives an order from the commander or his wife, she must obey it and remain silent. The fifth discrimination is that of **domestic roles issues**. Based on the excerpts, it appears that the handmaid's role is limited to domestic duties

such as shopping and breastfeeding. The sixth, form of discrimination is **female education issues**, in which the handmaid is not permitted to read a book and write while the commander is permitted to do so.

In the seventh form is **victim-blaming**. There is no use of the word barren for men. It is only appropriate for women. The eighth form of discrimination is **institutional oppression**. Women are being fired from their jobs and their bank accounts are being frozen.

Despite experiencing various forms of gender discrimination, Offred continues to develop her character. Offred's first time as a handmaid. She is a submissive person. She didn't want to violate the rules because she feared death and believe she is an object. But as the chapter progresses, she realizes that she is also human and has human desires. She started showing a change in character after she noticed it. Based on her own decision, she can do something. Then Offred changed to become someone who resisted the rules.

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