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Literary Theories

The Imaginary, The Symbolic and The Real: Stages of Feminine Germination in Atwood's Dystopian Vision

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Abstract: The intricate dynamics of female identity and resistance under authoritarian regimes are frequently explored in Margaret Atwood's speculative novels. This paper examines the metaphor of "feminine germination" as a thematic and symbolic process of female agency emerging under structural oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019). The paper explores how Offred, Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima, and Nicole negotiate Gilead's theocratic patriarchy in order to recover their identities, voices, and agency, drawing on Atwood's rich garden and seed imagery. The article shows, by close reading and textual analysis, how Atwood frames feminine resilience as a slow germination that is anchored in memory, narrative, and subversive action rather than as an abrupt rebellion. Using a Lacanian perspective, this article explores the stages and the early, fictitious identities and internalised roles that are influenced by patriarchal myths which included in the Imaginary. The mechanics of systematic oppression are revealed by the symbolic, which has its roots in language, legislation, and cultural codes. Trauma and rupture give rise to the Real, which is ultimately the place where genuine resistance and subjectivity originate. According to Atwood, the dialectical tension between repression and self-reclamation is where womanhood begins to emerge, not just in emancipation but in fulfilment.

Keywords: Lacanian psychoanalysis, Imaginary, Symbolic, Real, feminine germination, dystopian fiction.

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Introduction

The limits of female identity in relation to political and cultural power structures have long been questioned in Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction. Atwood depicts theocratic totalitarian governments in her landmark books *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019), in which women are confined to strictly regulated categories, devoid of autonomy, and reduced to functions. Atwood's characters exhibit significant psychological and symbolic development in spite of these limitations. This paper frames this development as a process of feminine germination—a slow, frequently agonising emerging of selfhood within and against the mechanisms that inhibit it—using Lacan's psychoanalytic triad.

Employing the Imaginary, the symbolic, and the Real registers, Jacques Lacan proposed a theory of the subject's evolution. Identity formation in connection to others is the first step in the Imaginary, which deals with pictures and illusions. Language, cultural standards, and the law—the institutions that control subjectivity and desire—are all part of the symbolic. Beyond the realm of symbolism, the Real stands for trauma, disintegration, and the unfathomable essence of life that resists language, shatters coherent meaning, and confronts us with what cannot be fully represented or understood. The stages offer a complex perspective of how women change under dystopian conditions, not as a linear progression but rather as a recursive process of resistance and reinvention when applied to Atwood's characters.

The latent potential of women in these dystopian settings is encapsulated in the metaphor of germination. Beneath a seemingly empty surface rests the latent and quiet seed. However, with time and a change in circumstances, it succeeds. Similar to this, Atwood's female characters start off as traumatised, silent, and afraid but end up being change agents. Their metamorphosis is frequently internal, nuanced, and calculated rather than dramatic or heroic. However, it signifies the reclaiming of identity in a society that aims to eradicate it.

The Imaginary

Women in Atwood's Republic of Gilead are denied autonomy under a theocratic government. Language turns into an instrument of oppression, and bodies become state property. Offred's reflection from *The Handmaid's Tale*: "I used to think of my body as an instrument... "Now the flesh arranges itself differently" (HT 73), which signifies a pivotal point in the reorganization of female subjectivity under Gilead's rule. Once associated with autonomy and selfhood, the female body is reinterpreted as a reproductive tool, with fertility serving as the sole criterion for its worth. Critics point out that Offred's body is "only important because of its 'central object,' her womb," exposing the regime's devaluation of women to fulfill a biological purpose.

This change places Offred in the Imaginary order, which is the domain of ego-identification, illusion, and misrecognition, according to Lacanian theory. At this point, rather than using their own self-recognition, the individual creates an identity based on imposed visuals. In the mirror-stage of womanhood created by Gilead's ideological infrastructure, the Handmaid internalizes the state's conception of femininity as reproductive function. Offred thus has two identities: "Offred," the patronymic indicator of possession, and the erased, unidentified lady.

"We were the ones who weren't in the papers," she said. This imaginary misrecognition is illustrated by the statement, "We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print" (HT 57), in which she saw herself as invisible, marginalized, and absent. In addition to erasing individual subjectivity, the regime's symbolic systems provide a manufactured, cohesive identity—that of the fertile Handmaid. As a result, at first, Offred internalizes Gilead's expectations and accepts her socially manufactured role as inevitable and natural.

Offred's early subjectivity is therefore a prime example of Lacan's Imaginary, which is a false coherence of identity maintained by ideological representations of women that mask the alienation and fragmentation imposed by patriarchal authority.

Offred talks about how there are not enough stories about women, particularly those who were persecuted or marginalized. They were not acknowledged by the public. The inner lives of the women it oppresses and its atrocities are not chronicled in Gilead; this metaphor effectively conveys erasure and enforced silence. The unspoken and unwritten realities of women's existence are symbolized by the "blank spaces". Living on the "edges" implies marginalization—women excluded from the prevailing discourse of society.

Offred's crimson habit serves as both a uniform and an identity that shapes how people perceive her. She describes her pregnant state: "I am a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear" (HT 73). She goes on to compare her form to a fog that has solidified around a pear-shaped core object. This metaphor demonstrates the power of the Imaginary; her identity is influenced by how other people perceive her, especially in relation to her position as a reproductive.

In *The Testaments*, Agnes too grows up inside Gilead's idealized definition of femininity. Rituals, purity balls, and the appreciation of domestic obedience all influence the early self-perception. She internalizes a holy femininity and idealizes her position as a prospective wife. However, these identifications are shaky and based on illusion rather than knowledge. She says, "I know how easy it is to spill secrets into a sympathetic ear. They spill out like a river breaking its banks" (TS 190).

This reflection foreshadows her future involvement in subversive action and how critical trust, speech, and testimony are in resisting authoritarian control. Thematically, the moment illustrates the power of language and memory—central to Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic orders. Daisy is stepping out of the Imaginary illusion of her ordinary life and beginning to enter the symbolic order of secrets, resistance, and lineage.

The Symbolic

The Other, Language, and Law entering the symbolic register means entering the realm of social order, language, and culture. At this stage, the main characters begin to understand the mechanics governing their imprisonment and attempt to get away or work around them. Through Offred's narration, the symbolic is introduced. She thinks with words and constructs a narrative that preserves her inner self despite her incapacity to write. She explains, "I'd like to think that this is a story I'm telling . . . I must have faith in it" (HT 49). The symbolic's role in providing structure to the Real of her experience is reflected in her drive to impose narrative order upon chaos.

However, resistance begins precisely within this hard, barren, and brutal terrain. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred cultivates an inner counter-world by recalling her past, preserving memories of her daughter, and engaging in illicit relationships that momentarily restore her sense of self. These acts are not merely emotional refuges; they function as covert strategies of survival and resistance, enabling her to retain a subjectivity that the regime seeks to erase. Her repeated recollection of the mock-Latin phrase, "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum"— "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (HT 53)—further demonstrates how language becomes a secret reservoir of strength.

Through this private repetition, Offred appropriates a fragment of forbidden discourse and invests it with personal meaning. In doing so, she converts silence, memory, and coded expression into subtle forms of opposition. Within such a system, where speech is regulated and truth is policed, even the use of deceptive or coded language becomes a genuine act of defiance, because it reclaims the power to interpret, signify, and remember beyond the control of Gilead.

Women are not allowed to read or write in Gilead. This is strategic, not incidental. Controlling language is equivalent to control reality. However, language penetrates the pavement like a seed. Offred's inner monologue turns into a subversive story. The idea of the Testaments is clearer: A covert document that exposes the hypocrisies of the regime is kept by Aunt Lydia. "You don't think the sky is falling until a piece of it falls on you," she writes (HT 33). Her documentation is a form of cultivation rather than only confession. By narrating the tale, she sows the seeds of Gilead's destruction. "What a strange world it is where you can say things that would once have got you killed, and now it gets you a round of applause" (TS 387).

One of the narrators of *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia, reflects on the significant change in social and political conditions following the fall of Gilead in this line. By disclosing secrets and allowing Baby Nicole's homecoming, she has contributed significantly to the internal collapse of Gilead, marking the culmination of her years of strategic survival and planned manipulation. Near the conclusion of her story, Lydia says this as she watches the oppressive government of Gilead fall apart and the citizens start to embrace concepts that were previously regarded as difficult.

These seeds are also inherited and carried out by the younger heroines, Agnes and Daisy (the latter also known as Nicole). Eventually, Agnes, who is reared in Gilead, and Daisy, who is raised outside, come together to assist in overthrowing the government. Literacy, both literal and emotional, signifies the entire development of a female that can imagine freedom.

Deeply rooted in the symbolic, Aunt Lydia is the most nuanced character in *The Testaments*. She is aware of the influence of language, scripture, and the law because she was a key contributor to the development of Gilead's philosophy. However, she documents the hypocrisy of that system. Her secret manuscript is a symbolic order act of resistance. As she puts it, "You have to realize that I was not just complicit but a collaborator (TS 44). This admission reveals a profound understanding of her place in the Symbolic and her attempt to use narrative to regain control.

When Agnes learns to read and write, she also enters a world that was previously closed to her. Not only is her introduction to the Ardua Hall library instructive, but it also changes her. The first step towards rebuilding one's identity is literacy. She sees through religious and legal texts, as she has the ability to interpret them, realizing that they are manufactured.

The Real

According to psychoanalytic theory, traumatic suppression can also serve as a site of resistance and return, especially when it comes to Lacan's concept of the "Real." Offred's jumbled recollections represent not only loss but also a psychological demand for the Real—the aspects of existence Gilead attempt to ignore but is unable to do so. When every exterior freedom is taken away, the inner world becomes the only place where germination may take place: "When we think of the past it's the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that" (HT 32).

In this statement, Margaret Atwood illustrates the selective nature of memory. People frequently filter their memories of the past emotionally when they are being oppressed or suffering (like in the dystopian society of Gilead). In addition to ignoring the suffering, strife, or everyday hardships that also occurred during that period, they focus on the positive memories of love, freedom, family, and laughter. In a way, this is emotional survival. Idealising the past gives people solace and a sense of purpose or optimism. However, this Imaginary illusion obscures reality, preventing the subject from confronting the historical and symbolic conditions that have produced the present order.

According to Lacanian philosophy, the Real is that which cannot be completely embodied or incorporated into the Imaginary or Symbolic. It is frequently perceived as trauma—a break that destroys the subject's unity. The Real frequently appears for Atwood's female characters under severe psychological or physical abuse.

Offred experiences the Real through her forced separation from her daughter and her sexual service. They reappear in her story in silences, dislocations, and pieces, making them not entirely narratable. Her experiences of numbness and dissociation indicate that she has encountered a world beyond representation. When Agnes discovers that she is a Handmaid's daughter who was separated from her mother, she faces the Real. Her symbolic identity as a privileged daughter of Gilead is undermined by the revelation. She undergoes a psychological breakdown, but she also starts to use the trauma to create a new identity.

Aunt Lydia's memories of the pre-Gilead period, especially the day she was detained and forcibly forced to comply, reveal her true self. This traumatic core is still present but active, which ultimately led to her betraying the system she helped create.

Feminine Germination:

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* are rooted in the tension between systemic oppression and individual agency. The Republic of Gilead is portrayed in both books as a theocratic, patriarchal regime in which women are denied autonomy, names, and rights. But Atwood sows the seeds of feminine resistance on this apparently barren land. Both stories use the concept of feminine germination, which refers to the gradual and frequently invisible process by which women develop their identities and sense of agency while living under oppressive control.

Atwood herself has noted that her dystopias are not purely fantastical: "Nothing went into it that had not happened in real life" (HT 311). This realism lends weight to her portrayal of women who, like dormant seeds, may appear passive yet hold latent potential for growth. This article examines how Atwood's protagonists embody this germination, moving from enforced dormancy toward self-assertion, and how Atwood uses garden imagery, acts of memory, and narrative testimony to articulate this thematic progression.

In order for womanhood to germinate, memory is essential. It is a storehouse of truth in opposition to the regime's fabricated past. Offred's identity is anchored by her memories of her past life, which included her mother, her daughter, and her husband, Luke. "The lovely things we choose to remember from the past come to mind. "We'd like to think it was that way," she reflects (HT 32). According to this memory, being a woman is a remembered and created self rather than a given.

Feminine Germination in The Handmaid's Tale

Offred, the main character in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, lives under Gilead's strict reproductive laws, where fertile women are designated as "Handmaids" to bear children for wealthy Commanders and their wives. "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (HT 146) reduces Offred to her biological role. This decrease is similar to how soil is treated in monoculture farming, where it is deprived of diversity and compelled to produce in a repeated manner. However, Offred's inner monologue, which is filled with memories of flowers, seeds, and gardens, shows how persistent selfhood is under the surface. "I once had a garden. ... the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers" (HT 13) is how she describes her former existence.

As germinal acts, these sensory memories protect an inner reality that is immune to Gilead's propaganda. When Offred muses, "I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. ... I become the earth" (HT 73), the image of the body as land is especially powerful. In this case, the swamp—wild, untamed, and uncultivable—suggests the aspect of the self that is yet outside Gilead's grasp. This internal soil is where germination starts, fed by observation and memory. Offred's existence depends more on the silent development of this inner self than on outright disobedience. In this way, Atwood associates germination with persistence, patience, and the deliberate hiding of agency.

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Feminine Germination in The Testaments

In *The Testaments*, which takes place fifteen years after *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's voice is replaced by three intertwined stories: those of Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima, and Nicole (Baby Nicole). A distinct stage and type of germination is represented by each narrator.

Aunt Lydia: Resistance from Within One of *The Handmaid's Tale's* most dreaded enforcers, Aunt Lydia, admits in her covert book that she has been attempting to weaken Gilead from within. Although she acknowledges her moral failings and compromises, she presents herself as a long-term planner: "I tell myself that I'm not a monster. I'm a practical person" (TS 57). The way she germinates is purposeful and secret, like a seed waiting for the right conditions to flourish. She gathers evidence against Gilead's authorities by abusing her privileged position, which ultimately contributes to the fall of the kingdom. Lydia's storyline illustrates the revolutionary possibility of inhabiting the very institutions designed to uphold injustice, even while germination may entail complicity.

Agnes Jemima: Awakening Through Knowledge

At first, Agnes thinks her intelligence is restricted since she was raised with Gilead's domestic ideology: "Our brains are soft and damp; they are not suited to the kind of thinking men can do" (TS 187). Learning to read, a talent that is prohibited for most women in Gilead, marks the beginning of her transformation. "They overcome their 'mud brains' ... they are every bit as intelligent as any men," she recognizes as a future aunt (TS 189). Education and the recovery of cognitive agency are the means by which Agnes germinates. She sees literacy as the seed's counterpart of sunlight, reviving long-suppressed growth.

Nicole: Rooting Identity in Truth

Raised in Canada, Nicole does not know her roots until she finds out she's Baby Nicole, who was smuggled out of Gilead as a baby. Her quest to discover who she really is and to play a part in Gilead's demise is comparable to a transplanted seed growing in fresh soil. The significance of historical continuity—how seeds spread across boundaries can nonetheless aid in the emancipation of people left behind—is emphasized by Nicole's storyline.

Thematic Synthesis: Memory, Naming, and the Body as Soil

Atwood's imagery connects the acts of remembering and naming to feminine germination in both works. While Agnes's revelation of a Handmaid's true identity restores dignity, Offred's mental memories of flowers and gardens are acts of preservation: "It was like finding a handprint in a cave: ... I existed" (TS 248). In a world that has attempted to uproot identity, naming is an act of re-rooting it. This relates to the ecofeminist theme that permeates Atwood's writing, which compares environmental exploitation to control over women's bodies. Both maintain the ability to regenerate when allowed to run their natural cycles, despite the fact that fertility is controlled and commercialized in both.

The conflict between resistance and passivity is questioned by Atwood's idea of feminine germination. By definition, germination is a covert process, and its power resides in its ability to remain undetectable until it becomes unstoppable. Through this metaphor, female survival under authoritarian control is reframed as strategic growth rather than merely endurance.

The Testaments expands on The Handmaid's Tale focus on the internal, nearly private emergence of a single woman's identity by demonstrating how several women, each in a different situation, can help bring about systemic change. Agnes's intellectual awakening, Aunt Lydia's institutional penetration, and Nicole's activism constitute a trio of germination techniques. Additionally, Atwood muddies the moral rectitude that is frequently expected of female protesters. Lydia's moral ambiguity and concessions imply that germination in hostile soil frequently entails absorbing components of that soil—sometimes concealment is necessary for survival.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* depict Gilead as a regime designed to sterilize female agency. Yet, through the metaphor of feminine germination, Atwood shows that identity, memory, and resistance can take root even in the most barren conditions. Whether through Offred's quiet preservation of self, Lydia's covert sabotage, Agnes's intellectual blossoming, or Nicole's reclamation of her history, Atwood's women demonstrate that growth under oppression is not only possible but inevitable.

In Atwood's dystopian vision, seeds lie dormant until the moment is right—then they break the surface, altering the landscape irreversibly. Feminine germination, thus, becomes not just a survival strategy but a blueprint for transformation.

Growth Through Contradiction

Lacan's psychoanalytic triad is forcefully mapped onto the metaphor of germination. Imaginary seeds lie inert, symbolic seeds emerge from the dirt, and real seeds develop erratically towards the sun. In Atwood's novels, womanhood develops via resistance, contradiction, and repression rather than being born whole.

Agnes emerges via education and self-discovery, Aunt Lydia by writing and postponed justice, and Offred via memory and narrative. They all go through changes that weaken Gilead from inside, even though none of them start out as revolutionaries. "Nothing changes instantly: in a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (56), Offred observes. But things do change. Silence, introspection, and buried seeds are where it starts.

Conclusion

Atwood does not offer simple liberation fantasies. Her characters are shaped by, and respond to, real violence and psychic rupture. Yet their journeys suggest that even in the most barren landscapes, seeds of identity and resistance can and do take root. Atwood's dystopian novels allow us to trace a complex evolution of feminine identity under authoritarianism by utilising Lacan's triad. The Symbolic shows the systems of control and offers resistance weapons, the Imaginary exposes the internalised illusions of femininity, and the Real faces the unimaginable tragedies that propel change.

In Atwood, being a woman is never static. Through narrative, memory, and solidarity, it eventually regains agency after sprouting in confinement and breaking under pressure. Simple illusions of emancipation are not what Atwood presents. Real-life violence and psychological trauma influence and impact her characters. Their experiences, however, indicate that seeds of resistance and individuality may and do germinate even in the most desolate fields. As Aunt Lydia writes, "In the midst of death we are in life: of whom may we seek succour, but of thee, O Lord?" (224). Atwood's answer is subtle but resolute: in ourselves, and in one another.

Atwood's dystopian works are not just warnings against losing one's independence; they are also incredibly creative reflections on the resilience, adaptability, and regeneration of the feminine self. In the face of oppression, gender grows gradually, painfully, but inevitably, as the metaphor of germination illustrates. Atwood's female characters resist the limitations placed upon them, whether through memory, literacy, storytelling, or familial heritage.

Nothing changes instantly, as Atwood herself states: "You'd be boiled to death before you knew it in a bathtub that was slowly heating up" (56). However, resistance builds up to the same extent as injury. According to Atwood, women are a silent but powerful force that begins in the shadows and finally blossoms into revolution.

This seminal work offers profound insights into psychoanalytic theory and its implications for understanding the complexities of human desire and identity. Lacan's exploration of language and the unconscious continue to influence contemporary thought in various fields, including literary criticism and feminist theory.

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