



International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 2: 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

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Literary Theories

Power and Peril of Myth: A Critical Reading of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale.

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Abstract: This study evaluates the rewriting of myths, epics, and folklores across cultures in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood through the lens of myth criticism. The research problem addresses how modern dystopian fiction shapes ancient mythical elements to critique contemporary systems of power, gender, and ideology. Building on myth-critical frameworks, particularly those concerned with sacred myths, archetypes, and ritual patterns, this paper analyses how myths shift their focus from sacred cultural narratives to institutionalised ideologies, ultimately functioning as instruments of political governance. These myths are not merely retold but strategically distorted to expose how patriarchal cultures exert influence on sacred narratives for social control. The paper demonstrates that Atwood's mythic rewriting becomes a tool to question the patriarchal structures, rather than to preserve it. The aim of this research is to demonstrate how myths shift their focus from sacred cultural narratives to political ideologies.

Keywords: Myth, Ideology, Patriarchal.



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Margaret Atwood is a contemporary Canadian novelist, poet and critic. She is well known for her ability to blend mythical and dystopian elements in her novels, which mainly focus on power, gender, politics and environmental crisis. Atwood's narrative techniques, such as silenced voices and fragmented memories, depict how the characters struggle to establish their identity. Other than this, her significance lies in combining myth with social crisis by using familiar narratives to challenge oppression.

In general terms, a myth is a story or fable that acts as a symbolic guide or map of meaning and significance in the cosmos. While traditionally regarded as sacred or communal stories, myths often extend beyond their origins to influence cultural imagination and institutional practices. Myth criticism develops from the anthropological and psychological bases of myths, rituals and folktales to restore the spiritual content to the alienated, fragmented world ruled by science and technology. Over a certain period of time, these narratives have been continually reshaped, allowing these narratives to remain within changing ideological and political contexts. In the postmodern era, myth therefore emerges not merely as an inherited form but as a challenging space where meaning is continually reinterpreted, and structures of power are critically examined. Contemporary fiction systematically questions mythic structures, whether myths support or challenge the power structures. Dystopian literature, in particular, focuses on the flexibility of myth, how cultural narratives can be reorganised by the patriarchal structures.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* occupies a significant position within this tradition of retelling myths. The novel constructs a republican society that relies heavily on inherited cultural symbols and strict rules to regulate individual behavior and social roles. This context is reframed within a socio-political order, revealing how cultural narratives can be selectively used to serve authoritarian purposes. This shows how myths can be revised and changed to support certain ideas or beliefs.

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Employing myth criticism as its theoretical framework, this paper examines how *The Handmaid's Tale* restructures mythic patterns across cultures to expose the transformation of sacred narratives into tools of political power. By situating myth within a dystopian context, the study highlights rewriting as a critical literary practice that challenges established ideas and opens the door for interpretation in multiple ways.

This research employs myth criticism as its primary theoretical framework to examine how *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood rewrites myths and sacred texts across cultures to uncover the dynamics of politics within a male-centred dystopian society. Myth criticism, as developed by theorists such as Northrop Frye, Mircea Eliade, Roland Barthes, and later feminist critics, views myth not merely as an ancient narrative form, but as a collective attempt of cultures to establish a meaningful context for human existence. Within this framework, myths serve to reinforce constructed social norms, thus shaping society's rules.

Atwood's novel provides a critical site for myth criticism because it demonstrates how mythic narratives, particularly biblical and patriarchal myths are selectively reinterpreted and institutionalised by republican society to control women's bodies and identities. The Republic of Gilead does not generate new myths; instead it reconfigures, distorts, and weaponises existing sacred myths, transforming them into instruments of ideological domination. This theoretical framework therefore positions *The Handmaid's Tale* within the broader context of rewriting myths across cultures, stressing the logical outcomes of such transformation of myths

Myth criticism is based on the idea that myths are foundational stories that comprises a society's values, fears, and power relations. Northrop Frye argues that myth provides the basic narrative patterns through which literature gives "shape and significance" to human experience. However, contemporary myth critics stress that myths are not detached from political ideology, they are deeply embedded in systems of power.

According to Barthes, myth transforms historically constructed ideas into naturalised truths. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, biblical myths are totally deprived of historical and cultural context and re-presented as absolute moral laws. This transformation allows the state to present patriarchal domination as morally justified rather than politically constructed.

Thus, myth criticism enables this study to examine how political governance in Gilead controls mythic narratives in order to regulate social order, particularly the female body. Myth becomes a language of authority, to justify oppression under the disguise of sacred tradition

The main aspect of this conceptual framework is to make a distinction between sacred myth and its political reconceptualisation. Scholars defines sacred myth as a narrative that constitutes the origins of the world and social laws by connecting them to cosmic order. In many cultures, sacred myths surrounding fertility, motherhood, and chastity have historically shaped gender norms. However, Atwood's novel exposes how such myths can be ethically corrupted when removed from their symbolic and spiritual dimensions and recreated as tools of governance.

The Republic of Gilead selectively interprets biblical myths, most notably the story of Rachel, Leah, and Bilhah, to justify the Handmaid system. Through myth criticism, this study argues that Gilead's power lies not in faith itself but in the strategic rewriting of faith.

"And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband says the Commander. ",d

The state suppresses alternative interpretations of myth and enforces a, patriarchal reading that positions women as worthy vessels for reproduction rather than a autonomous individuals.

The Commanders used to read the biblical story before the ceremony to manipulate and prove that Handmaid's system is a blessed practice. However, they neglect the historical backdrop of the biblical myth and concentrate solely on reproduction.

"It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. Then comes the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Centre. Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the wombs Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her."

To Conclude, this study employs myth criticism to analyse *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dystopian portrayal of how patriarchal governing systems rewrites myths, epics and folklore across cultures to authorise control over women's bodies. Hereby presenting myth as a double edged sword because it has the potential to shape meaning, identity and socio-political order and at the same time it has inherent capacity to normalise oppression and to authorise violence when misused.

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