



# Posthuman Identity and the Regulated Body in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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**Abstract**— Posthumanism offers a useful lens for examining how human identity is reshaped under systems of power and institutional control. In dystopian fiction, posthuman conditions often emerge not through advanced technology alone, but through social practices that redefine the body and limit agency. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a society in which women's bodies are regulated, monitored, and instrumentalised by the state in the name of survival and moral order. This paper examines how the novel reflects posthuman concerns by portraying the human body as a managed and functional entity rather than an autonomous self. Drawing on Donna Haraway's understanding of the constructed body, the study explores how Gilead transforms women into biological resources while restricting memory, language, and personal identity. It argues that Atwood's dystopia represents posthumanism as a condition of constrained agency, where survival occurs within systems that redefine what it means to be human. In doing so, the novel presents posthumanism not as futuristic speculation, but as an extension of existing power structures.



**Keywords**— Posthumanism; dystopian fiction; body; identity; power; Margaret Atwood

## I. INTRODUCTION

Posthumanism challenges the assumption that the human subject exists as an autonomous and self-determining centre of meaning. Instead, it highlights how identity is shaped by institutions, systems, and social structures that operate beyond individual control. In literary studies, posthumanism has gained significance through dystopian fiction, where imagined societies expose how bodies and identities are reorganised during periods of crisis.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* remains a central work in feminist dystopian literature for its depiction of a society in which women's bodies are subjected to strict political and religious regulation. The Republic of Gilead emerges in response to environmental decline and falling birth rates; however, its solution relies on reducing women to reproductive functions. Within this system, personal history and autonomy are sacrificed in favour of biological usefulness.

This paper examines *The Handmaid's Tale* through a posthumanist lens, focusing on how the novel represents the female body as a regulated and constructed entity within an authoritarian order. Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of the constructed body, it argues that Atwood's dystopia reflects posthuman conditions in which agency survives only within narrow institutional boundaries. By analysing bodily regulation, identity loss, and narrative memory, the paper shows how posthumanism in the novel functions as a critique of power rather than a vision of technological progress.

## II. POSTHUMANISM AND THE CONSTRUCTED BODY

Posthumanism questions the idea of the human as a stable and autonomous category. Donna Haraway's work, particularly her discussion of the cyborg, challenges boundaries between the human body and the systems that shape it. Her argument emphasises that bodies are not

purely natural or self-contained but are produced and regulated through social, political, and cultural forces.

Although Haraway's theory often engages with technology, its relevance extends beyond mechanical contexts. Posthumanism can also describe situations in which institutional structures redefine bodily value and purpose. Under such conditions, bodies are classified, managed, and controlled, while individuality becomes secondary to systemic needs. Posthuman identity emerges not through enhancement but through regulation.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, posthumanism appears through the state's reorganisation of women's bodies as functional resources. Gilead does not rely on advanced machines; instead, it employs ideology, ritual, and surveillance to achieve similar effects. The state produces posthuman conditions by redefining women as biological instruments rather than autonomous persons. Haraway's emphasis on the constructed nature of bodies provides a useful framework for understanding how identity in Gilead is shaped by power rather than choice.

### III. THE REGULATED FEMALE BODY IN GILEAD

One of the most striking features of Gilead is the systematic control of the female body. Handmaids are stripped of personal autonomy and assigned a single biological purpose: reproduction. Their clothing, movement, and daily routines are carefully regulated, reinforcing the idea that the body belongs to the state rather than the individual. Medical inspections, surveillance, and ritualised practices reduce the body to an object of management.

The Ceremony illustrates this transformation clearly. Framed as a religious obligation, it removes intimacy and consent from reproduction, turning the act into a public and institutional process. Offred's observation that she is "a national resource" captures the extent to which her body has been redefined as state property. From a posthuman perspective, her identity is no longer grounded in personal experience but in systemic function.

Naming practices further reinforce bodily control. The name "Offred" signals ownership rather than individuality, erasing personal history and replacing it with a functional label. Language thus becomes another tool through which identity is externally imposed. The body is rendered legible and classifiable within the system, much like a component within a larger mechanism.

Surveillance sustains these posthuman conditions. Handmaids are constantly observed, both by authorities and by one another. This environment discourages resistance and reinforces compliance, ensuring that bodies remain

predictable and controllable. In Gilead, the posthuman body is not enhanced or liberated but disciplined and constrained by power.

### IV. IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND CONSTRAINED AGENCY

Although Gilead seeks to eliminate individuality, *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates that identity is never fully erased. Offred's memories of her former life serve as a quiet form of resistance, allowing her to retain a sense of self beyond her assigned role. However, this resistance remains internal and fragmented, reflecting the limited nature of agency under posthuman conditions.

Language restrictions further weaken identity. Women are forbidden from reading or writing, cutting them off from knowledge and historical continuity. Offred's reflection that "thought must be rationed" highlights how linguistic control shapes inner life. When language is restricted, the ability to imagine alternatives is also diminished.

Narration becomes Offred's primary means of survival. Her storytelling does not directly challenge the system but preserves memory and meaning within oppressive conditions. This form of agency aligns with posthuman survival rather than humanist autonomy. Offred does not escape Gilead; instead, she negotiates space within its constraints.

Other characters reveal different responses to posthuman conditions. Moira's open rebellion represents a more visible form of resistance, yet it ultimately fails. Serena Joy's dissatisfaction suggests that even those who benefit from Gilead's hierarchy remain constrained by its rules. Together, these portrayals indicate that posthuman identity in the novel affects all individuals, not only the most visibly oppressed.

### V. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a fictional future, its posthuman themes resonate strongly with contemporary concerns. Advances in reproductive technologies, expanding surveillance practices, and biopolitical regulation raise ongoing questions about bodily autonomy and institutional power. Atwood's dystopia demonstrates how crisis narratives can be used to legitimise intrusive policies that reshape identity.

The novel also challenges the assumption that posthumanism is necessarily tied to technological progress. Instead, it shows how social and political systems alone can generate posthuman conditions. By presenting a society in which bodies are regulated through ideology rather than

machines, Atwood encourages reflection on the boundaries between human agency and systemic control in the present world.

## VI. CONCLUSION

*The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopian vision in which posthuman identity emerges through regulation rather than innovation. By transforming women's bodies into functional resources, Gilead creates conditions in which agency and individuality are severely constrained. Drawing on Donna Haraway's understanding of the constructed body, this paper has shown how Atwood's novel reflects posthuman concerns through bodily control, linguistic restriction, and fragmented identity.

At the same time, the novel suggests that agency persists in limited forms through memory and narration. Posthumanism in Atwood's work is not a celebration of technological evolution but a critique of systems that redefine humanity through power. Grounded in everyday practices of control rather than distant futures, *The Handmaid's Tale* remains a relevant and cautionary text for understanding how bodies and identities are shaped within authoritarian structures.

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