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## An analysis of gender discourse in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Catch-22*.

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### **Abstract**

Gender stereotypes still persist and are spread through the media, as well as through social, educational, and recreational socialization, which encourages gender discrimination. This paper explores and analyzes the representation of gender in media to understand the broader cultural and social implications of gender discourse with reference to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Catch-22*. Both are classic works of literature that have been adapted into movies. These stories explore gender discourse in very different ways, they both show how societal norms and expectations can limit individual freedom and perpetuate inequality.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the story takes place in a dystopian future where a totalitarian regime has taken over the United States, and women are forced to bear children for wealthy families in a society where women have no rights and are constantly under surveillance. While *Catch-22* is a satirical war story that takes place during World War II, the movie explores how gender roles and expectations affect men as well as women. The male characters in the movie are often depicted as struggling to live up to the expectations of masculinity and heroism that are placed on them. *Catch-22* hasn't aged well in some places because of its sexist and misogynistic content as well.

The issue raised by this thesis relates to the portrayal of gender or the gender discourse. The impact of gender representation in media on audiences is significant. Research has shown that exposure to diverse and positive representations of gender can have a positive impact on attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Conversely, exposure to negative and stereotypical representations of gender can reinforce

harmful attitudes and beliefs, such as the objectification of women or the rejection of non-traditional gender identities.

*Keywords:* Discourse Analysis; Representation; Gender Roles; Film and Media; *The Handmaid's Tale*; *Catch-22*.

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Gender discourses have a significant impact on individuals and societies, influencing their perception of gender roles and social norms. It builds on the idea of gender as a social construct. This perspective holds that gender is not something that is biologically determined, but rather is constructed by society through language, culture, and socialization. This means that gender roles, norms, and expectations are not natural or universal, but rather are shaped by historical, cultural, and social factors. An analysis of gender discourse involves examining how gender is represented, constructed, and negotiated through language and social practices. One key aspect of gender discourse is the way in which it reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations. For example, language use can be gendered in ways that reinforce these stereotypes and limit opportunities for individuals who do not conform to it.

These discourses are often perpetuated through literature, as demonstrated in two widely acclaimed novels, *Catch-22* by American writer Joseph Heller and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. These novels offer a glimpse into how gender discourses shape societal attitudes, impacting the lives of individuals in different ways.

Another interesting theme in gender discourse is the intersectionality of gender with other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality. This perspective highlights how gender is not an isolated category, but rather intersects with other social identities and structures to shape experiences of oppression and privilege. Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* is known for its satirical commentary on the absurdity of war and bureaucracy, but it also contains a complex portrayal of gender and gender roles. One of the main themes in the novel is the way in which gender is used to establish power imbalances and hierarchies. A pre-

feminist view of a world ruled by men who praised a "band of brothers" mentality is sketched by the novel's treatment of women, in which women are objectified and sexualized. This awful truth often gets neglected in the lunacy of the war. It builds on the idea of sexual assault as a misuse of power primarily by examining how it affects a female victim which can aid in a better understanding of the interactions between strong people and comprehending victims in Heller's novels that expose the damaging or improper features of World War II social scenario. Being the secondary characters in this male driven novel, women are largely serving as sexual objects or domestic caretakers. For example, Nurse Duckett is constantly subjected to sexual harassment and unwanted advances from male characters, and her primary function is to provide sexual gratification for them. Similarly, the prostitutes in Rome are seen as objects of desire and pleasure for the male soldiers. Women are rarely given agency or voice, and their only role is to support and appease men. Without autonomy or respect, all prostitutes are considered property. Only Natelly's whore, who is only known by her connection to a man, acquired a name; she was the only one to get to a position of relative power. Hungry Joe, a squadron mate of Yossarian, views women as "sexual beings" and is fixated on photographing nude women while posing as a magazine photographer. The first thing readers learn about Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife is that she had to strip off for her husband's squadron cadets who wanted to sleep with her, leaving her intellectual prowess as an afterthought. Only later do readers discover that she "read fine novels". Their bodies are frequently described in sexual detail. It is plainly stated that many of the women are willing to sleep with any man demonstrating the troubling desire of many of them to be treated as sexual objects. In the story, it is frequently stated that the main character is in love with one or more women, but what this truly implies is that he wants her body. This conflating of love and desire for sex is unsettling and is done repeatedly.

It is interesting to note how subtly the novel presents a critique of traditional gender roles and the portrayal of masculinity. Even though they spend so much time together, none of the males develop deep, enduring connections. Instead, people experience severe loneliness and insecurity or only find purpose in worldly possessions. Every time there's a guy who's a little different, the others label him as a target, which only helps to heighten the victim's sense of alienation. To escape the darkness and hidden 'hideousness' of the military officials, the soldiers often escape to prostitutes in Rome and try to seek comfort in their bodies. The offensive and degrading representation of women as mere sexual objects for male fulfilment is wrong and extremely problematic. This happens when practically all female characters, regardless of their social standing, are reduced to the status of sex objects. Yossarian and the

other males exhibit their homosocial tendencies in how they treat women, although mistreating women does not necessarily imply homosociality. As evidenced by Aarfy raping and killing Michaela, the narration supports their propensity to develop lasting connections only with other men and virtually disregard women. Michaela is not mentioned in the book and is solely used as a plot device to highlight how ridiculous Yossarian's life is. Because of his friendship with Aarfy, which they formed as a result of his situational homosociality, Yossarian finds out about her passing. Heller employs homosociality to undervalue women in the text, moving the plot forward through relationships with men regardless of the presence of any women. Because of their homosocial inclinations, the males are very reliant on one another; they reject the opinions of female characters, as Yossarian makes clear in his treatment of Nurse Duckett and his discussion with Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife. After having slept with her, he completely rejects her opinion of God and regards her points of view as absurd. Even while speaking with a woman, Yossarian minimizes her role as anything other than a tool for having sex, treating her like an object rather than a human being with whom he might interact. Yossarian completely denies the value of women because of his reliance on male connections and the homosociality that follows.

The character of Yossarian, who resists the patriarchal power structures of the military and refuses to conform to traditional expectations of masculinity and shows his struggles to reconcile his sense of duty as a soldier with his desire to stay alive further complicated by the gender discourses prevalent during the time, where masculinity was often equated with courage, bravery, and heroism but on the other hand, it also depicts the male characters as hyper-masculine, with their identities closely tied to their roles as soldiers. The men are shown engaging in bravado and one-upmanship, often at the expense of each other's well-being. This toxic masculinity is exemplified by the character of Milo Minderbinder, who becomes consumed with greed and power, even at the cost of the lives of his fellow soldiers. The gender discourse in *Catch-22* is complex and multi-faceted. Moreover, the novel's humor often relies on sexist jokes and innuendos, such as when one character suggests that the only reason women become nurses is to have sex with doctors. Overall, gender is not a central theme in *Catch-22*, but reflects the societal attitudes of the time in its portrayal of women and masculinity.

The *Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood depicts a dystopian society where women are stripped of all autonomy and reduced to their reproductive capabilities. The novel is set in the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic regime that has overthrown the US government and

instituted a new social order. The novel is narrated by Offred, a Handmaid who is forced to bear children for her commander. The novel explores how gender discourses can be used to control and subjugate women, with the regime using religion and social norms to justify their actions. The sheer impact of patriarchal systems on women's lives, and the consequences of gender-based violence on women in Gilead, who are denied access to education, work, and financial independence, reducing them to mere objects that exist solely for the pleasure and benefit of men. The Wives, who are married to the Commanders and are infertile, are given more privileges but are also subject to strict rules about their behaviour and appearance. The novel also touches on the issue of violence within the household through the character of Serena Joy, who is portrayed as a victim of her husband's violence. The Aunts, who are responsible for training the Handmaids, are a class of women who have internalized patriarchal values and enforce the rules of the Republic of Gilead. The novel highlights the insidious nature of gender discrimination, where seemingly innocuous social norms can be used to justify the most heinous of acts such as the extremely horrifying ceremony that Offred describes as feeling "like a summoned animal, like a thing horned and hooved", in which the Handmaids are raped by their assigned commanders while their wives hold them down, as a form of institutionalized violence (Atwood 88). The novel describes the ceremony as follows: "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 87).

Furthermore, a topic that falls under this discourse is equally fascinating, namely: knowledge. Whoever controls power also controls knowledge, which in turn regulates what can be spoken and claimed. This is power, says Foucault that "there are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault 347). Therefore, in order to prevent them from learning new things, ladies like Offred who are the "subjects to" are forbidden from reading. The television programming, she is permitted to watch is state-controlled and only airs content that is supportive of the government. At the same time, it does not reveal any negative information about the wars the republic is engaged in and it does not show any information about an organized resistance, which Offred is most interested in learning about.

The Gilead administration makes use of the outdated parts of society "before" to defend the predicament of women, particularly for Handmaids like Offred. By arguing that situations for women were worse prior to the occurrence of sexual violence, they attempt to defend the loss of women's independence and the ability to control their own bodies. Offred's flashbacks actually disprove any belief that society "before" was a good place for women.

Women are oppressed in both the rhetoric of Gilead and the society "before" as a result of the ideals present in both. It is a state mechanism in Gilead to keep women under control, such as through the use of handmaids. The "truth," or the value system, implied that assaulting women was not something that was particularly significant in the society that existed "before" the sexual assaults on women. The character of Aunt Lydia is a particularly powerful example of how psychological violence can be used as a means of control and oppression. She is responsible for the indoctrination of the Handmaids, and her methods involve breaking down their sense of self-worth and agency. For example, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids that they are "privileged women" and that they should feel grateful for being chosen to serve as Handmaids. It is evident of how Aunt Lydia uses psychological manipulation to make the Handmaids feel as though their role is important and valuable, when in reality they are being oppressed and controlled. Aunt Lydia's description of women as "sluts" illustrates how oppression often takes the shape of treating women with contempt. The official recognition of women's equal rights in the society "before" was thwarted by the discourse's underlying principles. Women are thereby unintentionally caught in a form of "Catch-22" which simply means a dilemma from which there's no escape.

It is well acknowledged that feminist discourse has been an important contributor to gender discourse, as it has highlighted the need to challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful critique of gender stereotypes and the dangers of a patriarchal society, highlighting the ways in which women are oppressed and controlled, and shows how these attitudes lead to a society that is brutally oppressive, physically and psychologically violent, and dehumanizing. Thus, serving as a warning against the dangers of ignoring gender equality and the importance of fighting for the rights of all people, regardless of their gender. Women are divided into different classes based on their fertility. They have no control over their bodies or their lives. They are assigned to households where they are treated as property and are subject to the whims of their male masters. They are not allowed to hold positions of power or authority, and are expected to be submissive to their husbands and masters. They are not allowed to express their sexuality and are punished severely if they do. For instance, the Handmaids are forced to have sex with their masters in a clinical, unemotional manner, with the aim of procreation. Any expression of desire or pleasure is considered a sin and is punished with severe consequences and are subjected to various rituals that reinforce their subservience and inferiority. Additionally, Offred recalls how the Eyes (the government's secret police) would regularly carry out executions by hanging

and then display the bodies on the Wall. She notes that some of the bodies were women who had been accused of being "gender traitors". This term is used to refer to lesbians, and the fact that they are hanged in public is a witness to their position in society. Offred reflects on this lack of agency when she says, "What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise, there are only two dimensions. Otherwise, you live with your face squashed up against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bedsheet, the molecules of the face" (Atwood 63).

The issue of male sterility in Gilead is another illustration of how the regime seeks to devalue women by insisting that only women can be held responsible for a man's inability to procreate. It is always her who is at fault. This doesn't stop here as the Handmaids are required to wear a specific uniform that covers their entire body and face, thus erasing their individuality and making them indistinguishable from each other. They are also subjected to public executions, which serve as a reminder of their powerlessness and the consequences of disobedience. They claim that women need to be protected from their own sinful nature and that their oppression is necessary for the greater good. This places the burden of their oppression on the women themselves, as they are seen as inherently flawed and in need of control. Women are not allowed to form relationships with each other that are not sanctioned by men. They are not allowed to form close friendships or share personal information with each other. This isolation prevents women from forming alliances and supporting each other, which makes them more vulnerable to the abuses of the men in power. The novel challenges these structures by highlighting the importance of reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, emphasizing the importance of sisterhood and solidarity among women, and encouraging resistance against patriarchal oppression.

Both novels highlight the damaging impact of gender discourses, illustrating how they can limit individual autonomy and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. These discourses are often reinforced through literature, as writers draw on societal norms and expectations to create compelling narratives. However, as both novels demonstrate, literature can also be a powerful tool for challenging gender stereotypes and shining a light on the damaging impact of gender discrimination. Through a critical analysis of these novels, readers can become more aware of the complex ways in which gender shapes individual lives and societal structures. This can help readers to develop a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of different gendered experiences and struggles. Readers can identify and challenge harmful stereotypes and assumptions about gender. This can help to promote more equitable and just societies, where

individuals are not limited by restrictive gender norms. Thus, promoting intersectional approaches to social justice, which seek to address the unique experiences and challenges faced by individuals who occupy multiple marginalized identities and also to question dominant narratives and power structures, and to envision alternative futures that are more just and equitable.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, every historical period introduces new ideas and developments that have an effect on educational theory and practice thus, an analysis of the same becomes significant. Gender discourses have a profound impact on individuals and societies, shaping not just individual attitudes but also the structures of power and governance. Both novels also explore the possibilities of resistance and subversion within oppressive systems. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Handmaids engage in small acts of rebellion, such as forming relationships with one another and sharing forbidden knowledge. Offred's narrative challenges the dominant narrative of the Republic of Gilead and offers a glimpse of hope for a better future. In *Catch-22*, characters like Yossarian and Nurse Duckett challenge the absurdity of the military bureaucracy and its destructive impact on human lives. Both novels suggest that resistance can come in the form of storytelling and that the power of narratives can subvert dominant structures of power.

*Catch-22* and *The Handmaid's Tale* offer a powerful commentary on the damaging impact of gender stereotypes, highlighting the insidious nature of gender discrimination and the ways in which it can be used to justify oppression and subjugation. As even today, the issues of gender equality and social justice are continuously grappled with, it is important to recognize the role of gender discourses in shaping our attitudes and beliefs and work to challenge these harmful stereotypes wherever we encounter them.

However, gender discourse can also be used in subversive ways to challenge and transform traditional gender roles. This can be seen in the way that feminist movements have used language and discourse to challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality.



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**Author's bio-note**

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Mansi Yadav is a dedicated educator and a passionate advocate for the power of literature and language. She recently completed her post-graduation in English from Hansraj College, University of Delhi. Currently, Mansi serves as a faculty member at Vivekananda College, University of Delhi, where she brings her deep understanding of English literature to a new generation of eager learners. Her literary pursuits extend to critical analysis, creative writing, and a keen interest in contemporary literature. Her future endeavors are poised to make significant contributions to the field of literature and education.

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