

# THE HANDMAID'S ANGER

## A RAIVA DA AIA NO CONTO DA MARGARET ATWOOD

### Abstract

This article analyzes the presence and significance of anger in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The concept of anger is researched and categorized, then applied to the novel. The analysis aids in the elaboration of literary criticism that focuses on oppression in relation to "the other." This notion, "the other", touches upon issues such as gender, class, and historical context, all analyzed here in regard to oppression. Additional analysis determines the role of anger, including its sub-categories, in causing an inner and an external emancipatory change.

**Key words:** Atwood. Gender. Anger. Dystopia. Speculative Fiction.

### Resumo

Este artigo analisa a presença e o significado da raiva no livro *The Handmaid's tale (O Conto da Aia)*, escrito por Margaret Atwood. A partir de uma pesquisa e categorização do conceito de raiva, o mesmo é então aplicado ao livro. Nesta forma, o artigo auxilia na elaboração de crítica literária focada na opressão relacionada ao "outro", o marginalizado dentro da sociedade. Essa noção do "outro" tange outros assuntos como gênero, classe e contexto histórico, analisados em relação à opressão. Análise complementar determina o papel da raiva e suas subcategorias na formação interna e externa de mudança emancipatória.

**Palavras-chave:** Atwood. Gênero. Raiva. Distopia. Ficção Especulativa.

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Harold Bloom has claimed that feminist scholars, a fraction of what he has named “the resentment school”, let their political and social beliefs stand in the way of their aesthetics and reason (50). His observation goes hand in hand with the popular Danish proverb, “When anger blinds the eye, the truth disappears.” But do resentment and anger (concepts that will be clarified here) necessarily imply a distorted perception? This essay analyzes the sources and significance of women’s anger resulting from conventions and practices regarding the female body within the frame of social oppression, as portrayed in Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, especially through the character Offred.

*The Handmaid’s Tale*, a caution story, depicts a future in which the body is the only representation of politically outcast fertile women. The author shows how anger, resentment, and remorse sustain the socially discriminated woman’s sense of self and propel her to break away from the oppressive system. Atwood’s novel concentrates mainly on one victim, Offred, whose fertility has been proven and whose partner has been considered unworthy by the fundamentalists. Offred is forced to leave her spouse and little daughter and go through a rough process of reeducation in order to serve a childless couple as a handmaid, bear a baby to the husband, and abandon her baby in the couple’s possession only to move on to another such couple.

Every sexual intercourse, a pathetic ritual in which the wife is positioned over her, is a rape justified by ideology (86-91). The wife, as well as the female re-educators, collaborate with the patriarchal law and receive certain benefits, but all women obey the patriarchal authorities and live in function of men. Under the power of the new laws, Offred is forced to wear red clothes to hide her body curves, and a hood with white wings that limit her field of vision, a metaphor for censorship and a reflection of women’s religion-oriented clothing. Even her name is a symbol of slavery and a reflection of the intention to erase her

individuality; it is a derivation from the name of the man who has the right to her body and future baby: “Of Fred.” Obviously, Atwood takes the patriarchal, tyrannical future into extreme in a dystopian manner. There is nothing subtle about her warning from fundamentalism.

The specific idea of using a handmaid when the wife is infertile due to global disasters has been probably inspired by the biblical citation that appears in the first epigraph: “And [Rachel] said [to Jacob], Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.” (Genesis 30:1-3). This early suggestion of forced surrogate pregnancy is duplicated in Gilead, but the initiators of the process are men. The change of roles reflects a preoccupation with male-driven religious politics. The handmaid is given a voice here, and an opportunity to express her indignation and save herself and others.

Through her long literary career, Atwood has proven her deep social involvement and preoccupation with social injustice. In this novel, she calls to prevent the establishment of autocracies, and questions the female victims’ means of survival.

### A Caution Story

As mentioned above, the novel shows oppression in its extreme, but *The Handmaid’s Tale* doesn’t belong with the genres of fantasy or horror. Many variations of the story, from radical fundamentalism to the elimination of the regime’s enemies to discrimination and to permanent denial of human rights, have occurred between the Bible days and 1993, the year the book was published. The media and other sources of information have revealed that such horrors have happened in Nazi Germany, old Yugoslavia and Bosnia, among other countries where sexual obedience has served to “fortify the race” and/or establish power relations. In light of that, the readers of *The Handmaid’s Tale* are invited to

consider the negative possibilities lying in the future as a consequence of acceptance and silence and to find ways to prevent such developments.

The memory of a better past as well as of past horrors is crucial for awareness and caution, as Atwood shows. In that regard, one of the Aunts, a re-educator, tells the handmaids that future generations will accept their role of handmaids without an objection and difficulty like theirs (117). Offred acknowledges the truth in this notion. If the next generation bears no reminiscence of a better past, the women will have no hope for a better future. If nobody knows what is done to women based on their gender, how can society prevent it? For that reason, Offred's journal, most of the novel, serves as a warning both in fiction and in real-life.

Atwood reminds the readers that tyranny may take full control of anything physical, and it will do its best to control what people think and feel, but there is still a certain freedom available to the victims as long as they don't cooperate mentally with her oppressors. Offred's silent protest, her fierce sense of injustice, and her anger against the malefactors, all fed by the memory of freedom, can sustain and perhaps save her once they transform into actions.

While collaborating with the system, for fear of torture and death, she is unwilling to consider herself a mere carrier of a procreation instrument. The forces that work against her weaken her life-force at times, but her memory of love and of liberty fortifies her, and she keeps striving for a change. She can also bear her isolation because she hopes that others share her values and one day they'll unite, thus obtaining power. Nothing is guaranteed, however, as she is well aware. Offred's designated pair, Ofglen, pays for that with her life (285) and Moira, her brave childhood friend, is forced to become a prostitute. Hope should transcend logic, perhaps. It should be fueled by a raging refusal to suffer.

## **Feminist context**

The author's preoccupation with an oppressive, sexist establishment and its impact on the individual is closely related to feminist concerns such as a woman's right to be a member of society without being limited to roles attributed to gender or bound by rules dictated by a powerful social fraction. The story clarifies how a patriarchal system that acts against equality and free will fixes its own body and class-centered meaning to women's identity and bases its rules upon this meaning. Women need powerful inner resources to maintain or create their sense of self, keep a bond with their body as a source of positive emotions, and remember it is one component of their hole. In Gilead, Offred is "the other" due to several variables stated by poststructuralist feminist thinkers: the body, sexuality, gender, class, and circumstance. These determine her place as a subjugated element of the system.

Feminist thinker Judith Butler advocates an awareness of the social discourse and the political system that affect women's lives. This awareness helps women gain a perspective of their socially constructed behavior and identity in a process of deconstruction that can bring change. It should be understood that repression justifies itself by attributing a demeaning significance to female anatomy, but this is not based on any actual biologically-determined identity (27).

## **Depiction of Rage as a Roof Concept**

Feminist scholar Patricia Yaeger wrote about Flannery O'Connor: "Writing in a culture that refuses women their rage and their intelligence, O'Connor uses both" (67). The same can be said about Atwood's dealing with a future culture that negates rage and intelligence by giving her protagonist both characteristics. As Offred resists the current social discourse, her rage is directed at sources around her and, to some extent, within her.

The most relevant concepts for the ensuing analysis, therefore, are rage, anger, resentment and remorse. According to The Oxford Dictionary, the definition of rage is based on anger: “violent, uncontrollable anger,” “a vehement desire or passion” and “[with modifier] an instance of aggressive behavior or violent anger caused by a stressful or frustrating situation.” Anger seems to be the key or the root concept. Its definition, as a noun, is “a strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility.” Still, it does not include the subtleties of resentment and remorse. The definition of resentment is: “bitter indignation at having been treated unfairly.” Finally, the definition of remorse is: “deep regret or guilt for a wrong committed.”

These concepts have been clarified according to an emotional register by Robert C. Solomon, professor of Continental Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin. He suggests that emotions are sets of judgments in which we can identify certain dominant patterns and name them as individual emotions. All emotions are judgmental, he writes, and project our values and expectations of the world (223). Based on Solomon’s register, I will assume that resentment is directed towards higher-status individuals, anger is directed towards equal-status individuals, and contempt is directed towards lower-status individuals (225). Remorse is an inner-directed feeling, associated with guilt (287).

### **Resentment**

Offred’s low status in Gilead determines that most of the objects of her rage are people of a higher status, and therefore, her emotion toward them can be defined as resentment. For that reason, the section dedicated to resentment is bigger in scope than the ones dedicated to anger and to remorse.

The targets of Offred’s resentment are divided in three groups. The most significant one consists of the controlling class of men who have obtained

power by force and have maintained it by applying violence and setting draconian laws. She doesn’t doubt their ill intentions even once. Therefore, when she finds that they enjoy so much power they don’t obey their own laws, she is not surprised, but cynical (237). Her spite is reflected in her body sensations. The body shuts up during sex with the commander, Fred; even at the one time she would have liked it to revive (255). This fact seems to mean that her mind, or the sum of her emotions and values, is stronger than her body’s sensuous voice, a proof it is not the source of her identity. Offred notices that her body has changed from a lithe, athletic ally, and a source of pleasure into a pear-like shaped entity. She observes it from a certain distance, as if it is not hers. But its indifference is only a sign of her disconnection from the commander and his sort, a symbol of her inner independence. It changes when she finds love.

It should be noted that while Offred’s resentment against the men in power is invariable, her feelings toward the commander become more complex, as she is called to secret encounters with him, in which they play scrabble, speak, share magazines, and fake intimacy. She remains an interested observer in expectation for an opportunity to gain power, more than an involved companion, but she also mellows down when he seems to her like a person, a man, and not an authority. At times she has to remind herself that he is dangerous, and then, her fear evokes resentment right away (183-188).

Another group that generates Offred’s resentment is the one of Aunts, the handmaids’ re-educators, messengers of the dominant men. Despite their gender they implant the cruel re-programming with an utter lack of solidarity. They manipulate the “girls” and don’t hesitate to torture them if they go out of line. None of the aunts softens Offred’s feelings, because none of them reveals any vulnerability or connects beyond her official role.

Lastly, Offred bears resentment toward the wives. These women look down on handmaids and attribute

vulgar and cowardly characteristics to them, also fearing their possible sexual appeal to their husbands, and envying them their probable fertility (115). But as it happens with the commander, when Offred recognizes his wife, Serena Joy's vulnerabilities, she develops certain compassion toward her. Almost absurdly, she also feels guilt due to her (forced) encounters with the commander.

Despite this tendency to mellow down, even in her lowest stage of resentment toward the couple, Offred is still aware that they never cease to treat her as if she were in their possession. Her resentment overpowers her empathy, after all. She coils away from them once and for all, when she finds love with Nick, the driver or the spy whom she chooses to trust. Toward the ending, when her safety is in danger, she realizes they'll never save her, but Nick might. Both resentment and love are her fueling powers. She goes on a ride that can take her toward torture and death or toward freedom (295).

### **Anger**

Before the political change, when Offred is declared financially dependent on her husband, she feels that he settles into being her guardian too comfortably, and her anger against him is strongly related to her resentment toward the whole patriarchal organization. It passes when she doubts he actually feels this way (176). After the change she occasionally develops anger against other handmaids though they are trapped like her. The emotion is mainly directed at Janine, a woman who is always on the verge of a breakdown. Offred is angry and impatient toward Janine's exhibitions of weakness (215-216). She questions her own feeling, but justifies it with her understanding that her colleague's fear can lead to betrayal. It may also be understood as a sign of her rejection of weakness; her anger is related to her sense of survival. However, Offred admits to herself that, if threatened by torture, she will, most

likely, tell whatever the torturers want to hear. This understanding helps her put herself in Janine's place and judge her with mercy. Her anger stays in check, after all, and is never in full flare.

### **Remorse**

Offred's remorse has two foci. She is angry at not having given importance to political declarations that seemed too absurd to be real at the time, but in the end, led to the direction that has destroyed her life (174). As the story unfolds, it brings reminiscences of slavery, rape and of genocides of the twentieth century. Through Offred, Atwood reminds the readers of the danger incorporated in declarations that witnesses dismiss as insignificant. The systematic cut of human rights picks Offred's full attention when the population is wholly Christian, and the regime turns against them as well. Her remorse drives her to leave behind her a journal directed at her beloved husband, Luke. Since this journal relates events Luke has witnessed, it is probably meant for other eyes as well. The journal is her only means of protest, and she feels remorse because of her inability to perform impulsive acts of self-liberation, the way her admired friend, Moira, does. In another expression of remorse, Offred disdains her own fear and feels guilty for not following her ideals, but she is too afraid of the consequences. She remains cautious because it is in her nature, but she remembers the other option. Nevertheless, the readers can't judge what emotion is more productive for liberation based on the story, since by the ending it is unknown whether either of the women made it out of Gilead safely.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to clarify the sources and the consequences of resentment, anger and remorse in regard to oppression and discriminatory ideology in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood.

Clearly, the protagonist's awareness of the injustice she suffers generates these feelings. They strengthen her in her resistance, since awareness can also lead to desperation and surrender. In Offred's case, her anger, resentment, and remorse steel her during the wait for the right moment of action.

Offred's anger is the weakest part of the three interrelated emotions, and the less significant. Her resentment helps her keep her integrity in the face of powerful oppression. Her remorse is the source of her attempt to construct a better future by supplying information to others. It brings to mind Martin Neomöller's famous message regarding the Nazis and the passive witnesses:

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out--

because I was not a communist;

Then they came for the socialists, and I did not

speak out--

because I was not a socialist;

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out--

because I was not a trade unionist;

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--

because I was not a Jew;

Then they came for me--

and there was no one left to speak out for me.

(Marcuse, web).

Offred should have recognized the importance of the decline in freedom and equality earlier, in which case she might have acted upon her resentment on time and wouldn't have developed such remorse. However, her choice to warn others about such happenings through her writing indicates Atwood's suggestion of hope.

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