



Review paper

Female Agency and Regression in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker

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ABSTRACT

In the hauntingly prophetic world of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the poignant, soul-stirring narrative of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, the silenced voices of Offred and Celie whisper tales of resilience, defiance, and unyielding hope, their stories a powerful testament to the indomitable human spirit that refuses to be extinguished, even in the darkest of times. As we bear witness to their struggles, their pain, and their triumphs, we are reminded of the preciousness of female agency, the devastating consequences of its erosion, and the transformative power of resistance and survival. This comparative analysis seeks to honour their voices, to amplify their stories, and to explore the complex intersections of oppression, resistance, and survival, inviting readers to reflect on the significance of collective action, solidarity, and empathy in the face of patriarchal domination, and ultimately inspiring a deeper understanding, compassion, and appreciation for the women who dare to resist, to survive, and to thrive.

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, depicts a totalitarian society where women's bodies are controlled and commoditised. The novel explores the themes of female agency, resistance, and regression in a patriarchal society. This research paper will examine the ways in which the novel portrays female agency and regression, and what implications this has for our understanding of women's experiences.

The novel's protagonist, Offred, is a complex character who embodies both agency and regression. On one hand, Offred's narrative voice and actions demonstrate her agency and resistance to the oppressive regime. She forms relationships with other Handmaids, like Ofglen, and engages in small acts of defiance, such as stealing a forbidden magazine.

On the other hand, Offred's experiences and choices are also shaped by the oppressive society. She is forced into reproductive servitude, and her body is controlled by the regime. Offred's narrative also reveals her internalized oppression, as she struggles with feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame.

The novel portrays regression as a result of the oppressive society's efforts to control women's bodies and agency. The Handmaids' experiences are marked by a loss of autonomy, identity, and individuality. The regime's use of language, such as the renaming of Handmaids with possessive names (e.g., "Of-" followed by the Commander's name), reinforces this regression. The novel also highlights the ways in which women's



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regression is perpetuated by societal norms and expectations. The Commanders' wives, like Serena Joy, are complicit in the oppression of Handmaids, and the novel suggests that this complicity is rooted in internalized patriarchal values.

The Handmaid's Tale offers a powerful critique of patriarchal societies and the ways in which they control women's bodies and agency. The novel highlights the importance of female agency and resistance in the face of oppression. It also underscores the need to challenge internalized oppression and societal norms that perpetuate women's regression. A thought-provoking novel that explores the complex themes of female agency and regression in a patriarchal society, through Offred's narrative, the novel portrays the ways in which women's experiences are shaped by oppressive systems and societal norms. The novel's portrayal of female agency and regression offers valuable insights into the importance of resistance and challenging internalized oppression.

In the hauntingly prophetic world of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the poignant narrative of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*, the silenced voices of Offred and Celie whisper tales of resilience and defiance, their stories a testament to the indomitable human spirit that refuses to be extinguished. As we bear witness to their struggles, we are reminded of the preciousness of female agency and the devastating consequences of its erosion.

In both novels, female agency is a powerful force that is brutally suppressed by patriarchal societies. Offred, a Handmaid in the oppressive Republic of Gilead, is reduced to a mere vessel for procreation, her body controlled and commoditised by the ruling regime. Similarly, Celie, a young black woman in the rural South, is subjected to physical and emotional abuse, her voice silenced by the societal norms that govern her life. Yet, despite these oppressive forces, both Offred and Celie find ways to resist, to assert their humanity and dignity in the face of overwhelming oppression.

The regression of female agency is a stark reality in both novels. Offred's memories of her past life, her relationships, and her identity are slowly erased, replaced by the rigid expectations of her role as a Handmaid. Celie, too, is forced to surrender her dreams, her desires, and her sense of self-worth, her existence reduced to a mere shadow of what it could be. And yet, even in the darkest moments, there are glimmers of hope, sparks of resistance that refuse to be extinguished.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's small acts of defiance, her secret notes and hidden memories, are testaments to her enduring spirit. In *The Colour Purple*, Celie's relationships with Shug and Sofia empower her to challenge the patriarchal norms that have governed her life, to find her voice and assert her independence. These moments of resistance are not just acts of survival; they are declarations of humanity, affirmations of the inherent worth and dignity of women.

As we read these novels, we are reminded of the importance of female agency, of the power of women's voices, and the resilience of the human spirit. We are also reminded of the devastating consequences of patriarchal oppression, of the ways in which societies can strip women of their autonomy, their dignity, and their humanity. These novels are not just stories; they are warnings, testaments to the enduring power of women's resistance and resilience.

In the end, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Color Purple* are not just novels about oppression; they are novels about hope, about the human spirit's capacity to resist, to survive, and to thrive even in the darkest of times. They remind us that female agency is not just a privilege; it is a fundamental human right, essential to our dignity, our autonomy, and our humanity. As we reflect on these novels, we are compelled to act, to challenge the patriarchal norms that govern our societies, to amplify the voices of women, and to celebrate the power of female agency in all its forms.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a powerful novel that explores the experiences of black women in the rural South during the early 20th century. Through the protagonist Celie's narrative, the novel sheds light on the themes of female agency, oppression, and regression. Despite the oppressive societal norms, Celie and other female characters in the novel demonstrate remarkable agency and resilience, ultimately leading to their empowerment and independence. The women in the novel – Nettie, Sofia and primarily Shug Avery boost Celie's self-esteem and empower her enough to find the courage to leave her abusive husband and initiate her own business. The narrative of emancipation highlights not only a woman's struggles to find her own voice, discovering her happiness but also forging a strong sense of identity quite distinct from the patriarchal values upheld by the society.

In a society where oppression of women was accepted as normal, Celie never understood the necessity of standing up for oneself and quite naturally preferred to remain invisible and be submissive to the agencies perpetrating oppression. Her step father conveniently abuses her sexually on the pretext that her ailing mother is no longer able to satisfy his physical needs. She is considered "... too dumb to keep going to school..." (11). She is forced to stay home and tend to the household chores. Even after marriage she continues to be the victim of the same abuse when her husband uses her to satisfy his physical needs in a cruel way. Through

relationships with other women and her own, Celie finally transforms herself from a victim to a strong and independent woman. As she becomes more confident and learns to assert herself, Celie openly expresses her opinions and feelings. "It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I Need...Sofia so surprise to hear me speak up. " (180), she reacts to the condescending remarks of her husband when he knows of her plans to leave him. In Memphis she starts her sewing business and she begins by making trousers that can be worn by women as well as men which become quite a success. She finally establishes herself as a successful entrepreneur and gain financial stability. Her sister Nettie is a constant support to her who encourages Celie to hope for a brighter future amidst all that is bleak.

Celie's quest to find her autonomy and identity is the underlying theme of the novel *The Color Purple*. In spite of being subjected to emotional and physical abuse, Celie ultimately finds a way to assert her own identity through her strong bond with Shug, Sofia and Nettie. These relationships give her the courage to emerge as a strong woman and challenge the patriarchal norms of the society. Regression is portrayed as an outcome of an oppressive society that suppress female agencies and wants to control their bodies. Celie's experiences are marked by a loss of autonomy, identity, and individuality. However, through her relationships and experiences, Celie begins to resist and challenge these oppressive forces. Her relationship with Shug, in particular, allows her to explore her own desires and sense of self-worth.

Shug Avery is an embodiment of financial independence and self-confidence who instills the same attributes in other women. She has a strong impact on Celie who models Shug's assertiveness and is able to find her stability through Shug. As a singer who earns her own living, Shug is not afraid to speak up her mind and often uses a sharp language to wield power in a patriarchal society. She becomes instrumental in Celie's own growth as a woman and provides protection and emotional strength to her.

In the novel, Sofia emerges as the symbol of resistance and also a source of empowerment for Celie through her indomitable spirit, her unwillingness to conform and her physical strength. She is portrayed as a strong woman who challenges the patriarchy and refuses to come to terms with oppression. She even beats up her husband Harpo when he tries to physically abuse her. The lack of love and care pains her and she says "...the worst part is I don't think he notice. He git up there and enjoy himself just the same. No matter what I'm thinking. No matter what I'm feel. It just him. Heart feeling don't even seem to enter into it. The fact he can do it like that make me want to kill him. (p. 69) " As a retaliation against this indifference and the abuse that she is subjected to, Sofia leaves her husband. Sofia's strength and independence inspire Celie to confront her own internal strength and fight for her own empowerment.

The female relationships and solidarity between them is a strong underlying theme of the novel. The protagonist's journey from suppression to emancipation and emerging identity is brought about by her strong bond with Nettie, Sofia and Shug. They provide solace, emotional support and the much needed strength to stand against the oppression of the patriarchy and reclaim female independence. Sofia embodies assertiveness and challenges male dominance with her own retaliation and in turn inspires Celie to find her own strength and Shug encourages Celie to embrace her sexuality and self-worth. This solidarity is central to the narrative of women reclaiming their identities in a patriarchal society that considers women as mere objects of pleasure and oppression. Sisterhood and female bond play a crucial role in Celie's personal development. Through these relationships, Celie learns not only to challenge the oppressive circumstances around her but also build a strong sense of self-reliance. Alice Walker has made use of these female bonds to portray a narrative of marginalization of women like Celie brought about by patriarchy yet clearly underlines the fact that through solidarity among women oppression can be definitely overcome.

By the end of the novel, Celie's evolution demonstrates the transformative impact of sisterhood, with the connections she forms with Shug and Sofia central to her growth and self-realization.

In conclusion, *The Color Purple* is a testament to the strength and resilience of black women in the face of oppression. Through Celie's narrative, the novel highlights the importance of female agency, empowerment, and independence. The novel shows that even in the most challenging circumstances, women can find ways to assert their autonomy and challenge patriarchal norms.

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