

Naming the Unnameable: Identity, Autonomy, and Survival in The Handmaid's Tale

Dr. Archana Singh

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a haunting dystopian novel that continues to resonate deeply in discussions of women's rights, bodily autonomy, and authoritarian control. Through the first-person narrative of Offred—a Handmaid in the theocratic Republic of Gilead—the story exposes how totalitarian regimes dismantle personal identity to enforce submission, while also illustrating quiet, resilient acts of resistance that preserve the human spirit.

Set in a near-future New England after a violent coup by the fundamentalist group the Sons of Jacob, the United States has been replaced by the Republic of Gilead—a patriarchal, totalitarian society facing a fertility crisis due to environmental pollution and disease. Women are stripped of rights: they can no longer own property, vote, read, work, or control their bodies. Society is rigidly divided by gender and function—Commanders (ruling men), Wives, Marthas (servants), Aunts (indoctrinators), and Handmaids (fertile women forced into ritualized surrogacy).

The protagonist, Offred (meaning "Of Fred," belonging to her Commander), narrates her life in Gilead. She recalls her pre-Gilead existence as a wife, mother, and working woman with her husband Luke and daughter. Captured during the regime's takeover, she undergoes brutal "training" at the Red Center under the Aunts. Assigned to the household of a high-ranking Commander, Offred participates in the Ceremony—a monthly rape disguised as biblical reproduction—while navigating surveillance, forced modesty in red robes, and constant threats of execution or exile to toxic Colonies.

Amid oppression, Offred forms fragile connections: illicit Scrabble games and forbidden conversations with the Commander, a secret affair with the chauffeur Nick, and memories of her defiant friend Moira and her feminist mother. Her narration—recorded secretly and discovered later as historical tapes—becomes an act of witnessing. The novel ends ambiguously: Offred is taken away in a black van, uncertain if it's rescue by the underground Mayday resistance or arrest, leaving her fate open but her voice enduring.

The Erasure of Identity: Naming the Unnameable

At the heart of Gilead's control is the systematic destruction of individual identity. Handmaids are denied their real names, replaced with patronymic labels like Offred, Ofglen, or Ofwarren—signifying possession by a man. As Offred reflects: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter... but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter."

This renaming reduces women to property and function. Offred's true name—hinted at through whispered roll calls as possibly "June"—is never confirmed, mirroring how history erases marginalized voices. The regime forbids personal history, literacy, and mirrors, forcing women to dissociate from their bodies and past selves. Offred describes feeling like "smoke" or a "mirage," fading away: "I feel as if there's not much left of me."

Clothing reinforces this erasure—the red habit symbolizes blood, fertility, and visibility as reproductive vessels, while "wings" blinders restrict sight and individuality. Quotes like "We are two-legged wombs, that's all" capture the dehumanization, stripping women of complexity to serve patriarchal reproduction.

The Struggle for Autonomy

Autonomy—bodily, mental, and emotional—is systematically stripped. Women cannot consent, choose partners, or control reproduction. The Ceremony enforces state rape, observed by Wives, turning intimacy into ritual duty. Offred longs for touch that values her beyond fertility: "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable."

Yet autonomy flickers in small rebellions. Offred reclaims agency through memory, storytelling, and secret acts—repeating her forbidden name like a mantra, playing Scrabble (a forbidden intellectual game), or finding pleasure in her affair with Nick. Narration itself becomes resistance: "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending." By bearing witness, Offred asserts control over her truth in a world that silences her.

Survival: Mental and Physical Resilience

Survival in Gilead demands dual strategies—physical obedience and mental preservation. Offred distinguishes between bodily submission (to avoid punishment) and inner resistance. Forgetting her past might aid physical survival, but erasing identity risks total annihilation. She balances resignation ("My name is Offred now") with defiance, cataloging facts about herself to anchor her sense of self.

The novel argues that true survival transcends mere endurance—it's retaining humanity amid dehumanization. Offred's narrative endures as testimony, proving that even in the darkest oppression, the unnameable can be named through voice and memory.

In an era of renewed threats to women's autonomy worldwide, *The Handmaid's Tale* warns that identity and freedom are fragile. Yet it also offers hope: as long as stories are told and names remembered, resistance persists. Offred may never fully reclaim her name, but in refusing to be fully erased, she names the unnameable—and survives.