

## EXPLORING BORDERS, SYMBOLISM AND IDENTITIES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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### ABSTRACT

*Earlier the area of Border Studies was considered to be related and limited to geographical boundaries but literature has always projected the theme of borders in a larger sense. Since the classical writing of Homer's Iliad, borders are represented substantially, maybe a visible boundary or the invisible borders of metaphors, thoughts, and symbols. After the twentieth century, border theory was widely considered and accepted to explore the theoretical approach to literature as it throws light on different dimensions of border planes. The paper undertakes the theoretical approach to the contemporary concept of border theory to analyze the use of borders, symbolism, and identities in the dystopian novel The Handmaid's Tale written by Margaret Atwood.*

**Keywords:** Border Theory, Symbolism, Identities, and Dystopian.

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### Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian author, poet, and literary critic born in Ottawa, Canada in 1939. She studied at the University of Toronto and Harvard University, where she completed her graduate studies in English literature. The dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* published in 1985. It is her best-known work. The novel is set in a future totalitarian society called the Republic of Gilead, which is located in what was formerly the United States of America. The society is controlled by a fundamentalist regime that has taken power after a period of social and environmental upheaval. The novel follows the story of Offred, a handmaid who is forced to bear children for a high-ranking government official and his infertile wife.

One of the major themes in the novel is the oppression of women. The handmaids are stripped of their identities and forced to conform to a rigid societal structure that is designed to control their bodies and their reproductive functions. Women are denied access to education, the right to own property, and the right to vote. They are also forced to dress in a uniform that covers their bodies, symbolizing their lack of agency and autonomy. It also explores the intersection of religion and politics. The government of Gilead is a theocracy, and the ruling class justifies their actions by citing religious scripture. However, the religion of Gilead is a twisted and oppressive version of Christianity, which is used to justify the subjugation of women and the persecution of minorities.

Another important theme in the novel is the power of language. The government of Gilead controls language by limiting access to books and literature and by creating a new language that is used to reinforce their ideology. This language is designed to erase the past and control the present, effectively erasing the identity of the individual. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that raises important questions about the role of women in society, the dangers of religious extremism, and the power of language to shape our understanding of the world.

The issue of border identities is an important theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The use of borders can be understood through the lens of 'Border Theory'. It examines that throughout the story borders are

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used to maintain power and control in society. The novel highlights various uses of borders to create divisions and hierarchies, and how they can be used to control the movement of people and goods. By exploring the theme of borders in this way, the novel offers a critique of authoritarianism and the abuse of power. The themes of border, identity, and symbols are used to create a dystopian world in which individuals are stripped of their autonomy and forced into predetermined roles.

The novel depicts a society in which borders have been erected both physically and socially, and these borders are used to control and subjugate certain groups of people. Physically, the borders between countries have been closed, and the citizens of Gilead are not allowed to leave. This has led to a sense of isolation and a lack of outside perspective, which has allowed the government to maintain its oppressive regime without significant opposition.

The society of Gilead is highly stratified, with people being divided into different classes based on their gender, social status, and fertility. The handmaids are considered to be the lowest class of women, and they are stripped of their identities and forced to conform to a rigid societal structure. The issue of border identities is particularly relevant to the handmaids as they are stripped of their previous identities and given new names that reflect their function as child-bearers. They are also forced to wear a uniform that covers their bodies and obscures their individuality. The handmaids are not allowed to have relationships with anyone other than their Commander and are constantly monitored by the government, which further reinforces their sense of isolation and separation from society.

Therefore, the issue of border identities highlights the dangers of creating rigid social structures that divide people into different groups based on their identity. This leads to the dehumanization and oppression of certain groups, as well as a lack of empathy and understanding between different groups of people. They play a significant role in the novel, both as physical barriers and as social constructs. In the world of Gilead, formerly the United States, borders have been redrawn to separate different regions and to control the movement of people and resources. The borders are heavily guarded, and those who attempt to cross them face severe consequences. Additionally, the borders between different social groups, such as the handmaids, wives, and commanders, are strictly enforced, creating a rigid hierarchy. They are also used to create divisions and maintain power in the society of Gilead. The borders in the novel are both physical and metaphorical, and they serve to reinforce the hierarchies of the society.

The physical borders in the novel are used to control the movement of people. The former United States has been divided into smaller regions, with heavily guarded borders between them. The borders are used to prevent people from leaving and to control the movement of goods and services. The novel also explores the use of borders to control people's bodies, as women's bodies are strictly regulated by the state.

Metaphorically, the borders in the novel are used to separate different groups of people. The society of Gilead is divided into various social classes, and the borders serve to maintain the power of the ruling class over the others. The handmaids are confined to certain areas of the city and are not allowed to interact with other members of society. This isolation serves to reinforce their status as subjugated individuals.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a richly symbolic novel that uses various symbols to convey its themes and messages. The colour 'Red' is a recurring symbol throughout the novel. The handmaids wear red cloaks and hats, which symbolize both fertility and oppression. Red is also associated with blood, which is a reminder of the handmaids' monthly cycles and their role as child-bearers. Similarly, the 'Wall' is a symbol of the totalitarian regime in Gilead. It separates the outside world from the inner world of the government and serves as a reminder of the strict social hierarchy in the society.

The 'Ceremony' symbolises the power dynamics between men and women in Gilead. It involves the ritualized sexual act between the Commander and the handmaid, with the wife present to hold the handmaid down. This ritual highlights the handmaid's lack of agency and her status as a reproductive vessel. The ever-present surveillance and control in the society, as well as the fear and paranoia that underlies the regime, is the 'Eyes'. It is the secret police of Gilead, and their symbol is an eye within a pyramid. 'Butterflies' are a symbol of transformation and freedom in the novel. Offred sees a picture of a butterfly in her room and imagines it as a symbol of hope and escape from the oppressive regime. The government of Gilead uses the Bible to justify its oppression of women and its strict social hierarchy, even though its interpretation of the Bible is narrow and selective. Therefore, 'Bible' becomes the symbol of manipulation and distortion of religious texts for political gain. Thus, these symbols help to deepen our understanding of the themes and messages of the novel and create a powerful and evocative world for readers to explore.

*The Handmaid's Tale* conveys a powerful message about the dangers of totalitarianism and the importance of individuality and freedom. The borders in the novel serve as a metaphor for the ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to isolate and control their citizens, while the strict societal structures and uniforms of the handmaids illustrate the ways in which individuality is suppressed and erased.

The use of symbols in the novel, such as the colour red and the wall, highlights how power is wielded and used to oppress others. The color red also symbolizes both fertility and oppression, illustrating how women's bodies are used as tools for reproduction and control. The Wall symbolizes the strict social hierarchy in Gilead and serves as a reminder of the ever-present surveillance and control in society.

In conclusion, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that broadens our horizons by raising questions about the role of women in society, the dangers of religious extremism, and the power of language to shape our understanding of the world. Through a deep study of the text, it can be analyzed that the author conveys a message by using different aspects and meanings of borders, identities, and symbols in the Tale and gives a warning about the dangers of totalitarianism and the importance of individuality and freedom. The novel also illustrates how power can be wielded to oppress and control others, and the devastating consequences that can result when individuality is suppressed and erased. The issue of border identities is particularly relevant to the handmaids, who are forced to bear children for their Commanders and are stripped of their previous identities and individuality. This highlights the dangers of creating rigid social structures that divide people into different groups based on their identity, leading to dehumanization and oppression.

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