
From Ego to Empowerment: Deconstructing Narcissism in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Masterpieces

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Abstract: *The goal of this study, From Ego to Empowerment Deconstructing Narcissism in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Masterpieces, is to identify and evaluate which characters in The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments characterize as Simone de Beauvoir's Narcissist in her theory on the Other. According to this, the narcissist makes their own ego and desires the focus of their universe. They look to other people for approval, exaltation, and attention to boost their sense of worth. This desire for outside approval frequently results from insecurity, which people try to mask by portraying themselves as exceptional. According to the analysis, Paula, Shunammite, Aunt Vidala, Aunt Lydia all exhibit characteristics of a Narcissist. Paula and Shunammite take delight in staging themselves as successful women—the role they create for themselves—and revel to the glory it brings. Aunt Vidala sees herself a righteous woman who gives herself a pass on guilt when she does something terrible, making her mysticism as the cause of her narcissism. Lastly, Aunt Lydia, enjoys her power, as the Aunt with highest authority, which makes the idea of losing it and shrinking back to a normal woman difficult to stomach. The study also examined the Narcissist's role in patriarchal society. The Narcissist's stance illustrates that culture, religion, politics, business, and social norms often justify male dominance in civilizations. Family, religion, culture, tradition, and politics must be re-evaluated to include women as subjects of their own lives and as human rights.*

Keywords: *Other, Narcissistic, Simone De Beauvoir, Margaret Atwood.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of "Otherness" situates a human as a non-subject, in direct opposition to the revered "Subject" or the Absolute. In essence, this connotes being confined to a state of objectification, rendering one vulnerable to abuse and discriminatory practices. Within the context of this theoretical framework, women have traditionally been assigned the societal position of the Other, while men have assumed the dominant position of the Absolute.



As a result, it can be argued that within the context of human society, the concept of womanhood is defined by men rather than being an inherent quality. Women are often perceived and evaluated in relation to men, rather than being recognized as independent individuals [4]. This particular notion has led to a lack of recognition for women as autonomous individuals, who can create an identity for themselves separated from the view man has for her. Moreover, it might be argued that women have acquired only what has been bestowed upon them by men, without actively take hold of anything for themselves. Their progress has been dependent upon the supposed generosity of men, rather than through their own agency.

Despite comprising roughly fifty percent of the global population, women are regularly confronted with the perception that their femininity is constantly under threat. This concept posits that the recognition of persons' identification as both human beings and humans possessing biological characteristics such as ovaries results in a substantial diminishment of their femininity. As a result, this narrative advocates for the assumption that women should adhere to, endure, and adapt to predetermined concepts of femininity.

The marginalization of women as the "Other" might be partially ascribed to a predisposition among males to create a separation from what is perceived as innate, as noted by Scholz [8]. The categorization of any deviation from the male ideal as the Other is a result of the prevalent perception of the male perspective as the standard and the norm. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize that an individual's perception of self is influenced, to some extent, by their interactions with others. The concept of the Self is fundamentally shaped and defined by its relationship to the Other.

In this particular environment, it is frequently seen that men tend to have a strong inclination to assert their control over women. This phenomenon stems from individuals acknowledging certain qualities that they view as absent within themselves, prompting them to actively seek these aspects in women. The aforesaid desire evolves into a compelling motivator for their behavior. Paradoxically, the perception of the woman's Otherness is regarded as a conceivable existential peril, serving as a reflective surface that illuminates the potential occurrences within the male, who represents the concept of the One. As a result, the individual endeavors to establish dominance over the female counterpart, motivated by a desire to alleviate the inner conflict.

In this context, women encounter challenges in establishing their own identity outside their societal duties, which are mostly associated with domestic responsibilities, which are predominantly shaped by the institution of marriage and motherhood. As such, De Beauvoir contends that women universally perceive a moral imperative to conform to societal expectations associated with femininity. In her seminal work, "The Second Sex," the author explores three distinct archetypes that exemplify the societal construct of femininity: the prostitute, the narcissist, and the mystic.

The prostitute is considered the definitive representation of the Other, being objectified. However, she also assumes the role of the exploiter. The individual in question engages in sex



work as a means of financial sustenance and also seeks validation for her perceived Otherness from her male clients. The narcissist exhibits a comparable inability to function as a subject, meaning that they are incapable of autonomously pursuing personal ambitions and objectives. She redirects her attention to her state of being different from others, therefore assuming the role of an object in her own perception. The mystic endeavors to immerse oneself in the divine, seeking to attain a state of unity with the divine essence. According to Scholz [8], the individual in question has a preference for being possessed rather than actively pursuing independence.

With this, it can be said that throughout the course of recorded history, the female gender has continually been marginalized and positioned as the "Other," as she is subjected to various social, political, economic, physical, and psychological frameworks that perpetuate her particular identity. The marginalization of women is an integral aspect of the ideological constructs devised by men, and often, women play an active role within these structures. The aforementioned definitions of the Other can offer clarifications for the current problem of this study.

Numerous scholarly investigations in the field of feminism have been conducted, encompassing both annual publications and academic works at the undergraduate and graduate levels. These contributions have significantly contributed to the awareness and understanding of feminist discourse among literary experts. Therefore, a sizable number of academics in this field of study have a thorough understanding of the various feminist theories and concepts put forth by various authors. Their aim is to promote gender equality by analyzing the historical, contemporary, and anticipated experiences of women.

Despite the abundance of existing feminist studies, there is an unexplored domain pertaining to the examination of Margaret Atwood's literary works, specifically "The Handmaid's Tale" and "The Testaments." The primary objective of this study is to analyze the portrayal of female characters in these literary works, employing de Beauvoir's theoretical framework of the Other as a critical perspective. More specifically, the research will concentrate on examining the Narcissist archetype within these female roles. Given the lack of previous research on this particular feature of de Beauvoir's paradigm, the focus of this study is primarily on this specific category of women. The results of this study will provide valuable insights for individuals and organizations pushing for gender equality across different domains, including legal, political, social, economic, and religious-cultural spheres. These findings are in line with the view that women possess inherent equality with men, as ordained by a higher power.

2. RELATED WORKS

Narcissism as a fundamental component of women's attitudes has provoked arguments, wary of overgeneralization. La Rochefoucauld's egoism analogy implies that overextending a notion loses its essence. Narcissism—ego identification and self-absorption—is a self-refuge. Due to several factors, women tend to focus on and appreciate themselves. Love requires a subject and an object, and women take different paths to narcissism. In early years, women are frustrated by their lack of alter ego and prevented from participating in masculine activities, forcing them



to find their identity and truth. As Marie Bashkirtsev said, "What am I? Nothing. How would I be? Everything." Women must uplift themselves internally to fill the lack of external recognition.

In this sense, narcissism, a complex and diverse concept, has been extensively studied in the literature. Pincus et al. [6] provided a modern definition that aims to reconcile differences among studies, suggesting that narcissism is the ability to uphold a favorable perception of oneself through several self-regulatory mechanisms. This concept includes the need of individuals to get validation and affirmation, which drives them to actively pursue experiences that boost their self-esteem from the social environment. The clinical literature recognizes two separate characteristics of narcissism: grandiose and vulnerability [6]. Grandiose narcissism is distinguished by overt arrogance and a sense of entitlement, whereas vulnerable narcissism is defined by self-centeredness, suspicion, and obvious psychological suffering [5]. While both characteristics have been acknowledged, empirical research has primarily concentrated on grandiosity, indicating that it has a more prominent position than vulnerability [1].

The upbringing and experiences of women shape their narcissistic identity. Education helps women identify with their bodies throughout childhood, laying the groundwork for narcissism. Puberty reveals their bodies as objects of desire and passivity, permitting physical and visual self-contemplation. This transition lets women be both subject and object of desire. They become active and passive participants in their own wants through solitary enjoyment. This mental dialogue shows a desire to love and be loved. Dolls, which represent the two-sided interaction women crave, best represent this inner dialogue in childhood.

The delicate dance between conscious recognition and unconscious dreaming is women's self-perception's subjectivity and objectivity. Being both for oneself and an "other" is a fantasy, a conceptual duality on the brink of actuality. Dolls represent this internal interaction for children. Girls can explore themselves through the doll, which is different from their bodies. This illustrates the dilemma of needing an "other" to talk to oneself affectionately. This interaction highlights the complexity of women's identity development, rooted in their narcissism.

The complex relationship between narcissism and identity in women's life highlights their particular self-discovery and self-affection path. Longing for external recognition, which is limited or unreachable, drives them to inflate their self-importance internally. This internalization of identity, driven by restrictions that limit their involvement in traditionally valued activities, provides a compelling narrative for explaining women's self-hood problems. The interaction of subject and object via the prism of narcissism illuminates the complexity of identity development in women and promotes greater investigation of sociocultural issues that shape their self-perception.

3. METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to identify and examine the characters in both novels who exhibit the traits of a Narcissist, as categorized by Simone de Beauvoir in her theoretical framework about the concept of the Other.

The present study adopts a descriptive research approach with the objective of providing a comprehensive analysis of the female characters shown in Margaret Atwood's literary works, namely *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. The theoretical framework employed in this analysis is Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the Other, with a specific focus on the characters that exhibit clear traits associated with the Narcissist archetype.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Female Characters who possess that exhibit traits of a Beauvorian Narcissist

		Narcissists
Female Characters	The Handmaid's Tale	Aunt Lydia and Aunt Vidala
	The Testaments	All Handmaids, Paula, and Shunammite

The Narcissists

Simone de Beauvoir [4] posits that there exists a claim asserting that narcissism represents the essential disposition of women. Given the aforementioned statement, one may posit that the female characters portrayed in Margaret Atwood's novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, exhibit varying degrees of narcissistic tendencies. However, for the purpose of this section, our focus will solely be on the female characters in both literary works who align with Simone de Beauvoir's characterization of a narcissistic woman, as elucidated in her seminal work, *The Second Sex*. The female characters in both stories possess a keen awareness of their gendered circumstances within the society of Gilead. The aforementioned scenarios play a vital role in the examination of this study as they serve to illustrate the narcissistic inclinations exhibited by the female characters within the novels.

Beauvoir employs the term "situation" to delineate the societal positioning of individuals, wherein the subject, such as a married woman, a mother, or an elderly woman, is typically placed without significant agency. These situations may be encountered by women at various stages of their lives. [9].

The circumstances in which the female characters of both works find themselves allow for the manifestation of narcissistic traits as a coping mechanism in response to the predetermined societal roles assigned to them by the men. The concept of narcissism, as proposed by David Waterman, suggests that it serves as a mechanism for individuals to identify themselves and position themselves within the broader social context. De Beauvoir [4] emphasizes the notion that individuals who exhibit narcissistic tendencies and identify with their fictional doppelgänger ultimately bring about their own demise. This is due to the nonexistence of this mirrored counterpart, rendering any form of partnership unattainable. De Beauvoir's



conceptualization of the mirror refers to the representation that a woman identifies with, perceiving it as a reflection of herself, within the specific circumstances she finds herself in. One example illustrating this notion is the character of Shunammite, who perceives herself as unparalleled among women upon her union with Commander Judd. Consequently, she is bestowed with the privilege of exercising dominion over the household's numerous servants, which she regards as a form of divine favor. This concept could also be extended to Paula, who perceives a sense of superiority over Agnes and Commander Kyle's late wife, Tabitha, within the context of her marriage to Commander Kyle.

[...] they are poorly protected by marriage and love and have become servants or objects, imprisoned in the present. They reigned over the world, conquering it day after day: and now they are separated from the universe, doomed to immanence and repetition. They feel dispossessed [4].

The self-perceptions of the Shunammite and Paula diverge from their actual identities, as they find themselves confined inside the societal expectations imposed upon them by their respective spouses. These two individuals derive pleasure from presenting themselves as accomplished women, actively constructing a particular identity for themselves, and deriving satisfaction from the recognition and admiration it garners. They consider themselves accomplished and “[seek] above all to put [themselves] in the limelight [...] [They] will be tempted by all roads leading to glory...” [4]. This assertion is most prominently demonstrated by Paula, as she committed the act of homicide against her former spouse in order to get the perceived prestige associated with marrying a significantly more esteemed individual. These two women can be succinctly characterized as follows:

Many women imbued with a feeling of superiority, however, are not able to show it to the world; their ambition will thus be to use a man whom they convince of their worth as their means of intervention; they do not aim for specific values through free projects; they want to attach ready-made values to their egos; they will thus turn—by becoming muses, inspiration, and stimulation—to those who hold influence and glory in the hope of being identified with them [4].

Both Shunammite and Paula exhibit ambition in utilizing their respective Commanders to achieve their individual goals. Shunammite aspires to become the mistress of a household with numerous servants, while Paula seeks to enhance her prospects by marrying a Commander of significantly higher rank. Paula's ambition extends to the extent of orchestrating the demise of her previous Commander spouse and falsely implicating his Handmaid in his murder. The individuals in question possess a completely subjective inclination towards seeking significance, and in order to substantiate this inclination, they engage in self-encouragement by asserting their superiority over all other women. Individuals with narcissistic tendencies often have a propensity to misinterpret their reality, as their awareness is limited to their own subjective universe. In the context of this global society, they perceive themselves as the unequivocal focal point.



Aunt Vidala's strong desire for power and inclination towards administering severe punishments could perhaps align with narcissistic tendencies. It is crucial to note that Aunt Vidala harbors a sense of envy towards Aunt Lydia's position of authority as the preeminent Aunt, perceiving herself as superior to her, likely in relation to her level of devotion and adherence to the principles of Gilead. This provides a more in-depth examination of her perception of superiority. Moreover, in light of her fundamentalist disposition, Aunt Vidala perceives herself as a morally upright individual who absolves herself of guilt when engaging in reprehensible actions. However, it is plausible that she may be entirely oblivious to the fact that she has transgressed, attributing all her deeds to a divine purpose. As previously discussed, she exhibits a significant propensity for stigmatizing and penalizing women whom she perceives as posing a challenge to her orthodox religious convictions. Hence, it can be postulated that the mystical beliefs held by Aunt Vidala are the underlying factor contributing to her narcissistic tendencies. According to Waterman [9], there exists a relationship wherein a Mystic experiences an elevation of narcissism when perceiving her own reflection in the eyes of God.

From the analytical standpoint presented in *The Second Sex*, it can be argued that Aunt Lydia can be characterized as a narcissist. Aunt Lydia, seen as the embodiment of moral excellence in Gilead, is honored by the display of her portraits in educational institutions, as well as the commissioning of a larger-than-life statue in her honor at Ardua Hall. These elements may not be directly aligned with her narcissism; yet, they are crucial to consider in this study since they align with the fundamental aspects of her narcissistic tendencies. The statue and photographs associated with her personage serve as an emblem of her dominion within the society of Gilead, signifying her commanding presence and attaining a near-legendary status among her constituents. The power possessed by the woman in question exhibits a multifaceted feature of her personality, as it presents both positive and negative conditions related to her state of being different from others. A statue is erected by men in order to immortalize her physical appearance in marble, symbolizing the extent and impact of her influence over numerous individuals of varying characteristics. However, the act of trying to manipulate these others into becoming her means of achieving her goals does not liberate her from their influence, since she must still get their approval in order to capture their attention. [4]. The following analysis highlights the characteristics that classify Aunt Lydia as a narcissist. Through the strategic manipulation of influential male figures in Gilead, the protagonist employs them as tools to orchestrate the eventual demise of the oppressive dictatorship, thereby rationalizing her morally questionable actions.

The contradiction is in the individual's mentality, when they assert the need for recognition from a world that they themselves deem devoid of worth, since they perceive themselves as the sole arbiter of value. External validation is an enigmatic and unpredictable entity that necessitates a mystical means of access. Despite displaying a facade of arrogance, the narcissistic individual possesses an underlying awareness of vulnerability. This awareness manifests in feelings of unease, susceptibility, irritability, and perpetual suspicion. The individual's vanity remains perpetually unsatisfied, leading to an increased desperation for praise and achievement as they age. Consequently, their heightened sense of paranoia leads

them to suspect conspiracies in their surroundings. Overwhelmed and fixated, they descend into a state of existential doubt and frequently construct a delusional narrative of persecution. The words “Whosoever shall save his life will lose it” apply specifically to her [4].

It can be argued that Aunt Lydia's actions of gathering significant evidence from the influential men of Gilead can be interpreted as her attempt to seek redemption for the morally challenging decisions she is compelled to make in her role as the most authoritative Aunt. However, it is also undeniable that she strategically employs a range of horrifying methods to maintain her position of power, thereby maximizing her personal gains. In her pursuit of personal goals, she is prioritizing her own well-being while disregarding the welfare of other women. Within the pages of *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia's quote may be found, aligning with the following sentiments:

I have experienced an increase in authority, indeed, but have also acquired an ambiguous and amorphous nature, capable of assuming several forms. The omnipresence and elusiveness of my existence are evident, as I exert a disconcerting influence even within the cognitive realms of the Commanders. How can one restore a sense of self-identity? [2].

The aforementioned statement made by Aunt Lydia conveys her apprehension regarding the potential repercussions that may befall the recipients of the manuscript she has authored, which reveals the illicit activities perpetrated by the influential male figures within the society of Gilead. The individual expresses apprehension regarding the potential assessments that others may pass on her character, specifically in terms of being perceived as an exemplary embodiment of moral rectitude to be imitated, as well as being regarded as a source of fear employed by the Marthas to intimidate young children. However, it may be argued that she is essentially a tool of the patriarchal system, and she strategically grasps whatever power is within her reach in order to ensure her own survival. In doing so, she justifies her complicit involvement in the oppression of women as a means of self-preservation. However, the extent of authority she has exerted could ultimately undermine the justifiability of her existence. It is evident that Aunt Lydia possesses a firm comprehension of the power she wields. Furthermore, it is evident that she derives much satisfaction from her position of authority, so rendering the prospect of relinquishing it and reverting to an ordinary female persona rather unpalatable. Based on the available evidence, it may be concluded that she exhibits traits consistent with narcissistic personality disorder.

The novels *"The Handmaid's Tale"* and *"The Testaments"* offer a nuanced exploration of the emergence, continuity, and eventual decline of the totalitarian and patriarchal regime known as the Republic of Gilead. These literary works provide valuable insights by presenting the experiences and perspectives of female characters who play active roles in the unfolding narratives. These two literary works demonstrate the extent to which the societal structure and its underlying principles are predicated on the practice of sacrificing, subjugating, and objectifying women in the pursuit of a purportedly superior collective benefit. The prevailing ideology in Gilead enables men to establish a system of oppression rooted in religious fundamentalism, which is presented as a means to improve the overall well-being of all individuals inside the dictatorship.



In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the men are in charge and sit higher on the hierarchy pyramid than women. Women have been offered only one view of the world, to see only what they are supposed to and to act only how they are supposed to, "marked and delimited by their social status" [10].

The above passage, while largely centered on the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, can be extended to encompass the thematic elements and narrative structure of its sequel, *The Testaments*. Both works explore the notion that women in Gilead are purportedly safeguarded by the privileged men of society, yet are denied the opportunities to pursue education, property ownership, and employment, which are rightfully theirs. Therefore, in both literary works, it is evident that the primary objective of Gilead is to ensure that whatever semblance of independence granted to specific groups of women, namely Aunts and Wives, is carefully designed to serve the interests of the government.

There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it [3].

In a patriarchal culture like Gilead, a government that strips women of their agency and confines them to traditional feminine duties succeeds. This manipulation forces women to serve the state in numerous capacities, aligning with conservative religious ideals. These beliefs often justify suppression and subversion. It's clearly shown in "*The Handmaid's Tale*" and "*The Testaments*."

Analyzing the female characters in both works shows that Gilead's high-ranking Sons of Jacob colluded with the Founding Aunts to build a totalitarian and male-centric rule. This rule uses social, political, and religious norms to degrade women as "Other." This image legitimizes men's "Subject." dominance. This structure forces women to play particular roles. They become the "Narcissist," giving up their independence by seeing themselves as objects of desire. The dictatorship controls women's independence by distorting their identities and self-perception. Such jobs indicate the regime's systematic endeavor to perpetuate male supremacy and patriarchy. These novels show how social standards, religious beliefs, and power dynamics maintain gender inequity.

5. CONCLUSION

The Narcissist is incapable of being a subject, or of freely pursuing her own projects and objectives. She instead focuses on her Otherness, becoming an object for herself. Shunammite, Paula, Aunt Vidala, and Aunt Lydia exhibit narcissistic characteristics. As a result of the circumstances in which they find themselves as women in Gilead, the women in both novels display narcissistic traits, perhaps as a means of coping with the decisive roles the males of their societies have assigned them.

The female protagonists in both works reveal that Gilead's high-ranking Sons of Jacob collaborated with the Founding Aunts to establish a dictatorial and male-centric society. Social,



political, and religious standards demean women as "Other." This image validates men's "Subject." domination. This system limits women's roles. As the "Narcissist," they lose their freedom by becoming objects of desire. The dictatorship distorts women's identities and self-perception to limit their freedom. Such positions demonstrate the regime's systematic promotion of patriarchy and male domination. These novels demonstrate how religion, society, and power maintain gender inequality.

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