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**Impossible Balance:
Textual Instability in
*The Handmaid's Tale***

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Impossible Balance: Textual Instability in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

The intention of the author/ character via their texts does not always safely reach the audience uninterrupted. In order to safeguard the intentions a safe journey to the audience, the authors or characters employ various methodologies or strategies to keep the stability of meaning of the text. The motivation to maintain textual stability originates from the fact of the indeterminacy of textual meaning, textual instability. *The Handmaid's Tale* is illustrated in this study to exemplify the unstableness of textual meaning, the universality of the impossible balance of textuality.

The study is conducted basically on two levels, the logic level of a text which concerns the intension, extension, and taxonomy of texts, and second, the epistemological level of text, which concerns the understanding, the interpretation and discernibility of texts. (Gracia 2006, xxv) Methodologically, this study will start, first of all from categorizing and examining the functions of the texts in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and then expose how the interpretation and understanding influence the textual stability from the perspectives of the characters in this novel and the author Margaret Atwood, finally discuss limitations of textual meaning in its influence on textual stability in the novel. The three efforts mentioned above are to prove that textual instability is the major motive for the adoption of the textual devices by the author.

Key words: text; textual instability; utopian literature

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Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, joining *Brave New World* as archetypal examples of the twentieth-century dystopian novel, presents an imagined world and society, the Republic of Gilead. It is a terrifying and restrictive world of darkness. The story is told from the perspective of a handmaid Offred in the form of a diary. The form of the textualization of the dystopian world remains basically the same: a guided tour with a slight variation with the traditional utopian textual formation, starting from Plato's *The Republic*, More's *Utopia* and running into the dystopian novel Huxley's *Brave New World*. It shares more similarities than differences in this tradition. The world of More's ideal state and Huxley's World State are presented with the guided tour, intending with the stable monolithic text to show the meaning of the textualization of the social structure of either utopian or dystopian world. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the guided tour takes another shape, the diary. The keeper of the diary, the Handmaid, is also able to provide an authoritative monolithic text and its disaster to her audience, but with a text of self-reflection to remind and warn her readers of the incoming of a possible dystopian world. The shift of narrative strategy enables the author taking feminist issues into her consideration, mainly the role of women in the patriarchal society.

The nightmarish world depicts by Atwood is called Gilead. It is a society founded on 'a return to traditional values' (Atwood 1986, 13) and gender roles, and on the submission of women to men. Atwood offers a dystopia with a strong feminist vision, 'a gender nightmare'. (Wilson 1993, 273) She explores the state of deprivation of women's rights, particularly from the point of view of Offred, the Handmaid. Women dress in conformity according to their categories. They don't have the right to hold property or jobs. They are forbidden to read and write, let alone to vote. What they are allowed to do is to perform the traditional roles. Like what happened in Plato's *The Republic*, women are taken as breeding machine. The most sacred role Handmaids play is trying to bear children for elite couples that have trouble conceiving. Atwood realizes her vision by presenting the injection of the patriarchal text into the minds of women and designating what role women play in the Republic of Gilead. They are made to accept the interpretation of their roles in this Republic, a kind different yet similar to the Plato's pattern of the utopian world.

In the Republic of Gilead, the major issue and focus is sexuality. To administer and control sexuality is to exercise political power. Under the powerful theocrats, marriage, sexual behavior, production, love affairs, even prostitution are all monitored and controlled. Sexuality is not the only thing the theocrats care about. They also take spiritual life, daily activities such as reading and watching TV into their domain of control. One of the main strategies for the theocrats is to manipulate their power to 'efface all the memory of the recent past in which women enjoyed a more liberated existence' (Booker 1994, 167). As a result, the women in the Republic of Gilead become text-free as soon as they enter the republic. They are emptied out of their own personal history, family history, cultural history and their spiritual history.

They are injected into their minds the history of the Republic of Gilead with the monolithic patriarchal text by various means. The purpose of this effort is to maintain the stability of the republic with the stability of the monolithic patriarchal text keeping insured the intended meaning reaching the minds of the citizens in the Republic of Gilead. However, the stability of the monolithic text itself carries with it in its core the instability in the process of encountering the other unstable textual forces such as the feminist text. Particularly, at the end of the novel, it is revealed that the diary contents are the tape-recorded transcription and a kind of reconstruction from the memory. Thus the stability of the text is subverted and transforms into a text of instability.

Authoritative Text and Patriarchal Text as Stability

The key idea to run the republic is political domination. Similar to sex in the republic, which is not a matter of emotion and biology, the spiritual freedom is also a matter of political domination. The fulfillment of the purpose of power in politics comes from the control of the flow of information. Atwood's Republic of Gilead is not so much innovative in this aspect. Strategies and methods adopted in the utopian world and the previous dystopian world are also accepted. The methods of textualization for the purpose of dominance, hence for maintaining stability employed are Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, called the Red Center, creating the official vocabulary while removing language, etc. These methods intend to create stability for the Commander, to a certain extent fulfills its role for the desired target.

One of the most effective methods for achieving a unified view is the enforced education. Like Plato in *The Republic*, More in *Utopia* and Huxley in *Brave New World*, Atwood again sees her Commanders adopt this methodology. Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, called the Red Center indoctrinates Gilead's ideology into their citizens, especially women. 'Like other things now, thought must be rationed.' (13) The function of the agency is female control. Aunts are assigned to be responsible for the job of spiritualizing the Handmaids with the philosophy of Gilead and finally preparing them to accept their fates and become qualified Handmaids.

As a spokesman of the authority, the leading instructor in the Red Center, Aunt Lydia's image and words haunt Offred in her daily life. Her slogans and maxims brainwash Handmaids to such an extent that whenever they met with a certain situation they will apply accordingly. For example, one of Aunt Lydia's slogans is to let the girls take the place as an army camp. She would say, 'Think of it as being in the army.' (13) She means that in the army camp, the girls are not prisoners, but a privilege. (14) In the eyes of Aunt Lydia, the Republic of Gilead knows no bounds and is everywhere when you go, Gilead should be within you. (32) Aunt Lydia frequently advises the girls that freedom takes many forms, '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.'

(33-4) The girls, according to Aunt Lydia, are free to choose their destiny. It takes time for the girls to accept their fates, things will become as ordinary as other daily activities gradually. She would say that ‘God made them that way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It’s up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked.’ (55) The Center motto of the republic is always on her lips: ‘Pen Is Envy.’ (213) which warns us away from such objects. Aunt Lydia is a person of ‘the spiritual value of bodily rigidity, of muscle strain’. ‘A little pain cleans out the mind.’ (222) The most important thing she carries is temptation in the center, it is something more than ‘eating and sleeping. Knowing was a temptation. What you don’t know won’t tempt you.’ (223) The teachings of Aunt Lydia represents the central idea of the republic, and the method she adopts is to blabbing the idea, a carefully monitored text into the minds of the young girls.

Creating the official vocabulary and using it as a powerful tool is also to control and monitor the flow of monolithic text. Dystopian novels like *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* which warn of totalitarian structures share a common feature of the practice of the language control in suppressing subjects. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is no exception. ‘Language is a key weapon for the reigning dystopian power structure.’ (Baccolini & Moylan 2003, 5) Gilead endeavors to create an official vocabulary.

The citizens in Gilead are categorized ‘hierarchically according to class status and reproductive capacity,’ and also ‘metonymically color-coded according to their function and their labor’ (Kauffman 232). There are a system of titles in Gilead which divide men by their political ranks such as ‘Commanders’, ‘Eyes’, ‘Angels’, and ‘Guardians’, and women by their corresponding class status and reproductive ability such as ‘Wives’, ‘Daughters’, ‘Marthas’, ‘Econowives’, and ‘Handmaids’ to attain the reproductive goal of the new society efficiently. As for Handmaids, they are even stripped of their real names. Hence they have no identity except as potential child bearers. There are new terms for feminists and deformed babies, i.e. ‘Unwomen’ and ‘Unbabies’ respectively. ‘Unwomen’ are treated as subhuman that are either killed or sent to the ‘Colonies’ doing toxic-cleanup or cotton picking and fruit harvesting at best. The days and lives of Gilead’s citizens are governed by a series of grotesque rituals: ‘Birth Days’ when all Wives and Handmaids participate in one of the Handmaid’s delivery; ‘Ceremonies’ when a Commander has sex, for reproduction, with a Handmaid in the presence of his Wife; Women’s and Men’s ‘Prayvaganzas’ for group weddings and military victories respectively; ‘Salvagings’ which is the public execution of traitors, and ‘Particution’, when Handmaids take part in the execution of a traitor by tearing apart by bare hands cruelly. Some other words helpful to support the new regime are preferred like ‘habit’. ‘In front of us, to the right, is the store where we order dresses. Some people call them habits, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break.’ (34) Gileadean structure is devised in such a way that women are totally deprived of their individuality.

The official vocabulary also includes customized greetings for personal encounters. Any failing to offer the supposed greetings would be suspected as

disloyalty. 'Blessed be the fruit.' is the accepted greeting. 'May the Lord open.' is the accepted response. (27) 'Under His Eye.' is the right farewell. And 'Under His Eye.' is the right reply. (55) Reactionists make best use of this to check if the other is one of them. For example, Offred takes a chance saying *yes* to try the new Ofglen when she said, 'Let that be a reminder to us.' (319) by the Wall where traitors' dead bodies are hung. The meaning of this sentence could be totally different. From the perspective of a reactionist, the new Ofglen could mean that this is a reminder to us of the unjustness and brutality of the regime. 'In that case I ought to say yes.' (319) Or she could mean the opposite that we should remember to behave well as we are told and not get into trouble, and this is an example of punishment. 'If she means that, I should say praise be.' (319)

Language removing is another strategy for the Commanders to strengthen their effort for maintaining the stability of the monolithic text, therefore to safeguard the indoctrination of the ideal of the Republic of Gilead. Introducing an official vocabulary is only part of the whole plan, at the same time the Commanders work to remove language from their society. All women are forbidden to read and write, with the exception of the Aunts, whose zealous loyalty is supposed to be unquestioned. Books and magazines have been systematically destroyed and are available only in the black market. When Offred first enters the Commander's study, she is shocked to see that,

all around the walls there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare' (157).

Until the Commander begins their visits, Offred has nothing to read except the word 'FAITH' embroidered on the cushion and the hidden pig Latin inscription in her room. Even the most utilitarian texts have been removed. Shop signs use sign language instead of words. Offred notes that she 'can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone'(34). And 'They put the picture in the window when they have something, take it away when they don't. Sign language.' (189) Picture tokens have replaced printed and minted money, which used to have the numbers and slogans on that Offred remembers. Words which can be subversive to the State are proscribed or become obsolete or heretical after the coup like free, sheepish, networking etc. 'And he does look embarrassed, sheepish was the word, the way men used to look once. He's old enough to remember how to look that way, and to remember also how appealing women once found it. The young ones don't know those tricks. They've never had to use them.' (159) 'Networking, one of my mother's old phrases, musty slang of yesteryear.' (231)

As patriarchal text, the account of Commander's justification for Gilead presents a fraction of life in the Republic of Gilead. After a few drinks during

their visit, the Commander usually wishes to explain things, justify himself and the values of Gilead. The Commander actually knows what Offred would think about what they have done when Offred reserves it. ‘You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.’ is what he says. ‘We thought we could do better.’ (241) But actually he means that ‘Better never means better for everyone.’ ‘It always means worse, for some.’ (241) This makes his moral blindness even obvious. The Commander considers that the past years before Gilead were just an anomaly. ‘Just a fluke. All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm.’ (250) And he also justifies for the existence of Jezebel’s and mingling with prostitutes when Offred says she thought this sort of thing was strictly forbidden. He says officially it is, ‘But everyone’s human, after all.’ ‘You can’t cheat Nature,’ and ‘Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it’s part of the procreation strategy. It’s Nature’s plan.’ And ‘Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many different clothes, in the old days? To trick the men into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day.’ (270) He says without shame at all. The commander, the representative of the patriarch is the standard of everything.

Feminist Text as Instability

However, the stability of the patriarchal text is frequently challenged by the feminist text. The women and even men frequently violate the rules and regulations textualized with strict enforcement, which leads to the instability of the text. Offred’s secret power of language is an account of how the monitoring functions and content of language takes another turn, destabilize the stability of the text. Atwood tries to present a different picture of what might be light of hope by inserting a feminist text of Offred’s exceptional ability with language, thus overturning the monopoly of language by the patriarchal power and taking the stability of monolithic text into the edge of instability. The totalitarian structure intends to come through by language control, whereas language can never be only patriarchal tradition, feminine resistance also seek exit from it.

Atwood depicts language as an aspect of both patriarchal tradition and feminine resistance. No matter how persistent is the protagonist, he or she would grow conscious of the language control and resist by the same means in response to it more or less. Despite the Commanders’s efforts to reclaim ‘history as a static, gender-inscribed narrative’—or possibly, because of their efforts—Offred emerges as an engaging, sympathetic storyteller who is ‘intensely aware that she is telling a story, one with a potential infinitude of permutations’ (Caldwell 340). Glen Deer (1992) praises Offred as ‘a powerful user of language, a poet, and rhetorician who presents in a strategic way the horrors perpetrated by the Gileadean regime.’ (220) Offred continually muses on her task as a storyteller, frequently recasting a story that she has just told—for example, her first tryst with Nick, which she describes, recants, and describes again before asserting that ‘it didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction.’ (263)

She constantly muses over her choice of words, the changes in names and meanings that the revolution has caused. She corrects her past tenses, as if speaking of the disappeared in the present tense may keep them alive—‘[Moirra] was still my oldest friend. Is’ (173) —and to distinguish her actions from things done to her—‘Yesterday morning I went to the doctor. Was taken...’ (59) Offred understands that the act of telling inscribes a reality and that the teller therefore controls reality through her language and the story she tells, no matter to whom. Linda Kauffman (1989) notes that Offred is the most successful thief in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, since ‘language is what she steals, and through language, knowledge and power.’ (229) Offred recognizes language’s limited power to relate experience, and she makes up for this lack by emphasizing ‘synesthesia, the poetic mixture of sensory impressions.’ (Kauffman 225) Thus, Offred succeeds to create a complete portrait of life in Gilead.

The secret scramble games between Offred and her Commander is the best example of Offred’s ‘stealing the language back again.’(Kauffman 229) Scrabble used to be a game especially for children and old people,

*Now it’s forbidden, for us. Now it’s dangerous. Now it’s indecent.
Now it’s something he can’t do with his Wife. Now it’s desirable.
Now he’s compromised himself. It’s as if he’s offered me drugs.
(159)*

Despite the danger, she finds scrabble an opportunity to exercise her talent in language and the vent to give her suppression to. ‘The feeling is voluptuous.’ ‘This is freedom, an eyeblink of it.’ (160) ‘We play two games. Larynx, I spell. Valance. Quince. Zygote...Limp, I spell. Gorge.’ (160) The second evening, ‘Prolix, quartz, quandary, sylph, rhythm, all the old tricks with consonants I could dream up or remember.’ (178) It is worth noting that words she chooses are not entirely random. Most of them have something to do with the new culture and her feeling directly or metaphorically.

The use of obsolete words again by women just shows their resistance linguistically. More than anyone or anything else, Offred remembers old words that are now proscribed or whose meanings have been rendered obsolete or heretical by the revolution, like free, sheepish (when describing men), job (something women no longer have), networking (which women no longer do), romance, and normal. (Atwood 1986, 54, 138, 173, 202, 262, 282) Offred is deeply sensitive to the importance of names and words. Her knowledge of how Gilead’s government works or how it seized power in the first place is very limited—but her understanding of what the revolution has done to language is profound. We discover what it is like to live in Gilead primarily from Offred’s thinking about language. Offred refused passively to accept linguistic domination. She continually muses on her real name, and her narration is liberally spiced with wordplay and other demonstrations of her dexterity with language. The very fact that Offred records her diary indicates her insistence on her own articulateness and refusal to accept the official Gileadean lines that

women are vastly inferior to men in their linguistic abilities. Offred is thus able to maintain an identity of her own.

Conclusion

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood reveals the nightmarish world through the perceptions of Offred, first-person narrator, who does not possess even her own name. As the name indicates, Offred is the belongings of the Commander Fred. She is a commodity of Fred. As a woman she is nobody as women are stripped of their rights of holding jobs, owning money and anything else that might enable them to be independent and subversive to the society. Offred like the other women in the Republic of Gilead has to subjugate themselves to men and perform their fertility responsibilities. In this way, they lose their individuality and become commodities at best. Offred is the result of the Republic's advanced method of indoctrination, which puts into the minds of women the designated ideas with the special wrought text. Under the guidance of these ideas, the women obediently perform their function as the Wives, Marthas, Aunts and Handmaids. The texts such as literature, naming activities and Bible reading are carefully watched and censored in order to safeguard the intended meaning of the text reaching the handmaids. With all these effort, the commanders tries to keep a balance between the patriarchal text and the acceptance of this text, the patriarchal text and its counter-force, the feminist text to ensure the stableness of intended text as it shows at the end of the novel that the language employed both by the Commanders and the Handmaids follows both the patriarchal tradition from utopian literature and dystopian literature and the feminine resistance within the scope of utopian and dystopian world depicted by writers like Plato, More, Huxley and Atwood herself. However, the stability of the authoritative and patriarchal text is frequently challenged by the feminist text, the women and even men frequently violate the rules and regulations textualized with a strict enforcement, which leads to the instability of the text. The result of the instability manifests in the restoration of language ability of women, regaining the power of individuality and the possible restoration of history, hence the independence and freedom. In the last section of the novel entitled "Historical Notes", Atwood reveals that the story of the handmaid is a transcript from the tape as a matter of fact. It is presented at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies held in Nunavit where anthropologists and historians meet for debating 'the chronology and authenticity of events detailed in Offred's story' (Spanckeren 1998, 111). Taken Offred's story as a text, then, the authoritative text within the story is overturned, the stability of the patriarchal text is completely turns itself into a text of instability.

With the evidence in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this paper tries to argue that textual instability mainly comes from the craving for the stability which has been exhibited from the following aspects, first of all, the function of the text from the logical understanding of text. Secondly, the textual instability is

caused by the various understanding of the texts. Thirdly, the textual instability is the result of the limits of understanding of its meaning apart from their historical authors. The relationship of textual stability and instability is mutually dependent. Textual instability, the indeterminacy of textuality is the result of the effort of indoctrination of a single meaning into the text. Its textualization will lead directly to the instability of society.

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