

Language as Fixed Destiny or Chosen Destination in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*: Testimony and Surveillance through Judith Butler and bell hooks

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines the role of testimony in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* and investigates how voice and language function both as tools of self-fashioning and mechanisms of surveillance within the post-Gileadean narrative.

Methods: The analysis draws on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and bell hooks' intersectional critique of power and voice. Through a close reading of the testimonies of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy, the study explores how language constructs authority, identity, and moral legitimacy while reflecting unequal access to expression.

Results: The analysis demonstrates that testimony in *The Testaments* is not neutral but shaped by social and political systems that enable some narratives while marginalizing others. Butler's framework reveals how authority and legitimacy are produced through the repetition and recognition of language, while hooks' perspective highlights how power operates through unequal access to voice, even among women. Across the three perspectives, language emerges neither as a space of absolute freedom nor total restriction but as a constrained field of possibility.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that *The Testaments* shifts the focus of control in Gilead from silencing individuals to regulating how they speak. Through its use of voice, memory, and survival narratives, the novel raises ethical questions about expression, authority, and the preservation of memory under systems of power.

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* returns to the theocratic world of Gilead more than three decades after *The Handmaid's Tale*, yet it does so under markedly altered narrative conditions. While the earlier novel foregrounds enforced silence and the erasure of women's voices, *The Testaments* unfolds through acts of testimony, confession, and retrospective narration. Margaret Atwood talks about writing dystopian fiction about "power—who has it, what others want from them and how it transfers" (Atwood, 2011: 85). In *The Testaments*, power is no longer represented by the inability to communicate; rather, it is represented by controlled communication. The absence of language has been replaced with an abundance of controlled language, which is also preserved, documented and curated, therefore converting voice into a controlled resource that is delivered according to strict protocol. Recent criticism has noted that *The Testaments* shifts Atwood's dystopian imagination from lived oppression to institutional memory and historical reckoning (Howells, 2020; Stein, 2021). The novel's multiple narrators, Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy, are invited, and even compelled, to speak. This increased freedom for expressiveness creates a serious conflict between when testimony should be accepted as an expression of authoritativeness versus another tool for oppression. Testimony scholars have maintained that narratives always have a frame that dictates how the narrative is created and how one is heard and trusted regarding the story (Foucault 1980; Felman & Laub 1992), while the narrative in *The Testaments* serves not only as self-expressive but also makes the person subject to institutionalized truths, exposing and bringing about compliance to those truths. The theoretical contributions of Judith Butler and bell hooks address this issue. Butler's idea of performativity states identity and authority is created through the repetition of social acts of speech rather than social essences (Butler 1997, 2004). Testimony, from Butler's perspective, is not just revealing a truth but rather actively creates a subject as credible, moral and intelligible within a social order created by a specter of previous speech acts. hooks, however, focuses on the intersectional aspects of voice, stating that voice as accessibility is always based upon levels of privilege as it exists along class, race, gender, and institutional representation (hooks 1989, 2000). hooks illustrates the empowerment of some individuals can happen alongside the continued lack of empowerment of others. The current research analyzes how *The Testaments* alters the relationship of language to its politics through the alteration of its way of using language from the prohibition of speech to the

regulation of speech. Utilizing the narrative testimonies that were compiled by Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy, the article examines the nature of the governmental power that operates through appropriately sanctioned storytelling; the author argues that both liberation and coercion take place through the principals of negotiation between the participants as well as their respective institutions. Thus by illustrating how the transition from a relationship of silencing on the part of the states and federal governments to one of legislating and managing the public expression of their citizens, the article provides support of the continuing dialogue regarding feminist theories and testimonial ethics, while also demonstrating how the voice, memory, and continued existence of individuals remains a matter of ethical concern, even after the overt presence of authoritarianism has been eliminated.

Theoretical Framework

Through analyzing what *The Testaments* says about the use of testimony, the article uses Feminist and Poststructuralist Theory to understand how testimony's role in producing subjectivity (our sense of who we are, and our place in society) is traditionally viewed as something that should be universally accessible, but in reality it is determined by which institutions deem certain voices to be official or legitimate. Within the frameworks of these theorists' works, it becomes evident that while both Judith Butler and bell hooks have been instrumental in shaping contemporary discussions regarding the relationship between power and the politics of speech and power, respectively, there exist significant differences between the types of contributions and insights provided by each theorist; thus, an integration of both theorists' philosophies will create a more holistic analysis of the relationship between testimony and the regulation of ideological beliefs.

Judith Butler: Performativity, Speech, and the Production of Authority

Judith Butler's concept of performativity offers a method for analyzing the way that *The Testaments* creates a sense of authority and identity through its use of language, rather than simply reflecting both. According to Butler, subjectivity is formed through the repetition of socially sanctioned behaviour, which becomes legitimate through recognition (Butler, 1997). In this sense, speech cannot simply be understood as a voluntary act of expression, but rather is limited by existing norms that decide who is allowed to speak, what constitutes an intelligible act of speaking, and which narratives will be regarded as credible. Thus, testimony is a performative act that produces a speaking subject within a framework of institutionalized assessments of truth.

Furthermore, in Butler's book *Excitable Speech* (1997), speech exists within a framework of power relationships, as power exists prior to and helps to determine the effectiveness of speech because it depends on established traditions and conventions. Butler's insight into *The Testaments* conveys how the narrators have been given permission to testify based upon specific historical and institutional conditions. The authority of their testimonies emerges not from an uncontested truth but because the narrative fits into conventional forms of confession, documentation, and historical record. Butler's further writings have made it even clearer that performativity does not imply that there is not a possibility of changes in the way repetition occurs; new meanings can arise from a single act of repetition (Butler, 2004). This tension allows testimony to serve dual purposes as both an authority figure and as an avenue for an individual to purge themselves of their responsibility for their own actions, thus creating an authority over the author of the testimony. The novel by Atwood uses the concept of testimony as a way for the individual characters to establish legibility. Through the use of an intended or real audience, whether fictional, historical or ethical, speaking individuals can now establish themselves as speaking subjects. The Framework developed by Judith Butler shows how the ways in which language is used in Atwood's *The Testaments* serve as a means through which to exert power; not necessarily through the rendering of individuals voiceless but instead through the creation of the environment in which there is an ability for their voice to be rendered as meaningful.

bell hooks: Intersectionality, Voice, and Hierarchies of Speech

While Butler explores how speech creates subjects, hooks discusses how unequal voice distribution occurs within power structures through an intersectional feminist approach which allows for it to be virtually impossible for anybody without the ability to speak. hooks argues against equating having a voice with being empowered and states that race, class, gender, and institutional location all contribute to the manner in which we hear someone else's voice (hooks, 1989). From this point of view, it is important to examine testimony not only in terms of who speaks but to also consider whose speech will be valued, protected and legitimized and whose will not. In addition, hooks argues that power continues through many of the same internal hierarchies found within the power structure, including women's own sharing many of the same oppressions, which exists within their shared environment (hooks, 2000). This is especially true in *The Testaments*, where women in authority still occupy positions having power to speak while

simultaneously maintaining the structure that dominates. hooks has also warned against the danger of becoming a victim of having your voice 'empowered' by being in a position to speak without considering that the unequal distribution of speaking can also dominate. Testimony can create institutionalized support while simultaneously being viewed as challenging.

Furthermore, hooks's emphasis on pedagogy and authority highlights how storytelling can function as a disciplinary practice. The voice serves as a means of transmitting, justifying, and preserving societal norms. Testimonial narratives create a historical perspective in the novel by providing an opportunity for ethical consideration regarding both documentation and erasure of individual experiences. hooks provides an approach to examining testimony that recognizes testimony as socially conditioned and therefore not simply an act that liberates the testimony speaker.

Testimony as a Site of Power and Surveillance

The combined use of Butler's and hooks' theories enables a better means of understanding the nature of testimony both as a hierarchical structure, and as a performative act. Butler discusses the means through which speech creates and defines human beings through the recognition of others; hooks, on the contrary, discusses the various ways that the opportunity for being recognized are typically distributed unequally among people. By blending the two theories, the testimonial evidence provided in Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Testaments*, will emerge as an example of how testimony can be a medium for constituting an individual sense of agency in a context of limited options. Considering that testimony is never completely imposed/forced or freely chosen, testimonies are fashioned according to institutional values and expectations of how an individual's story will be told/presented and how it will be interpreted/received by those listening. The combined theories also reflect the contemporaneous body of work on the nature of witnessing and testimony more generally; scholars believe that witnessing is always connected to the inherent power dynamics related to hearing and viewing (i.e., surveillance) (Felman & Laub, 1992; Foucault, 1980). Ultimately, the speaking out of (i.e., the act of testifying) individuals in *The Testaments* does not bring an end to domination but instead illustrates a new form of domination, a shift of authority from that of prohibiting the spoken word to that of regulating the spoken word, from the eradication of an individual's voice to creating a curated, public, collective voice. The

current review of the nature of the spoken word places testimony as a textual site where both resistance and regulation exist simultaneously.

Material and Methods

The present research uses an interpretative qualitative approach to examine *The Testaments* and the main stories within it, including how they relate to testimony, language and power. The approach is influenced by Feminism's perspective on language, identity and surveillance. In addition to looking at Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy, the research also analyses these characters from Judith Butler's view of performativity and bell hooks' Intersectional analysis on Power.

Textual Analysis: Close Reading of Testimony

The primary material for the study is *The Testaments* (Atwood, 2019), specifically the testimonies of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy. In the dystopian society of Gilead, the four narrators present very different viewpoints of their surroundings. Their accounts are important for understanding the change in power in Gilead from control and repression to mandatory compliance. An analysis of language will provide insight into how these narrators support and validate their experiences by the manner in which they speak, what they tell about themselves, and what shape or context/setting allows for their voices to be heard. The process of analysis includes identifying instances in which testimony and memory intersect - in particular those times when narrators create themselves under the authority of an oppressive environment and the ways in which each of their narratives operates within the regulatory structures of Gilead. Close reading of the text is a necessary component to facilitate the understanding of how language is used as an instrument of agency within Gilead's parameters. The four narrators' storytelling is understood not to be a recitation of an experience, but rather as a performance of identity that has been constructed and shaped by the socio-political ideologies that govern the way in which they express themselves. The analysis will include section-by-section evaluations of specific texts that explore how characters develop their identity in a Gilead's totalitarian system by utilizing resources available to them and the limitations/obstacles incited by oppression. Additionally, the focus will be on the various ways the characters gain agency through repetition, silence, and compromised storytelling. By doing so, we will see the struggles between individual power and state control.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist and Poststructuralist Lenses

The Testaments use Judith Butler (1997)'s performativity theory as a framework through which to explore how language creates a sense of authority and identity (and the moral legitimacy) based upon the act of performance. When we say the act of performance is based upon language, we don't just mean performing the normative acts typical of a male or female, but that the performer creates an environment or creates a space for the performance of authority, identity, and moral legitimacy for another person. Within the social construction of language, the use of language becomes a tool for enforcing (reinforcing) power or resisting power, depending on how the language is being used by each narrator in the role of a referent. In this respect we understand Judith Butler (1997)'s argument as saying that language is constitutive (i.e., it creates) of both the identity and subjectivity of a person, and by extension, provides us with an understanding of the narrators' testimony, and the performance of that testimony, in both their conformity to and disruption of (or challenge) the existing gender normative ideology of the Gilead totalitarian state. bell hooks provides a framework for the exploration of power and voice, utilizing an intersectional approach that explains how the differential access to voice and power within the act of speech can impact an individual. In this valuable resource, hooks refers to patriarchy as a web of power, that not only includes all women and men, but also encompasses different races, classes and systems of Institutional Control, thus giving the reader insight into how power operates within the experiences of Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy. hooks asserts that having access to voice goes beyond just the ability to speak; it is important to know who has the ability to articulate what they want to say, who has the ability to validate their perspectives through language, and who has the ability to take as well as to not take action based on what people say. Through this discussion, it becomes clear how each of the three Narrators in Gilead's social hierarchy experience the intersectional constraints of gender, class and institutional power to express themselves.

Methodological Approach: Interdisciplinary Textual Criticism

This investigation employs a combination of textual analysis techniques from the fields of feminism, post-structuralism and critical discourse analysis. The analysis draws upon Foucault's (1980) formulation of power/knowledge, which posits that, the production, control and dissemination of knowledge within a culture stems from the power/knowledge dynamic. In *The Testaments*, the use of language is not merely descriptive of reality; rather, it plays an active and regulatory role in creating the meaning of individuals that it purports to reproduce. The

investigation looks at how language serves as both a mechanism for surveillance and a mechanism through which individuals may resist within Gilead; it further looks at how the testimonies of the narrators serve to illustrate the dual functioning of language.

Narrative theory is also a factor in shaping the analysis of the narrators' testimonies and the degree to which their structures constitute an avenue for thematic investigation of memory and survival. Using the fragmentation of memory, gaps in the narrative, and the internalized regulatory speech of Aunt Lydia as a framework, the investigation examines the role of language as a site of negotiation between the self and the social structures that dictate what may be said and who may say it.

Ethical Considerations

This is not a study that directly involves people, as it is an analysis of a literary piece. The Testaments has been analyzed with an eye to the fact that testimony has ethical ramifications and consideration for the representation of marginalized people. There was a particular concern for the ways in which female voices in Atwood's fictitious world are allowed to be represented by Atwood, but are still constructed within the same systems of domination/ oppression that the characters are trying to escape from. The methodology recognizes that it is an ethical obligation for the researcher to represent these female voices in a manner that gives acknowledgment to the role that these women play in upholding/deconstructing these systems of oppression, whilst at the same time acknowledging their potential for oppositional action through subversive means.

Results

The analysis of *The Testaments* demonstrates that language in Atwood's dystopian imagination cannot be understood through a simple binary of oppression and resistance. Rather, language operates within a dynamic tension in which it simultaneously inscribes subjects into ideological roles and offers limited, contingent pathways toward agency. This dual function confirms Butler's insistence that subjects are interpellated through discourse (*Gender Trouble*, p. 3), while also affirming her claim that naming and speech can be resignified and redirected (*Excitable Speech*, p. 2). *The Testaments* suggest that the primary place of resolution between 'destiny' and 'destination' is through testimony. The analysis shows that testimony is not only an unmediated representation of truth or an act of emancipation. According to Felman and Laub, testimony is

always 'relational' (Felman & Laub, pp. 70–71) and depends on an audience that allows it to be 'expressed' in the first instance. This relational structure is evident in Aunt Lydia's manuscript, which is written under conditions of surveillance and directed toward an imagined future reader. Saying "writing can be dangerous" (*The Testaments*, pp. 14-15) drives home how even when the act of writing witnesses to power, it has a role in solidifying power. Butler explains that "if the body is supported by language, it can also be harmed by language" (*Excitable Speech*, p. 5). The risk associated with Lydia's writing is due to her need to sustain her life through her writing, so while she is affirming her agency by writing about her experiences of being a woman in Gilead, it is also limiting her to create her own experiences; therefore, the exercise of agency in Gilead exists as an ongoing risk. The discussion also indicates that the gendered subordination experienced by women in *The Testaments* is multi-faceted. hooks states that patriarchy maintains its power through the subjugation of both men and women (*Feminist Theory*, p. 106). The stratification of women into Aunts, Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, and Econowives confirms hooks's argument that domination persists when women are divided against one another rather than united in solidarity (*Feminist Theory*, pp. 43–44). Aunt Lydia's role exemplifies this paradox. Publicly, she embodies institutional authority, while privately she records the system's brutality. Her testimony exposes the cost of complicity and confirms Butler's claim that regulatory practices "constitute identity" while never fully completing it (*Gender Trouble*, p. 23; *Bodies That Matter*, p. xii). Agnes's narrative complicates conventional accounts of victimhood by demonstrating how privilege and subordination coexist. Although she is the daughter of a Commander and thus, she is isolated from the daily forms of violence against women, all aspects of her being and future are being enforced to meet the expectations that are directed at women through religious ideology that defines womanhood only by reproductive functions. For example, she remembers, "every woman wanted a baby" (*The Testaments*, p. 86) and how this ideology naturalizes gender roles through its repetition, as Butler argued that performativity is "the reiterative and citation practice by which discourse produces that effect that it names" (*Bodies That Matter*, p. 2). In having the opportunity to later narrate the memories she has of these experiences as a form of agency, she illustrated the argument of bell hooks, that by moving from silence into speaking, one has moved into a space of "defiance" (*Talking Back*, p. 9). The testimony of Daisy offers an important perspective from outside the regime of Gilead and provides a different perspective of the sacred language of Gilead

as a constructed language. The testimony of Daisy reinforces the claim by bell hooks on the political significance of speaking back to power (Talking Back, p. 5). Daisy's testimony serves as a counter-archive, preserving Daisy's narrative of not only the oppression she experienced but also the loss of her family and the loss of Gilead as an organization. Consequently, Daisy's narrative supports Baccolini and Moylan's assertion that critical dystopias construct not only the hegemonic narratives of oppression but the counter-narratives of resistance (Baccolini & Moylan, p. 6). It provides a source of continuing hope for those who will continue to fight against oppression, and it creates an opening for the future. This section discusses the function of surveillance in constructing agency. Foucault thought about docile bodies (Discipline and Punish 151), and *The Testaments* describes how the process of learning considered "acceptable" behaviour by watching others or by training to become a docile body results in the internalizing of discipline by women. The way in which Agnes is trained at Vidala School demonstrates how the training comes to be expressed in the way that she physically presents herself, as well as silence, self-policing, and later on her testimony, which is the story of how surveillance has been incorporated. As Butler states, the materialization of experience is never a complete act (Bodies That Matter 1-2), and thus absent spaces within the continuing repetitions of surveillance allow for the emergence of narrative resistance, which Agnes articulates when using the absence in her own surveillance experience. The polyphonic structure of *The Testaments* allows for a specific process to occur. According to Howells, the novel expands Offred's one voice into three narratives, and thus, when there is more than one narrative voice telling a story, there is no way for one narrative to dominate (Howells 185). hooks suggests that solidarity cannot be built upon expected shared experiences, but that solidarity can be developed from embracing differences (Feminist Theory 65) and it is in the converging of Lydia's bureaucratic testimony; Agnes's confessional narrative; and Daisy's perspective as an outsider where the fragmented narratives become a powerful and collectively resistant voice. Finally, the discussion confirms Atwood's utopian vision, in which dystopia and utopia coexist. According to Brian Atwood (*In Other Worlds*), there is a "hidden utopia" within every dystopian society. *The Testaments* do not provide a simplistic way out of oppression but show that testimony is an ethically ambiguous process — it both reproduces and challenges power. The use of language is a battleground and does not offer a way out. The interplay between the idea of destiny and destination creates a constant struggle and the testimony documents this delicate

exchange. This reinterpretation of dystopian literature as a process of ongoing storytelling, rather than breaking through as a dramatic/profound response, is what allows us to see how Testimony creates a framework for the negotiation of survival, memory, and ethical responsibility. Patricia Hill Collins (Feminist Theory) points out to us that feminists must continuously work together to support one another rather than relying on assumed solidarity. Atwood's work argues, despite the failure of language to dismantle oppression alone, it remains a critical method for making oppression visible, remembering it and fighting against it.

Discussion

The present article set out to address a central question raised by *The Testaments*: does language function as a fixed destiny imposed by power, or as a chosen destination through which subjects negotiate agency? The analysis demonstrates that language in Atwood's sequel operates in neither of these terms exclusively. Instead, *The Testaments* presents language as a regulated terrain in which destiny and choice are in constant tension. Testimony has now become part of the records; no longer is it the subject of a fear of punishment for speaking about one's life and the lives of others. At present, testimony is allowed however, it must be approved, approved by an institution, stored as historical documentation and kept on file. This turns testimony into an opportunity to exercise agency as well as a tool for institutionally controlled testimony. Through Aunt Lydia's, Agnes's, and Daisy's experiences, the text illustrates that testimony will be formed from the point of view of who is telling it. According to Butler's theory of performativity, the speech of *The Testaments* has the ability to shape both authority and identity, through the act of repeating and recognizing the statements, rather than an absolute truth. Furthermore, according to hook's intersectional critique, the ability to obtain a voice is still unbalanced and that empowerment for some can take place concurrently with continued disempowerment for others. Therefore, testimony is a construct of the institutions that dictate the types of testimonies that are stored, which testimonies will be accepted and which testimonies are not accepted. The results demonstrate that the language in *The Testaments* does not exist as a fully autonomous object of choice opposing institutional authority on its own volition. Instead, this text asserts itself through limitation of choice and agency regarding how individuals navigate their subjective positions within established structures designed specifically to impose limits on

individual expression without completely prohibiting it. Authority in Gilead evolves from preventing speech to governing how speech circulates, demonstrating that domination adapts rather than disappears. In this context, testimony resists oppression by exposing its mechanisms, yet it also facilitates power by participating in the production of official memory. At the end of it all, *The Testaments* decontextualizes dystopian resistance not only as an ethical dilemma, but as an ethical dilemma to be solved. Memory, Voice and Survival cannot be separated from issues of Complicity and Responsibility, as well as History's Narration. Language shapes how memory, voice, and survival are defined and interpreted directly influence how oppression is recognized, internalized, and challenged. When Atwood presents Testimony as both an area of Resistance and Regulation, he implies that the Power Struggle does not simply exist between those who can speak, but also in how those voices are shaped, regulated, and preserved through Language.

Limitations

While the primary focus of the study is on *The Testaments*, it is important to note that the analysis is limited to the voices of the three narrators, and does not encompass the full spectrum of characters or perspectives within the novel. Future studies could expand the analysis to include other characters, such as the Wives or the Marthas, to further explore the intersectionality of voice and power in Gilead. Additionally, the study is confined to textual analysis and does not incorporate secondary qualitative data, such as interviews or reader-response theory, which could add another layer of interpretation to the analysis of language and power in the novel.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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