

The Metonymy about Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

As a speculative fiction, the book *the Handmaid's Tale* written by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood shows us a dystopian world where women are under the totalitarian rule by men, and not only women, men are also constrained by the totalitarianism in Gilead. Based on this, by applying the research method of textual analysis, the this paper mainly discusses the metonymies about power reflected in *the Handmaid's Tale*, which are manifested in the dress color in Gilead, the stratification of the upper class and the naming of Handmaids in this book. Furthermore, this paper tries to unearth the underlying cause of the metonymies used in *the Handmaid's tale* through specific analyses of the metonymies. And based on the result of the analyses, it indicates that to some extent, metonymy here can be a way to achieve power oppression.

Keywords: Metonymy; *The handmaid's tale*; Power; Totalitarian.

1. Introduction

The book *the Handmaid's Tale* was written by the Canadian female writer Margaret Atwood, and it was first published in 1985. Set in the near future, it describes life in what once was the United States, now called the Republic of Gilead. Reacting to social unrest, and a sharply declining birth rate, the new regime has reverted to — even gone beyond — the repressive tolerance of the original Puritans. Gilead is based on Christian fundamentalism, that is, it strictly abides by the basic principles of Christianity, and adheres to the literal meaning of *Bible*, especially *the Old Testament*. On this basis, strict social hierarchy, patriarchy and religious extremism have enveloped the entire society. Due to various ecological crises including environmental pollution, frequent occurrence of infertility, and the extremely low birth rate of healthy babies, Gilead therefore attaches great importance to the problem of population fertility. Therefore, based on *Bible*, they formed a group called "Handmaid", who are specially trained and assigned to each Commander, that is, the senior officers of Gilead, so they can give birth to offspring. If they can give birth to healthy children, the Handmaid will be able to change their fate and avoid being sent to clean up the nuclear trash which are extremely harmful to human's body. If not so, then the Handmaids will be sent to the trash station as an "Unwoman" and ultimately be killed by nuclear radiation. The first-person narrator of the novel, Offred, is one of the Handmaids. Offred is a Handmaid who may leave the home of the Commander and his wife once a day to walk to food markets whose signs are now pictures instead of words because women are no longer allowed to read. She must lie on her back once a month and pray that the Commander makes her pregnant because she is only valued as long as her ovaries are viable. Offred can remember the years before, when she lived and stayed with her husband, Luke; when she played with and protected her daughter; when she had a job, money of her own, and access to knowledge. But all of that is gone now. Funny, unexpected, horrifying, and altogether convincing, *The Handmaid's Tale* is at once scathing satire, dire warning, and tour of force.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the embodiment of power is penetrated almost every aspect of Gilead. One of the most salient is Gilead's control policy on its people (FuJunjun, 2021). For example, in order to maintain totalitarian rule of the society, people of all strata are ordered to wear different colored clothing. The Commander at the top of the power pyramid wears a black uniform, the Commander's wife wears a blue skirt, and the Aunt who disciplines her Handmaids wears brown clothing. The female servant, also called Martha, the color of their clothing is dull green. And the attire of the poor wife, Econowives, is a striped dress, while the iconic and only color of the Handmaid's dress is blood-red, which symbols maternity and fertility. All of those different colored dresses wore by disparate group of people here in Gilead is a way of implying distinctive stratification of power, and it is exactly right in here that metonymy about power is demonstrated, which is, different colors equal different status and different power.

2. Metonymy

Metonymy is everywhere in spoken and written language. It can be found in novel, poetry, prose, the political jargon that fills newspapers and radio, songs, folk sayings, and more. As a rhetorical device, the use of metonymy can be traced back to ancient Greece. Traditionally speaking, metonymy is a type of figurative language in which an object or concept is referred to not by its own name, but instead by the name of something closely associated with it. For example, in “Wall Street prefers lower taxes,” the New York City street that was the original home of the New York Stock Exchange stands in for (or is a “metonym” for) the entire American financial industry. In literature, it often substitutes a concrete image for an abstract concept. For instance, “Heart” can be used to mean “love,” or “grave” to mean “death.” Since the publication of *Metaphors We Live by* by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and *Metonymy in Language and Thought* by Panther and Radden (1999), metonymy is not simply a rhetorical term. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), see metonymy (including synecdoche) as a predominantly referential shift phenomenon within one cognitive domain—much in line with the traditional conception of metonymy. “Metonymy is a cognitive phenomenon—not just a figure of speech—with a considerable role in the organization of meaning (semantics), utterance production and interpretation (pragmatics), and even grammatical structure.” Panther and Thornburg (2010) Most contemporary accounts in Cognitive Linguistics have built on Lakoff and Johnson (1980) original distinction between metaphor as a cross-domain mapping and of metonymy as a mapping within one cognitive domain. Other scholars like Ruiz and Francisco (2000) proposes that metonymic mappings, which are usually considered to be whole-part, part-whole, or part-part mappings, can be reduced to two kinds: either the source of the metonymic operation is in the target (“source-in-target” metonymy) or the target is in the source (“target-in-source” metonymy). A widely accepted definition of metonymy inspired by Langacker (1993) is the one proposed by Radden and Zoltán (1999): “Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same cognitive model.” Other than these, some scholars in China also have concluded their own opinions towards metonymy. ShuDingfang argues that “metonymy involving the properties of something and its special relations with other things”, “As metonymy basically involves using a special property of something or its special relationship with other things to refer to it, its major function is to help the hearer to locate or recognize the referent and its special characteristics.” Shu (2004). Other scholars take a deep research on contiguity, “the authors argue that conceptual contiguity, rather than linguistic contiguity, is the cognitive basis of metonymy. Contiguous relationships can arise in and between the realms of language (form), reality and concept. Wen and Ye (2006)” Despite different scholars hold different arguments, under the framework of cognitive linguistic, they almost all share the same common view, which is, metonymy is about contiguity. Therefore, based on contiguity within the same cognitive domain, this paper will analyze the metonymies in *The Handmaid's Tale* from three specific aspects.

3. The Specific Aspects of Metonymy about Power in Gilead

3.1. Dress Color in Gilead

In Gilead, people in different status wear different colored clothes, in a way to show the salient distinction between them. According to Margaret Atwood, author of the book, each color has its own original religious meaning. The wives of Commanders are dressed in blue to symbolize purity, which originates from the Virgin Mary; the Handmaids are dressed in red to symbolize the blood during childbirth, which also originates from Mary Magdalene. In addition, if Handmaids want to escape, red is easier to recognize. The wives of men from lower status are called “Econowives” and wear striped clothing. Here in the novels, there’re a lot descriptions toward dress color. For example, in chapter 2, “...and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood.” Same descriptions in this chapter “But the frown isn’t personal: it’s the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck”. From the perspective of contiguity, “red cloak” and “red dress” refer to the Handmaid herself based on the context. Here both “red” are impartible elements of the Handmaid, which consist of the metonym, and the referent is the Handmaid, who barely has no right nor power.

As for the Commander’s wife, in chapter 36 “He goes to the cupboard and gets out a cloak, with a hood. It’s light blue, the color for wives.” Here “light blue” is a metonym, which indicates the Commander’s wife since it is the only color of those wives’ dress. Combined with the context, the Handmaid can only pass the checkpoint by disguising as the Commander’s wife, which is by wearing her blue cloak. And this once again metonymically stands in different power. In chapter 2 “Some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they’re called. These women are not divided into functions.” Just like the Handmaid and the Commander’s wife, “dull green” and “red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy” conceptually and metonymically indicate the Marthas and Econowives, both are from lower classes and have little power. Compared to them are the Commanders who wear black, who are the real praepositus. And black in the book, “the color of prestige or a hearse”, which symbolizes power and positions, metonymically imply those power-holders. But among those Commanders, their power is not evenly contested, which will be discussed in 3.2.

3.2. The Stratification of the Upper Class in Gilead

Even in the world of real power-holders, the unevenness of power is also metonymically reflected. For example, the upper class of Gilead is further divided, relying on the brand of the cars and the steps in front of the houses to

distinguish the size of their power. As for cars, “Whirlwind” is more high-ranking than “Chariot” and “Behemoth”, in chapter 4 “The car is a very expensive one, a Whirlwind; better than the Chariot, much better than the chunky, practical Behemoth. It’s black, of course, the color of prestige or a hearse, and long and sleek.” Another is the number of steps in front the houses, those who have more steps in front of the houses subsequently have more power in the upper class. In the book, the Handmaid Offred once mentioned that another Commander had more steps in front of his house than the one she served, indicating a higher rank. Here in the book, the brands of the car and the number of the steps both are used metonymically to stand in different ranks and power of the upper class in Gilead, which in another way coincide the rule of contiguity in metonymy.

3.3. The Name of Handmaids in Gilead

Except the dress color and the stratification of the upper class, there’s another aspect also shows the metonymy about power in Gilead, which is the name of Handmaids. Before being assigned to the Commander's home, the Handmaids were taught to be docile and obedient. And they were coded and recorded in order to control them as easily as the farm animals. Different numbers were printed not only on their passes but also tattooed on their ankles. So far, Gilead has completed the total control of the Handmaids by depriving their names and replaced them with numbers and names which are combined with an “Of” in front of the names and the names of the Commanders they serve. The Handmaid’s name, “Offred”, is an example, it consists of “Of” and “Fred”, while “Fred” is the name of the Commander. Through the naming of Handmaids, they can no longer have an identity of their own, but can only rely on a relative male’s identity to recognize who they are, they are no one but the belongings of Gilead. Once again, here the identities of Handmaids are metonymically expressed as the numbers on their ankles and the names given by Gilead, which further testifies that power repression is everywhere in Gilead.

4. The Causes Based on Metonymies about Power in Gilead

4.1. The Pervasive Control of Totalitarianism over the Members in Gilead

In this novel, the control of totalitarianism is everywhere since Gilead is built on the basis of Christian fundamentalism, which strictly follows the rules and regulations of the *Bible*, especially *the Old Testament*. The Commander is the sovereign ruler of the state, and the only political party is a party of Christian fundamentalists who massacred infidels, declared war on religious liberals, and hanged Quakers, Baptists, Catholics, and Jews who refused to convert. In Gilead, abortion, sex outside marriage, infidels and homosexuality are punishable by death by law. Thus, everyone is required to behave like a Puritan under the control of Gilead. Everything is connected with religion and strict hierarchy. In Gilead, it not only constrains the power of women, but men are also under the confinement of Gilead, which makes it easier to understand why there’re stratifications in the upper class. And under this kind of circumstances, everything is printed the marks of power. “Although the Handmaids were the most oppressed in Gilead, they were not the only ones. Almost everyone was restricted in the Panopticon to what they could and could not do. Even the Commander himself can be observed, for, locked in the centre of the structure, his fate is tied up with the mechanism” (Wang and Zhang, 2005).

4.2. The Male Dominance in Gilead

Gilead is a totalitarian country built on patriarchy, and everything is male-dominated. The law declares fertile women outside the ruling class as state property, making them the Handmaids, or maidservants, of the Commander's wife, who could not bear children. The law defines women cannot have jobs, women cannot own properties. The law also declares there are no infertile men, only infertile women. The legal purpose of a Handmaid is nothing else but procreation. According to the law, Handmaids may breastfeed for a few months after giving birth and then leave the baby with the Commander's family, where she is sent to bear the next Commander's child. “By banning women from reading, working, owning property, disenfranchising, and official ideological indoctrination, and by terrorizing them in concentration camps. The Republic of Gilead tamed women into tools for achieving the reproductive goals of the totalitarian regime” (SunJinlin, 2021). Consequently, women, as a victim of patriarchy, their power is sure to be oppressed and constrained, thus reflected relatively in their names and dress color.

5. Conclusion

Through the metonymic analysis of dress color in Gilead, stratification of upper class, and the name of Handmaids in Gilead. *The Handmaid's Tale* metonymically denotes the power oppression of women and its ruling class itself, mostly men, in the totalitarian society, which fully embodies that, in totalitarian society, no one can escape the bondage of power. And the metonymy about power reflected in *the Handmaid's story* is, to some extent, a way to achieve power oppression. For, it objectifies every member in Gilead, especially women. And this also alerts the human being in modern society.

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