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ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In recent decades, the intersection of anthropology and literature has emerged as a fascinating field of study, offering unique insights into cultural representations, social norms, and human experiences. As literature is a powerful medium for reflecting and commenting on social realities, exploring anthropological perspectives in fictional works becomes particularly compelling. Among the numerous authors contributing to this discourse, the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood stands out for her captivating narratives that delve deep into anthropological themes.

Margaret Atwood's literary works have garnered critical acclaim for their intricate exploration of human behavior, societal structures, and environmental concerns. Her novels often feature dystopian or speculative settings, which provide a compelling backdrop for anthropological analysis. Atwood's ability to craft complex characters and richly textured societies makes her fiction ideal for studying cultural practices, power dynamics, and the nuances of human relationships.

This dissertation examines the anthropological and narrative dimensions of Margaret Atwood's fiction. This study aims to shed light on her works' multifaceted layers of meaning by applying anthropological frameworks and narrative theories. Moreover, this research seeks to examine how Atwood's storytelling techniques contribute to her portrayal of cultural dynamics, identity constructions, and societal representations.

RESEARCH GAP AND SIGNIFICANCE

This study holds significant academic value as it bridges the gap between anthropology and narrative literary analysis. By intertwining these two disciplines, we can gain a deeper understanding of how narratives shape our comprehension of the world and its complexities. Additionally, this research may offer innovative perspectives on the relevance of literature as a means of cultural exploration and social critique.

The scope of this dissertation revolves around an in-depth examination of anthropological and narrative perspectives in Margaret Atwood's selected novels. The research will primarily focus on a carefully chosen set of Atwood's books: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)*, Alias Grace* (1996)*, The Blind Assassin* (2000), and *The Testaments* (2019). These works represent a diverse range of themes and narrative styles, offering ample opportunities for anthropological analysis.

The study will examine various anthropological themes in the selected novels, including gender roles, power dynamics, cultural practices, and feminist concerns. It will also closely examine Atwood's narrative techniques, including multiple perspectives, unreliable narrators, metafiction, and intertextuality.

The dissertation will draw upon relevant anthropological and narrative studies and theories for a well-rounded analysis. Anthropological concepts from cultural anthropology, gender, and feminist studies will be applied to interpret Atwood's fictional societies. Additionally, narrative theories, such as those related to postmodernism and self-reflexivity, will aid in understanding Atwood's unique storytelling approach.

In summary, this dissertation comprehensively explores the anthropological and narrative aspects of Margaret Atwood's fiction, aiming to contribute to the broader fields of anthropology, literary studies, and cultural analysis. Through this investigation, we strive to illuminate the profound impact of Atwood's scholarly contributions and expand our understanding of the human experience through the lens of her imaginative narratives.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this dissertation is to explore and analyze the anthropological and narrative perspectives in the fiction of Margaret Atwood. The following particular goals will serve as the research's guidance to accomplish this overarching goal:

1. To identify and examine the prominent anthropological themes in Margaret Atwood's selected works, including but not limited to gender roles, power dynamics, cultural practices, and feminist concerns.

2. To understand how Atwood's narratives engage with and reflect anthropological concepts, shedding light on the complexities of human societies, identities, and interactions.

3. To analyze the narrative strategies employed by Margaret Atwood in her fiction, investigating the use of multiple perspectives, unreliable narrators, metafiction, and intertextuality.

4. To investigate the intersection of anthropology and storytelling, examining how Atwood's fiction serves as a medium for anthropological inquiry and cultural critique.

5. To evaluate the implications of Atwood's fiction in the context of anthropological studies, discussing how her narratives contribute to broader understandings of culture, society, and human behavior.

6. To offer new insights into the significance of literature as a platform for exploring anthropological themes and to provide a deeper appreciation for fiction's potential in addressing real-world concerns.

By addressing these research objectives, this dissertation aims to enrich scholarly discussions on the interplay between anthropology and narrative in literature, with a specific focus on Margaret Atwood's thought-provoking works. Ultimately, this study endeavors to foster a deeper understanding of the human condition, societal complexities, and the power of storytelling in shaping our perceptions of the world.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this dissertation involves a rigorous and systematic approach to analyze the anthropological and narrative perspectives in Margaret Atwood's fiction. The research will be conducted through the following key steps:

1. Literature Review: The initial phase will involve an extensive literature review to gather relevant scholarly works on Margaret Atwood's fiction, anthropology in literature, and narrative theory. This review will provide a solid foundation for understanding the existing research and identifying gaps in the field.

2. Selection of Novels: A careful selection of Margaret Atwood's novels will be made based on their relevance to anthropological themes and narrative techniques. The chosen novels include *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)*, Alias Grace* (1996)*, The Blind Assassin* (2000), and *The Testaments* (2019), which offer rich material for analysis, analyzed in chronological order of appearance.

3. Anthropological Analysis: The selected novels will be subjected to a thorough anthropological analysis. Key anthropological themes, including gender roles, power structures, cultural practices, and feminist perspectives, will be identified and explored within Atwood's fictional worlds.

4. Narrative Analysis: The narratives in the chosen novels will be closely examined to understand Atwood's storytelling techniques. The analysis will use multiple perspectives, unreliable narrators, metafiction, and intertextuality to uncover the narrative complexities.

5. Theoretical Framework: The research will draw upon relevant theoretical frameworks from anthropology and narrative studies to interpret the findings effectively. Anthropological concepts and narrative theories will be applied to enrich the analysis.

6. Data Collection will primarily involve gathering textual evidence from the selected novels. Relevant passages, quotes, and excerpts will be documented to support the analysis.

7. Data Analysis: The data collected will be carefully analyzed, and patterns, themes, and insights will be derived from the textual evidence to develop coherent arguments.

8. Interpretation and Discussion: The findings will be interpreted in light of the research objectives and discussed in depth, providing meaningful insights into Atwood's fiction's anthropological and narrative dimensions.

9. Conclusion: The dissertation will conclude with a summary of the key findings, their implications, and the contributions made to anthropology and literary studies.

The methodology adopted in this research will ensure a rigorous and systematic investigation into the anthropological and narrative aspects of Margaret Atwood's fiction, providing valuable insights and expanding the understanding of the interplay between anthropology and storytelling in literature.

This thesis aimed to reveal the intricate link between the anthropological and narrative perspectives in Margaret Atwood's fictional body of work by challenging the boundaries of literary studies and the cultural climate and social context in which this evolves. Regarding our methodology, we used a mixed-methods approach, exposing a rich interdisciplinary analysis of Margaret Atwood's writing's aesthetics and politics. The primary texts were analyzed closely (through textual and metatextual analyses) and distantly (via contextual and sociocultural analyses) from diverse yet convergent perspectives. At the same time, we highlighted the common elements regarding the dystopian feminist vision and the narrative and linguistic strategies shared by the Canadian author. Consequently, this paper explored and expanded on the following topics:

The Anthropological Foundations in Atwood's Fiction

Reader-Response Theory

Narrative Strategies in Atwood's Fiction

Science Fiction, Dystopia, Gender, and Society

Politics, Feminism, and Fiction

The Intersection of Anthropology and Narrative in Atwood's Fiction

Canadian novelist and poet Margaret Atwood is one of the most influential writers of our time. Her diverse body of work, comprising essays, novels, and poems, is often characterized by dystopian themes and speculative fiction. Inspired by her father, an entomologist, Atwood's early poetry works —*Double Persephone* (1961), *The Circle Game* (1964), and *The Animals in That Country* (1968) —explore human behavior while honoring the natural world. Written soon after Reagan's election, one of her dystopian books, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; film 1990; opera 2000), depicts the overthrow of the U.S. democratic government and its replacement by a theocracy by a group of religious extremists.

Atwood is the author of several novels, including *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972), which explore her views on the relationships between people and animals. The novels *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Robber Bride* (1993) stand in stark contrast to each other. *Alias Grace* (1996) tells the story of a Canadian girl who was found guilty of two murders in an 1843 trial. Both works use female characters to explore moral dilemmas by depicting female villains. Another historical fiction set in Canada is *The Blind Assassin* (2000), which tells the story of Iris Chase and the things that influenced her early and later life, including a story she is currently writing.

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), features Agnes, a young woman residing in Gilead, and Daisy, a young woman living in Canada, as told by Aunt Lydia, a character from the prequel. The book concludes with an epilogue that Professor Pieixoto describes as a record of the 13th Symposium on Gileadean Studies in 2197. Atwood upholds the "open-end" idea first presented in the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) (adapted from the proceedings of the 12th Symposium on Gileadean Studies in 2195).

The Anthropological Foundations in Atwood's Fiction

Studying anthropology in literature is becoming a popular multidisciplinary area that provides essential insights into how people behave and how cultures are portrayed. Academics have explored how literature reflects society's norms and values, providing a framework for analyzing a range of anthropological subjects. Notably, cultural anthropological viewpoints have been thoroughly studied in literary works, giving insight into how writers represent various cultures, customs, and religious beliefs. By exploring the anthropological foundations in Margaret Atwood's work**,** we highlighted social and economic structures, sexuality and marriage, reproduction, adoption and fostering, and the power

structure. Moreover, the present research aimed to examine the cultural and historical elements in Atwood's fiction, as well as the rituals and symbolism illustrated by topics such as sight and blindness, quilts, polygamy, images of food, and others.

The theoretical frameworks used to analyze anthropology in literature have been affected by the writings of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said. Furthermore, anthropology and literature also share the recognition that written texts are creations rather than summaries of an absolute reality that may be claimed to be being described, as Geertz and others have recently stressed. According to Geertz, anthropological texts are convincing to the extent that they convince the reader that the author has traveled to and returned from a different way of life and "has been there as well as here"; an ethnographer is someone who records the daily experiences of others. (Geertz, 1973: 19).

Reader-Response Theory

The anthropological perspective is closely intertwined with reader-response theory, as conceptualized by Wolfgang Iser in *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1993). In this respect, the 1930s saw the emergence of the reader-response theory, which gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s and is based on the cognitive-constructivist theory of learning. Although several theorists, such as Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser, are acknowledged for their contributions to reader-response theory, Louise Rosenblatt is credited with initially developing the concept (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). Employing a reader-response technique fosters critical reading and thinking skills, as students must provide textual evidence and justification for each of their multiple readings of a text, rather than being given predetermined answers. People actively engage with texts when applying the reader-response strategy because they can relate the text's meaning to their own experiences. Reader reaction improves readers' interaction with texts and reading comprehension. Reading is a subjective activity in which readers interpret literary texts using a variety of viewpoints, personal experiences, and prior knowledge. (Mitchell, 1993).

Narrative Strategies in Atwood's Fiction

The study of narrative levels and their theoretical aspects in Margaret Atwood's novels offers a fascinating exploration of the complexities of storytelling. In narratology, the concept of narrative levels and narrators was studied by Wayne Booth, who distinguishes the

"undramatized narrator" from an impersonal character and "the dramatized narrator. Gérard Génette initially discussed the concept of the narrative level in *The Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980). According to Génette, a narrative scenario must be thoroughly examined as with any other "complex whole." As a result, he classified its critical elements as "period of the narrating," "narrative level," and "person." Mieke Bal addressed embedded texts and narratives in his book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. (2009). Despite not using the term *embedding* explicitly, Bakhtin's dialogic heteroglossia expresses the presence of several languages in the book, suggesting multiple temporal dimensions, such as the past, present, and future.

Furthermore, diegesis, or narrative levels, is fundamental to understanding how stories are constructed. At the highest level, known as the extra-diegetic level, lies the overarching narrative, which concerns itself with the narration itself. In simpler terms, this is where the story about the story is presented. An example is Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1386-1400), where the narrator introduces the pilgrims, who, in turn, tell their own stories.

In summary, Margaret Atwood's novels, particularly in the dystopian context of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019), employ intricate narrative levels and theoretical concepts. These layers of storytelling, ranging from the overarching narrative to stories within stories, enrich the narrative complexity and provide insights into characters, themes, and the fictional worlds Atwood creates. Using *mise en abyme* and documents, such as diaries and tapes, adds depth to the narrative, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. These narrative techniques align with Atwood's exploration of power, identity, and societal structures in her dystopian narratives, offering readers a thought-provoking and immersive reading experience.

In *Alias Grace* (1996), the protagonist, Grace Marks, presents her story through shifting perspectives, leaving readers to decipher the truth behind her version of events. This unreliable narration raises questions about the nature of reality and the complexities of human memory. In summary, Margaret Atwood's novels, particularly *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Handmaid's Tale (1985),* explore autobiographical self-representation, constructing a stable and unitary self through their storytelling, focusing on the coping mechanisms and desire for agency in a patriarchal society.

The comprehensive analysis of metafiction and self-reflexivity showcases its functioning within Margaret Atwood's novels. It proves its contribution to the richness of her

storytelling. Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing "which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality," as defined by Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (2001).

In novels like *The Blind Assassin* (2000), Atwood employs a nested narrative structure where multiple stories are interwoven, creating a multi-layered and intricate plot. This technique adds depth to the storytelling and simultaneously allows Atwood to explore various themes and perspectives. Although meta-referencing is a typical element of autobiographies, it has a specific function in *The Testaments* (2019) as it is considered a pseudo-autobiography. Some have praised *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), as a warning against governmental intrusion on women's civil and reproductive rights in the wake of the election of U.S. President Donald Trump.

In conclusion*,* Atwood plays with genre conventions and subverts them through metafictional, parodic, and satiric elements to remake traditional genres. The author's metafictional elements interact with other texts within her novels, including references to literature, historical documents, or even her previous works.

Science Fiction, Dystopia, Gender, and Society

According to Matthew Wolf-Meyer's argument in "The Necessary Tension between Science Fiction and Anthropology," science fiction is another literary form affected by its historical popularity, just like other fiction genres. Consequently, science fiction provides anthropologists with a rich laboratory, serving as the basis for anthropological research on diverse cultures.

According to some critics, feminists utilize science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction genres to express their opinions about gender (Westfahl, 2005: 291). These genres allow writers to create and "grow" new worlds with unique ideologies, social structures, governmental systems, and sexual orientations.

Since the science fiction boom of the twentieth century, male authors have dominated the genre, often writing about topics specific to men. Although science fiction was written in the past by some legendary authors, such as Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* (1818), women writers of the genre did not gain widespread recognition until the Second Wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

In dystopian environments, the conflict between oppressive regimes and insurrectionist organizations often results in some form of violence. The elite class of Commanders, who are at the pinnacle of the male social order in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), are followed by Eyes, the secret police, Angels, Guardians, and various fighters. Gilead controls language and restricts communication, particularly for women, linguistic manipulation becoming a tool of oppression and control in the dystopian society.

To summarize, the ruling class in Gilead justifies its actions and social structure through a distorted interpretation of religious scripture; the gender roles portrayed in Gilead are deeply entrenched, reflecting traditional patriarchal norms, whereas the Handmaids are reduced to their reproductive function, symbolizing the metamorphosis of women's bodies in the name of procreation.

Politics, Feminism and Fiction

Margaret Atwood's writing often explores feminist themes. *The Blind Assassin*'s (2000) female characters—Iris in particular—maneuver through the patriarchal society of the era. World War II and the Great Depression are just two of the significant historical events against which the novel is set. These historical occurrences significantly influence the lives of the characters, as well as the broader social context, shaping their experiences through political upheaval and economic adversity. Sakiel-Norn's story is recounted as a metaphor for the political intrigue, economic injustice, and betrayal that characterized Toronto's social scene during the Great Depression.

Atwood is recognized for her feminist viewpoints and provocative subjects. The author's imaginative use of narrative tactics and writing style has gained scholarly interest. *The Testaments* (2019) broadens the perspectives of its prequel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), by including a voice from an inner woman of power, a woman primarily caught in the upper levels of the Gilead machine, and another vision from the outside (Canada) that is somewhat naive and deeply cynical. These confessions unite a well-established Gilead for the reader and document the last days of theocracy.

Margaret Atwood emphasizes her use of the literary form of the survival narrative in her essay "Margaret Atwood on What *The Handmaid's Tale* Means in the Age of Trump." In her writing, Atwood often references the testimonies of those who lived through historical

disasters and recorded them. Gilead is a nightmarish dystopia, and Atwood's witnesses survive to narrate the story subsequently.

In conclusion, in both novels, Atwood reveals that whoever controls the word maintains power. These novels should remind readers that, throughout history, learning to read has been carefully controlled - who is allowed, who is not, and who remains so burdened with life that reading seems like a luxury.

The Intersection of Anthropology and Narrative in Atwood's Fiction

The relational dynamics between the individuals participating in the storytelling, the story's content, and its techniques are the three essential thematic elements of the anthropology of storytelling. Anthropologists are storytellers by nature; they tell stories frequently. However, because their stories fit within a specific category, they are rarely acknowledged as such.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen arrived at the following conclusion when trying to determine why anthropology has recently lost so much of its significance in public discourse: "Anthropological writing […] tends to be chiefly analytical" (Eriksen, 2006: 35), as opposed to being narrative.

In the same manner that an event acquires meaning through narration, the anthropology of storytelling should essentially be a critical investigation of anthropology's innate storytelling capacities. Anthropologists who study storytelling consider the content of the story. Nonetheless, rather than focusing on the story, an anthropological approach to storytelling should emphasize telling and hearing stories.

Contributions to Existing Literature

The present thesis employed an interdisciplinary study integrating anthropology and narrative theory to examine the novels chronologically. One of the key strengths of this study is that it represents a comprehensive examination of the selected novels, from the anthropological to the narrative perspectives illustrated through the case studies in Chapter 5: "Chapter 5. Anthropological and Narrative Perspectives of Atwood's Four Most Prominent Novels: Case Studies."

This dissertation aimed to advance academic discourse on the relationship between anthropology and narrative in literature, with a particular emphasis on the provocative

writings of Margaret Atwood. Ultimately, our research aimed to foster a deeper understanding of society's complexities, the human condition, and the impact of storytelling on our perception of the outside world. Consequently, every chapter covered the main points that define how anthropology and storytelling interact in Margaret Atwood's fiction:

1. The identification and investigation of the significant anthropological themes—such as gender roles, power relations, cultural practices, and feminist concerns—in Margaret Atwood's chosen works and the delineation of various narrative concepts.

2. The research of Atwood's contribution to our knowledge of culture, society, and human behavior while evaluating the fiction's relevance to anthropological studies.

3. The exploration of the relationship between anthropology and storytelling, looking at how Atwood's fiction might be used to do anthropological research and offer cultural criticism.

4. Examining various perspectives, unreliable narrators, metafiction, and intertextuality are examples of Margaret Atwood's storytelling techniques in her fiction.

5. The coherent and well-investigated analysis that adds to the body of literature studies and the anthropological and narrative knowledge already in existence as an inspiration for further interdisciplinary research in these fields.

Limitations and Comparative Context

While this dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive study, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations that may impact the research. Despite these limitations, this dissertation offers a robust and insightful exploration of anthropological and narrative perspectives in Margaret Atwood's fiction, contributing valuable knowledge to the interdisciplinary fields of anthropology and literary studies.

1. Limited Scope of Novels: The analysis will be confined to a specific set of Margaret Atwood's novels; other significant works from her bibliography might not be included. Some valuable insights from her other books may be worth exploring.
2. Subjective Interpretations: Literary analysis can be subjective to a certain extent, and different researchers may interpret the exact text differently. Although efforts will be made to maintain objectivity, personal biases and perspectives may influence the analysis.

3. Temporal and Contextual Constraints: The research is based on the existing knowledge and context up to the knowledge cutoff date in September 2021. It may not include any developments or works published by Margaret Atwood after this date.

Comparing Margaret Atwood's writings with those of Octavia E. Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Nnedi Okorafor provided valuable insights for the research. Moreover, analyzing the narrative techniques of postmodern works by authors such as Italo Calvino and David Mitchell helped us reveal several choices in contemporary works, including the themes of intertextuality, the concept of metafiction, embedded narratives, the connection between anthropology and science fiction, critical versus speculative anthropology, and African futurism versus totalitarianism..

Concluding Remarks

Cultural anthropologists have proposed several themes and methods over the ages. The present study examined several aspects of culture, language, social structures, gender and sexuality, economy, authority and power, marriage, religion, and ritual, then applied and elaborated on these elements of Margaret Atwood's literature.

Consequently, Atwood's works raise essential problems such as extreme morality, gender inequality, historical analogies and anachronisms, and nuclear and chemical contamination. Even if these objectives might be crucial, this kind of future looks less spectacular and more complicated. Still, her novels are potent works that transcend space and time because they present an alert spirit against unfathomably harsh reality.

The pervasiveness of life and death, peace and war, power and politics is paramount in Margaret Atwood's fiction, which draws its roots from real life; thus, anthropological issues are brought to the foreground. "I put nothing into the book that people had not done at some time, in some place" (Atwood, 2017). Margaret Atwood's skillful use of narrative techniques enriches her novels, contributing to her exploration of diverse themes, including feminism and the nature of storytelling.