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GENDER, POWER, AND WOMEN'S AGENCY: THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN* AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conditions under which women can make consequential choices in Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Through comparative close reading, it distinguishes independent entitlements from opportunities granted at another person's discretion. Woolf's account of income and intellectual access is placed beside Atwood's representations of confiscated resources, restricted reading, and reproductive coercion. A feminist framework informed by Naila Kabeer, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Alice Walker directs attention to the unequal distribution of resources and recognition. The analysis finds that female visibility, private concessions, and the survival of testimony do not necessarily confer authority. Differences of genre also matter: Woolf reconstructs the conditions of cultural exclusion, while Atwood explores the loss of established freedoms and the uncertain reception of a woman's account. Their contemporary relevance lies in making the quality and security of choice available for scrutiny, without treating different historical societies as interchangeable.

KEYWORDS: *Women's Agency; Material Independence; Bodily Autonomy; Literary Authority; Conditional Privilege; Feminist Criticism.*

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INTRODUCTION

An opportunity is insecure when its continued availability depends on pleasing the person who grants it. This problem connects Woolf's demand for the material conditions of authorship with Atwood's account of a society that makes women dependent on male authority. The celebrated requirement of money and a room concerns the capacity to pursue a purpose without continual permission (Woolf 6). Offred's loss of financial access establishes the opposite condition: resources previously available to her become subject to someone else's control (Atwood, ch. 28). Read together, these moments make dependence an institutional relationship rather than a personal deficiency.

The comparison developed here concerns the difference between being included and exercising authority. Woolf's extended essay and Atwood's dystopian novel investigate distinct settings and cannot be reduced to a single history of female victimhood. Their formal differences nevertheless make a shared question productive: what allows a woman to use resources, refuse demands, and determine how her experience becomes public knowledge? The argument is that agency requires more than an exceptional opportunity. It depends on control over the terms of participation, on meaningful

alternatives, and on institutions that do not convert recognition into another form of dependence.

CRITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

Kabeer distinguishes resources, agency, and achievements, explaining that empowerment involves acquiring an ability to make choices previously denied. The existence of an apparent decision is insufficient when alternatives are inaccessible or unthinkable (13–14). This distinction guides the reading of literary situations in which women act deliberately but cannot determine the conditions of action. A concession, a bargain, and a right therefore require separate evaluation. Crenshaw's account of intersecting racial and gender hierarchies prevents the category "women" from being treated as a socially uniform position (1242–43). Walker supplies a related challenge within literary criticism by questioning whose circumstances Woolf's model adequately describes (235).

The method is comparative close reading of financial arrangements, restricted spaces, bodily negotiations, and the interpretation of testimony. These scenes are examined through diction, narrative perspective, and institutional context. The findings are interpretive, not statistical claims about readers or societies. Woolf's page references follow the 1929 Hogarth edition as reproduced in Wikisource. The consulted University of Szeged digital copy of Atwood's novel lacks printed pagination, so citations identify chapters or "Historical Notes." Scholarly sources retain their printed page numbers. Television adaptations and Atwood's sequel are outside the study.

INCOME, DEPENDENCE, AND THE SECURITY OF CHOICE

Woolf's narrator describes an inheritance of five hundred pounds annually and the change it produces in her relationship with prospective employers and benefactors (56–57). Its significance lies in predictability. The money makes it possible to think beyond the next necessary act of compliance. Her observation, "I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me," identifies the dependence that previously shaped judgement (57). The point is not that affection or cooperation must disappear. It is that neither should be compelled by the threat of losing subsistence. Intellectual independence begins when disagreement need not become an economic emergency.

Atwood reverses this security through the removal of women's employment and control of accounts. Luke's reassurance that he will provide for Offred does not restore what she has lost (ch. 28). The scene distinguishes a loving intention from an unequal legal position. His kindness cannot make dependence equivalent to ownership, because the ability to decide no longer belongs equally to both partners. A relationship may remain affectionate while the distribution of power within it changes. Atwood consequently locates the beginning of dispossession before its most spectacular public manifestations.

The comparison also qualifies Woolf's confidence in private income. An inheritance can release one individual from immediate dependence, but it cannot by itself secure the institutions that recognise possession. Atwood supplies this missing vulnerability. Money is an enabling resource only when its owner can continue to access it. Neither exceptional wealth nor personal goodwill provides a sufficient account of emancipation. The relevant condition is durable control over resources, supported by arrangements that survive a change in another person's preferences.

ROOMS, READING, AND REVOCABLE PERMISSION

The library encounter in *A Room of One's Own* demonstrates how exclusion can operate through courteous procedure. The narrator is informed that a woman requires a Fellow's company or a letter of introduction to enter (Woolf 12). An individual prohibition is presented as an orderly institutional requirement. Her intellectual purpose is irrelevant to the decision. The library preserves literary achievement while restricting who may examine the evidence of its production. Culture appears open to enquiry in principle, yet access depends on a relationship with those already authorised to belong.

This episode is especially revealing because an exception remains available. A woman with the appropriate endorsement can enter, but her admission does not invalidate the rule. The institution can appear hospitable while retaining its power to classify her as a guest. Woolf directs attention to the interruption of thought as well as the denial of entry. Scholarship requires continuity, and a researcher who must repeatedly establish her legitimacy bears an additional burden before her argument can even begin. The courtesy of the refusal makes that burden easier for its administrator to disregard (12).

Atwood's private reading scenes expose a more coercive version of permission. The Commander offers Scrabble and later a prohibited magazine, making ordinary literacy an exceptional favour (chs. 23, 25). His pleasure depends partly on his capacity to suspend restrictions that remain binding on Offred. The encounter does not distribute intellectual freedom equally between them. She receives access to words while he retains authority over the occasion. The game is therefore significant less as a simple act of rebellion than as a demonstration that a privilege can leave the structure producing deprivation intact.

The contrast between the two rooms sharpens this distinction. Woolf's room names a condition for self-directed work (6). Offred occupies a bedroom whose door does not close properly and whose arrangement she has not chosen (Atwood, ch. 2). A separate enclosure can provide surveillance and containment instead of privacy. Its meaning depends on who controls entry, what activity is permitted, and whether its occupant can leave. Possession cannot be inferred from physical occupancy. Domestic comfort, even when supplied, would not resolve this absence of authority.

A similar problem returns when Offred feels watched while reading in the Commander's presence (Atwood, ch. 29). Reading becomes a performance for the person who has granted it. Her attention is divided between the text and the management of his response. This is the inverse of the intellectual relation Woolf seeks: a person cannot freely assess an object while continually anticipating the judgement of a patron. The comparison establishes a practical distinction between access and autonomy. Entry to a library, room, or conversation matters, but its emancipatory value depends on whether participation remains independently exercisable.

BODILY AUTONOMY AND UNEQUAL NEGOTIATION

The invented history of Shakespeare's sister links creative exclusion to control of movement, education, and marriage. Judith is denied schooling, redirected towards domestic tasks, and punished for rejecting an arranged match (Woolf 70–72). The fiction isolates conditions that prevent talent from becoming publicly recognisable work. Her predicament cannot be explained by insufficient ambition, since her desire to act and write remains strong. Nor is access to a man in the theatre equivalent to entry into a profession. The subsequent pregnancy and death expose the vulnerability of someone whose search for opportunity has no reliable protection (73).

Judith's father alternates violence with emotional appeal, framing disobedience as an injury to family affection (Woolf 72). This change of register matters. Coercion does not cease when an order is expressed as love, disappointment, or concern. The daughter is required to treat another person's distress as a reason to abandon her own future. Woolf thereby locates the obstruction of authorship within decisions that might otherwise appear outside literary history. Bodily freedom and intellectual possibility become connected through the capacity to refuse an assigned life.

In Atwood's novel, the Ceremony institutionalises reproductive use while excluding Offred from determining its terms (ch. 16). The relevant contrast is between being socially valued for a function and being recognised as an agent. Reproductive importance does not confer the right to decide whether, when, or under what conditions that function is performed. Indeed, the more essential the assigned function becomes to the household, the more insistently the individual can be subordinated to it. Esteem for motherhood cannot be treated as evidence that the mother's judgement carries authority.

Serena Joy's proposed arrangement with Nick further separates strategic action from free consent. Her offer of information about Offred's daughter gives the bargain emotional force (Atwood, ch. 31). Serena can challenge a rule when it obstructs her preferred outcome while preserving the unequal relationship that makes Offred available for negotiation. Both women face restrictions, but their positions are not equivalent. One controls a resource that the other desperately needs. The agreement consequently cannot be assessed without considering the penalties of refusal and the absence of a safe alternative.

Keck's account of women's complicity and resistance usefully stresses that moral agency in Atwood is situated and can involve contradictory conduct (14). Within the earlier novel considered here, this insight prevents a simple division between helpless victims and emancipated rebels. A woman can exercise judgement under coercion, and another woman can use limited authority to intensify that coercion. Survival decisions should not be mistaken for endorsement, but neither should shared gender erase differences of responsibility. The comparative result is a demanding account of agency: deliberate action matters, yet its freedom depends on the range and cost of available alternatives.

TESTIMONY AND THE AUTHORITY TO INTERPRET

Woolf's account of Judith also challenges the authority of an incomplete literary record. The imagined sister cannot be offered as a recovered historical person. Instead, her story identifies what a canon organised around surviving achievements is unable to demonstrate. The absence of a recognised work does not prove the absence of capacity when training and professional entry have already been obstructed (70–73). Literary history can reproduce exclusion if it treats the products of unequal opportunity as transparent evidence of unequal ability. The imaginative example changes the question from who succeeded to what made success possible.

Atwood subjects the reception of an actual surviving account within her fiction to a related test. In "Historical Notes," scholars transcribe and arrange Offred's recorded speech, while the conference setting turns it into an object of professional interpretation. The editorial mediation is necessary to make the material readable, but necessity does not make its decisions neutral. The arrangement of an account, the questions asked of it, and the title under which it circulates influence the person readers encounter. Preservation can therefore create a second dependency, this time on the priorities of interpreters.

Pieixoto's jokes and professed suspension of moral judgement make this dependency visible (Atwood, "Historical Notes"). His scholarly position is not identical to the Commander's power, and the conference does not reproduce Gilead's political regime. The difference is essential. Nevertheless, institutional prestige can coexist with a diminished responsiveness to the woman whose experience gives the research its subject. The critique is directed towards an imbalance between the effort spent establishing an account's provenance and the attention given to what its narrator endured. Technical competence and ethical attention are distinct responsibilities.

This problem complicates Woolf's own account of artistic impersonality. Her warning against writing dominated by sex-conscious grievance imagines creative freedom as release from restrictive antagonism (157). Yet the ideal of freedom from grievance cannot simply become a demand that those still suffering suppress its expression. Applied without regard to circumstances, such a standard would privilege the calm made possible by security. Atwood's unsettled narration tests the adequacy of that aesthetic expectation. A voice shaped by injury may remain intellectually significant without acquiring the composure of an independent lecturer.

Neither text consequently permits a straightforward equation between having a voice and possessing authority. Woolf investigates how a voice acquires the conditions for sustained production; Atwood examines what can happen when its surviving traces reach an institution. The comparison adds reception to a material account of agency. A woman needs opportunities to speak, but she also needs audiences capable of addressing the substance of her account without turning its difficulty into a reason for dismissal. Literary authority is relational: authorship, circulation, and interpretation each provide a point at which unequal power can intervene.

CLASS, RACE, AND THE LIMITS OF A UNIVERSAL "WOMAN"

Walker's response to Woolf brings the question of ownership into sharper historical focus. Invoking Phillis Wheatley, she asks how a model of money and private space applies to a woman who was herself enslaved (235). She also recognises creativity in the work of mothers whose artistic capacities could not be separated from strenuous domestic and agricultural labour (238–39). These examples require a broader account of cultural production than the independently supported author alone can supply. Material deprivation restricts expression, but the absence of an accredited literary career does not establish the absence of creative practice.

Walker's intervention qualifies the comparison without cancelling Woolf's central insight. It directs attention to whose labour makes another person's leisure possible and whose work becomes visible as art. Crenshaw similarly shows why analysis organised around a single dominant axis can obscure women situated at intersecting forms of disadvantage (1242–43). Applied here, the implication is methodological: neither an educated narrator nor an elite household should stand for every woman. Serena's relative authority and Offred's vulnerability already make any uniform account of female experience inadequate. Agency must be assessed from the person's position within several relationships, not inferred from gender alone.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE: TIME AND DECISION-MAKING

The present relevance of these texts is strongest when their distinctions are tested against specified conditions rather than used as universal political labels. The 2025 United Nations gender report states that women spend, on average, 2.5 times as many hours a day on unpaid domestic and care work as men (UN Women and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 17). This disparity gives Woolf's concern with uninterrupted intellectual work a contemporary context.

Access to an institution does not necessarily provide an equal capacity to use it when responsibilities consume time unevenly.

The same report records that 56.3 per cent of married or partnered women aged fifteen to forty-nine have full decision-making power concerning sexual and reproductive health and rights, based on data from seventy-eight countries (17). This is a defined indicator for a specified population, not a measurement of every woman's freedom worldwide. It nevertheless supports the importance of distinguishing an available service or recognised social role from the authority to make a decision. Atwood's fiction helps articulate that distinction; the report supplies evidence about contemporary conditions rather than confirmation that contemporary societies are equivalent to Gilead.

For education and public discussion, the comparison therefore supports a practical change of emphasis. Evaluating inclusion should involve attention to usable time, control over resources, the consequences of refusal, and the handling of testimony. These are implications of the reading, not outcomes demonstrated by an empirical intervention. Literature contributes by showing how a formally reassuring arrangement can feel unequal from within, especially when its benefits remain conditional on silence, dependence, or gratitude.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The close reading yields three connected distinctions. The first concerns control: ownership and independent access differ from provision by a benefactor. Woolf's secure income and Atwood's confiscated accounts identify the capacity to act without seeking renewed permission as a material condition of agency (Woolf 56–57; Atwood, ch. 28). An opportunity remains fragile when the person using it cannot defend its continuation. This finding shifts attention from whether a resource exists to who determines its use and availability.

The second concerns the quality of action. A decision made under severe constraint can reveal intelligence and purpose without establishing freedom. Judith's attempted departure and Offred's reproductive bargaining both require evaluation of the alternatives open to the woman, although their narrative circumstances differ substantially (Woolf 72–73; Atwood, ch. 31). Kabeer's distinction between choices and the conditions enabling them helps preserve this difference (14). The analysis consequently resists both the dismissal of survival strategies as passivity and their celebration as complete emancipation.

The third concerns recognition. Cultural prominence, bodily importance, and archival survival are insufficient measures of authority. A woman may be necessary to an institution while remaining unable to set its terms. The reading of "Historical Notes" shows that the transmission of testimony can preserve experience while transferring interpretive control (Atwood). Walker's challenge adds that recognised literary achievement is itself an uneven measure of creative life (235, 238–39). Together, these findings require the study of gendered power to connect production, access, and reception rather than treating representation as an adequate substitute for agency.

CONCLUSION

Woolf and Atwood make dependence visible at different stages. *A Room of One's Own* asks what must be available before intellectual work can develop. *The Handmaid's Tale* examines what happens when familiar capacities are withdrawn and limited privileges replace them. Their comparison reveals a recurring difficulty: institutions can accommodate women, benefit from their work, or preserve their words without granting them independent authority. Meaningful agency requires the ability to use a resource, decline a demand, and participate in the interpretation of one's experience.

The contemporary value of these works rests in this scrutiny of conditions rather than in a claim that history repeats without difference. Economic security, bodily autonomy, and responsible interpretation are related but distinct requirements. Progress in one cannot automatically compensate for deprivation in another. A room becomes enabling when its occupant directs her work; a choice becomes meaningful when refusal is possible; testimony acquires public force when its recipient answers its claims. These distinctions keep the study of literature connected to questions of equality while preserving the historical and formal particularity of the texts.

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