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## From Vindication to Dystopia: A feminist poetics comparative study of Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Atwood

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### Abstract

This paper compares two feminist poets, Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and Margaret Atwood (1985), who, though separated by nearly two centuries, both challenge and challenge back at the patriarchal ideological structures in different ways, but in complementary literary modes. This study examines thematic intersections, drawing on the theoretical work of Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory, and current intersectional feminist theory, in the areas of bodily autonomy, education and rationality, language and silence, and systems of institutional power. The paper proposes that Wollstonecraft's rational-liberal feminism and Atwood's speculative-dystopian feminism form a continuum of feminist literary resistance, each reacting to the epistemological and political context of its time and each expressing a shared feminist vision of female subjectivity and agency. The study uses Showalter's three stages of women's writing (the Feminine, Feminist, and Female) as a framework for analyzing the development of feminist literary consciousness from Enlightenment rationalism to postmodern textual politics. The results show that although the genres and historical periods differ, both authors use narrative strategy as a political intervention, making the literary form itself a site of struggle for feminists.

**Keywords:** Gynocriticism, Patriarchy, Wollstonecraft, Atwood, Dystopian Fiction, Enlightenment Feminism



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## **Introduction**

Literature and gender politics have always been a place of fruitful tension. Feminist poetics is a critical practice that asks not only what literature has to say about women, but also what its form, language, and narrative say about women. One of its main architects, Elaine Showalter, in "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979), proposed that feminist criticism should not simply focus on detecting misogyny in male-authored works, but also develop an independent history of women's literature, which she called gynocriticism. This methodological turn demands that women's writing be evaluated as a writing, its forms, its themes, and its connections to a female literary history.

In this tradition, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) and Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) hold unique places. Wollstonecraft was a writer at the edge of modernity, using Enlightenment reason as a revolutionary weapon to reveal the irrationality of gender subordination. Her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) attacked not only the legal and educational barriers for women, but also the ideology, based on sentiment and domesticity, that made women's reason inferior. Two hundred years later, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a speculative dystopia that speculates on the logical outcomes of the restoration of patriarchy with alarming accuracy. Atwood imagined politically, while Wollstonecraft argued philosophically, but both texts are fundamentally anti-biological and anti-socially functional.

This paper proposes a comparative reading of Wollstonecraft and Atwood in the context of feminist poetics to reveal a tradition of feminist literary resistance that has been ongoing and evolving. Both authors use narrative and rhetorical techniques that focus on female subjectivity, reveal the workings of patriarchal power, and imagine, albeit in an uncertain way, the potential for female autonomy and agency, despite the significant temporal, generic, and contextual differences between them. The paper unfolds in four analytical parts: Politics of rationality and education; Control of the female body; Silence, language, and narrative authority; and Institutional power and resistance. A final section considers the theoretical and historical significance of this literary continuity.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study is based on three overlapping theoretical frameworks. First, Showalter's gynocriticism offers a methodological framework that focuses on women as creators of literary meaning, not on male-authored representations of women. As Showalter described it, gynocriticism is the study of "the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and



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the problem of female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and... the themes, genres, and structures of literature by women" (Showalter, 1979). When applied comparatively, this framework enables us to consider both Wollstonecraft and Atwood as actors in a long female literary tradition in the face of historical rupture.

Second, the thematic analysis of both texts is based on Simone de Beauvoir's seminal idea that women are not born but made; that femininity is a cultural inscription and not a biological destiny. De Beauvoir's notion of woman as the Other to the normative male Self sheds light on the ideological structure that Wollstonecraft and Atwood attempt to destroy. Wollstonecraft foreshadows this analysis in her critique of an education that makes women into decorative, sentimental creatures; Atwood literalizes it in Gilead's regime of female categorisation and enforced function.

Third, Showalter's developmental model of women's writing provides a temporal framework for the comparative analysis. This trajectory, which began in British literary history, can be seen in both authors and is defined by the Imitation of male forms in the Feminine phase (1840–1880), Protest and advocacy in the Feminist phase (1880–1920), and the Autonomous self-expression in the Female phase (1920 onward). Wollstonecraft, who wrote in the late eighteenth century, may be placed at the boundary of the Feminine and Feminist phases: living in the rational-philosophical language of her male peers, yet radically transforming it. In the postmodern period, Atwood is a writer of the Female phase, who appropriates and subverts a variety of genres to create a distinctly feminist narrative consciousness.

### **Rationality, education, and the politics of knowledge**

The epistemological revolution at the core of Wollstonecraft's feminist project is that women are rational beings who can reason, act with virtue, and exercise moral self-governance, and that their apparent intellectual inferiority is due to deliberately impoverished education. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman's opening argument is a philosophical critique of the educational system that systematically produces female irrationality. Wollstonecraft specifically targets Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762), in which the ideal female education (as seen in Sophie) is one of ornamental dependence, not the development of Sophie's own reason, but to please and serve *Émile*. For Wollstonecraft, it is not just a pedagogical mistake but a moral disaster: it creates women who are incapable



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of true virtue, for, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, she claims, virtue is the exercise of rational agency.

The double-edged nature of Wollstonecraft's poetic strategy is remarkable. On the other hand, she uses the prevailing rationalist language of Enlightenment male discourse reason, virtue, rights and merely applies it to women, revealing the hypocrisy of a liberalism that will not let women in the drawing-room door. At the same time, she suggests that women are responsible for their own oppression, as women who take on the values of sensibility and decoration are complicit in their own oppression. This shift is in anticipation of the second-wave feminist theory of internalised patriarchy. Wollstonecraft is forensic in her condemnations of women who "lose themselves in the vortex of pleasure" and abandon rationality, not to condemn them but to condemn the educational system that has made such a retreat seem desirable.

The Handmaid's Tale takes a different tack on the politics of knowledge: not in arguing for women's access to rational education, but in showing how it can be destroyed. In Gilead, women are not allowed to read, write, or have knowledge that could help them make decisions on their own. Reading is a crime; the Handmaids are not even allowed to read street signs or maps. One of the most chilling ways of control in Gilead is this systematic epistemic dispossession. At its most basic level, Offred's story is an act of illegal self-inscription, a reclaiming of the thinking, remembering, analyzing self from a regime that has tried to make her into a biological function.

The intertextual connection of these texts is impressive. Atwood shows what the tyranny of denying women rational education looks like when taken to its institutional extreme, while Wollstonecraft says that it is tyranny. Both authors recognize that knowledge and literacy are not just instrumental goods but are part of the subjectivity that is denied by the patriarchy. Furthermore, Atwood's Aunts, the women who implement the educational program of the regime, reflect Wollstonecraft's condemnation of women who are the agents of their own oppression, in this case an institutional class. The feminism of both texts is not just liberationist, but epistemological; not only what women can do, but what they can think, know, and speak.

### **The female body as contested territory**

The politics of rationality and education is one strand of feminist interest in both texts, while the politics of the female body is another strand, equally central. Both Wollstonecraft and Atwood are sensitive to how the male-dominated system attempts to



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control women through their bodies, by controlling their sexuality, their reproduction, and their physical appearance. Their analyses vary in emphasis and register, but collectively they trace the landscape of feminist theory's later term, bodily autonomy.

Wollstonecraft's attack on the female body is rooted in her attack on sensibility. She believes that the cultural glorification of female physical beauty and emotional susceptibility, which is the very quality that writers such as Edmund Burke and Rousseau extol, is a device of subordination. Where women are valued mainly for their bodies and their affective responsiveness, they are treated as objects of male aesthetic pleasure and not as subjects of moral and political life. Wollstonecraft's attack on fashion, coquetry, and sensibility is not, as some critics have claimed, a puritanical rejection of femininity, but rather a systematic examination of how femininity, as culturally constructed, is used to render women incapable of rational agency. The body developed for sexual enjoyment is a body without political subjectivity.

Atwood's treatment of the female body is more visceral and more politically explicit. In *Gilead*, the bodies of the Handmaids are state property, used for reproduction. The Ceremony is a ritualistic rape that is performed each month, under the auspices of theological authority, and that reveals the violent nature of systems that abstract women as reproductive bodies. The narrative technique Atwood employs here is one of defamiliarization: the metaphors of feminist critique (women as vessels, women's bodies as the property of the state) are literalized, making them visible. Atwood's exploration of the oppression of bodily autonomy in *Gilead* resonates with contemporary issues of reproductive rights and gender-based violence, as highlighted by scholars like Rafea Mohsin Alwan (2023).

Muhammad Khuram Abbas et al. (2024) have examined this intersection of race and reproductive control in the context of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional approach. *Gilead*'s reproductive regime is not only gendered but also racialized: the text implies that women of color are in a different and more marginalized place in the hierarchy. This is an inter-sectional critique of Atwood's, which goes beyond Wollstonecraft's class-conscious but racially unmarked feminism, and demonstrates a 200-year span of feminist thought. But both writers, in their own ways, argue that the regulation of women's bodies is not natural or inevitable but political, and that it can and should be opposed.



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---

### **Language, silence, and narrative authority**

Feminist poetics is not only about what texts mean, but how they mean it, how they are related to gender, genre, and narrative form. Wollstonecraft and Atwood make formal decisions that are ideologically important, and both, in their own ways, address the feminist issues of language and silence raised by French feminist thinkers such as H el ene Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

A Vindication is a formal strategy that is appropriative and subversive. She writes in the genre of the political treatise, which is traditionally associated with the philosophical authority of the male, and appropriates the discursive power of the political for a feminist argument. Her prose style is deliberately unornamental, unsentimental, and feminine, as she rejects the sentimentality of women's prose of the time, which serves as her thematic critique. But her text also has the tensions of this appropriative strategy. Wollstonecraft's writing, as Anasuya Adhikari (2022) has noted, is a negotiation with the gendered expectations of intellectual discourse; moments of passionate personal investment break through the rational surface, creating a text that is more heterogeneous in tone than its systematic argumentation might suggest. This general hybridity is feminist because it rejects the distinction between reason and feeling that the mainstream discourse made to keep women out of reason.

Atwood's formal approach to *The Handmaid's Tale* is more self-reflexive in its radical approach. The novel is written in a retrospective first-person voice, supposedly recorded on cassette tapes, which are then analyzed academically in the appended "Historical Notes. The multi-layered construction foregrounds the issue of female narrative authority at each level. Offred is unable to write and speaks into the dark, arranging memory and experience into the form of a story that she is not sure will ever be heard. Her story is one that is self-disrupted, with multiple versions of events and an explicit recognition of its constructedness: "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. This metafictional aspect is a direct confrontation with the feminist issues of who is allowed to tell stories, when, and how.

The "Historical Notes" section, where a male academic, Professor Pieixoto, critically examines Offred's story, adds more troubling questions about the politics of scholarly authority. In her detached, ironic, methodologically careful analysis of Offred's account, Pieixoto reproduces, in miniature, the very hermeneutic violence that feminist criticism has identified in the treatment of women's writing by male-dominated academic



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institutions. His interest in the population policy of Gilead and not in Offred's suffering, his jokes about the female experience, these are not authorial endorsements, but satirical indictments. The male-authorized academic voice in which Atwood structures Offred's story performs within the novel's form the conflict between female self-expression and the interpretive authority of the male, which is at the heart of feminist literary theory.

Both authors are interested in women's right to be the authoritative narrators of their experiences, which is a fundamental continuity. Wollstonecraft takes this power by entering the discourse of rational philosophy; Atwood takes it by revealing the fragility of female narrative and the institutional forces that would silence or domesticate it. They form a feminist literary genealogy in which the struggle for narrative authority is inextricably linked to the struggle for political and social rights.

### **Institutional power, patriarchal structures, and the possibilities of resistance**

Wollstonecraft and Atwood both make systematic analyses of the institutional structures, legal, religious, familial, and educational, through which patriarchal power reproduces itself. Their diagnoses vary in emphasis: Wollstonecraft's is on the ideological apparatus that produces feminised subjects unable to act politically; Atwood's is on the institutional apparatus of a theocratic state that has made such ideology literal law. However, both have a structural view of gender oppression, one that cannot be explained by individual acts of male badness, but is part of the structures of society.

Much of Wollstonecraft's criticism is directed at the institution of marriage as it was structured in the late eighteenth century. She claims that marriage, as it is practiced, is prostitution, with women being trained to be sexually appealing to men, and once they marry, they become a legal non-person, their property, their children, and their legal identity transferred to her husband. In Wollstonecraft's analysis, marriage as an institution is not just a place of personal unhappiness, but a structural process that perpetuates female dependence from one generation to the next. Her proposed solution is a typically liberal one: rational education, economic participation, and reform of the marriage laws, which are institutions through which patriarchal power is exercised.

Atwood's Gilead is an extreme extrapolation of the institutional logic that Wollstonecraft criticized. In Gilead, the religious doctrine of the subordination of women has become a state doctrine; the subordination of women to reproduction has been codified in law and enforced by armed guardians; the family unit has been restructured around the control of the male. Manpreet Kaur & Dinesh Khanna (2023) have explored Atwood's



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creation of dystopian environments as a means of revealing the mechanisms by which gender roles are enforced and power is centralized. Gilead's brilliance as a literary tool lies in its ability to naturalise and make visible, through exaggeration and literalization, the structures of ideology that operate through naturalisation and invisibility.

Both texts also focus on the ambivalences of resistance in systems of domination. Women who take on the values of men in their internalization are, in a structural sense, agents of their own oppression and, more disturbingly, agents of the oppression of other women, especially as domestic educators, Wollstonecraft acknowledges. The "despotism of the nursery" she describes, in which women who have no other means of asserting power wield petty tyranny over their children and servants, is a proto-sociological analysis of how patriarchal systems are reproduced in the most intimate domestic settings. This is one of the most disturbing aspects of the novel: the Aunts, who have taken to the regime's ideology, are its most effective enforcers, and they conscript the oppressed into their own perpetuation.

But in the end, both texts make it clear that resistance, albeit limited and expensive, is possible. The assertion that reason is not a male power, but a universal human power, is a subversion of the naturalizing discourse of female subordination. The feminine subjectivity she claims exists in the rational order is demonstrated in her text. The disunited, disjointed and fragile nature of Offred's story is not simply a weakness but also a strength that rejects the regime's effort to silence and make her a walking womb. The regime can't completely silence its people from making meaning out of their experience, from speaking to an imagined future reader, or from asserting their human dignity by the act of narration. In the texts, resistance is an integral part of writing.

### **Comparative analysis: continuities and transformations**

After studying the four analytical domains individually, this section directly compares Wollstonecraft and Atwood as actors in a feminist literary continuum, both in terms of the important continuities between their projects and the equally important changes wrought by two centuries of feminist thought and political action.

They share a commitment to the subjectivity of women, a commitment that is the most basic continuity amid ideology and institutions that attempt to deny, diminish, or co-opt it. Both writers reject the feminization of women, the feminine role as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a reproductive vessel, and insist that there is an inner life for women, one that is rational, desiring, judging, and resisting. This insistence is different in each text: in



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Wollstonecraft, it is through philosophical argument; in Atwood, through Offred's interior monologue, its ironic self-awareness, its flashes of desire, humour, and grief. The feminist commitment is the same, however: women are not objects, they are subjects, and literature must do more than just state this truth; it must make it happen.

The most important change is between feminism and liberal rationalism. The rationalism of Wollstonecraft's feminism is its starting point: women's claims to equality are based on their possession of reason, and its vision of liberation is mostly in terms of rational education, legal reform, and economic independence. The project is strong and weak in its rationalism. It is strong in its philosophical exactitude and its ability to resist the promises of the Enlightenment with its exclusionary practices. Later feminist critics pointed to its tendency to idealize the rational over the emotional, the public over the domestic, and to reproduce in its form some of the hierarchies it critiques.

Atwood's feminism is a critical development of the last 200 years. She is not complacent about the universal subject of liberal rationalism, but rather holds it under critical examination, focusing on the potential intersections of gender, race, and class that create different and unequal subjects in systems of power. Her dystopia is not a departure from liberal modernity, but a projection of the tendencies in it that Enlightenment rationalism did not eradicate: the subordination of women, the control of reproduction, and the organization of society around male authority. Atwood also avoids the teleological optimism of some of the earlier feminist writers, and *The Handmaid's Tale* does not end with liberation, but with the uncertain prospect of an archived testimony, its meaning disputed by a male academic two centuries later. This postmodern skepticism towards the resolution of the narrative is a product of the hard-won realism of late-twentieth-century feminist thinking.

The contrast between the two texts is a generic one, and it is a part of the feminist literary history itself. In the same way that Wollstonecraft wrote a philosophical treatise and Atwood a speculative novel, so the generic possibilities for feminist argument vary over time. In 1985, Atwood took up the dystopian fiction form, which had been embraced by feminist writers since Herland (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin, because fiction provided an imaginative freedom and political hypothesis that was not available in the dominant discursive forms. In this respect, the genre change from one text to another is a register of feminist literary history.



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### **Conclusion**

This comparative study has suggested that, when viewed as a tradition of feminist literary resistance through the lens of feminist poetics, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are continuous and evolving, spanning two centuries of feminist writing in the face of patriarchal ideology and two very different generic forms. Both authors, in their different ways, argue with a compelling and purposeful clarity about the subjecthood, agency, and dignity of women, in their engagements with the politics of rationality and education, with the control of the female body, with the struggle for narrative authority, and with the analysis of institutional power.

The theoretical frameworks of gynocriticism and feminist literary history illuminate this continuity. The generic and tonal distinctions between the texts as historical adaptations, not ruptures, are illuminated by Showalter's developmental model: Wollstonecraft's polemical energy in the Feminist phase, Atwood's self-reflexive formal experimentation in the Female phase. De Beauvoir's notion of woman as Other offers a common critical lexicon to the ideological critique that both authors carry out with such precision. An intersectional feminist theory, specifically from scholars such as Muhammad Khuram Abbas et al. (2024), uncovers how Atwood's feminist perspective has evolved to consider the racial and class aspects that were not fully addressed by Wollstonecraft's liberal theory.

This comparative study is not only literary historical; it is also a study of the significance of the literary work. In an era when women's reproductive rights continue to be contested, when the gains of feminist politics are regularly subject to political reversal, and when the ideological conditions Wollstonecraft diagnosed, the feminization of irrationality, the reduction of women to domestic function, the structural invisibility of female experience have not been extinguished but transformed, the feminist literatures analyzed here retain their critical urgency. Rationalist feminism and dystopian feminism are not past entities but resources for feminist thought and practice, both for Wollstonecraft and Atwood.

Future research could continue this comparative project in a number of ways: by exploring Wollstonecraft's less-studied works, such as her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1798) and *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* (1799), alongside Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) and *Alias Grace* (1996); by focusing more closely on the intersectional aspects of feminist analysis in relation to both writers;



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and by placing this literary genealogy in a wider context of global feminist writing traditions. The field of feminist poetics is still growing and evolving, and the work of Wollstonecraft and Atwood is still one of its most influential and significant works.

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