

Beyond Victimhood: Psychoanalytic Negotiations of Power and Identity in Margaret Atwood's Novels

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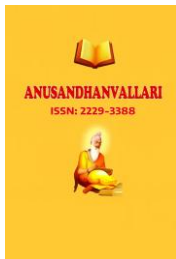
Abstract

This paper examines the psychoanalytic dimensions of victimhood and agency in selected novels of Margaret Atwood, focusing particularly on *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis and trauma theory, the study explores how Atwood constructs characters who oscillate between positions of victim and victor within oppressive sociopolitical structures. Atwood's concept of "victim positions" provides a critical framework for understanding the psychological evolution of her protagonists, who initially internalize oppression but gradually develop self-awareness and resistance. The study argues that Atwood destabilizes the binary between victim and victor by portraying identity as fluid and shaped by unconscious drives, memory, and trauma. Freudian concepts such as repression, defence mechanisms, and the return of the repressed are employed to analyse how characters negotiate psychological conflict. Trauma theory further illuminates how past experiences resurface in fragmented memories, influencing present behaviour and identity formation. Through close textual analysis, this paper demonstrates that Atwood's protagonists do not simply overcome victimhood but reconstruct themselves through processes of introspection, narration, and symbolic resistance. The transformation into a "victor" is thus not absolute but represents a psychological negotiation with trauma and power. Ultimately, the paper contributes to interdisciplinary literary studies by integrating psychoanalytic theory with feminist criticism, offering new insights into Atwood's exploration of power, identity, and survival.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic Criticism, Victimhood and Agency, Trauma and Memory, Margaret Atwood & Identity and Power.

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's fiction persistently interrogates the structures of power that define human relationships, particularly those shaped by gender, politics, and psychological control. Her novels frequently centre on characters who experience various forms of victimization, physical, emotional, and ideological, yet resist remaining confined within these roles. The dynamic interplay between victim and victor becomes a central thematic concern, inviting critical engagement through psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Sigmund Freud, offers valuable tools for understanding literary representations of the unconscious, repression, and trauma. Freud's model of the psyche, comprising the id, ego, and superego, provides insight into how individuals navigate internal conflicts shaped by external pressures. In Atwood's fiction, characters often exhibit psychological fragmentation, reflecting the tension between imposed identities and suppressed desires. These tensions are especially evident in dystopian and psychologically complex narratives such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye*.



Atwood's own theoretical contribution in *Survival* introduces the concept of "victim positions," which range from denial of victimhood to creative transcendence beyond it. These stages provide a useful framework for analysing her characters' psychological journeys (Wynne-Davies, 2019). Rather than presenting victimhood as a static condition, Atwood conceptualizes it as a process that can lead to empowerment and self-definition. Trauma theory further enriches this analysis by emphasizing the lasting impact of past experiences on the psyche. Trauma disrupts linear narratives of identity, often manifesting through memory, repetition, and psychological dislocation. Atwood's protagonists frequently revisit their pasts, revealing how trauma shapes their present consciousness and actions. This aligns with psychoanalytic perspectives that view literature as a site where unconscious conflicts are symbolically expressed (Elsevier, 2015).

Atwood complicates the dichotomy between victim and victor by portraying characters who occupy both positions simultaneously. For instance, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is both a victim of systemic oppression and an active agent who resists through memory and narration. Such complexity challenges traditional binary frameworks and calls for a nuanced psychoanalytic interpretation. This study aims to explore these dynamics by analysing selected novels through a psychoanalytic lens, focusing on how Atwood constructs and deconstructs the categories of victim and victor. By integrating Freudian theory with contemporary trauma studies, the paper seeks to demonstrate that Atwood's fiction offers a profound exploration of psychological resilience and transformation.

2. Objectives

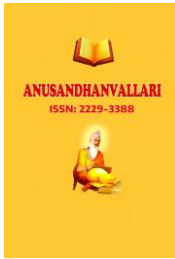
- How does Margaret Atwood construct the psychological dynamics of victimhood in her selected novels?
- In what ways do characters transition from victim to victor within a psychoanalytic framework?
- How do Freudian concepts such as repression, trauma, and the unconscious inform character development?
- What role do memory and trauma play in shaping identity and resistance?
- How does Atwood challenge binary distinctions between victim and victor?

3. Research Questions

- To analyse victimhood using psychoanalytic theory in Atwood's fiction
- To examine the transformation from victim to victor in selected characters
- To apply Freudian and trauma-based frameworks to literary analysis
- To explore the role of memory, repression, and identity formation
- To contribute to psychoanalytic literary criticism of feminist dystopian fiction

4. Scope and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in textual analysis, employing a psychoanalytic interpretive approach to examine selected novels of Margaret Atwood. The qualitative nature of the study allows for an in-depth exploration of complex psychological themes, particularly those related to victimhood, trauma, and identity formation. Qualitative textual analysis serves as the primary methodological tool, focusing on the close examination of narrative structures, character development, and thematic patterns within the selected texts. Unlike quantitative methods, which prioritize measurable data, qualitative analysis emphasizes interpretive depth and contextual understanding. This approach is particularly suited to literary studies, where meaning is often layered, ambiguous, and open to multiple interpretations. Through careful reading and analysis, this study



identifies recurring motifs such as repression, memory, and resistance, which are central to the psychoanalytic framework.

The psychoanalytic interpretive method further guides the analysis by focusing on the unconscious dimensions of the text. Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, this method examines how characters' thoughts, behaviours, and narratives reflect underlying psychological processes. It also considers how the text itself may function as a manifestation of unconscious meaning, revealing tensions and contradictions that are not immediately apparent. This interpretive approach aligns with the broader aims of psychoanalytic criticism, which seeks to uncover hidden dimensions of meaning within literary works (Williamson, 2014). Close reading constitutes a key component of this methodology, enabling detailed analysis of specific passages and narrative techniques. By paying close attention to language, imagery, and structure, the study uncovers how Atwood constructs psychological depth and complexity. For instance, shifts in narrative perspective, temporal disjunctions, and symbolic representations are analysed as indicators of trauma and repression. Close reading also allows for the examination of how characters articulate their experiences, particularly through internal monologue and memory recall.

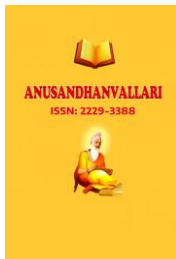
The selection of texts, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*, is based on their rich exploration of psychological and social themes. These novels provide diverse contexts in which victimhood and agency are constructed and contested, making them ideal for a comparative psychoanalytic analysis. Each text is examined individually as well as in relation to the others, allowing for the identification of both common patterns and unique variations. This methodology prioritizes interpretive rigor and theoretical integration. By combining qualitative textual analysis with psychoanalytic interpretation and close reading, the study offers a comprehensive examination of Atwood's portrayal of victimhood and transformation. This approach not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the selected novels but also contributes to broader discussions in literary and psychoanalytic criticism.

Analysis

5. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Margaret Atwood's fiction has frequently emphasized themes of victimization, survival, and identity. Central to this discourse is Atwood's own theoretical framework of "victim positions," which categorizes responses to oppression into stages ranging from denial to creative transcendence. Critics have noted that this framework is instrumental in understanding the psychological trajectories of her characters (Wynne-Davies, 2019). Studies on *The Handmaid's Tale* have often focused on the systemic oppression of women and the internalization of patriarchal control. Vinoth and Muthusamy (2023) argue that Atwood portrays women as socially constructed "Others," whose identities are shaped by oppressive structures. While this perspective is primarily feminist, it also intersects with psychoanalytic ideas about identity formation and internalized authority. The notion of the "Other" aligns with Freud's concept of the superego, which imposes societal norms onto the individual psyche.

Recent psychoanalytic readings have explored the role of fantasy, repression, and desire in Atwood's narratives. Akı (2026) examines *The Handmaid's Tale* through Freudian concepts such as the pleasure principle and defence mechanisms, suggesting that private acts of reading and storytelling function as forms of psychological escape and resistance. This highlights the importance of imagination and narrative in negotiating trauma and reclaiming agency. Trauma theory has also been widely applied to Atwood's work, particularly in relation to memory and identity. Scholars emphasize that trauma disrupts coherent selfhood, leading to fragmented narratives and recurring psychological patterns. Atwood's characters often revisit traumatic experiences, suggesting that healing requires confrontation with the past rather than repression. This aligns with psychoanalytic views that emphasize



the necessity of bringing unconscious material to consciousness (Elsevier, 2015). In addition, critics have explored the transformation from victimhood to agency in Atwood's fiction. Rather than presenting a simplistic narrative of empowerment, Atwood portrays this transformation as complex and often incomplete. Characters may achieve a form of psychological equilibrium without fully escaping the structures that oppress them. This nuanced portrayal challenges binary distinctions between victim and victor, suggesting that these categories are fluid and interdependent (EKB Journal, 2017).

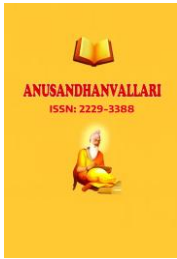
Psychoanalytic literary criticism more broadly has raised questions about the locus of meaning in literary texts. Williamson (2014) argues that psychoanalytic interpretation occupies a "third space" between authorial intention and character analysis, where unconscious meanings emerge through textual structures. This perspective is particularly relevant to Atwood's work, which often resists definitive interpretation and invites multiple readings. Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in the integration of psychoanalytic theory with Atwood's concept of victim positions. While feminist and trauma-based approaches have been extensively explored, fewer studies have systematically examined how Freudian concepts intersect with Atwood's framework of victimhood and agency. This paper seeks to address this gap by offering a comprehensive psychoanalytic analysis of selected novels.

6. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and Margaret Atwood's concept of victim positions. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive lens for examining the psychological construction of victimhood and the transition toward agency in selected novels. Freudian psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud, offers foundational insights into the workings of the human psyche, particularly through the concepts of repression, the unconscious, and defence mechanisms. Repression refers to the process by which distressing thoughts, memories, and desires are excluded from conscious awareness, yet continue to influence behaviour indirectly (Freud, 1915/2001). In Atwood's fiction, characters frequently repress traumatic experiences in order to cope with oppressive environments. However, these repressed elements resurface through dreams, fragmented memories, and narrative disruptions, illustrating Freud's assertion that the unconscious remains active and expressive. *Défense* mechanisms such as denial, displacement, and rationalization further illuminate how characters negotiate psychological conflict, often revealing the tension between survival and self-awareness.

Complementing psychoanalysis, trauma theory provides a critical framework for understanding how extreme experiences shape identity and memory. Scholars such as Cathy Caruth emphasize that trauma is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence but returns belatedly in repetitive and fragmented forms (Caruth, 1996). This notion is particularly relevant to Atwood's narrative structures, which frequently employ non-linear storytelling and disrupted temporality. Memory in these texts is not a stable repository of the past but a dynamic and often unreliable process through which characters attempt to reconstruct their identities. The repetition of traumatic events, whether through recollection or symbolic reenactment, highlights the persistence of psychological wounds and the difficulty of achieving closure.

In addition to these theoretical perspectives, this study draws on Atwood's own conceptualization of victimhood, articulated in her critical work *Survival*. Atwood outlines a progression of "victim positions," ranging from denial of victimhood to the attainment of a "creative non-victim" status. These stages include denial, where individuals refuse to acknowledge their oppression; acceptance, where victimhood is recognized but internalized; resistance, where individuals begin to challenge their circumstances; and finally, creative non-victimhood, where individuals



transcend victim identity through self-definition and agency. This framework is particularly valuable for analysing character development, as it foregrounds the fluidity and complexity of identity.

By synthesizing these three approaches, the theoretical framework of this study enables a nuanced analysis of Atwood's characters as psychologically complex individuals shaped by both internal and external forces. Freudian psychoanalysis elucidates the role of unconscious processes, trauma theory highlights the impact of memory and experience, and Atwood's victim positions provide a literary-specific model for understanding transformation. Together, these frameworks support the central argument that victimhood and agency are not fixed states but evolving psychological conditions.

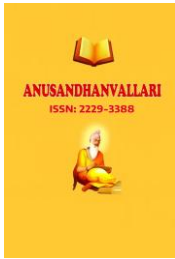
➤ **Victimhood and Psychological Repression**

Margaret Atwood's fiction presents victimhood not merely as a social condition but as a deeply internalized psychological state shaped by repression and unconscious conflict. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of repression, victimhood in Atwood's novels can be understood as the suppression of traumatic experiences and forbidden desires into the unconscious. These repressed elements, however, do not remain dormant; they return in disguised forms such as fragmented memories, dreams, and compulsive behaviours. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's subjectivity is structured through repression. Living under the totalitarian regime of Gilead, she is forced to suppress her past identity, including her name, relationships, and autonomy. The state functions as an externalized superego, enforcing rigid moral codes that regulate desire and behaviour. Offred's compliance, however, is not indicative of complete submission; rather, it reflects a psychological strategy of survival. Her internal monologues reveal the tension between repression and resistance, illustrating Freud's argument that the unconscious continuously disrupts imposed order (Williamson, 2014).

Similarly, in *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley's childhood trauma manifests through repression and delayed recognition. Her experiences of bullying are initially normalized, but later resurface as psychological distress in adulthood. This aligns with trauma theory, which suggests that traumatic events are often not fully processed at the time of occurrence, leading to their deferred return in consciousness. Elaine's artistic expression becomes a medium through which repressed memories are symbolically articulated. Atwood's portrayal of repression complicates the notion of victimhood by showing that it is not solely imposed from outside but is also maintained internally. Characters often participate in their own subjugation by internalizing oppressive norms, a process that echoes Freud's concept of identification with the aggressor. Thus, victimhood becomes a psychological condition sustained by both external power structures and internalized authority.

➤ **Trauma, Memory, and Identity Fragmentation**

Trauma plays a central role in shaping identity in Atwood's novels, disrupting the coherence of selfhood and producing fragmented narratives. Trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, emphasizes that trauma is characterized by its belatedness, the inability to fully comprehend an event as it occurs. This results in repetitive recollections and fragmented memory, both of which are prominent in Atwood's narrative techniques. Offred's narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* exemplifies this fragmentation. Her story is non-linear, marked by abrupt shifts between past and present. These disruptions reflect the psychological impact of trauma, as her mind oscillates between memories of freedom and the oppressive reality of Gilead. Memory becomes both a source of pain and a means of resistance, allowing her to preserve a sense of identity despite systemic erasure.



In *The Robber Bride*, the character Zenia embodies a different dimension of trauma. Unlike Offred and Elaine, Zenia appears to manipulate victimhood to her advantage, destabilizing the victim–victor binary. Her ambiguous identity and shifting narratives suggest a fragmented self that resists fixed categorization. The other female characters, Tony, Charis, and Roz, each experience trauma differently, leading to diverse forms of psychological fragmentation and coping mechanisms. The interplay between trauma and memory in Atwood’s work also highlights the role of narrative as a therapeutic process. By recounting their experiences, characters attempt to reconstruct a coherent sense of self. This aligns with psychoanalytic therapy, where verbalization is a key mechanism for processing unconscious material. However, Atwood resists the notion of complete recovery; her characters’ narratives remain partial and unstable, reflecting the enduring impact of trauma.

➤ **Resistance and the Emergence of the Victor**

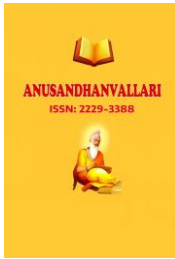
The transition from victim to victor in Atwood’s fiction is not a straightforward process of empowerment but a complex negotiation involving psychological resistance and self-awareness. Atwood’s concept of “victim positions” provides a useful framework for understanding this transformation. The progression from denial to creative non-victimhood involves recognizing one’s condition and actively resisting it. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this transition can be seen as the strengthening of the ego, which mediates between internal desires and external constraints. In Offred’s case, resistance takes subtle forms, such as storytelling, memory preservation, and small acts of defiance. These actions may appear insignificant, but they represent a refusal to fully internalize the regime’s ideology.

Elaine’s journey in *Cat’s Eye* illustrates a more introspective form of resistance. Through her art, she confronts her past and reinterprets her experiences. This creative process allows her to move beyond passive victimhood, achieving a degree of psychological autonomy. However, her transformation is not absolute; the lingering effects of trauma indicate that victimhood cannot be entirely transcended. In *The Robber Bride*, the notion of the victor is further complicated by Zenia’s character. She exerts power over others, yet her identity remains unstable and enigmatic. This suggests that the role of the victor may also involve psychological fragmentation and moral ambiguity. Atwood thus challenges the assumption that victory equates to wholeness or ethical superiority. Resistance in Atwood’s novels is therefore multifaceted, encompassing both internal and external dimensions. It involves not only opposing oppressive structures but also confronting one’s own psychological limitations. This nuanced portrayal aligns with contemporary psychoanalytic thought, which emphasizes the ongoing negotiation of identity rather than its resolution.

➤ **Collapse of the Victim-Victor Binary**

One of Atwood’s most significant contributions to literary discourse is her deconstruction of the binary opposition between victim and victor. Rather than presenting these categories as mutually exclusive, she portrays them as fluid and interdependent. Characters often occupy both positions simultaneously, reflecting the complexity of human psychology. This collapse of binary distinctions can be understood through the lens of psychoanalysis, which challenges fixed identities and emphasizes the multiplicity of the self. Freud’s concept of the divided psyche suggests that individuals are inherently conflicted, containing contradictory impulses and desires. Atwood’s characters embody this fragmentation, resisting simplistic categorization.

For instance, Offred is both a victim of Gilead’s oppressive regime and an agent of resistance. Her narrative voice asserts her subjectivity, even as her physical autonomy is constrained. Similarly, Elaine’s role as both victim and observer complicates her identity, highlighting the interplay between experience and interpretation. Zenia’s



character further destabilizes the binary by embodying traits of both victim and aggressor. Her manipulative behaviour challenges conventional moral frameworks, suggesting that power dynamics are not easily reducible to clear-cut categories. This ambiguity reflects Atwood's broader critique of hierarchical structures that define individuals in terms of dominance and subordination. By collapsing the victim-victor binary, Atwood invites readers to reconsider the nature of power and agency. Victimhood is not simply a condition to be overcome but a perspective that can coexist with resistance and self-awareness. This insight has important implications for both literary criticism and broader discussions of identity and social justice.

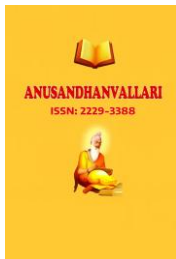
7. Discussion

The present study set out to examine the psychological dynamics of victimhood and agency in selected novels of Margaret Atwood through the combined lenses of psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and Atwood's concept of victim positions. The findings suggest that Atwood's fiction resists simplistic categorizations of characters as either victims or victors, instead presenting identity as fluid, unstable, and shaped by both unconscious processes and socio-political forces. Drawing on the psychoanalytic framework of Sigmund Freud, the analysis demonstrates that repression plays a central role in sustaining victimhood. Characters such as Offred and Elaine internalize oppressive structures, leading to the suppression of traumatic experiences and desires. However, these repressed elements inevitably resurface, supporting Freud's assertion that the unconscious remains active and influential (Freud, 1915/2001). The return of the repressed is evident in fragmented memories, recurring imagery, and narrative discontinuities, which function as literary representations of psychological conflict.

The application of trauma theory further deepens this understanding by highlighting the role of memory and repetition in shaping identity. As theorized by Cathy Caruth, trauma is characterized by its delayed impact and its tendency to reappear in fragmented and repetitive forms (Caruth, 1996). This is clearly reflected in Atwood's narrative techniques, particularly in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where non-linear storytelling mirrors the protagonist's fractured consciousness. Memory becomes both a burden and a resource, enabling characters to preserve a sense of self while also confronting painful experiences. Importantly, the study finds that Atwood's concept of victim positions provides a valuable framework for understanding character development. The progression from denial to creative non-victimhood is not linear but cyclical and often incomplete. Characters may oscillate between different stages, reflecting the complexity of psychological transformation. For instance, Offred exhibits moments of resistance through storytelling and memory, yet remains constrained by the oppressive system in which she exists. This suggests that the emergence of the "victor" is not an absolute state but a provisional and context-dependent achievement.

Moreover, the analysis reveals that Atwood challenges the binary opposition between victim and victor by depicting characters who embody both roles simultaneously. This aligns with psychoanalytic theories of the divided self, which emphasize internal conflict and multiplicity. *Zenia* in *The Robber Bride* exemplifies this ambiguity, as she occupies positions of both power and vulnerability. Such representations complicate moral and psychological categorizations, encouraging readers to reconsider the nature of agency and responsibility. The findings also contribute to feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how psychological processes intersect with structures of power. Atwood's portrayal of victimhood is not limited to individual psychology but is deeply embedded in social and political contexts. The internalization of oppression reflects broader systems of control, while acts of resistance, however subtle, indicate the possibility of agency within constraint.

Overall, this study underscores the value of an interdisciplinary approach that integrates psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and literary frameworks. By examining the interplay between unconscious processes, memory, and social structures, the discussion highlights the complexity of Atwood's characterization and her contribution to



contemporary literary discourse. The transition from victim to victor, rather than being a clear-cut transformation, emerges as an ongoing negotiation shaped by psychological, cultural, and narrative forces.

8. Limitations

While this study provides a comprehensive psychoanalytic analysis of victimhood and agency in selected novels of Margaret Atwood, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the study is limited by its reliance on a qualitative textual analysis, which is inherently interpretive and subjective. Although the psychoanalytic framework offers valuable insights into unconscious processes and symbolic representations, interpretations may vary depending on the reader's theoretical orientation. The absence of empirical validation means that conclusions are based on critical reasoning rather than measurable data, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the scope of the study is restricted to three novels: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Robber Bride*. While these texts provide rich material for analysis, they do not encompass the full range of Atwood's literary oeuvre. Other works, such as *Oryx and Crake* or *Alias Grace*, may offer additional perspectives on victimhood and psychological transformation. Including a broader selection of texts could yield more comprehensive insights and strengthen the study's conclusions.

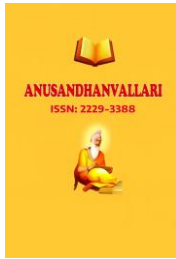
Third, an exclusive focus on Freudian psychoanalysis may limit the study's analytical depth. Although concepts such as repression and the unconscious are highly relevant, other psychoanalytic approaches, such as Lacanian theory or object relations theory, could provide alternative perspectives on identity and subjectivity. Incorporating additional theoretical frameworks, such as poststructuralism or intersectional feminism, might enrich the analysis by addressing power dynamics related to race, class, and colonialism. Another limitation lies in the use of trauma theory, particularly its emphasis on universality. Critics have argued that trauma theory can sometimes overlook cultural and historical specificity, potentially leading to generalized interpretations of diverse experiences. In the context of Atwood's work, which often engages with specific socio-political settings, this may result in an incomplete understanding of the characters' experiences.

9. Conclusion

The psychoanalytic exploration of Margaret Atwood's selected novels reveals that victimhood is not a fixed identity but a dynamic psychological condition shaped by trauma, memory, and unconscious processes. Through the application of Freudian theory and trauma studies, this paper has demonstrated that Atwood's characters navigate complex internal landscapes in their movement from victim to victor. Importantly, Atwood resists presenting this transformation as absolute or linear. Instead, her protagonists inhabit a liminal space where victimhood and agency coexist. This challenges traditional binaries and underscores the fluidity of identity. The concept of the "creative non-victim" emerges as a crucial endpoint not as a state of complete liberation, but as a mode of psychological resilience and self-definition. Ultimately, this study highlights the relevance of psychoanalytic criticism in understanding contemporary literature. By integrating psychoanalysis with feminist and trauma-based approaches, it offers a nuanced interpretation of Atwood's work, contributing to broader discussions on power, identity, and survival.

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