

# The Significance of Multidisciplinary Research in Driving Innovations and Breakthroughs

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## CULTURAL CROSSROADS: ANALYZING THEMES OF POWER, IDENTITY, AND OPPRESSION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S AND KAMALA DAS'S NOVELS

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the themes of power, identity, and oppression in the works of Margaret Atwood and Kamala Das by focusing on how their novels interact with the intersection of gender, personal identity, and societal constraints. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Das's *My Story* are powerful anti-patriarchal critiques focusing on the control exercised over female bodies, the battle within the internal conflict between individual identity and expectations from society, and the acts of resistance to oppressive systems. Atwood projects a dystopian world where the bodies of women are commodified and controlled-Offred exemplifies this idea as she resists the regime of Gilead. Das's autobiographical writing also challenges the cultural and emotional oppression of women in post-colonial India, calling for self-expression and sexual freedom in a society that restricts the roles of women. Both authors explore how the cultural and historical contexts, whether dystopian or post-colonial, influence female identity and, at the same time, reveal the more subtle yet effective ways in which women reclaim their agency. The works of Atwood and Das therefore emphasize the importance of gender in the fight for selfhood as well as how women resist, survive, and assert their identities within oppressive societal frameworks.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal Structures, Female Identity, Oppression, Resistance, Cultural Contexts

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood and Kamala Das offer rich landscapes in their novels through the cultural, social, and political dynamics, particularly those surrounding power, identity, and oppression. Both these writers are drawn from widely differing cultural and geographical backgrounds yet tackle universal human struggles, framing their narratives to criticize the dominant ideologies of their societies. She, a Canadian writer, situates most of her works in the speculative fiction world and constructs dystopian worlds, pointing to dangers inherent in imbalances of societal power, patriarchal control, and erasure of individual identity. On the other hand, an

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Indian poet and novelist, Kamala Das, by means of a personal and confessional style, talks about deep-seated social norms, gender roles, and colonial legacies shaping women's lives in postcolonial India. Despite the differences in their cultural contexts, both writers use language, symbolism, and narrative techniques to expose the intersectionality of power, identity, and oppression.

Atwood's books, like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*, explore the means by which power functions in communities, with specific attention to the ways in which authoritarian systems disenfranchise women and other groups. Her protagonists are often placed in situations in which they lose control over their lives, thereby being forced to question their identity in a strictly prescribed social context. Through these characters, Atwood unravels themes of identity formation under oppressive regimes, the resilience of individuals in the face of dehumanization, and the costs of societal conformity. In the same vein, Kamala Das's *My Story* and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* portray how women deal with oppressive patriarchal structures that restrict their freedom, sexuality, and voice. Her frank inquiry into female sexuality, desire, and frustration is an attack on the societal constructs of women as duty-bound wives or angelic mothers. It simultaneously contests the impact of colonialism and cultural forces on personal and collective identity.

Both authors engage deeply with the theme of identity, though they approach it from different angles. Atwood's characters often grapple with the deconstruction of personal identity within dystopian frameworks, where individualism is subjugated for the sake of societal control. In contrast, Das's exploration of identity focuses on the quest for self-assertion amidst the societal confines of gender and caste. Both writers, in their respective styles, explore how power forges and reforms identities—either through systemic and institutionalized processes or through the cultural norms of personal and social life. Atwood's novel often casts a woman in resistive roles when she is desperately trying to work out her autonomy against worlds that remove her agency and Kamala Das's works give prominence to a painful, quite irreconcilable conflict between personal desires and societal demands, thus functioning as a comment on the suffocating pressures of cultural or familial power relationships.

This can be derived by analyzing these works through Atwood and Das using the power lenses, aspects of identity and oppression. That would reveal deep resonances universal enough despite its cultural particularities in the texts of both these authors. Using this juxtaposition of two, it brings attention to the ways these dynamics of power are negotiated as well as contested and internalized; how continually, the oppressor's might impacts the sense of identity-formation. Through the prism of their novels, readers are asked to reflect upon the ongoing

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battles for personal liberty and social justice, making the works of both Atwood and Das timely as well as timeless in their applicability to international discourses surrounding gender, power, and identity.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITREATURE

**Bagul (2019)** a look at some dimensions of new female Indian English writings, considering work by contemporary authors Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur and Anita Nair Bagul further elucidates about women's quest during post-independence India - its cultural impediment and more through the characters who are found speaking for each. This is done by Hariharan's revealing relationships in patriarchal and familial structures, Kapur's mapping out emotional and psychological lives of women, and Nair's detailed potential to portray the complexities of contemporary relationship as the challenge to Indian women. All these writers through their works are highlighting how the main female characters violated the expectations of societies to follow the self-discovery and empowerment journey.

**Sharma (2021)** analyzed *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, published in 1985, to transcend the boundaries of time and give an analysis of the relevance of the novel in contemporary discussions on gender, power, and autonomy. Sharma argues that Atwood's dystopian vision of a totalitarian society where women's rights are systematically stripped away is a powerful critique of patriarchy and authoritarianism. Placing the novel out of its time, in 1980s, brings out its continuing relevance to feminist struggles in today's world. The protagonist Offred of the novel represents extreme consequences of control over women's bodies, identities, and freedom by society. Reviewing through feminist analysis of criticism, Sharma's research analysis proves how Atwood's work does not only criticize the current or historical patriarchy but also prompts readers to think about how precarious women's rights can be at any given time.

**Kaur (2021)** adds to feminist literary criticism in her work that delves into the development of feminist thought beyond traditional boundaries. In her book, *Feminism and Beyond*, she looks at how feminist theory has grown and evolved over time as the global socio-political landscape has changed. She also emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, stating that gender oppression cannot be understood in full without the considerations of class, caste, and race. This more expansive understanding of feminism has influenced literary studies, and scholars have only recently started exploring how women's identities are defined not only by gender but also by layers of socio-political and cultural contexts. Kaur's work, therefore, expands the boundaries of the conventional feminist study by demanding an inclusive and global approach toward understanding power structures in literature.

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**Dirghangi (2020)** analyzes feminist revisionist mythmaking in the works of Kavita Kané, who has reimagined ancient Indian myths. She often positions female characters from mythological traditions as complex, assertive, and more autonomous figures than they were initially portrayed. Dirghangi argues that the works of Kané, including *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* and *Sita's Sister*, are feminist revisions of patriarchal myths that have historically marginalized women's voices and agency. Through these retellings, Kané challenges the traditional portrayal of women in Indian mythology, giving them agency and a voice that was often suppressed in the original texts. The study by Dirghangi analyzes the ways these rewrites make an input in the feminist dialogue: they open a space to re-imagine a woman's position in myths and, subsequently, society. The text describes how the critical reading perspective created by Kané can facilitate criticism and further reflection on patriarchal orders deeply rooted within old stories.

### 3. PATRIARCHAL POWER AND ITS CONTROL OVER FEMALE BODIES

#### Margaret Atwood

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood builds a chilling dystopian society, Gilead, where women's bodies are reduced to mere instruments for reproduction. In this regime, women are strictly categorized, and their value is based solely on their fertility. The Handmaids, including the protagonist Offred, are forced into reproductive servitude for the ruling class, who view them as vessels to bear children for the elite. Atwood uses Offred's journey to portray the dehumanizing results of a patriarchal society, where women's bodies are subject to total control by the government, leaving no choice but taking on roles to suit the needs of the state. The government has not only taken control over the reproductive capabilities of women but also their identity as individuals; they have nullified their own identity. Offred's struggle is not just survival but a battle for the preservation of her personal identity in a world that seeks to eliminate it. Even under intense oppression, Offred finds ways to resist the totalitarian control exerted by the regime. But dangerous as it remains, the relationship that Offred shares secretly with Nick actually becomes an act of rebellion, an expression of autonomy in a world where everything in her life, from what she eats and when, is decided by others. All these small but significant acts of defiance insure that Offred doesn't lose her humanity; she does not allow society to dictate who she is. Through this novel, Atwood critiques deeply rooted patriarchal structure that is responsible not only for controlling the body of a woman but also of eradicating her rights, emotions, and desires. In this manner, it outlines dehumanization under oppression but does display strength in the sense of individualistic resistance at all costs under such oppressive systems. Through Offred's struggle for agency, *The Handmaid's*

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Tale draws attention to the importance of maintaining individuality and resistance against control systems that would take away the rights of the individual.

## **Kamala Das**

In *My Story*, Kamala Das narrates her personal experiences candidly that reveal the deep-seated patriarchal norms governing women's behavior in Indian society, especially regarding family roles and expectations. Das's body is objectified since her early days; it is considered a vessel defined by societal standards of modesty, purity, and submission. Her sexuality, which should be a source of personal expression and freedom, is repressed by cultural imperatives that require women to be good wives and mothers. But Das refuses to accept such oppressive norms and instead faces them head-on in her writing. She refuses the ideal of the self-sacrificing woman and instead affirms her sexuality as a powerful and unapologetic part of her self. She challenges the cultural, moral expectations of being confined into wife and mother roles through her extra-marital affair as an experiential construct to carve out the spaces of emotional and sexual autonomy in Das. The narration thus not only proclaims personal rebellion against the rigidity of the societal framework but also carries the struggle of bringing out the ownership of a woman's body and desire by many women. She uses her autobiography as resistance because she doesn't want women's sexuality and emotional fulfillment to be silenced and shut inside the narrow norms of tradition. She uses her pen to reveal broader issues related to cultural control over women's bodies, protesting against the need of the social expectations that are in competition with a woman's right to self-expression or self-determination. Like Atwood, who uses her characters' bodies as sites of both oppression and resistance, Das creates a narrative that speaks to the empowerment women can achieve by reclaiming their identities and resisting the forces that seek to define them. Through her personal account, Das invites women to embrace their authentic selves and challenge the oppressive systems that attempt to control them.

## **4. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN PERSONAL IDENTITY AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS**

### **Margaret Atwood:**

Margaret Atwood develops in *Alias Grace* the ways how social norms or rather those with gender and class elements deeply interfere within and limit women's personal lives. The writer chooses a miserable servant girl working 19th Century Canada as an extremely influential figure at that time whom societal roles dramatically shape her character. From an early age, Grace is thrust into the rigid expectations of her class and gender, first as a laborer in a wealthy household and then as a suspect in a notorious murder case. Through Grace's journey,

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Atwood shows how a woman's identity is not self-determined but is instead heavily influenced by external forces, namely the patriarchal societal structures that define her worth based on her gender and class. The trauma Grace undergoes, especially as a result of her subjugation and the assumptions others have made about her, becomes the center of her struggle. She is a servant whom society considers to be dispensable and a woman expected to play the subservient role. The further complication in her identity arises with her involvement in the murder case: she is at once demonized and romanticized in ways that strip her of agency and force her into the roles society dictates for her. Poignantly, Atwood depicts how societal constraints limit a woman's ability to assert her own identity but instead mold it through the perceptions and judgments of others. The example of Grace has highlighted the process by which class, gender, and social expectations confine the personal identity of a woman while simultaneously creating an intra-relationship between the true self of the woman and the roles expected from her through society. Through Atwood's criticism of the unbalanced power of power relations, which prevent women from defining themselves according to the freedom given by an unrestrictive patriarchal society, this runs throughout the novel.

## **Kamala Das:**

In her poetry and her autobiography, *My Story*, Kamala Das vociferously protests against the social constraints imposed upon a woman that curtail her freedom over her own desires, emotions, and sexual nature. Hailing from a traditional Indian family that believed women must only be a good wife and mother, Das's emotional and sexual desires could not find space to reconcile within these societal norms. She challenges such traditional gender roles with her writing, speaking boldly for freedom in experiencing and expressing desire without shame or restriction. Through autobiographical work, Das reflects on emotional struggles in a society that determined how women were supposed to be and feel within the marriage and motherhood realms. She candidly talks about her sexual experiences, the yearning for emotional fulfillment, and her resistance to the role of the submissive wife and mother. In this, Das breaks away from the cultural dictates that sought to suppress her individuality. Her poetry similarly captures this tension between the woman's inner desire for self-expression and the societal pressure to conform to prescribed gender roles. Her works express a form of defiance, positing that women have the right to their emotions, desires, and sexual independence. Das's writing becomes an empowering tool for women, asking them to transcend the social order that confines them, and to fight for the right to live, on their own terms, as they please and not according to cultural disapproval. Through her candid and unapologetic expressions, she voices the unspoken struggles of many women who are trapped by the cultural expectations of a patriarchal society.

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## 5. RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION

### **Margaret Atwood**

In the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, resistance in this context is depicted to be subtle yet powerful. Internal rebellion or small, seemingly insignificant acts may challenge the oppressive regime. The story unfolds in Gilead, a dystopian society in which the rights of women have been absolutely stripped away and their roles strictly defined and controlled. Despite the ever-present danger of open rebellion, Offred manages to resist the totalitarian regime's attempt to erase her sense of self. One of the most powerful forms of resistance she engages in is the preservation of her memories from the time before Gilead. By holding onto her past, Offred maintains an inner narrative of who she once was, an assertion of identity in a world that seeks to erase it. Her secret trysts with Nick become an illicit love affair, a personal act of defiance against the regime's control over her body and emotional life. Though it is dangerous, the relationship allows Offred to experience intimacy and emotional freedom in a society that denies her both. Her interactions with other women in covert resistance groups, such as Mayday, illustrate how solidarity and shared resistance can be expressed even under the strictest conditions. These small, ordinary acts of remembering, nurturing the forbidden love and secret networks-these are Offred's quiet resistance against the annihilation of her own self. Here, Atwood emphasizes that there is always an element of human resistance that goes on to surface even in the most oppressive circumstances - through memory or the power of secret networks, or even by the slightest negation of established norms. This quiet and hidden resistance is a force of great assertions of selfhood against oppression in systemism.

### **Kamala Das**

Kamala Das's autobiographical writing, especially in *My Story*, is a significant act of resistance against the societally imposed constraints on women's lives, more specifically in regards to sexuality and emotional freedom. Das challenges the very cultural norms set up to try to control women's bodies and desires and suppress women's emotional outbursts. She candidly reveals her sexual and emotional life; she refuses to become a perfect wife and mother as required by society, for she doesn't want to live the life portrayed by the so-called dutiful wife and mother. Thus, by disclosing her sexual experience, desires, and inner turmoils, Das questions the existing oppressive structures of a world in which women's sexuality is something shameful and silent. What stands out here is not just a tale of personal rebellion but the conscious rejection of the societal framework striving to control the identity and autonomy of women. Das speaks for the silently enforced women



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who have been made to move in unison, asking for the general acceptance of the self, a self free from the shackles of marriage, motherhood, and sexual repression. In this way, Das encourages women to be their selves, to retain the right of emotional and sexual autonomy, and to reject societal impositions aimed at defining and then restricting the ambit of the female entity. Her writing, thus, becomes a powerful tool for women's empowerment, urging them to break free from the roles imposed upon them and assert their own voices in a world that continues to attempt to silence them.

## 6. CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS SHAPING IDENTITY

### **Margaret Atwood:**

Margaret Atwood's novels, the majority of which include *The Handmaid's Tale*, situate historical events within dystopian and speculative settings to critique the nature of how culture and politics shape individual identities, particularly women's. The use of the dystopian world of Gilead by Atwood's novel provides a powerful framework through which to explore extreme forms of gender inequality. In this imaginary society, women's rights are systematically taken away, their reproductive functions controlled, and religion manipulated to justify patriarchal oppression. By placing the narrative in a hyperbolized, yet plausible future, Atwood reflects the real-world concerns of her time, creating a chilling mirror for contemporary society. Criticism in the dystopian lens: it critiques the decline of women's autonomy, reproduction controls, and the use of religion as an instrument to control rigid gender roles. The political and cultural forces that characterize the novel especially patriarchy and authoritarianism take shape and silence personal identities usually with devastating results. Atwood's speculative fiction is both a cautionary tale and a strong reminder to resist political and cultural systems that would define and restrict women's roles. The story calls on the reader to consider how such forces continue to entrench systemic inequalities, to act to preserve freedoms and identities, especially those of women in society.

### **Kamala Das:**

Kamala Das's *My Story* is deeply rooted in the Indian post-colonial context, where centuries of patriarchal traditions and legacies of colonialism continue to shape the roles and identities of women. Exploring her personal experiences within the broad socio-political landscape of post-independence India, a country emerging from the shackles of colonial rule but still bound by deeply entrenched patriarchal values. Women's roles in Indian society have been confined to family and social expectations, with little room for personal autonomy or self-expression. Das navigates this complex terrain in an attempt to define herself outside the



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roles that society and tradition impose upon her. This confluence of a very strong patrilineal framework within Indian culture and residual effects of colonialism makes for an immense internal struggle within Das as she battles both the forces of history and those of culture in constraining her. Her writing attacks the mores of society which curtail the freedom of women in general and especially concerning their sexuality, marriage, and emotional fulfillment. Through Das's rejection of the traditional role imposed on her, she pleads for people to accept who they are rather than trying to fit into set roles. Using her personal life as a case within the larger tapestry of Indian post-colonial history, Das portrays how cultural and historical forces play across women's identities, often tying them down so they cannot really live their own lives. Her work also, in many ways, is a critique of the expectations that define and limit women's experiences in the society to date, urging them to reclaim their autonomy and their right to decide what constitutes their identities.

## **7. CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS SHAPING IDENTITY**

### **Margaret Atwood**

Often in Margaret Atwood's novels, culture, politics, and history inform the sense of personal identity, though through dystopian and speculative means. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, she extrapolates extreme facets of gender imbalance to an amplified extent within a fictionalized world where all vestiges of women's rights have been completely eliminated in a totalitarian society. Hence, the society of Gilead, with its strict control over the bodies of women and their power to procreate or have children, provides a harsh critique of a patriarchal society that reduces women to their reproductive functionalities. Atwood uses this dystopian landscape not only as a setting for her narrative but also as a critique of real-world issues, including the erosion of women's autonomy, control of reproductive rights, and religion as a tool for patriarchal governance. By creating a speculative future grounded in familiar social and political dynamics, Atwood challenges readers to ponder how the problems of gender at the moment could evolve into some of the worst forms of oppression. This can be seen through her challenge of personal identity as an entity that is completely autonomous and independent. Rather, she suggests that women's identities, especially in patriarchal societies, are shaped by the roles imposed on them—roles that are often rigid and limiting. Drawing on historical events and existing cultural issues, Atwood underlines the idea that personal identity, especially for women, is defined by societal expectations, which reinforces systemic inequalities that persist through time.

### **Kamala Das**

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This aspect makes Kamala Das's work, especially her work *My Story*, a significant analysis of how the intersection of personal identity and greater historical and cultural forces shapes the position of women in post-colonial India. Her autobiography has taken into account the fact that despite political freedom from colonialism, patriarchy continues to have control over Indian society. Das critiques the tension between the victory of newly acquired independence of India and the ongoing cultural pressures that existed, especially within the institution of traditional families. Women expectedly wore the garb of dutiful wives, mothers, and caretakers and suppressed the "selves" of personal desires and emotional expression and sexual freedom. Das uses her own life as a lens through which to critique the ongoing patriarchal norms. Here the conflict between this search for her individuality with the historical colonial legacy which intersected with very deep-seated traditional gender in India, plays out. Within her own strife for selfdefinition, Das satirizes both the cultural constraint toward women's emancipation, through the taboo areas of female desire and emotions in society. Through candid and bold writing, Das exposes how deep the historical and cultural expectations have been in forming the personal identities of women in post-colonial India, ultimately questioning and challenging the oppressive systems that sought to define her.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In the works of Margaret Atwood and Kamala Das, we see a deep exploration of how cultural, historical, and gendered forces shape women's identities and experiences in terms of power, identity, and oppression. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* critiques in a dystopian society how women's bodies have become entirely controlled, and Das's *My Story* denounces in post-colonial India social values of the time, especially about sexuality and emotional autonomy. Both authors narrate a conflict in the distortion of one's personal identity and needs at the hands of societal expectation, depicting how strict gender orientations work to crush the identity imposed on people. They also reveal resistance as the way to retake autonomy: Atwood reveals subtle rebellion when an oppressive regime is present, while Das argues that women should have the freedom to express their desire and break loose from cultural restraint. In addition, their stories emphasize how cultures and histories have shaped identity in the sense that Atwood writes dystopian fiction to criticize existing inequalities in the world, and Das reflects on post-colonial tension between tradition and individual freedom. Atwood and Das team up to write powerful commentaries about the unrelenting struggle for women's autonomy, inciting reflection on the ongoing forces shaping gendered experiences around the world.

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