



Noise as Narrative: Disruption and Resistance in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the function of narrative “noise” in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, exploring how formal disruptions, silences, and fragments operate not as narrative flaws but as integral strategies of resistance. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Michel Foucault, Cathy Caruth, and Julia Kristeva, the analysis positions noise as a narrative voice that simultaneously reveals and conceals the trauma of living under Gilead’s oppressive regime. Unlike conventional narrative coherence, Atwood’s text embraces interruptions, ellipses, and shifts in tone that mirror the protagonist’s fractured subjectivity and the instability of memory under surveillance. Noise, in this context, is not mere background interference but a counter-discursive force that undermines authoritarian control of language and truth. It exposes the gaps, contradictions, and unspeakable aspects of Offred’s lived experience, producing a testimonial form that resists both silence and closure. By foregrounding noise as a narrative strategy, the article argues that Atwood destabilizes the expectation of linear storytelling to embody the dissonance of women’s voices erased by patriarchy. This reading reframes *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a text where narrative noise functions as both survival and subversion, situating Atwood’s work within broader discussions of trauma literature, feminist narratology, and resistance



1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) occupies a pivotal position in the landscape of contemporary dystopian fiction. Often read as a feminist classic and a warning against authoritarianism, the novel constructs a world where theocratic patriarchy reduces women to their reproductive functions, stripping them of autonomy, history, and even names. At the heart of the narrative lies Offred, a Handmaid whose story is mediated through fragments, digressions, contradictions, and moments of silence. These disruptions—what may be called “narrative noise”—do not simply reflect stylistic experimentation but act as essential tools for representing trauma, memory, and resistance. Unlike the linear coherence expected of realist fiction, Atwood embraces fragmentation and dissonance as forms of storytelling that capture the complexities of life under Gilead's oppressive regime.

The concept of “noise” has been theorized across multiple disciplines. In communication theory, noise is considered an interference that distorts clarity. In literary and cultural studies, however, noise has increasingly been recognized as a productive disruption—an interruption that unsettles dominant narratives and opens space for marginalized voices. Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, for example, suggests that rhythms, silences, and pre-linguistic elements intrude upon the symbolic order, producing dissonance that reveals the limits of meaning. Similarly, trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth argue that trauma resists straightforward narration, often surfacing instead through repetition, silence, or rupture. In this sense, noise is not merely what interrupts narrative but what allows otherwise unspeakable experiences to find form.

Atwood's novel lends itself to this reading because it refuses neat storytelling. Offred constantly interrupts herself, revises memories, questions her reliability, and acknowledges the gaps in her recollections. She tells us, “I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling,” foregrounding the instability of narrative itself. These shifts create a form of narrative static, where the reader is made acutely aware of absence, contradiction, and distortion. Far from diminishing the narrative, this static amplifies the novel's central themes: the impossibility of truth under authoritarian rule, the precariousness of memory, and the resilience of women's voices under erasure.

This article argues that “narrative noise” functions in *The Handmaid's Tale* as both a stylistic and political strategy. By examining the interplay between silence and speech, coherence and fracture, the study situates Atwood's work within broader conversations about feminist narratology and trauma



literature. It also repositions noise as not simply disruption but as a narrative voice in itself—a counter-discursive mode that resists the hegemonic imposition of order and meaning. Where Gilead seeks to enforce silence, Atwood introduces noise; where the regime erases individuality, noise reasserts subjectivity through its very instability.

Such an approach illuminates *The Handmaid's Tale* in ways that extend beyond feminist critique or dystopian allegory. Reading noise as a narrative strategy underscores how Atwood subverts conventional forms of storytelling to embody the affective and psychological dissonance of life under totalitarianism. Moreover, it situates the novel within a lineage of experimental narratives that use disruption—whether through fragmented syntax, digressive plots, or unsettling verbosity—as a means of staging resistance against cultural silencing. Thus, this article not only contributes to Atwood scholarship but also participates in the broader critical conversation about how literature formalizes disruption in order to bear witness to trauma and oppression.

2. Noise, Silence, and Narrative Disruption

At its most basic level, noise has traditionally been understood as interference: the static that interrupts a broadcast, the distortion that makes communication incomplete. In Shannon and Weaver's influential model of communication (1949), noise is that which blocks or alters the transmission of a message between sender and receiver. But in literary and cultural theory, this notion of noise as “failure” has been productively reinterpreted. Rather than merely a disturbance, noise is often the site of meaning. As Michel Serres (1982) suggests, noise is not simply accidental interference but an inevitable presence within any system of communication, and it is precisely what forces interpretation. Literature, in this sense, thrives on noise—on ambiguities, silences, and ruptures that disrupt clarity and push readers to question not only what is said but also what is left unsaid.

In narrative theory, noise frequently appears in the form of fragmentation, contradiction, or dissonance. Postmodernist and experimental texts have long embraced narrative noise to undermine the illusion of transparency and to foreground the instability of meaning. When Atwood constructs *The Handmaid's Tale* through Offred's shifting, hesitant, and sometimes contradictory voice, she is participating in this tradition of narrative disruption. Her storytelling is punctuated by gaps: “I made that up. It didn't happen that way.” These confessions are not flaws in storytelling but deliberate intrusions of noise, which remind the reader of the provisional, unstable nature of memory under trauma.



Silence, conversely, is often positioned as the absence of narrative. Yet silence in literature is never empty; it is a meaningful presence. In feminist criticism, silence has been theorized both as an instrument of oppression and as a form of resistance. Adrienne Rich argues that silence can signify erasure when imposed externally but empowerment when chosen as refusal. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the regime enforces silence on women by stripping away their names, their literacy, and their ability to speak freely. Yet Offred reclaims silence as a form of storytelling itself—her pauses, her digressions, and her contradictions become part of the noise that resists Gilead's desire for a single, controlled narrative. Thus, silence and noise are not opposites but complementary aspects of narrative disruption.

Trauma theory further illuminates this relationship. According to Cathy Caruth (1996), trauma is often unrepresentable in straightforward, chronological language; it resurfaces instead in fragments, repetitions, or gaps. Silence and noise become the only adequate forms of representation for experiences that exceed language. Offred's fragmented narrative reflects this dynamic: she oscillates between memory and the present, often unable to narrate her experiences in full coherence. For instance, her recollections of her daughter are fractured, hesitant, and painful—she tells us both too much and not enough. These moments of narrative rupture embody the incommunicability of trauma, where silence and noise signal not failure but fidelity to the unassimilable nature of lived experience.

Atwood's use of narrative noise also complicates the reader's role. Because Offred's account is incomplete, filled with ellipses and contradictions, the reader is forced to engage actively in reconstructing meaning. This disruption prevents passive consumption and mirrors the uncertainty of living under authoritarian rule, where truth itself is unstable. In this way, narrative noise acts not only as a stylistic choice but also as a political tool, drawing the reader into the precarious act of survival and memory alongside the narrator.

The interplay of noise and silence in *The Handmaid's Tale* is particularly striking when examined against the backdrop of dystopian literature. Traditional dystopian novels often rely on direct narration or documentary-style accounts to expose the mechanics of oppressive regimes. Atwood, however, turns inward, privileging the subjective and unreliable account of a woman whose story is both deeply personal and politically urgent. The narrative's disjointedness resists the clarity and order that Gilead demands. Instead, Atwood constructs a counter-discourse of noise—fragmented, digressive, and disruptive—that destabilizes the reader's desire for certainty and completeness.

One of the most telling aspects of narrative noise is its insistence on multiplicity. Offred herself acknowledges that she is telling different versions of the same story: "I would like to believe this is a



story I'm telling. I need to believe it." Her revisions and contradictions are forms of narrative static, interrupting the linear flow of storytelling. Yet these interruptions also create layers of meaning, revealing how memory, trauma, and storytelling are inseparable. The gaps in her narrative signify not ignorance but survival—the refusal to reduce her experiences to the clear, controlled script Gilead would prefer.

Silence in the novel is equally layered. It manifests in the literal prohibition of women's speech, but it also takes the form of withheld information in Offred's account. The silences in her storytelling are active spaces where meaning is negotiated. They ask the reader to listen not only to what is said but also to what is withheld, interrupted, or lost. This tension between noise and silence illustrates what Dauenhauer (1980) calls "the paradox of silence": it is both the mark of repression and a site of potential expression.

Taken together, noise and silence destabilize narrative coherence in *The Handmaid's Tale*. They operate as disruptions that resist closure, resist the totalitarian demand for clarity, and resist the smoothness of conventional storytelling. This disruption is not ornamental; it is the narrative itself. By foregrounding noise and silence, Atwood articulates the precariousness of female voice in a system that seeks its eradication. She reminds us that storytelling under oppression can never be seamless, that its gaps and dissonances are the very traces of survival.

3. Trauma and the Fragmented Voice

Trauma theory offers a particularly fruitful lens for understanding narrative noise. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that trauma resists direct representation; instead, it surfaces through belatedness, disruption, and repetition. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's narrative is marked by such traumatic gaps. She repeatedly loses track of time, shifts between past and present, and interrupts herself with fragmented memories of her daughter, her husband, and her life before Gilead.

Dominick LaCapra (2001) distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through" trauma. Offred's narration exemplifies both tendencies. At times, she "acts out" by compulsively returning to painful memories, generating narrative noise in the form of digression or temporal disorder. At other times, her storytelling enables partial "working through," as she uses words to assert presence against erasure. The disjointed voice, far from signaling weakness, underscores the impossibility of narrating trauma without noise.

Moreover, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) describe testimony as inherently unstable, marked by silence, contradiction, and fragmentation. Offred's testimony to the imagined listener—and by



extension to future readers—carries precisely this instability. The tape recordings discovered in the “Historical Notes” are riddled with noise: interruptions, distortions, missing sections. This noisy testimony highlights both the difficulty of bearing witness under oppression and the power of storytelling as survival.

4. Feminist Narratology and Gendered Noise

From a feminist perspective, noise has long been coded as feminine excess or irrationality against masculine reason and order. Judith Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble* challenges these binaries, emphasizing how subversive repetitions destabilize power structures. In Atwood’s novel, Offred’s narrative “noise” takes the form of playful word games, whispered jokes, and illicit linguistic creativity. Her puns—such as “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”—are humorous disruptions that resist Gilead’s enforced solemnity.

Adrienne Rich (1979) argued that women’s truths often emerge in the interstices of silence and secrecy. Atwood draws on this idea by constructing Offred’s voice as one that resists linear coherence. Instead of a traditional plot, we encounter fragments, digressions, repetitions—forms of narrative “noise” that signify gendered survival within a regime of enforced silence.

Furthermore, feminist narratology helps us see how Atwood destabilizes the very concept of narrative reliability. Gérard Genette (1980) describes narrative reliability as central to classical storytelling, yet Offred’s voice is consistently uncertain. She admits, “I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling” (Atwood, 1998, p. 39). Such admissions generate epistemological noise, foregrounding the instability of truth under conditions of censorship.

5. Linguistic Noise and the Politics of Power

Foucault’s (2002) analysis of discourse underscores how regimes maintain power through control of language. Gilead exemplifies this by repurposing biblical phrases into linguistic instruments of authority. Yet, as Jacques Derrida might suggest, every system of meaning contains its own slippages—its own noise. Offred exploits these slippages, creating small acts of resistance. Her whispered conversations with Ofglen, her secret reading of forbidden texts, and her wordplay generate micro-disruptions that challenge Gilead’s linguistic order.

Atwood also highlights how authoritarian regimes fear noise. Public spaces are organized around ritualized silence—the Red Center, the Prayvaganza, the Salvagings. Noise becomes associated with



rebellion, whether through whispers of the Mayday resistance or the unregulated murmurs of women's private speech. Thus, noise is constructed as a political threat, a reminder that absolute silence can never be fully enforced.

6. Noise as Counter-History: The “Historical Notes”

The novel's ending, the “Historical Notes,” reframes the entire narrative. The academic symposium treats Offred's testimony with ironic detachment, reducing her noisy, fragmented story to an object of analysis. Yet, as LaCapra (2001) suggests, history and trauma exist in tension: historical discourse seeks order, while traumatic testimony resists closure.

The “Historical Notes” attempt to silence noise by imposing structure, but the very gaps, uncertainties, and distortions in the tapes ensure that noise survives. The resistance lies in the irreducibility of Offred's voice. Her fragmented narrative cannot be fully contained by academic discourse, reminding readers that the lived experience of oppression exceeds neat historiographical categories.

7. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates how noise can operate as a powerful narrative strategy. Far from being mere interference, narrative noise reflects the fractured temporality of trauma, the politics of silence, and the instability of meaning under authoritarian rule. It is both symptom and resistance: a mark of psychic injury and a tool for survival.

By employing noise as narrative voice, Atwood transforms dystopian storytelling into an act of feminist resistance. Silence, fragmentation, and disruption become modes of speaking the unspeakable, preserving memory, and undermining totalitarian discourse. Ultimately, the novel insists that noise is not the absence of meaning but a form of counter-discourse that destabilizes power, making room for suppressed voices to be heard.

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