

Polyphonic resistance: Voices of rebellion in Margaret Atwood's the testaments



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ABSTRACT

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This study explores Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and polyphony to examine how multiple narrative voices articulate resistance against Gilead's totalitarian regime. The purpose is to demonstrate how Atwood's use of diverse narrators transforms rebellion into a dialogic process that challenges monologic authority. Employing a qualitative analytical approach grounded in Bakhtinian criticism, the paper interprets the perspectives of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy as independent yet interrelated voices. Through textual analysis, the study identifies how Atwood's polyphonic design allows each narrator to speak autonomously while engaging in a dynamic exchange with the others, thereby dismantling the dominance of a single authoritative discourse. The findings indicate that *The Testaments* functions as a polyphonic novel where meaning arises through interaction rather than authorial control. Rebellion becomes a collective act voiced through multiple, autonomous consciousnesses. The dialogic exchange among narrators illustrates Bakhtin's belief that truth is relational and plural, never confined to a single viewpoint. This study contributes to Bakhtinian literary criticism by showing how Atwood's narrative form embodies dialogic rebellion. It also provides a model for understanding reality through multiplicity and diversity of voice. Finally, it demonstrates the power of literature to resist ideological domination by allowing distinct voices to coexist, converse, and challenge oppressive authority.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on Bakhtinian criticism by applying the theory of dialogism and polyphony to *The Testaments*. It demonstrates how Atwood's three narrators embody distinct voices of resistance, providing a new interpretive model for understanding rebellion and reality through multiple interacting perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study examines Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of polyphony and dialogism. It is divided into two main parts: the first sets the theoretical background by tracing Bakhtin's idea of polyphony and dialogism in novelistic discourse; the second applies these concepts to Atwood's work, showing how they illuminate the novel's structure and themes. Mikhail Bakhtin is regarded as one of the most significant literary theorists of the twentieth century, best known for his formulation of dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony

concepts. His work has profoundly influenced contemporary literary theory, particularly in demonstrating how texts incorporate diverse voices, conflicting ideologies, and competing social discourses. Foundational works like *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) introduce major concepts that resist monologic interpretation of literature. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin elucidates heteroglossia, indicating that literary texts inevitably draw upon and syncretize available speech genres. In his view, any novel is composed of multiple styles and voices, which are carefully organized into an artistic system that manages and arranges these differences in a specific manner.

Concerning Atwood, she is Canada's most successful and well-known writer. Atwood has authored numerous award-winning novels, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *The Testaments* (2019), and the *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003–2013). Atwood frequently depicts diverse female protagonists existing in patriarchal cultures, and her fiction, frequently described as feminist, tackles women's rights through dominant female protagonists struggling with original personal and societal dilemmas.

This research uses Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical concepts of polyphony and dialogism to explore the emergence and intersection of different rebellious voices in Atwood's *The Testaments*. Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and semiotician, had a significant impact on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. He is especially renowned for his revolutionary philosophy of language and his novel theory, particularly his concepts of polyphony, dialogism, and the carnivalesque.

Polyphony, in the theory of the novel by Bakhtin, refers to the coexistence of numerous points of view, visions, and voices in a single unified narrative form. His analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky's prose demonstrated the concept's first significant application. According to Bakhtin, in Dostoevsky, unlike earlier novelists, there is no imposition of a unifying authoritative vision but rather the creation of fully dramatic "novels of ideas" wherein contending voices and characters are permitted to evolve independently. In his seminal work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin refers to this aspect as the hallmark of Dostoevsky's polyphonic prose. In his view, the presence of many independent and autonomous voices, a genuine polyphony of fully autonomous viewpoints, is the defining mark of Dostoevsky's novels (Bakhtin, 1984).

Bakhtin declares that understanding is inherently dialogic. In its simplest sense, dialogism explains the interplay of various modes or perspectives within a text, where contradiction and interaction are essential for interpretation. In literature, a dialogic text expresses meaning through dialogue between speaker and hearer, whether overt or implicit. The theory, formulated by Bakhtin, is applied extensively in literary criticism and philosophy to explain texts with scope for various voices instead of one authoritative voice. In his work "The Dialogic Imagination," Bakhtin (2010) explains that dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world shaped by heteroglossia. Meaning is never isolated; instead, it is constantly produced and understood as part of a greater whole, in constant interaction with other meanings, each with the potential to influence and transform the rest. Which meaning prevails, how it shapes others, and to what degree, is determined in the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative arising from the fact that language precedes and exceeds any individual speaker ensures that a true monologue is impossible.

Bakhtin emphasizes that Dostoevsky's novels are polyphonic due to the appearance of several different voices with different ideas. Multiple voices do not merely suggest the existence of numerous characters; each voice must express its own ideology, refusing to be absorbed by a single authorial perspective. Thus, for Dostoevsky, characters are represented in a manner that does not repeat the author's ideas. Instead, they express their particular worldviews and ideologies. This portrayal of several autonomous voices is what constitutes polyphony. According to Bakhtin (1984), a character's own testimony regarding their world and themselves is no less valid than the author's own word; it is not reduced to the level of an attribute of the character's imagined image, nor is it a mere mouthpiece for the authorial voice (p. 7).

According to Bakhtin's genre scale, the novel is higher because it integrates a multiplicity of speech forms and several voices. Poetry, which maintains a unifying style and linguistic register, is contrasted with the novel, which as

a whole is a phenomenon that is multiform in style and variform in speech and voice (Bakhtin, 1984). Here, the novel subverts the Aristotelian principles of unity of story, action, and monologic voice. As Bakhtin suggests, the novel structures its themes through the totality of objects, ideas, and experiences that it reflects through the social spectrum of speech forms and the multiplicity of individual voices that flourish within it (1984).

The term polyphony, derived from the Greek words polys (many) and polyphōnos (multiple voices or sounds), defines an arrangement in which two or more independent voices are heard simultaneously. These voices can contrast the central theme or be in a harmonious combination with it. In literature, the polyphonic principle challenges the possibility of one accurate or coherent point of view; rather, every idea or concept exists within a dialogue, often in contention with other ideas and concepts (Novák, 2023). While polyphony allows the reader to hear multiple voices, it does not render meaning purely subjective or relative. Rather, it creates a genuine multiplicity in which each voice holds equal status and exists in a dynamic relationship with others.

Literary texts whose style demonstrates a polyphonic structure often draw inspiration from music. In literature, polyphony rarely exists as a rigid stylistic approach, but it more closely resembles free polyphony. The theory of the polyphonic novel is well grounded in literary criticism, largely thanks to Mikhail Bakhtin's examination of the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, where he identified and analyzed the presence of many independent voices coexisting. Following Bakhtin's observations, many literary critics have developed ideas about the polyphonic potential in novels. Novak discusses that Bakhtin's concern with polyphony is rooted in his broader concern with language, specifically the concept of heteroglossia the presence of multiple languages and types of speech within a single language system. Novels serve as microcosms of heteroglossia for Bakhtin, incorporating high and low genres, dialogic interaction, folk culture, and unofficial speech (2023, p. 183).

In Bakhtin's theory of the novel, the concept of polyphony is multifaceted and complex. It does more than simply encompass transcribed dialogue between characters to include inner thought and consciousness, as well as the inherent voices that guide the reader through the text. Polyphony is not only the characters' views but also the author's presence, whether direct or indirect, and even that of the responsive reader, who participates in a dialogue with the text. Plurality itself is the very essence of polyphony (Viswanathan, 2010).

Polyphony is distinguished from the traditional understanding of the novel by its treatment of collective narratives. These narratives comprise several protagonists, each of equal importance, individually meaningful plots, and diverse "perspectives on reality." In these, contradictions remain unreconciled by a single authoritative perspective. Contemporary scholarly critiques of Bakhtin's concept of polyphony reveal two central interpretative tendencies. On the one hand, it is celebrated for promoting cognitive and ideological plurality, particularly its liberating possibilities within community development and giving voice to historically marginalized communities. On the other hand, it is criticized for its alleged lack of coherence and social cohesion, reflecting and perhaps reinforcing the fragmentary and disjointed quality of modern life (Yeşilbaş, 2020).

A polyphonic novel is not dominated by any voice or single overarching perspective, as opposed to traditional narratives. As Bakhtin (1984) states, the author of a polyphonic novel intentionally avoids one-sidedness or dogmatic gravity and will not grant exclusive power to a single perspective or manner of thinking. Instead, polyphony is receptive to a variety of voices, including those that issue outside the narrative itself, thereby registering the surrounding historical, social, cultural, and political contexts in which it was composed or published. In the same vein, Lodge (1964) has defined the polyphonic novel as one in which consecratory ideological positions are expressed and set into dialogue between and within particular speaking subjects, without being inclined towards an overarching authorial point of view.

The other characteristic feature of the polyphonic novel is its multi-leveled structure, made up of autonomous worlds that are the possessions of different characters. Such stories usually have two or more interwoven threads along which the story advances. The polyphonic novel, therefore, presents numerous voices and planes of plot rather than being within the single consciousness of the author. According to McCallum (1999), multivoiced narration uses

two or more character focalizers or narrators to present events from their respective perceptual and attitudinal perspectives (p.23).

According to Suwondo (2001), the polyphonic novel only relates to the idea of "social" that is owned by composing discourse, not to theme, form, content, or anything else that conveys reality (p. 38). Bakhtin did not strictly distinguish between literary genres like novels, tragedy, and comedy because of this. He maintained that two components are necessary for a complete understanding of genre: first, genre as a way of conceptualizing reality, influenced by how people use language to describe the world; and second, genre as it relates to other literary forms.

The polyphonic novel consists of characteristics that Bakhtin described as carnival elements. Carnival is a mode of thinking that conceives the world as a common place, where everyone is free to speak, untethered by social hierarchies or typical borders. This unique carnival spirit first appeared in oral folk tales and later influenced serious comic traditions in classical literature, such as the Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire (Suwondo, 2001). Carnivals are a sign that things are changing and new things are coming. As Bakhtin points out, folktales often end with a feast instead of death.

Each voice plays a significant part in the construction of the narrative in the polyphonic novel. These voices not only engage in conversation with each other but are also not guided by any authority. As Narwani and Vaidya (2024) observe, the novel can be shredded into pieces where no voice merges with or becomes less important than another voice (2024). From a Bakhtinian perspective, such multiplicity frees the text from "the authorial clutches," allowing voices to compete, contradict, and resist silencing. As Dentith (1995) indicates, "the issues raised by the question of polyphony have a wide general significance" (p.41).

Instead of a single perspective or point of view created by the author, the reader is surrounded by a multitude of different consciousnesses, each with its own world to explore. Polyphonic texts stand in contrast to monologic works, which are guided entirely by the author's point of view. Monologism, as Bakhtin (1984) explains, corresponds to a single, unified authorial viewpoint. The author's ideology remains at the center of a monological work, and the unique voices of each character are frequently neglected. In polyphonic, dialogic works, there is a chance to make all the ideologies visible.

When a text embraces the idea of diversity of viewpoints, polyphony becomes essential for the composition of the text. It represents free voices that can rebel and protest to express their points of view. Every character in the novel rebels to tell her about the multiple voices with different ideologies in any novel, giving the reader multiple perspectives of truth. In a polyphonic novel, the characters are accorded the utmost autonomy that can be given to them, and they are not just able to interact with the author but also communicate with one another. It also encourages a dynamic exchange of viewpoints by enabling various ideologies to coexist and interact within the narrative (Nesari, 2015).

Even when a novel is written from the perspective of a single character or narrator, other characters inevitably emerge as subjects in their own right, with their own voices rather than being objectified as voiceless objects. These subjects, in turn, focus on others, who present themselves as independent voices. This way, the first narrative voice starts with a chain of points of view, which allows the reader to hear more than one voice at a time. This approach also invites the reader to join in the conversation between these voices (Viswanathan, 2010).

As James (1987) notes, the imaginary house has not one but a million windows, offering myriad points of view on the same story. Every narrator or character is a window or point of consciousness through which things are perceived and understood. (p. 485). According to James, the focus of the work is "the whole of human consciousness," which can extend "anywhere it will take in absolutely anything" (pp. 337-338).

It becomes evident that Bakhtin's broader understanding of language as "dialogic" and made up of "heteroglossia" is essential to his conception of the novel. Bakhtin also gives attention to the dialogic integrity of language, whereby each statement acquires significance from those that preceded it and anticipates those that will follow in the same communicative context. In this way, dialogism creates an interaction between current utterances with past and future

utterances. Dialogic texts have an ongoing dialogue that unifies and responds to information already provided. Literary theory and philosophy employ the adjective “dialogic” to describe such a relational meaning-production. Bakhtin's theory is traditionally referred to as dialogic, stressing that meaning results from the active interplay between the writer, text, and reader or hearer. Besides, such interactions are always mediated by the broader social and political forces that contour the settings in which they take place.

Like Socrates, Bakhtin believed that truth and understanding arise from dialogue, not the isolated mind. Characters are not merely objects in the author's mind; they are independent entities that can stand beside their creator and agree, disagree, or even rebel against them in the ongoing dialogue between the author, characters, and reader. They continue to have independent voices rather than being influenced by the author. They are free and able to rebel. Similarly, the reader is not subordinated to the author but occupies an active, interpretive role (Viswanathan, 2010).

Despite their distinct characteristics, dialogism and polyphony are inherently intertwined and dependent upon one another within a literary work. The voices that make up the polyphonic novel are dialogic by nature, interacting with one another, and the language they use is influenced by dialogic exchange. Bakhtin (1984) mentions that dialogue represents the essence of human beings, wherein a person participates entirely and uninterruptedly with eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, and the whole body. From a formal perspective, dialogue is a form of discourse and a consciousness model that emphasizes communication and is founded on language acquisition. Every human enjoys resisting, confronting, and giving personal meaning to social interactions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Atwood's *The Testaments* has been the subject of numerous studies. Most scholarly analyses of Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* have focused on feminism and the dystopian world of Gilead. In their 2020 paper “Rewriting Politics, or the Emerging Fourth Wave of Feminism in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*,” for example, Gheorghiu and Praisler (2020) examine how Atwood's reimagining of Gilead has been impacted by the fourth wave of feminism, which has been shaped by the political context of the Donald Trump era and the conversation surrounding women's rights. A feminist lens is also used by Kołodziejuk (2020) work, “The Mothers, Daughters, Sisters: The Intergenerational Transmission of Womanhood in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*,” to examine the interlinked concerns of feminism, womanhood, and motherhood within Atwood's Gileadean world.

Labudová's (2020) article “Testimonies in *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood: Images of Food in Gilead” is another notable research on *The Testaments*. She argues that Atwood utilizes food representations to highlight the utilitarian aspects of the society in Gilead. She also discusses feminism and women's rights in addition to food symbolism. Though it examines a dimension not yet explored in existing scholarship, the current study refers to these works as part of its discussion. In particular, it applies Bakhtin's ideas of polyphony and dialogism to *The Testaments*, which adds a new point of view and expands the range of research in this field. In addition, Masoomi and Rashidi Nezhad (2020), in their article “The Voices towards Identity: Heteroglossia and Polyphony in Mrs. Dalloway and Things We Left Unsaid,” analyze the application of heteroglossia and polyphony in creating identity in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Zoya Pirzad's *Things We Left Unsaid*. Narwani and Vaidya (2024), in their article *Polyphony of Unguided Voices: A Bakhtinian Reading of Hosseini's The Kite Runner*, they utilize Bakhtin's theory of polyphony to contend that the novel resists an authoritative voice through the coexistence of heterogeneous voices, whereby the ambiguity of the narrator is set against the certainty of other characters. In writing about *The Testaments*, most critics foreground Atwood's use of several narrators as a means of opposing authoritarian domination. Polyvocality enables women to make their stories heard and disclose intersecting systems of power. The same dynamics appear in recent research. To illustrate, Alhourani et al. (2025) examine Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood*, demonstrating how trauma and intersectionality converge in Black women's marginalization. Their examination of

layered oppression echoes Atwood's portrayal of women living with trauma and institutionalized oppression in Gilead.

Similarly, [Alhourani, Adel, Othman, Khalifa, and Elhalafawy \(2025\)](#) address Rohina Malik's *Unveiled* and argue that performance is used as a means of resisting postcolonial stereotyping. Their analysis of how storytelling and performance can reclaim silenced voices provides a helpful template for understanding Atwood's practice, where narrative becomes an act of rebellion. Together, these studies situate *The Testaments* within a broader lineage of texts centering intersectional resistance and employing polyphony as a resistant tactic.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper examines Atwood's 2019 novel *The Testaments* in the light of Bakhtin's ideas of polyphony and dialogism. It attempts to uncover the differing voices of resistance embodied in the three protagonists of the novel. Atwood employs polyphony to expose the complexities and contradictions inherent in the political regime of Gilead. In *The Testaments*, readers must accept and deal with several truths rather than pursue a single, absolute one, knowing that truth is different and sometimes contradictory.

4. RESULTS

Throughout the novels, many female voices are smuggled out, imprisoned, ignored, despised, resisted, and rebelled from the main characters like Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima, and Daisy to the secondary characters like Becca, Aunt Vidala, Aunt Helena, Tabitha, Paula, Ofcail, Aunt Gabbana, Aunt Liz, Vera, Rosa, and Zilla (Marthas in *The Commander*). There is not even a single female character who does not have a story to tell about her struggles. With this multiplicity of narrators and the diversity of their voices, Atwood effectively uses Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, according to which every character speaks out her own distinct experience.

Analyzing the novel's structure enables the reader to see how its various components individually make up the overall narrative. Striving for coherence, the author combines these various pieces into a cohesive whole. In a polyphonic novel, the structure is explicitly built to permit space for various ideologies and perspectives to exist and develop independently. *The Testaments* is an excellent example of this structure, with its intertwined stories of three women whose acts of defiance bring Gilead's repressive system down. Atwood weaves together these parallel narratives, allowing multiple perspectives to arise, and concentrates on combining them into a rich interplay of different yet complementary voices.

Atwood constructs the novel from multiple interwoven strands rather than one straightforward narrative. The structure brings together disparate narratives and tones, one of the characteristics of a polyphonic novel. Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima, and Daisy each have their own voice, and their stories are interwoven and illuminating to each other. The chorus of three voices describes Gilead in subtle color, so the reader can examine the regime from multiple perspectives and pass judgment on the diverse manner in which it polices and restricts women's lives ([Driss, 2023](#)).

The dialogism in this novel can be depicted through the overlap and interconnection of the multiple voices in the novel to give the reader a comprehensive view of the situation in Gilead and their attempts to rebel against it, and how they did so.

Although there is no direct dialogue between the characters, as the novel is narrated through testimonies, each voice in *The Testaments* is not isolated. However, despite their multiplicity, all of them confirm one idea: how these women resist and rebel against this system. This confirms Bakhtin's theory of dialogue that discourse cannot be dealt with in isolation from the world.

The dialogic process between the author, characters, and reader is dynamic and continuous. The three narrators of *The Testaments* do not simply conform to the author's perspective; instead, they become separate voices with the power to resist even the author's latent control.

They are not instruments of the author's language but active forces of their contemporary discourse, each holding an independent ideological stance. So also, the reader, as with the characters, is not subordinated to the author's voice but instead brought into active engagement in interpreting, being a part of the polyphonic discussion that constitutes the novel's structure (Viswanathan, 2010).

5. DISCUSSION

The Testaments (2019) is Margaret Atwood's sequel to her 1985 dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is set in the oppressive theocratic state of Gilead and follows the lives of three women, Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy, whose lives become intimately intertwined. The novel, through its testimonies, reveals the secret workings of Gilead's political structure and the resistance fighting to topple it. Atwood's compelling narrative weaves together themes of power, rebellion, and the unrelenting search for freedom, issuing a haunting and intellectually provoking denunciation of authoritarianism. The 2019 Booker Prize winner, the book features three distinct narrative voices: Aunt Lydia's sections, which are titled *The Ardua Hall Holograph*, are written as her own memoir, while Agnes's and Daisy's accounts are presented in the form of "Transcripts of Testimony," perhaps taped after Gilead fell. The employment of this polyphonic structure makes *The Testaments* another one of Atwood's incisive observations about our world today.

Contrasting with *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* reveals the truth behind Gilead's facade, a society full of corruption covered up by pretensions to moral purification. The novel also shows how its female characters resist and ultimately bring about Gilead's destruction. Unlike the first novel, the book has three main protagonists, none of them Handmaids. These narrators are Aunt Lydia, previously known to readers from *The Handmaid's Tale*; Agnes, a young girl brought up in a Commander's home in Gilead; and Daisy, also referred to as Nicole, an adolescent living in Canada. While their narratives begin separately, they increasingly overlap as the story develops (Josefsson, 2020).

Before examining *The Testaments* from a polyphonic viewpoint, describing how the narrative is told is the first requisite. The novel is presented within three interwoven stories of women who survived and resisted the totalitarian regime of Gilead. The first of these storytellers, Aunt Lydia, previously met in *The Handmaid's Tale*, tells her tale in the form of a secret memoir that reveals her own key part in the ultimate downfall of Gilead. She is brilliant and in a good position among the Aunts, so they trust her to develop the systems that keep women in Gilead under control. Lydia secretly gathers sensitive documents that show the regime's corruption and sends classified information through an extensive network of resistance operatives. She is determined to show the world the terrible things that happen to women in Gilead (White, 2020).

The second narrator or voice in the novel is a young girl who is adopted into a Gileadean household headed by the influential Commander Kyle. Though she receives affection from her adoptive mother, Tabitha, Agnes develops covert reservations about what Gilead does to women as she grows up. When Commander Kyle compels her to marry senior Commander Judd, she dodges this fate by becoming one of the Aunts. In this regime, marriage is banned, giving women the potential to read, write, and enjoy books: "That is why they could have written and books" (Atwood, 2019). With her new position, Agnes comes into possession of documents chronicling Gilead's brutal and corrupt past. Her life changed unexpectedly when Daisy appeared at Ardua Hall, and Aunt Lydia announced that Daisy was none other than Baby Nicole, making the two young women sisters.

The third narrator of *The Testaments* is Daisy, who was raised in Canada by adoptive parents. Following their sudden murder, agents of Mayday, a resistance movement opposed to Gilead, tell her that the man and woman she had considered her parents were not her real parents, and that she is in fact "Baby Nicole," a child who had achieved legendary status after being smuggled out of Gilead as an infant. Daisy also learns that Agnes is her biological sister. The two women are charged with the mission of smuggling a cache of incriminating documents out of Gilead to expose to the rest of the world the violence and corruption of its regime. At the conclusion of the novel, Daisy is given a renewed sense of belonging, as she has been reunited with both her sister and her birth mother.

Hence, Atwood's novel is an ideal example of literary polyphony, containing a combination of explicit and implicit voices. They are not simply the personal opinions of characters in the novel, but also resonances from the external world, the historical, social, cultural, and political milieus that generated and welcomed the novel. As a polyphonic text, *The Testaments* has multiple voices of resistance that unite to create a multi-level and multilayered vision of Gilead. At the center of this structuring is the thematic centering of women's capacity to narrate their own stories, reclaiming agency through narrative.

The narration of *The Testaments* is framed through multiple voices, which include Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy. Each one of them presents different ideologies and experiences in the Gilead world. In *The State of Gilead*, women cannot rebel or resist; they are treated as subordinates. This society is based on the difference between the sexes. In the narration of Aunt Lydia, she begins to describe the early beginnings of Gilead. She states how Commander Judd and the Aunts worked to suppress women in Gilead. Commander Judd contends that gender equality is a myth because "by nature they can never achieve it" (Atwood, 2019).

Lydia's voice invites the reader to see things from her perspective and to refrain from judging her from a single point of view. As Driss (2023) argues, the Grossman passage Atwood uses as an epigraph also serves as a warning, introduction, and forewarning of the story's complexity (p. 113). This aligns with Aunt Lydia's frequently repeated demands, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, for the reader to take her account as truth. At one point in her holograph, she entrusts the reader with her message, although she is not certain what kind of message it is. Some days, she fancies herself a "Recording Angel," setting down all of Gilead's sins, including her own; other days, she downplays this moral authority, wondering if she is nothing more than a purveyor of "sordid gossip," and acknowledging that she will never hear the reader's ultimate judgment (Atwood, 2019).

Aunt Lydia is forced to participate in the suppression of women as she is one of the Aunts, but she decides to do so in order to help overthrow the patriarchal regime of Gilead. She quickly gained dominance over the other founders. She has established a wide network of surveillance to collect evidence of the oppression of women in Gilead. As Agnes arrives at Ardua Hall, her friend Becka warns her to watch what she says because Aunt Lydia has a way of knowing about it. She does not pass all the information she knows to Commander Judd, but she reveals just enough information to him to keep him satisfied (Josefsson, 2020). She does not tell him all the information about Baby Nicole, but only the information she wants him to know. She states that Aunt Lydia also mentions that her plans are already in motion. However, she does not reveal the details to anyone since even an accidental phrase could jeopardize everything. She reaffirms that under her authority, Pearl Girls are central characters in the novel and belong to a women's universe, which, in her view, should be beyond the reach of dominating men.

In addition, Aunt Lydia intervenes to prevent Agnes from committing suicide when her parents force her to marry Commander Judd. She consoles her by informing her that marriage is not for all, hence justifying that marriage is not the only way for women. Lydia ultimately risks her life to save Agnes from Gilead to be with her sister. Another example of her sacrifice is in her assistance in the escape of Daisy, when she guides her to a cache full of evidence of the atrocities committed by the regime (Rehman & Khalid, 2022). In her illustrations of these acts, Atwood seems to aim for the partial forgiveness of one of her most ethically complex characters: Aunt Lydia, who collaborates with the system in her efforts to survive but at the same time actively pursues its destruction (Pollitt, 2019).

The character of Aunt Lydia portrays the voice of a woman who is one of the founders of the Gilead regime and, at the same time, the one who resists and rebels to overthrow the regime in Gilead. She does her best to collect information and pass it to Agnes and Becka to make Agnes change her point of view of the Gilead system. She uses all her knowledge to reveal many truths about the Gilead system. She makes Becka and Agnes resist and bring down the regime. She bids them farewell, likening them to messengers or "silver doves" and "destroying angels," and wishes them a safe landing (Atwood, 2019).

The second voice of rebellion in the novel is Agnes. As Agnes begins to share her testimony, she feels that she needs to explain her feelings about Gilead. She knows something about what the outside world thinks of Gilead: a

horrific, tyrannical hellscape that brutally oppresses its citizens, especially women. She also identifies the moral corruption of Gilead, acknowledging that it is filled with evil, deception, and deeds that go contrary to God's intentions (Atwood, 2019).

Throughout Agnes's narrative, the doll's house reappears as a symbolic element, underscoring its importance in her memories and interpretation of the extreme social hierarchy of Gilead. Through this miniature version, she demonstrates to the reader her understanding of the regime's hierarchical structure and rigid gender roles. As Yadav, Arora, and Singh (2024) point out, the underlying undertones of resistance occur when Agnes is about to be the Commander's wife (p. 7).

In describing the doll's house, she places each character in their assigned place: the wife at the table, the obedient daughters, the toiling Martha in the kitchen, the Commander sitting alone in his study, but then disrupts this scene by moving the wife's doll out of the way, symbolically rejecting the role she has been assigned.

Her refusal to marry is a clear indication of her rebellion against the patriarchal system. In Gilead, marriage is a fundamental tool used to oppress women. When Commander Kyle decides to marry her, he believes she has no right to resist. She states that, despite belonging to the privileged class herself, she is presented without a sense of self and is portrayed as a girl who will be imprisoned in wedlock. While she reflects, "Wedlock: it had a dull metallic sound, like an iron door clicking shut" (Atwood, 2019), showing that, for her, wedlock signifies imprisonment, as the iron door clanks shut.

Thus, Agnes starts thinking of solutions to escape from this marriage. In order to survive, Agnes chooses the path of becoming a future Aunt. Along the way, she encounters another tortured soul in Gilead, Becka, whose life further shapes her worldview. Agnes's decision to become an Aunt is a gesture of resistance against the patriarchal rule of Gilead. Although the position inscribes her in the hierarchy of the regime, it also helps her avoid forced marriage and undermines the submissive role that was originally her destiny. This way, she gains control over her existence while undermining Commander Kyle's power. The Aunts are tied by the system's rigidity, which inspires Agnes and Becka to defy and ultimately topple it. Agnes and Becka assist Aunt Lydia in deconstructing the regime by providing intel to the Mayday resistance. As Agnes later reflects, "We had been spared, and these struggles had ground off the softness that might once have been there" (Atwood, 2019).

The third resistant narrative voice is that of Daisy, who is revealed to be Baby Nicole in Gilead. In her opinion, Gilead appears as a repressive society where women are not allowed to drive cars or work based on gender discrimination, indicating that women there are treated "like cows," and that even cows have a better fate. Aunt Lydia conceals a microchip in the scarred "O" on Daisy's arm when she comes to Gilead. This chip contains a cache of documents meant for Canadian resistance agents, which detail the brutal treatment of the citizens by Gilead and contain the potential to liberate the regime's women and girls (White, 2020). Though Daisy nearly dies to accomplish this, she resists and survives due to her sister. Looking back at the experience, she notices that her left arm was separated from her body, as if it were no longer a part of her. While Daisy departs Gilead, she feels very free, hoping that one day the women of Gilead will join her in freedom.

Another feature of Bakhtin's novel theory that emerges in *The Testaments* is dialogism. Directly linked to the contemporary theory of intertextuality, dialogism in the novel manifests itself in its allusions to culture, literature, and history that multiply the narrative and connect it to earlier discourses (Narwani & Vaidya, 2024). As Driss (2023) points out, *The Testaments* is an exquisitely crafted intertextual setting that encourages readers to find their way through various literary, critical, and cultural perspectives (p. 115). The novel borrows explicit allusions to real-world sources, such as Commander Judd quoting the assumption that anyone not in favor of something is bound to be against it, quoting the war on terror discourses (Atwood, 2019). Similarly, Aunt Lydia cites Benjamin Franklin's caution regarding unity, observing that people should stick together to avoid communal disaster (Atwood, 2019). Such intertextual references enrich the text's dialogue by situating Gilead's fictional rhetoric within broader political and historical discourse.

Dialogism recognizes the irreducibly dialogic nature of utterance, where meaning for any utterance emerges from its connection to what comes before it and anticipation of what will appear in the same context. Bakhtin argues that there can never be a solitary utterance, but all utterances are continuously in dialogue with other texts, voices, and pasts. *The Testaments* demonstrates this idea as a response to and elaboration upon *The Handmaid's Tale* and as positioning itself within a wide cultural and historical discourse. In doing so, it is involved in a multi-layered conversation not merely with Atwood's earlier book but also with real political speeches, feminist thought, and earlier movements to secure women's rights. Atwood's novel portrays a dialogical relationship with its forerunner and with feminist, political, and religious discourses in the real world.

6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, reading Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* through Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and dialogism makes a suggestive commentary on the novel's plurality of resistant voices. This Bakhtinian approach illustrates how Atwood constructs a resistant text that avoids dominating a single authorial voice and allows for the coexistence of distinct ideological positions. In keeping with Bakhtin's assertion that the novel should have several patterns of social discourse, *The Testaments* presents characters whose voices are not subordinated to the authorial intention nor restricted by a single interpretive horizon. By employing several narrators and merging their accounts, Atwood establishes a dense dialogic landscape in which each voice speaks with other voices and to broaden cultural and historical spaces. What results is a compelling model of a polyphonic and dialogic novel that tracks the travails of its three women protagonists and reveals how narrative form can become a practice of resistance.

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