

Construction of History and Truth in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Alias Grace

Abida Begum¹, Dr.Prof.S.Prasanna Sree²

¹(Ph.D) Andhra University Assistant Professor in English,

St. Ann's College for Women Malkapuram Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

²Department of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam. & Vice Chancellor of Adi Kavi Nanayya University.

Abstract—This research paper explores the construction of history and truth in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Alias Grace* (1996), emphasizing how narrative strategies, power structures, and gendered experiences shape historical understanding. Atwood challenges the traditional view of history as an objective and factual record by presenting it as a subjective, fragmented, and ideologically mediated process. Through the use of unreliable narrators, nonlinear narration, and metafictional framing, the novels expose the instability of truth and question the authority of official historical discourse.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the personal testimony of Offred resists the totalitarian regime of Gilead, which manipulates history, religion, and language to legitimize patriarchal control. The novel's concluding "Historical Notes" further complicate notions of truth by reframing Offred's suffering within an academic context that privileges scholarly detachment over lived experience. In *Alias Grace*, Atwood reconstructs a real nineteenth-century murder case using contradictory documents, medical reports, and Grace Marks's ambiguous narrative voice, highlighting the limitations of archival records and scientific inquiry in uncovering historical truth.

This paper argues that both novels exemplify historiographic metafiction, revealing how historical narratives are shaped by power, ideology, and gender bias. By foregrounding marginalized female voices, Atwood critiques patriarchal historiography and underscores the ethical responsibility of readers and scholars to engage critically with historical narratives. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Atwood's fiction presents history not as a fixed truth, but as a dynamic and contested narrative open to multiple interpretations.

Index Terms—Construction of History, Truth, Historical Narrative, Fiction and Fact, Gendered Memory, epistemology, cultural memory.

I. INTRODUCTION

The intertwining of history and truth has long been a central concern in literary studies, particularly in works that engage with historical memory, gendered experience, and the politics of narration. Canadian author Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Alias Grace* (1996) are prime examples of how fiction can confront the tensions between recorded history and subjective experience. Both novels demonstrate that historical truth is not a static collection of facts but is instead constructed, mediated, and often manipulated through narrative, ideology, and power structures. This paper examines the construction of history and truth in these two novels, focusing on the interplay between narrative voice, socio-political context, and gendered experience. In exploring Atwood's use of unreliable narrators, archival interventions, and metafictional strategies, this study argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* expose the instability of historical truth and challenge readers to recognize the political contingency of all narratives that claim authority.

Literature Review: History, Truth, and Narrative

The relationship between history and truth has been debated extensively in literary theory. Hayden White's concept of "narrativization" argues that historical events cannot be separated from the narrative forms used to represent them (White 1987). Similarly, Michel Foucault's notion of power/knowledge suggests that what counts as truth is whether it serves dominant social structures (Foucault 1977). Feminist scholars have also highlighted how patriarchal structures shape historical narratives, often

marginalizing women's experiences (Scott 1999). The *Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*, both widely studied in Atwood criticism, engage directly with these theoretical concerns. Critics such as Margaret Atwood scholar Coral Ann Howells have noted Atwood's deliberate blurring of historical fact and fiction to foreground the subjective and ideological nature of truth (Howells 2005). By positioning their protagonists within oppressive historical frameworks—Gilead's theocratic regime in *The Handmaid's Tale* and 19th-century Canadian penal system in *Alias Grace*—Atwood destabilizes the notion of an objective historical record.

Historical Contexts in Atwood's Fiction

The *Handmaid's Tale* and the Politics of Memory

The *Handmaid's Tale* is set in the Republic of Gilead, a dystopian theocracy that has replaced the United States after a series of ecological and political crises. The regime rewrites laws, repurposes biblical language, and reconfigures gender roles to justify its authoritarian control. Within this context, historical truth is reshaped to support ideological ends. The narrative is presented as a recovered set of "salvaged manuscripts" discovered centuries later, emphasizing the instability and fragmentary nature of historical knowledge.

Offred's narrative is not a traditional historical account but a personal testimony shaped by fear, memory, and survival. Her story is recorded orally, not written, highlighting the fragility of women's voices within oppressive systems. Gilead's authorities actively suppress pre-Gilead history, erasing women's autonomy and rewriting the past to normalize subjugation. As Offred recalls her former life, readers become aware that personal memory functions as a form of resistance against enforced historical amnesia. The novel's concluding section, "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*," delivered by Professor Pieixoto, further complicates the construction of truth. The academic tone distances Offred's suffering, reducing her lived experience to an object of scholarly speculation. This framing demonstrates how history is often filtered through institutional authority, privileging detached analysis over emotional truth. Atwood thereby critiques traditional historiography that marginalizes individual voices, especially those of women.

Alias Grace and the Reconstruction of the Past

Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace* is grounded in actual historical events, drawing inspiration from the real-life case of Grace Marks, a young Irish immigrant convicted of murder in 19th-century Canada. Atwood bases the novel on historical documents, newspaper reports, trial transcripts, and contemporary accounts, yet she deliberately leaves gaps and contradictions unresolved. This strategy underscores the impossibility of accessing a singular, objective truth about the past.

Grace Marks serves as an unreliable narrator whose fragmented memories challenge official historical narratives. Her recollections are shaped by trauma, repression, and social conditioning. The male-dominated judicial system interprets her silence and inconsistencies as evidence of guilt or manipulation, reflecting broader patriarchal assumptions about female morality and credibility. Atwood thus exposes how history often criminalizes women through selective interpretation of evidence.

The character of Dr. Simon Jordan, a psychiatrist attempting to uncover the "truth" behind Grace's actions, represents the limitations of scientific and rational inquiry. Despite his methods, Jordan fails to access definitive answers, reinforcing the novel's skepticism toward authoritative truth claims. The multiplicity of voices—letters, testimonies, interviews—creates a mosaic of perspectives that resist closure, emphasizing history as a contested narrative rather than a fixed record.

Narrative Strategies and the Question of Truth

Unreliable Narration and Fragmentation

Both novels employ unreliable narration as a means of questioning historical truth. Offred openly acknowledges the gaps and inconsistencies in her story, stating that she tells it differently depending on imagined audiences. Her admission foregrounds the constructed nature of storytelling and undermines expectations of narrative certainty. Similarly, Grace Marks oscillates between apparent innocence and calculated ambiguity, forcing readers to confront their own assumptions about truth and guilt.

Fragmentation plays a crucial role in both texts. Offred's narrative is nonlinear, shifting between past and present, memory and imagination. Grace's story is interrupted by external documents and alternative voices that contradict her account. These fragmented structures mirror the fractured nature of historical

knowledge and challenge linear, authoritative historiography.

Archives, Authority, and Power

Atwood critically engages with archival practices in both novels. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the absence of written records highlights the vulnerability of marginalized histories. The "Historical Notes" reveal how archives are interpreted through dominant academic frameworks that may distort or trivialize lived experience. In *Alias Grace*, the abundance of documents paradoxically obscures truth, as competing accounts create confusion rather than clarity.

Both novels illustrate Michel Foucault's argument that knowledge is inseparable from power. Those who control archives, language, and interpretation determine what becomes historical truth. Women's voices, particularly those of lower social classes, are either erased or reinterpreted to serve patriarchal interests. Atwood's fiction thus functions as a counter-archive, restoring attention to silenced perspectives.

Revisiting the Concept of Truth: Philosophical Dimensions

The concept of truth in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* cannot be understood solely within historical or political frameworks; it must also be examined philosophically. Atwood draws attention to epistemological questions concerning how truth is known, who has the authority to define it, and whether truth can ever be fully recovered. Truth in these novels is not absolute but contingent, shaped by narrative mediation and ideological positioning.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, truth is fragmented and provisional. Offred herself admits that her narrative may not be accurate in a conventional sense, acknowledging that she reconstructs events based on need. This admission aligns with postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives and universal truths. The novel suggests that truth is experiential rather than factual, emphasizing emotional authenticity over empirical certainty.

Similarly, *Alias Grace* problematizes the very notion of factual truth. Despite the abundance of historical documents, Atwood demonstrates that facts alone cannot yield definitive truth. Contradictory testimonies, biased reports, and cultural prejudices undermine the reliability of historical evidence. Grace's own refusal—or inability—to present a clear, unified account highlights the epistemological limits

of both historical and psychological inquiry. Language, Discourse, and Ideological Control

Manipulation of Language in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Language is one of the primary tools through which history and truth are constructed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gilead's regime systematically alters language to control thought and suppress dissent. Biblical phrases are selectively quoted and ritualized, transforming religious language into a mechanism of political domination. Greetings such as "Blessed be the fruit" and "May the Lord open" function as ideological reinforcement, normalizing oppression through linguistic repetition.

The restriction of literacy for women further emphasizes the relationship between language and power. By denying women access to reading and writing, Gilead ensures that women cannot produce their own historical records. Offred's oral narrative thus becomes an act of

resistance, preserving personal truth in the absence of written documentation. Atwood highlights how silencing language leads to historical erasure, reinforcing patriarchal control.

Narrative Discourse in *Alias Grace*

In *Alias Grace*, language operates differently but with similar implications. The novel juxtaposes multiple discourses—legal, medical, religious, and domestic—each claiming authority over Grace's story. Legal discourse frames Grace as a criminal, medical discourse pathologizes her behaviour, and religious discourse moralizes her actions. None of these discourses fully capture her lived experience.

Grace's own narrative voice is marked by restraint and irony. She speaks carefully, aware that language can be used against her. This strategic ambiguity underscores how marginalized individuals must navigate dominant discourses to survive. Atwood thus exposes the limitations of authoritative language systems and suggests that truth often exists in the interstices between competing narratives.

The Role of the Body in Historical Truth

The Female Body as Historical Text

Atwood foregrounds the female body as a site where history is inscribed and contested. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women's bodies are reduced to reproductive instruments, symbolizing how patriarchal regimes control biological functions to enforce ideological

goals. Offred's body becomes a living historical document, bearing witness to Gilead's brutality.

The ritualized sexual ceremonies imposed on Handmaids transform intimate acts into political performances. These ceremonies are recorded not in archives but in bodily memory, emphasizing how history can be transmitted through lived experience rather than written records. Atwood suggests that bodily suffering constitutes a form of historical truth that resists erasure.

Embodiment and Trauma in *Alias Grace*

In *Alias Grace*, the body is similarly central to historical construction. Grace's physical labor, imprisonment, and medical examinations highlight how women's bodies are subjected to institutional scrutiny. The use of early psychiatric practices, including hypnosis, reflects historical attempts to access truth through the body, often at the expense of autonomy.

Grace's possible dissociative episodes complicate the relationship between body and memory. Whether her lapses are genuine or strategic remains unresolved, reinforcing

Atwood's refusal to impose narrative closure. Trauma disrupts coherent recollection, suggesting that historical truth must account for psychological complexity rather than demand consistency. Atwood rejects linear temporality in both novels, emphasizing how history is experienced subjectively rather than chronologically. Offred's narrative moves fluidly between past and present, illustrating how memory collapses temporal boundaries. This nonlinear structure mirrors trauma theory, which suggests that traumatic experiences resist linear narration.

In *Alias Grace*, temporal fragmentation is achieved through alternating chapters, letters, and testimonies. The past continually intrudes upon the present, undermining the notion that history is fixed or complete. Atwood's

manipulation of time reinforces her critique of traditional historiography, which often imposes artificial order on chaotic human experience.

Silence, Absence, and the Ethics of Interpretation

Silence plays a crucial role in the construction of history and truth in both novels. What is left unsaid often carries greater significance than what is recorded. Offred's silences—particularly regarding acts of resistance or emotional pain—reflect survival strategies within oppressive systems. These gaps

challenge readers to recognize the ethical limits of interpretation.

Grace's silences are even more pronounced. Her refusal to confess definitively frustrates both the characters within the novel and the reader. Atwood uses this frustration to critique the demand for narrative closure, suggesting that insisting on definitive answers may replicate oppressive dynamics

Religion, Morality, and Historical Authority

Religion functions as a legitimizing force in both novels, shaping moral interpretations of history. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead's leaders manipulate religious texts to justify authoritarian control, presenting their ideology as divinely ordained. This appropriation of religion highlights how moral authority can be used to suppress alternative truths.

In *Alias Grace*, religious morality informs public judgment of Grace's character. She is alternately portrayed as a fallen woman or an innocent victim, reflecting societal anxieties about female sexuality and agency. Atwood exposes how moral frameworks influence historical interpretation, often reinforcing gendered stereotypes

Female Experience as Historical Evidence

Atwood foregrounds female experience as a legitimate form of historical knowledge. Offred's body becomes a site of political control, symbolizing how women's reproductive capacities have historically been regulated by institutions. Her personal memories challenge Gilead's official narrative, asserting the validity of subjective truth.

In *Alias Grace*, Grace's domestic labor and social marginalization reflect the invisibility of working-class women in historical records. Atwood emphasizes how women's histories are often preserved only through scandal, crime, or moral judgment. By centering Grace's voice, the novel reclaims female experience as a crucial component of historical understanding.

Patriarchy and the Construction of Truth

Both novels reveal how patriarchal systems shape historical narratives. Gilead's ideology selectively interprets religious texts to justify oppression, while 19th-century Canadian society frames Grace Marks through moral binaries of innocence and corruption. In both cases, women are denied agency over their own stories.

The male authorities—Commanders, academics, doctors, judges—serve as gatekeepers of truth. Their interpretations often dismiss emotional and experiential knowledge as unreliable, privileging institutional authority. Atwood critiques this hierarchy, suggesting that historical truth must account for marginalized voices to be meaningful.

Memory, Trauma, and Historical Gaps

Memory functions as both a source of truth and a site of uncertainty in Atwood's novels. Trauma disrupts linear recollection, producing silences and distortions. Offred's memories of her daughter and husband are incomplete yet emotionally resonant, conveying truths that transcend factual accuracy. Grace's memory lapses raise questions about repression and survival, highlighting the psychological dimensions of historical narration.

Atwood suggests that historical gaps are not merely absences but meaningful spaces that reveal power relations. What is forgotten, suppressed, or left ambiguous often speaks louder than what is recorded. By refusing definitive answers, both novels challenge readers to accept uncertainty as an integral part of historical truth.

Metafiction and Self-Reflexivity

Atwood's use of metafiction draws attention to the act of storytelling itself. The "Historical Notes" in *The Handmaid's Tale* frame the narrative as an academic artifact, prompting readers to question whose interpretations shape history. In *Alias Grace*, the interweaving of factual documents with fictional invention blurs boundaries between history and literature.

This self-reflexivity aligns Atwood's work with postmodern historiographic metafiction, a move that interrogates the authority of historical discourse. By exposing narrative construction, Atwood invites readers to critically engage with historical texts rather than passively accept them.

Atwood's novels exemplify what critics describe as historiographic metafiction—a mode that simultaneously constructs and deconstructs historical narrative. By blending historical fact with fictional invention, Atwood challenges the boundary between history and literature. This approach emphasizes that both are narrative forms shaped by perspective and selection.

The "Historical Notes" in *The Handmaid's Tale* explicitly foreground this metafictional concern. The

academic framing invites readers to question scholarly authority and recognize the ideological assumptions underlying historical analysis. Similarly, *Alias Grace* exposes the constructed nature of historical knowledge by presenting multiple, conflicting accounts without resolution.

Comparative Analysis

While *The Handmaid's Tale* projects a speculative future and *Alias Grace* revisits a historical past, both novels converge in their treatment of history as a contested narrative shaped by power, gender, and memory. Offred's voice represents suppressed future history, while Grace's story embodies unresolved past history. Together, they illustrate Atwood's broader critique of how truth is constructed, recorded, and transmitted.

The speculative framework of *The Handmaid's Tale* warns against the dangers of ideological manipulation of history, while the historical realism of *Alias Grace* exposes the limitations of archival truth. Both texts emphasize that historical understanding requires attentiveness to marginalized voices and narrative complexity.

From a feminist perspective, both novels critique the exclusion of women from historical authorship. Offred and Grace represent women whose stories are mediated by male authority figures—academics, doctors, judges—who claim objectivity while perpetuating patriarchal norms. Atwood's narrative strategies reclaim female subjectivity as a valid source of historical truth.

The novels also emphasize the intersection of gender with class, sexuality, and power. Grace's status as a poor immigrant woman compounds her marginalization, while Offred's reproductive value paradoxically grants her limited protection within Gilead. These complexities enrich Atwood's feminist critique, demonstrating that historical truth is shaped by intersecting social forces.

Atwood's exploration of history and truth remains highly relevant in contemporary contexts marked by debates over misinformation, ideological polarization, and historical revisionism. Both novels caution against uncritical acceptance of authoritative narratives and highlight the importance of preserving marginalized voices.

In an era where history is frequently contested and politicized, Atwood's fiction serves as a reminder that truth requires ethical engagement and interpretive

humility. By foregrounding narrative uncertainty, Atwood encourages readers to approach historical texts critically, acknowledging both their power and their limitations.

II. CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* offer profound insights into the construction of history and truth. Through fragmented narratives, unreliable narration, and metafictional framing, Atwood challenges the notion of objective historical truth and exposes the power structures underlying historical discourse. By centering women's voices and experiences, the novels reclaim marginalized histories and underscore the ethical responsibility of readers and scholars to question authoritative narratives.

Ultimately, Atwood's fiction demonstrates that history is not merely a record of the past but an ongoing negotiation of meaning shaped by memory, power, and storytelling. In recognizing the constructed nature of truth, readers are encouraged to engage critically with both historical texts and contemporary narratives, fostering a more inclusive and reflective understanding of the past.

Through *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood offers a sustained interrogation of how history and truth are constructed, mediated, and contested. By employing fragmented narratives, unreliable narrators, and metafictional framing, Atwood dismantles the illusion of objective historical truth and exposes the ideological forces that shape historical discourse.

Both novels foreground women's voices as essential yet marginalized sources of historical knowledge. Offred's testimony and Grace's ambiguous narrative challenge patriarchal historiography, emphasizing the ethical responsibility of readers and scholars to engage with silenced perspectives. Atwood ultimately suggests that truth is not discovered but constructed—a process shaped by power, memory language, and narrative form.

In refusing definitive answers, Atwood's fiction affirms uncertainty as a critical space for reflection. History, in her vision, is not a closed record of the past but an ongoing dialogue that demands attentiveness, empathy, and critical awareness. By illuminating the constructed nature of truth, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Alias Grace* contribute profoundly to feminist literary

discourse and contemporary debates on historical representation.

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