

Conflict in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Critical Discourse Approach

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Abstract

Conflict is a common but complicated phenomenon. It has been extensively researched in many domains, including philosophy, sociology, psychology, and linguistics. Using the Critical Discourse Approach, this study examines the issue of self-society conflict in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The significance of this work lies in the identification and explanation of the discursive strategies that force the ideological polarization of the positively portrayed self versus the negatively portrayed other. The purpose of this study is to answer two questions: what are the discursive strategies used in *The Handmaid's Tale* to create a positive or negative representation, and how are these strategies implemented? Five extracts from *The Handmaid's Tale* were examined using eight of Van Dijk's discursive strategies (2006). The findings show the pervasiveness of the discursive strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which attempt to transmit the ideological polarization of a positive portrayal of the self against a negative presentation of the other. Students of critical discourse analysis, communications studies, and of English, in particular, may find the findings useful.

Keywords: conflict, critical discourse analysis, discursive strategies, self-society conflict, *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Introduction

Conflict is an all-encompassing phenomenon that can be found throughout literature. It occurs in any context, institution, or organization due to differences in people's perspectives, desires, perceptions, and requirements. It can be viewed as a competition between people with competing wants, ideas, convictions, or ambitions. Algert (1996) states that conflict is a struggle between opposing forces, usually a protagonist and an antagonist. Literature often shows the conflict between Man and Society. Man vs. Society's main character disagrees with a larger group such as a community, society, culture, etc. A primary character battles with prevailing opinions or communal values. It is also described as an adversarial condition of resistance characterized by disagreement between two or more parties. This paper sheds light on the theme of self-society conflict in five chosen extracts from *The Handmaid's Tale* novel.

In reality, the concept of conflict has researched from a social, linguistic, and psychological standpoint. It is at the center of current studies, but the purpose of this study is to examine this notion in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel from a critical standpoint. Thus, the present study will bridge the gap in the literature by studying the discursive strategies that underlie the self-society conflict in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel. The work will be helpful to linguistics since it aims to address the issue of self-society conflict in texts. This will contribute to the area of linguistics by providing new understandings of the language that are required by the writer to generate specific beliefs through the use of specific linguistic strategies. It is significant to enrich the domains of linguistics in general and critical studies in particular by researching the concept of self-society conflict in literature. As a result, it provides comprehension of *The Handmaid's Tale* language. This benefits not only linguistics but also literature by providing new insights into the concept of self-society conflict. The purpose of this study is to investigate, through critical discourse analysis, the discursive strategies used in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. For this purpose, we adopt Van Dijk's (2006) methodology to examine five extracts from *The Handmaid's Tale*. The focus of the analysis is the polarization of positive self-presentation versus negative other presentations. The researchers seek to answer the following:

- 1-What are the discursive strategies that uncover the ideologies used by the characters in the novel to convince the readers and to create a positive or negative representation?
- 2-How are these strategies implemented?

Literature Review

Conflict and Critical Discourse Analysis

Conflict is a significant theme in Atwood's novels and shows in her writing. Conflict happens in any setting, institution, or organization because of variations in people's views, desires, perceptions, and needs. Conflict is an adversarial condition of resistance characterized by disagreement between two or more parties (Wilmont, 2001). It is a connection between two or more individuals or groups who have or believe they have irreconcilable goals and needs. As a result, the incompatibility could be real or perceived, involving material and, or symbolic resources. Most people view conflict as a bad term with negative implications. Conflict categorizes into many types, such as intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict, intergroup conflict, intragroup conflict, inter-organization conflict, and intra-organization conflict (Al-Mamary & Hussein, 2019).

Almost every nation suffers from self-society conflict. Humans go through a period of socialization as social beings. In a society with many individuals and social institutions, there is a great deal of opportunity for social contact. It is possible to converse with an individual, a group of individuals, or even a group. People will begin to see distinctions between themselves due to their interactions. Societal strife is fueled by various factors, including, but not limited to, differences in religion, economy, and social class.

From the point of view of Van Dijk (1995), critical discourse analysis is a method of researching and investigating text and speech (as cited in Akbar & Nawal, 2019). Social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are all examined in this kind of discourse's social and political situations (Gyollai, 2020). To put it simply, CDA goes beyond the awareness of discourse's social aspects, according to Fairclough (1993). CDA's central concept is to show how speech shapes and has shaped our community and how this, in turn, shapes our sense of self. It is important to remember that language does not exist in a vacuum, which is why CDA focuses on the interdependence between language and society. In CDA research, ideology is one of the most significant concepts. Ideology is divided into three parts: discourse, social cognition, and society. These three parts are intricately intertwined. As ideologies are discursively expressed and generated through discourse, speech serves as the socio-cognitive foundation for everyday manifestation and social replication. In other words, discourse helps to disseminate ideas and make them tangible (Van Dijk, 2006). The central tenet of CDA "draws heavily on social theories and seeks to develop a critically contextualized approach to linguistics which identifies issues of ideology, power, and inequality" (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018, p. 1).

Previous Studies

The issue of conflict was studied by many researchers. For instance, Yusuf (2018) examined the conflict resolutions in language use among leaders of agitating groups in Nigeria. This research aimed to discover how hate speech and stereotyping might incite inter-group strife via the power of human language. This was done by analyzing the chosen speeches by social group players based on speech act theory and socio-cognitive critical discourse analysis, respectively, to generate a conflict scenario. The study demonstrated that essential community members might use language as the standard semiotic system to maintain their self-interest, even if it does not benefit the larger population.

In 2019, Chernenko studied on the pragmatic peculiarities of the final phase of conflict interaction in fiction discourse. This study aimed to complete a theoretical framework of conflict discourse studies by revealing the pragmatic peculiarities of the final step in conflict fiction discourse, revealing gender peculiarities, and studying verbal and non-verbal means of communication in the use of linguistic means in the final step of conflict discourse. Methods in linguistic studies, including pragmatic and discourse analysis, were used in this work, as well as analysis and synthesis, induction, and deduction. The data were drawn from works by British and American authors from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The findings revealed three pragmatic sorts of communicative situations, from the perspectives of pragmatic, structural, and contextual values: separation, reconciliation, and accommodation of the speakers with elocutionary effect. Both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication were used to demonstrate gender differences in conflict speech. Verbally, male and female variations in conflict

communication were seen using emotional-evaluative vocabulary, taboo vocabulary, and qualifiers. Nonverbally, haptic communication, touch, smile, cry, voice quality, and eye contact had particular gender meanings.

Another study by Abustan (2020) focused on the conflict of the main character in Saroyan's *The Human Comedy*. He studied the conflict the main character in the novel faced, explaining the many types of competition split into internal and external conflicts. This study analyzed the variance explained by the main character in the novel. To explore this research, the author took a structural approach which usually studies literary works by examining the intrinsic elements that make up the piece. The findings showed that most of the main character's problems were caused by the environment or external circumstances. Homer, the primary character minimizes his desires and prioritizes those around him. Then, he matured. With his patience and care, he grew into a responsible adult. The narrative teaches people how to be accountable in their daily lives.

These studies attempted to detect and explain the (linguistic) nature of conflict; still, a gap is identified in terms of (1) the lack of a contextual discursive interpretation of the strategies employed and (2) the failure to address the ideological premises embedded in producing discursive content. The current study has attempted to bridge this gap by investigating discursive strategies at the critical discourse analysis levels. Through a critical interpretation, the study intends to give a more comprehensive and contextualized understanding of how conflict is produced and used.

The Handmaid's Tale (1985)

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* introduces readers to Gilead, a totalitarian religious state that values childbearing and gender hierarchy above everything else. Handmaids, Martha, and their wives are all under the thumb of Gilead, who uses religion to keep them in line. Flashbacks and memories of Offred's marriage, children, and captivity are utilized to tell the protagonist's tale. It's not uncommon for Gilead to pick up and retrain young, fertile women like Offred. Every month, they must perform a special ritual to sleep with their designated commander. They exist only to give wealthy couples who are unable to conceive children. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, the corruption deepens. As she tries to find a way out of her new incarceration, she worries about the safety of both herself and her daughter, whom she wants to be reunited with.

Method

This study employs the socio-cognitive method of Van Dijk's discursive strategies (2006). The central critical perspective is Van Dijk's ideological square, which emphasizes (1) our good traits while concealing our bad ones and (2) their terrible qualities while concealing our bad ones (Van Dijk, 2006). For the qualitative analysis, the deployment of discursive strategies is explored at the critical discourse analysis levels, whereas the quantitative analysis will cover the frequency of the identified discursive strategy.

The ideological square is a term coined by Van Dijk. Positive self-presentation and negative other demonstration characteristics demonstrate not only how we dip into in-groups and out-groups, but also how we represent ourselves and others during conflict (Van Dijk, 2000). Van Dijk employs several discursive strategies to demonstrate how the ideological square may debate

in various contexts (Van Dijk, 2000, 2006; Ajiboye, 2013). Due to space constraints, only eight of these discursive strategies were thoroughly studied.

Discursive strategies are several linguistic tools employed by the speaker to capture the attention of the listening audience in the situation in which the message is communicated. The strategy of repetition uses to stress the argument and direct the audience's attention to the content of the utterance by using the same term, phrase, or sentence multiple times. There is a strong connection between these four ideological speech strategies: actor description, polarization, positive self-presentation, and negative other-presentation. Actor description refers to the depiction of discourse actors—individually, collectively, unfavorably, or positively—as represented. It is common for ideological debate to focus on us and them. Thus, actor description often corresponds with the discourse players' polarization into us and them groups, which embodies the positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation of the discourse actors. Topoi refers to the apparent facts to back up an argument is known as self-evident reasoning. A metaphor is the invoking of a direct likeness between two items. An example strategy uses to provide concrete evidence in support of an argument (as cited in Aini, 2019).

Research Procedures

In this study, the CDA method will determine how self-society conflict is expressed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The researchers set up the analysis following certain steps: First, after reading the novel several times, they identify where specific ideas about self-society conflict are hidden. Then, they choose from the extracted statements those that have a particular ideology and one or more of the critical discourse analysis strategies. The researchers put the extracts in their proper context and explain the textual or conceptual meaning: This has to do with how the language choices in each extract show a different point of view on the self-society conflict.

Data Description

Five written extracts are chosen for analysis from the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* which was released in 1985. English is the original language of the novel. The number of words varies, and they are taken from Margaret Atwood's book. The chosen extracts are (a) written texts and (b) representative of the issue of self-society conflict to qualify as analytical materials. The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is chosen to portray the conflict of the handmaids in Gilead culture. The corpus of the study is depicted in the table one:

Table 1. *Corpus of analysis*

Social Theme	N.of extracts	N. of words	Publication year	Text type
Conflict	1	78	1985	Book
Conflict	2	28	1985	Book
Self-Society Conflict	3	61	1985	Book
Conflict	4	68	1985	Book
Conflict	5	55	1985	Book
Total	5	290		

Analysis

The data below explain the quantitative frequency of the discursive strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The five extracts analyses reveal a moderate-to-high frequency of discursive strategies, as shown in Table two below.

Table 2. *Distribution of discursive strategies in The Handmaid's Tale*

Discursive Strategies	Frequencies	Percentage %
Polarization	4	25 %
Metaphor	2	12.5 %
Actor Description	2	12.5 %
Lexicalization	3	18.75 %
Topio	1	6.25 %
Repetition	2	12.5 %
Vagueness	1	6.25 %
Example	1	6.25 %
Total	16	100 %

Extract 1

Aunt Lydia: They made such a mess of everything. They filled the air with chemicals, radiation, and poison! So, God whipped up a particular plague. The plague of infertility, as birthrates fell, made things worse. They were dirty women. They were slobs. But you are special, girls. Fertility is a gift given right by God. The world can be quite an ugly place. But we cannot wish that ugliness away. We cannot hide from that horror. (p.98)

Contextualization

The extract above notifies the character Aunt Lydia. She is one of the leading female characters who play a significant role in spreading the oppressive system of Gilead in this novel.

Linguistic Analysis

There are several discursive strategies in the above extract. The first is evident from the usage of the pronouns they in the utterance, *They made such a mess of everything* and we in the utterance, *we cannot wish that ugliness away* throughout the whole extract above, reflecting a sort of ideological polarization of the characters into an in-group (Handmaids) as she refers to them by the pronoun "we" and an out-group (Gilead's women) as she refers to them by the pronoun they. This ideological polarization reflects the writer's employment of the strategies of positive-self presentation and other-negative presentation. Another strategy is lexicalization. The character uses this strategy to represent something or someone positively or negatively. The use of negative lexical items such as dirty, worse, and sluts in this utterance, *They made things worse. They were dirty women. They were sluts* to represent Gilead's women negatively. In contrast, using a positive lexical item such as "special" in the utterance *But you are special girls* represents the handmaid positively. Another discursive strategy is that of example and illustration. The character uses this strategy to provide evidence in support of an argument. It is evident in the following utterances, *They made such a mess of everything. They filled the air with chemicals, radiation, and poison! So, God whipped up a special plague, The Plague of Infertility*. The writer illustrates the cause that

makes Gilead's women infertile. This is because they made such a mess, so God punished them. Repetition is another strategy used to make the reader focus on the content of the utterance by repeatedly using a similar word or phrase. This strategy is evident in these utterances, *They made such a mess of everything. They filled the air with chemicals, radiation, and poison.* Repetition strengthens what the character says. The word "they" is repeatedly mentioned echoing the negative other presentation of women in Gilead society.

Extract 2

Offred: Sterile, there is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren. That's the law. (p.61)

Contextualization

Offred narrates this extract to exhibit her philosophy of reflecting the polarization system enforced by Gilead between women and men.

Linguistic Analysis

The main character in the extract above, Offred, expresses self-social conflict when the law of Gilead society represents another example of how society uses women as scapegoats. The strategy of lexicalization is evident in the extract above through the use of the negative lexical items sterile and barren in the utterance, *Sterile, there is no such thing as a sterile man anymore and women who are barren, that is the law* which reflects the theme of self-society conflict among women in Gilead society. Offred finds herself struggling against the totalitarian restrictions of her society. The use of lexicalization refers to women as the outgroup, contributing to the negative representation of women in Gilead society. Negative adjective is used here to represent women negatively, while men are portrayed positively to reflect the ideology of racism that dominates Gilead society. The use of the positive word fruitful reflects how the handmaids portrayed while the negative term barren reflects how Gilead women are performed negatively, reflecting the strategy of actor description and how the characters in this novel describe either positively or negatively.

Extract 3

Offred: I used to think of my body as an instrument of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will... Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is harder and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (p.73)

Contextualization

Offred narrates this extract. She rests in the bath. She compares how she used to think about her body and how she does it today.

Linguistic analysis

Many strategies are identified in the extract above. These strategies use by the main character to reflect conflict with society. Metaphorical process is apparent in the utterance, *I used to think of my body as an instrument. Now the flesh arranges itself differently* through which Offred compares her body to a device of her desire before Gilead, but now she is just a mound of flesh

surrounding a womb. Offred expresses her self-conflict because she realizes Gilead's attitude toward women, which treats them not as individuals but as objects important only for the children they can bear. Offred uses the strategy of lexicalization. The use of harmful items such as cloud, congealed, and hard reflects Offred conflict that there are no human values in Gilead society. Gilead society treats them as nothing more than bare children. Topoi is another discursive strategy used to depict self-society conflict. Women of different types experience abuse. Topoi is diverse in women's discourse, as seen in this utterance, *I used to think of my body as an instrument of pleasure or a means of transportation*. Domestic violence against women spans from sexual deprivation to physical and psychological assault. Diversity of the abuse topoi in women's discourse strengthens the negative other presentation

Extract 4

Offred: These men, we have been told, are like war criminals. It is no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples for the rest, though this is hardly needed. No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive. (p.201)

Contextualization

This extract narrates by Offred when she wants to portray how men in Gilead society dominate women.

Linguistic Analysis

There is solid ideological polarization regarding the description of the participants in this extract. Ideological polarization is formulated through, on the one hand, the use of the pronoun 'we' to emphasize the positive self-image of in-groups (women). On the other hand, the pronoun 'they' refers to the out-groups (men). Ideological polarization of participants is figured out through the negative lexical items the writer uses to describe men as a source of threat: war criminals and atrocities, which in turn reflect the ideology of criminalization. In the utterances, *their crimes are retroactive and, they should she be so lucky as to conceive* denote that the writer emphasizes her negative opinion about men as she mentions the words their crimes are retroactive. The adjective retroactive refers to men as the out-groups contribute to the negative other-representation of men. At the same time, women are described with a positive adjective denoted throughout the word lucky, which serves the positive self-presentation of the in-group. The character uses the metaphorical expression in this utterance, *These men, we have been told, are like war criminals* to highlight the discursive strategy metaphor. The strategy is clear when men (doctors) who perform abortions are compared to war criminals.

Extract 5

Offred: There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they are called. They have to do everything they can.(p.306)

Contextualization

Offred, narrates this extract. Offred describes the women in Gilead society according to their dresses. Women are classified by color: red Handmaids, blue Wives, and green Marthas.

Linguistic Analysis

This extract is rich in discursive strategies. The strategy of vagueness is the first strategy that appears in this extract. The strategy is evident through the use of the word some. By using the word some in the utterance, some in red, *some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses*, the speaker does not specify an exact number of women. The other discursive strategy is the ideological polarization in which the handmaids are represented as the out-groups through the pronoun they in the utterance, *They have to do everything; if they can*. The strategy of actor description utilizes to describe the participants positively or negatively by using negative adjectives such as cheap and skimpy, and the handmaids negatively related, contributing to expressing the ideology of negative representation. The repetition strategy uses by the writer or the speaker to emphasize the argument and make the reader focus on the content. The strategy is evident in these utterances, *some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, and some in the striped dresses*. By repeating the same word some. It shows that the same word is repeatedly mentioned to convince her argument about the problem and to make readers focus on the content.

Discussion

The analysis in this study attempts to fill the gap highlighted in previous studies. The previous research as mentioned above, did not sufficiently pay attention to social contextual interpretations, resulting in little consideration of the theme of conflict's ideological reasons. In terms of the investigated self-society conflict, the current study has provided more comprehensive conclusions. The quantitative findings provided an overview of the variety and frequency of the critical discourse analysis and discursive strategies used in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The qualitative research included deconstructed analytical reflections on what and how ideology entrenches in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as a closer look at the ideological reasons.

Critical discourse analysis has been utilized to answer two research questions the first of which was: *What are the discursive strategies used in the novel The Handmaid's Tale to construct positive or negative representation?*. In the book *The Handmaid's Tale*, discursive strategies were seen in moderate to high abundance. In terms of the conflict theme addressed, these strategies played a significant role in the discourse of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The handmaid dispute employed the highest frequency of the polarization strategy, whereas lexicalization employed the second highest frequency of strategies. Repetition, actor description, and metaphor appeared to be the third most widely used strategies. Finally, an example, topoi, and vagueness appeared with the smallest number of strategy.

The second research question was: *How are these strategies implemented?* was addressed in light of the previous analysis, which provided a contextualized explanation of the inherent ideological polarity. *The Handmaid's Tale* may attempt to influence lay readers' mindsets to transform, re-present, and re-affirm their surrounding social reality. This is accomplished by communicating a favorable portrayal of oneself in contrast to a negative presentation of the other. This polarization was portrayed within critical discourse analysis and discursive strategies. Furthermore, *The Handmaid's Tale* may seek to create and sustain an intellectual hegemony of chosen social realities.

Conclusion

The present study has attempted to accomplish the study aim at the level of critical discourse analysis by expressing the ideological polarization of a positive representation of the handmaid's self versus a negative presentation of the other. In the scope of the data, ideological polarization was constructed in terms of pronouns and adjectives that reflect positive-self and negative-other representations. The macrostructure level revealed by the character's use of discursive strategies and ideological functions showed the reality of the struggle between the character and society. Based on the findings of this study, these characters' remarks are divided into two categories: those that promote positive self-presentation and those that promote negative other-presentation. The in-group and the out-group are good examples of how these strategies function. The writer uses them to demonstrate how patriarchal most nations' constitutions are and how women are still treated as second-class citizens in society. We/us vs. them/them polarization and lexicalization strategies, as well as positive and negative representation strategies are used to illustrate this idea. The closeness of these two levels shows the self-society conflict theme. The importance of these two levels of analysis can be observed in this research since they demonstrate how gender disparity occurs in our society. Handmaids in Gileads society show to be subject to gender inequity, identity conflict, and the struggle between self and the rest of the community by using macro-level several discursive strategies to portray the conflict in *The Handmaid's Tale*, including polarization, actor description, metaphor, repetition, vagueness, and example/illustration. The microstructure is evident by using these strategies.

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