

PERFORMING GENDER: A BUTLERIAN READING OF IDENTITY AND POWER IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED AND ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE.

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ABSTRACT

This research paper conciliates a Butlerian analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* to inspect how gender identity is built, regulated, and resisted under domineering power structures. Depiction on Judith Butler's concepts of gender performativity, the heterosexual matrix, and regulatory ideals, the study inspects how both novels exemplify gender as a coerced reiteration of norms enforced by ideological or material violence. In Atwood's work, gender is designed through discursive discipline, panoptic surveillance, customary performance, and linguistic erasure, convincing women to reproduce and represent theocratic ideals of femininity. Offred's conflict arises through critical imitation, narrative subversion, and the conservancy of internal agency. In contrast, Morrison's depiction of chattel slavery hubs racialized materiality, where the Black female body is imprinted through physical possession, commodification, and suffering. Sethe's scar, ruptured identity, and infanticide unveil the restrictions of performativity when defied with historical brutality, with resistance taking the form of radical corporeal breach rather than calculated performance. Through comparative analysis, the paper discusses that ideological systems depend on persistent performative fortification, while material systems impose identity through corporal fierceness. In the end, both plots irradiate the political possibilities that arise when obligatory gender performances flop.

Keywords: Performativity, Performance, Regulatory Ideal, Heterosexual Matrix, Cultural Intelligibility, Citationality / Reiteration, Panoptic Surveillance, Discourse / Discursive Control, Materiality, Racialized Materiality, Trauma, Abjection, Subjectivity

Performing Gender: A Butlerian Reading of Identity and Power in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

I. Introduction: Framing the Critical Imperative

1.1 Establishing the Critical Nexus: Performativity, Power, and Resistance

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) stand as central literary inspections of identity building under systemic totalitarianism. While disconnected by context, *Beloved* (Morrison) embedded in the historical barbarism of chattel slavery and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood) portraying the ideological dystopia of the Republic of Gilead, both novels validate how oppressive regimes sadistically impose, regulate, and exploit the gendered and sexed body. This research paper employs Judith Butler's theoretical framework of gender performativity, regulatory ideals, and the heterosexual matrix to examine the apparatuses by which identity is built and, critically, the strategies through which resistance emerges within these structures of absolute power.

The comparative analysis establishes that the compulsion to adhere to normative gender roles, which Butler discusses is indispensable for retaining the "grid of cultural intelligibility" and essential heterosexuality, is the foundational mechanism of control in both texts (Butler). Atwood illustrates a system originated on

discursive-ritualistic compulsion, imposed through panoptic surveillance (Foucault) and linguistic erasure, where the protagonist, Offred, resists mainly through narrative subversion and cognizant, critical performance. On the contrary, Morrison irradiates a system engrained in **material-corporeal inscription**, the physical branding and proprietary definition of the slave body, where Sethe's resistance expresses as a deep-seated, distressing denunciation of compulsory gender and reproductive roles. By concentrating on the material differences in how power acts upon bodies, the examination highpoints the critical compulsion of adapting Butler's theory when opposed with the specificity of racialized historical trauma.

The structures portrayed in both novels function as hyper-intensive, specialized matrices. Gilead, driven by fear of biological scarcity, centers persistently on the Handmaid's reproductive function, reducing her to a "two-legged womb" (Atwood). Sweet Home, driven by economic exploitation, diminishes the slave woman to property defined by her labor and her capacity to produce more property. In both illustrations, the *compulsion* to perform gender and stick to the reproductive imperative is the combining factor that permits their distinctive forms of institutional violence. The paper continues to carefully allocate the Butlerian apparatus before applying these concepts to the respective narrative worlds.

1.2 Introduction to the Butlerian Apparatus

Judith Butler's seminal works, *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), essentially move the understanding of gender from an internal essence to a social and corporeal phenomenon. For Butler, gender is performative, meaning it is "manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Ton Msc). This reappearance of normative acts is exactly what produces the fiction of a long-lasting, inner self. This theoretical shift offers the systematic tools essential to dichotomize how cruel regimes maintain control: by compelling the definite and violent reiteration of gendered norms.

This paper is arranged to first define the theoretical difference between conscious performance and constitutive performativity. It will then examine Gilead's dependence on panoptic discipline and ritualized performance for its governing force. Subsequently, the paper will discover the material violence of slavery in *Beloved* and Sethe's disastrous rejection of the imposed regulatory ideal. Lastly, a comparative synthesis will institute how the divergent modalities of power, ideological versus material, shape the potential for political resistance in each literary universe.

2. Literature review

Scholarship on gender, power, and identity construction in *Beloved* and *The Handmaid's Tale* has consistently drawn upon feminist, poststructuralist, and intersectional frameworks to analyse the mechanisms of oppression and resistance. Critics of Atwood, such as Stillman and Johnson (1994) and Bouson (2010), emphasise Gilead's reliance on Foucauldian surveillance, ritual discipline, and linguistic restriction, arguing that Offred's narrative functions as a subversive act against the state's attempt to render women unintelligible. Scholars working with Butler's theory of gender performativity have shown how Gilead forces hyper-repeated gender norms to fabricate a compliant reproductive identity, while leaving gaps for resistant counter-performance. Literary analysis of Morrison's *Beloved*, particularly by Henderson (1997), O'Reilly (2004), and Wyatt (1993), highlights the material, racialised violence of slavery, focusing on how the Black female body becomes a literal site of inscription, property, and trauma. Unlike the discursive regulation in Atwood's dystopia, Morrison's novel foregrounds the embodied, economic, and historical brutality that predetermines the possibilities of gendered subjectivity. Intersectional scholars (Crenshaw, 1989) further argue that race intensifies and complicates gendered performances under slavery, making Sethe's resistance distinctly corporeal rather than discursive. Together, existing scholarship shows that while both texts depict oppressive systems that enforce gender through reiteration, the nature of violence—ideological in Gilead and material in *Sweet Home*—produces fundamentally different modalities of resistance, from Offred's narrative defiance to Sethe's radical bodily rupture.

Theoretical Architecture: Discursive Limits and Materialization

To perform a rigorous Butlerian (Butler) reading, a clear delineation of the central theoretical concepts is vital, mainly the division between voluntary "performance" and constitutive "performativity," and the operative of the power structures that mandate them.

Performativity vs. Performance: The Fabrication of Essence

Butler emphasizes that gender "ought not to be construed as a stable identity" (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory"). In its place, gender identity is "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results". The notion of performativity is frequently misjudged as simply a mindful "choice" or a "role" that an already existing subject positions on, like choosing clothes from a "wardrobe". Butler clearly rejects this notion, arguing that there is "no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted". Gender, therefore, is always "a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*).

The establishment of personality and individuality depends upon *citatoriality* and *reiteration* (Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*). Gender is an identity "tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory"). The continuous repetition of conventional gender norms strengthens and enfranchises the social script, thus producing the fiction of interiority. Political potential exist in the probability of critical, insolent, or failed reiterations of these normative scripts, creating a space for an "excess" or "remainder" that might bid political substitutes to normative identity (Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*).

2.2 The Heterosexual Matrix and Regulatory Ideals

The obligation of gender as a binary is fundamental to the maintenance of power structures. Butler describes the *heterosexual matrix* as the "grid of cultural intelligibility through which norms are created and maintained in bodies, genders, and desires and how they appear natural". This matrix standardizes desire, privileges a binary model (male/female, masculine/feminine), and thus strengthens the constancy of the heterosexual norm. Without adherence to this matrix, a life is rendered unintelligible or, as Butler advises, "Unstable" (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*).

Significantly, the category of 'sex' itself is not seen as an only biological given but rather as a "regulatory ideal," a term borrowed from Foucault (Foucault, vol. 1). This ideal functions as a norm whose "materialization is compelled" through ongoing regulatory practice. Power, therefore, is not an external force acting upon bodies, but that which "forms, maintains, sustains, and regulates bodies at once".

This regulatory power works through "constrained and reiterative production," but also through the violent "foreclosure of effect," which produces an "outside," a "domain of unlivability and unintelligibility that bounds the domain of intelligible effects" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*). The comparative force of this structure is thoughtful: totalitarian regimes, whether ideological or historical, are defined not merely by what they mandate (compulsory reiteration), but by what they dynamically render *unintelligible* and *unlivable*. In *Gilead*, this outside is manufactured and labeled (the Colonies, the "Unwomen"). In *Beloved*, this unintelligible space is entered through the trauma and radical action of Sethe, creating an obligatory critical distinction in the application of the theory.

III. Methodology: Theoretical and Comparative Framework

This research employs a **qualitative, theory-driven textual analysis** deserted chiefly in Judith Butler's conceptual framework of gender performativity, regulatory ideals, and the heterosexual matrix. The methodology is interpretative rather than empirical, targeting to scrutinize how control, individuality, and gendered subjectivity are constructed through two diverse oppressive classifications. Butler's theoretical apparatus delivers the analytical lens through which both novels are read, allowing an assessment of how gender is produced, imposed, and repelled through either discursive or material mechanisms.

The study shadows a **comparative literary methodology**, discussing *Beloved* and *The Handmaid's Tale* as comparable case studies that lighten unlike modalities of coercion. Close reading is used to recognize instants of regulatory control, enforced gender performance, recurrent norms, physical inscriptions, and acts of resistance. These textual annotations are then construed through Butler's categories of performativity, citatoriality, and the foreclosure of indecipherable identities.

Moreover, the methodology assimilates **intersectional analysis**, recognizing that the presentation of gender in *Beloved* is inseparable from the racialized and economic dimensions of slavery. This sanctions the study to become accustomed with Butler's primarily discursive model to a historical context where material fierceness leads gendered subject formation. By merging Butlerian theory, comparative analysis, and intersectionality, the methodology purposes to divulge both the communal and conflicting policies of power and resistance embedded within the two narrative worlds.

The Gileadean Regime: Regulatory Discipline and Ritual Performance in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's Gilead represents a hyper-realized mechanism of the heterosexual matrix, where the regulatory ideal of 'sex' is surgically reduced to its reproductive function, imposed through an incorporated system of surveillance, discourse, and ritual.

3.1 Discursive Discipline and the Panoptic Gaze

Gilead functions as a classic disciplinary society, perfectly exemplifying Michel Foucault's panoptic model. The persistent surveillance mechanisms, represented by the ubiquitous "Eyes", induce the subjects, mostly the Handmaids, to adopt the observation, rendering their "visibility a trap" (Foucault). The Red Centre, where Handmaids are trained, acts as the established core of this panoptic regime, captivating them to adopt disciplinary techniques and safeguarding the obligatory reiteration of their assigned roles (Atwood).

Complementing surveillance is the mechanism of discursive control, which functions through the philosophies identified by Edward Said (Bresnahan et al.). The regime imposes measured linguistic concepts and classifications Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, to outline and compartmentalize individuals. This creation of specialized, hierarchical vocabulary (Commander, Wife) serves as a potent tool for "othering" (*Orientalism*, p. 3), stripping women of their individual subjectivity and describing them just by their forced societal roles, thus implementing the cultural intelligibility demanded by the regime. The Handmaids are accurately and symbolically "framed" by their red attire and wimples, which serve as physical differentiations of their status and restrict their perception, safeguarding they see only the tapered reality permitted by the authoritarian state.

3.2 Performance of the Ideal Subject: State-Mandated Rituals

The obligatory materialization of the Handmaid's 'sex' as a reproductive vessel is straightaway evident in her uniform (Atwood). This attire dictates a conventional and narrow bodily behavior, guaranteeing the public performance of modesty and submission required by the regulatory ideal. The fundamental apparatus for the necessary reiteration of the heterosexual imperative is The Ceremony. This monthly ritual, stripped of all emotive content and agency, is the state-mandated portrayal of gender and desire. Offred's forced contribution highlights the ruthless crack between genuine performativity (the unconscious forming of identity) and forced *performance* (the conscious, obedient execution of a role).

The regime's dependence on continuous, visible policing (surveillance, ritual, and linguistic control) proposes a critical operational weakness. If Butler discusses that performativity constructs the deception of a stable essence, Gilead's constant requirement for strengthening and reiteration connotes its letdown to rightly naturalize gender roles (Atwood). The system trusts heavily on cognizant *performance* rather than internalized *performativity* (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*), making its structure naturally brittle and leaving major room for internal dissent and subversion.

3.3 Agents of Power: Aunt Lydia and the Internalization of the Matrix

The character of Aunt Lydia is fundamental to understanding how regulatory power is not simply applied from above, but is adopted and obligatory by subjects who have known the logic of the matrix (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*). Lydia's previous professional life as a judge, enforcing women's rights, prepares her with the essential "background information" mandatory to comprehend "how those rights could be taken away". She is a key example of a previous subject whose knowledge is perverted to serve the Gileadean regime.

Lydia's denunciations of pre-Gilead life, such as her disdain for women who brandished their bodies, "oiling themselves like roasted meat", establish a multifaceted gender performance. This performance is somewhat strategic (undertaken to deceive and control the Handmaids) and moderately ideologically deep-seated (the belief that sexual freedom led directly to victimization). This dichotomy cabinets the success of the regulatory

ideal in becoming self-perpetuating, converting formerly autonomous subjects into agents of their own, and others', oppression.

3.4 Subversion through Narrative and Imitation

Offred's confrontation is located chiefly in the discursive sphere, demonstrating the measurements for agency and uprising through narrative power. In a world that strive for to make women "seen and not heard," Offred's private voicing of her experiences functions as the central "symbol of her resistance," a tool used "to resist and subvert the meanings attached to her". Her narrative retrieves the agency lost to her peripheral role (Atwood). Additionally, Offred engrosses in strategic, critical iteration. Her cognizant performance of sexual interest with the Commander and Nick is a thoughtful act of *acting* and *pretending* for survival. This conscious imitation, reminiscent of Butler's concept of drag as a parody of the original is not constitutive performativity, but a critical *performance* designed to utilize the regime's script against itself (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*). By knowingly and critically recapitulating the expected roles of desire and femininity, Offred opens up the potential for the "remainder, or excess, that has political potential" identified by Butler. This strategy of critical reiteration ensures her subjective continuity, permitting her to live on *within* the system while concurrently labelling its coercive mechanisms through her story.

IV. Slavery's Materiality: Trauma, Bodies, and Radical Disruption in *Beloved*

Relating Butler's framework to *Beloved* (Morrison) necessitates piloting the critical challenge of historical trauma and racialized materiality. While Butler often attentions on the discursive creation of gender (Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*), the slave system foregrounds the brutal, physical inscription of power, posing a theoretical limit that necessitates adaptation. The historical realism of slavery brutally verbalized a racialized materiality where the body was defined as proprietary, viciously determining the discourse rather than being merely formed by it.

The literature widely explores the constructivism of gender within Margaret Atwood's dystopian novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. Scholars frequently employ Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to analyze how the totalitarian state of Gilead establishes its hierarchy by imposing a "highly rigid regulatory frame". Butler's framework posits that gender is not an intrinsic "essence" but rather a social construction created through the repetition of mandated, sanctioned acts.

The Gileadean regime utilizes Michel Foucault's "apparatus of sexuality" to enforce new norms through discursive and coercive means. This process involves profound dehumanization, reducing women to objects or animals, often termed "two-legged wombs" or "sacred vessels," thereby excluding them from the discourse of sex and linguistic agency. Power structures further disguise their political machinations behind essentialist rhetoric that projects responsibility onto "Nature's plan," claiming the gender roles are natural and incontestable. Protagonists like Offred experience an identity crisis as they struggle to reconcile their former selves with the imposed roles, channeling their resistance primarily through acts of storytelling.

4.1 Material Inscription and the Limits of Discursive Formations

The familiarity of the enslaved woman, as portrayed through Sethe, defies the view of 'sex' as purely a "regulatory ideal" (Morrison) by foregrounding the body as commodified property. Under chattel slavery, the obligation of gender and reproductive roles is not simply an ideological limitation, but an economic decree forced through "physical cruelty" and general objectification. Black women withstood a double burden of domination and cruelty by the male-controlled social world and the ruthless organization of slavery, which robbed them of the right to motherhood and womanhood (Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*).

Sethe's past forces the recognition that this racial materiality is the *a priori* condition for the performance of gender and sex. The solicitation of Butler's theory to *Beloved* must therefore assimilate the visceral materiality of historically traumatic, racialized bodies, shifting the focus to how systemic, non-discursive violence anticipates and limits the potentials of gendered performance.

4.2 The Scar and the Performativity of Injury

The ultimate testament to the violent inscription of power is Sethe's "chokecherry tree" mark on her back (Morrison). This scar is the factual, physical edition of white patriarchal power, marking her body as chattel. Unlike the Handmaid's red robe, a removable costume of forced performance, the scar is everlasting, accidental

anti-performance enforced by the oppressor. It is the obliged embodiment of her labelled 'sex' as proprietary breeder, attained through absolute physical torture.

The deed of reading this scar becomes central to re-claiming subjectivity. Paul D's efforts to "read" the scar recognize it not as a biological given, but as a fierce, continuing narrative of systemic dominance. The scar defines how the structure of slavery trusts on unavoidable performativity accomplished through physical pain and proprietary violence, defining Sethe's identity and limiting her personal sovereignty.

4.3 Fractured Identity and the Embodiment of Trauma (Gender Trouble)

Slavery imposes deep psychological trauma, leading to an "alarming unmaking of selfhood" and a split identity. Sethe's downfall of selfhood make parallel with Butler's conception that "being a man" and "being a woman" are "internally unstable affairs" (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*). In *Beloved*, this splintered individuality is given tangible, terrifying form in the character of Beloved herself. Beloved, the physical manifestation of the family's "split identities" and generational trauma, functions as an influential form of radical "gender trouble". Her presence keenly challenges the norms of cultural intelligibility. She is vague, her identity is non-linear, and she "disidentifies the existing temporal coordinates, thereby mutilating them". This indistinctness and non-normative status created by the thoughtful "withholding of important details" by the narrator, positions Beloved as the perplexing, physicalized "excess" or "remainder" of the traumatic past, fundamentally outside the bounds of rational, intelligible subjecthood.

4.4 Resistance as Radical Rejection of Compulsory Maternity

Sethe's infanticide is the core act of resistance in *Beloved*. It is a radical refusal of the slave system's proprietary definition of black womanhood, which mandates compulsory and exploitable reproduction.⁵ Sethe's desperate attempt to "out-hurt the hurter" is an act of agency that rejects the compulsory mother/slave role, choosing to destroy her children rather than allow them to be reabsorbed into the system's reproductive machinery.²⁸

This act pushes Sethe into the domain of the unintelligible, the "domain of unlivability" that bounds the regulatory ideal. Her resistance is not a strategic performance, but a violent rupture of the regulatory ideal, incurring the devastating cost of subjective stability and social isolation. The community's disapproval of Baby Suggs's excessive pride and the subsequent isolation of 124 Bluestone Road reveals a localized mechanism of self-regulation. The black community, striving for post-slavery cultural intelligibility and protection, subconsciously attempts to enforce its own set of normative, proprietary expectations, viewing Sethe's actions and Baby Suggs's defiance as an uncalled-for violation of social codes. Sethe's act confirms that political agency can emerge through the violent rupture of the regulatory ideal, even if that rupture results in abjection.

V. Comparative Synthesis: Materiality, Power, and the Political Potential of Failure

The comparative analysis exposes two dissimilar totalitarian approaches to implementing the heterosexual matrix and two essentially diverse political paths for resistance, representing the requirement of integrating the factor of race into Butler's framework, as supported by intersectionality theory.

5.1 Regimes of Compulsion: Ideological vs. Material Regulation

The two novels illustrate the application of essential gender through different modalities of power:

The Handmaid's Tale: Ideological Compulsion

Gilead's power is chiefly *ideological*, employing panoptic surveillance, theocracy, and linguistic regulator to employ a gender identity that is reducible to biological utility (fertility). The catastrophe to perform the Handmaid role suitably results in discursive erasure, being categorized "Unwoman" and banished to the Colonies. The mechanism compels subjects to *perform* a role designed to produce an artificial sense of gendered essence.

Beloved: Material Compulsion

The slave structure's power is chiefly *material*, engrained in economic ownership, racialized violence, and the definition of the body as property. The regulatory ideal of the slave woman is compulsory through corporeal coercion and torture. The "foreclosure of effect" here is not just discursive unintelligibility, but physical erasure, commodification, and the absolute deprivation of personal sovereignty.

The difference in power structures leads to a corresponding divergence in the nature of resistance.

5.2 Modes of Resistance: Narrative Subversion vs. Corporeal Rupture

Butlerian Concept	Atwood's <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (Ideological Control)	Morrison's <i>Beloved</i> (Material Control)
Regulatory Ideal of 'Sex'	The Handmaid (reproductive vessel); enforced biological utility.	The Slave Woman (chattel/property); enforced reproductive production.
Mechanism of Compulsion	Surveillance, ritual, and discursive categorization.	Racialized physical violence, ownership, and economic mandate.
Inscription of Power	External, removable markers (red habit); internalized gaze.	Internal, permanent scarring; dismemberment and linguistic objectification.
Mode of Resistance	Narrative subversion, critical imitation/parody, maintenance of internal dissent.	Radical corporeal act (infanticide), embodiment of trauma (<i>Beloved</i>), rejection of normative role.

Offred's resistance is strategic, internal, and purposes for **critical reiteration**. She endures by deliberately performing the normative script while upholding an internal, dissenting narrative that parodies the required performance. Her resistance safeguards her idiosyncratic prolongation *within* the system, looking for incremental, discursive agency.

Sethe's resistance, conversely, is violent, external, and aims for **corporeal rupture**. Her infanticide is a radical *non-reiteration* of the compulsory role.²⁸ This act grants a profound, devastating moment of agency against the proprietary definition of her body, but demands the cost of subjective stability and social connection.²⁶ This approach utilizes the disruptive power of abjection, where the "remainder" (*Beloved*) becomes the physicalized manifestation of the traumatic past, forcing a necessary confrontation with history.⁷

5.3 Reconciling the Materiality Divide

The successful application of Butler's framework to *Beloved* requires moving beyond a purely discursive view of the body. The analysis confirms that Sethe's gendered experience is fundamentally structured by race and the economic necessity of slavery, a point enriched by employing the concept of intersectionality. Sethe's body is already brutally defined by a racialized materiality that precedes and limits the discursive possibilities available to her. Thus, the performance of gender and sex under slavery is mediated by the non-discursive violence of historical structures.

The contrast between the novels reveals two distinct pathways for achieving political potential. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the political potential resides in the *success* of critical performance, the maintenance of subjective excess (memory, narrative) that the ideological system cannot control. In *Beloved*, the political potential resides in the *failure* of compulsory performance the violent rejection and abjection that forces a rupture in the regulatory ideal, allowing the horrifying truth of the "unlivable" domain to become manifest and eventually reconciled.

VI. Conclusion: Reconsidering Subjectivity Beyond the Binary

This research paper determines that gender identity is exposed as an unhinged construct, perpetually manufactured through the obligatory reiteration of norms within the totalitarian regimes of Gilead and the chattel slavery system. By applying Judith Butler's notions of performativity, the heterosexual matrix, and the regulatory ideal, the analysis commendably dichotomizes the devices of power in both Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The fundamental comparative finding is that Atwood demonstrates how ideological power structures impose gender through **discursive performance** and are resisted through strategic narrative subversion (Offred's critical iteration). On the contrary, Morrison demonstrates how systems rooted in racialized, proprietary violence impose gender through **material inscription**, compelling resistance through radical corporeal and psychological rupture (Sethe's abjection).

A nuanced Butlerian framework, when applied to historically definite trauma like slavery, must integrate the brute materiality of racialized bodies. This assimilation approves that gender performativity, though critical

for understanding identity formation, is always trained and viciously shaped by the material realisms of factually specific power structures. Eventually, the profound impact of both novels lies in showcasing the defiant and often devastating political possibilities that emerge when mandated performance fails, offering profound insights into the construction of identity and the resilience of the human spirit when confronted by the coercive forces of the state and history.

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