How does Margret Atwood use language as a tool of oppression in the novel 'the Handmaid's Tale'?

Language is an extremely powerful factor in our culture and society. It can be a key into our community and as a form of communication to our peers and acquaintances. However in Margret Atwood's novel 'The Handmaid's Tale' we see a society which has no equal communication, let alone any equality in gender or a consensus of democracy. Atwood has created an oppressed society which displays corporal and capital punishment as a norm to its citizens who are kept alike to prisoners in a concentration camp, yet there are no gas chambers and barbed wire gates, but high walls and categories not of choice but for exploitation. It is a patriarchal society which presents women in a state of subjugation who are socially controlled by either a woman in a higher status of by a man. In this essay I intend to explain how Atwood uses language as a tool of oppression in the novel.

Oppression can be explained in many ways. These can include systematic oppression, hierarchy oppression, internalized oppression and indirect oppression. The term oppression is primarily used to describe how a certain group is being subordinated by unjust use of force, authority, or societal norms. In Handmaid's Tale we see the character Offred by which she is called, forced into a parallel life which she resents, the only way to hold on to her past life is through her husband Luke and their daughter, and her real name.

In chapter one the reader sees the first sign of an oppressed society when we discover that Offred and some other women are living in a gymnasium under the supervision of the Aunts, who monitor and control the women who become known as handmaids. In the first paragraph we see two words which could show some form of link to an oppressed society: 'palimpsest' is the first word which gives the impression that there is an eerie atmosphere which could also show how there is a dark under covering that something is not as it appears. This displays a contrast as before there are a few lines which state a more feminist society of rebellious freedom the women had when they were teenagers, 'later in mini skirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair', the use of language creates imagery of what our main character was like before the concept of control came into place and what she would like to relive. The second word is 'forlorn' which presents an emotion of sadness and isolation, which can link to the emotions of the handmaids and the oppression the Aunts create for them. 'We could not talk' and 'they had electric cattle prods' presents a sense of brutality and reality to their situation. The words 'we could not talk' show how little freedom they had left and it gives a sense of a boarding school environment as they are being controlled and are told what to do and think rather than them doing it for themselves. No choice is given in this society, only orders.

In chapter two, Offred begins to describe her room by moving from simple to complex sentences to evaluate and analyze her room to display a build up into the chapter. '-it only partly opens-' creates an image of being locked in or confined from the outside world which could relate to her room being alike to a prison cell. Language is used here to emphasize the imagery of the room, to make it sound like a "gilded cage" – a beautiful

room which still incarcerates her. 'They've removed everything you could tie a rope to' emphasizes the prison concept and develops on the idea that there is social control of Offred and society itself. Chapter two in the book provides a real indication of freedom these handmaiden's have- none. 'flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing' illustrates that dancing or any form of pleasure is discriminated as it is not what they are for, they are to do as they are told or else they will be sanctioned. Language here exhibits the reality of their society of Gilead. They are confined to rooms that appear to be perfect when in fact they are stifling even though the window is open; the words they've removed anything you could tie a rope to states that people don't want to be here, they would rather hang themselves because they are that oppressed by their environment.

Language is also used to convey the imagery of the outfits for the citizens of Gilead; sumptuary laws would have a major control point here as they could restrain any form of luxury. The outfits described in chapter two present the garments to be quite restricting and uncomfortable. The women in society are dressed according to their social functions which includes colour, the repeat of colours display a link between the statuses of the citizens. 'Everything except the wings around my face are red' and 'gathered to a flat yolke that extends' creates an image of confinement and oppression as its like Offred is being weighed down by her clothes as it shows nothing and gives control again because it is like a uniform, there is no individuality between people. No freedom of speech is allowed so they must live by the rules to survive. The men wear military outfits in the book which could be a symbol for their status above the women which backs up the idea that Gilead is a patriarchal society.

Later in the novel we hear the words 'I feel buried' in chapter thirty-two. This simple sentence Offred feeling overwhelmed by the weight of control and rules that she begins to feel alone and becoming deeper encased in this oppressed society that she is finding it harder to escape the fate of being a "sexual breeding object" for 'her' commander. This is causing her to become more isolated than before. Serena Joy herself became isolated when she lost her high status job in media (a powerful form of influence) and has become very secluded like a hermit. This shows discrimination against gender causing women especially to feel oppressed. In Gilead women are no longer allowed to read or write let alone to have an opinion. Gilead is a fascist state which is against any form of radical feminism or conjugal roles in society.

In the pre-Gilead society (around the time of 1985) Offred's mother was a feminist who was persecuted by the state for what she believed. When Reagan came to power in 1980 he was anti-communist so equality in his mind was a negative idea, causing an oppressive society.

Aside from having to cope with oppressive cultural and social phenomena, women in the Handmaid's tale have to cope with a lack of meaning to their lives apart from following the laws and values to their society. In the beginning of the book there are prefixes to the story, one of these quotations is from 'A Modest Proposal' by Jonathon Swift. He uses satyr to get his issue across that there is an increase in the population of Ireland which is a contrast to the story which has a decrease in birth rates. His proposal to solve the issue is so sinister and brutal it then becomes similar to the novel in tow.

'The Handmaid's Tale' is a story about Offred, her thoughts and her life in Gilead. The society she is living in is oppressive. Her society is so tyrannical that she has no freedom whatsoever. Language is used to convey this by creating vivid images in the reader's head that they feel they are there with her in that society. She is so restricted in what she does she can't even have a diary to console her thoughts to, she is isolated, all the women are in some way as they don't feel comfortable talking to others, they aren't allowed. Society is meant to be a community, but Gilead is a concentration camp. Language displays the emotions these women feel and uses words like 'isolation', 'forlorn', palimpsest'. Gilead has no equality but a ladder of status and women are to live in a patriarchal society. This is shown by the dress code, her room, and what we are allowed to see through her eyes. Language is used as a tool of oppression, just as today's society is used by the government, and influenced to think whatever the mass media states.