Women's Quest for Identity and Struggle for Survival: A Comparative Study of the Novels *Handmaid's Tale, The Lowland, and Burnt Shadows*

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the common theme of women's quest for identity and survival across three distinctive works by Margaret Atwood, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Kamila Shamsie. The selected novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood), *The Lowland* (Lahiri), and *Burnt Shadows* (Shamsie) present women characters with different intertwined struggles for identity, survival, and agency within oppressive and patriarchal environments. By examining the challenges faced by these women whether in dystopian worlds, the postcolonial Indian diaspora, or the consequences of war and displacement, this study highlights how these writers craft narratives that critique gender, identity, and survival in ways that resonate across cultural and historical contexts. Through a feminist and postcolonial lens, this article explores the intersectionality of gender, history, politics, and identity as portrayed in the lives of these female protagonists, revealing the resilience and agency that emerge even in the face of extreme adversity. This comparative analysis not only deepens our understanding of the women's survival strategies but also speaks to the larger global issues of gender-based oppression and identity formation.

Key words: Quest for Identity, Margaret Atwood, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie, Women struggle for survival

Introduction

The quest for identity has been a central theme in literature, particularly in narratives that explore gender, oppression, and survival. For centuries, women have struggled to define themselves in societies that often limit their roles and voices. This struggle is not confined to a single historical period or culture but transcends time and geography. From the rigid constraints of the Victorian era to the complexities of modern society, women have continuously fought to assert their individuality and agency. This ongoing battle for identity has made it a compelling subject of academic discourse, as it reflects deeper social, political, and psychological realities.

Margaret Atwood, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Kamila Shamsie, though distinct in style and context, converge in their commitment to portraying the multi-layered realities of women's lives. Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale is a chilling portrayal of women stripped of autonomy in a dystopian regime, where identity is reduced to function and resistance becomes a form of survival. In contrast, Lahiri's The Lowland unravels the interiority of female

identity within the familial and political upheavals of postcolonial India and the immigrant experience. Shamsie's Burnt Shadows spans continents and generations, tracing how women endure war, cultural dislocation, and personal trauma, crafting identities that transcend borders. Each author masterfully illuminates the psychological and political dimensions of womanhood in turbulent worlds. These novels are not only narratives of personal survival but also rich texts that reflect broader socio-political commentaries. Atwood critiques the dangers of state-imposed gender roles and the erasure of women's subjectivity. Lahiri reflects on the silent burdens carried by women navigating loss, exile, and expectation within a fractured identity. Shamsie, on the other hand, articulates how historical violence and migration shape and reshape female identity across generations. Despite varying cultural and temporal settings, all three works share a thematic undercurrent of resistance, resilience, and reclamation. They highlight how women, even when silenced or displaced, find ways to assert their presence and purpose. These layered portrayals offer profound insights into the global and intersectional struggle for selfhood and survival in the face of adversity. The pursuit of identity and survival is not just a literary theme and it is a lived reality of suffering for countless women across the world. From enduring patriarchal control to resisting displacement, war, and sociopolitical turmoil, women's lived experiences have been characterized by struggle and strength. Literature, in turn, becomes a mirror to these realities, offering a space where the silenced are given voice, the invisible are made seen and women are given historical importance. Women's survival in fiction frequently echoes real-world resilience, revealing how personal agency often arises not despite hardship, but because of it face challenges for survival. Through literature, the psychological, emotional, and socio-political dimensions of a woman's identity are made vivid and accessible, providing readers with a deeper understanding of gendered resistance and empowerment.

Each of the three selected novels represents a unique yet resonant narrative of feminine endurance and transformation. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood constructs a dystopian world that reflects the extreme consequences of patriarchal control, drawing frightening parallels to real-world issues of bodily autonomy and state power. The central character Offred's rebellion begins quietly, with memory, language, and desire and signifying that the reclamation of identity often starts in the most intimate spaces. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* presents a more internalized battle of women psyche, where central character Gauri's search for self unfolds through intellectual emancipation and emotional detachment from all the bonds made by tradition and society. Her resistance is subtle but profound, challenging traditional gender roles within diasporic and postcolonial frameworks. Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* offers a transnational perspective, where protagonist Hiroko's identity is shaped and reshaped by historical trauma, that hunted her family and life from Hiroshima

to 9/11 Arabs attacks on US. Her survival is physical, emotional, and symbolic, exemplifying how identity can evolve while still retaining a core sense of self and meaning to her life. These texts uniquely map the diverse terrains of feminine identity, illustrating how survival for women is a personal journey, a political act and a historical fact.

Thematic Analysis and Discussion

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood explores the ways in which patriarchal structures strip women of their identity, reducing them to mere instruments of reproduction. Although Gilead is a fictional theocratic dystopia, Atwood constructs it with meticulous attention to historical and contemporary precedents. The totalitarian state of Gilead is not a speculative fantasy, but rather a synthesis of real-world patriarchal structures and ideologies drawn from various cultures, religions, and historical periods. Through the lens of Gilead, Atwood presents a cruel plausible world where women's rights are systematically stripped away under the guise of morality, tradition, and religious orthodoxy. The regime's rigid control over women's bodies and identities particularly their reproductive capacities reflects the mechanisms employed by patriarchal societies across time and geography to assert and maintain dominance. Atwood's narrative is particularly potent in highlighting how such systems dehumanize women by categorizing them solely based on biological function. In Gilead, women are not recognized as complete individuals with intellect, desire, or agency. Instead, they are assigned strictly delineated roles as Wives, Marthas, Handmaids, and Aunts and each representing a fragmented and utilitarian dimension of womanhood. Handmaids, in particular, are reduced to their reproductive utility, valued only for their ability to produce offspring for the elite class. This fragmentation of female identity operates as a powerful metaphor for the objectification and commodification of women in patriarchal societies, where women are often turned into symbols or tools rather than recognized as full human beings with unique identities.

Further emphasizing this erasure of identity, Handmaids are not even allowed to retain their real names. Their identities are instead subsumed under the names of the men they are assigned to serve as concubines. The main protagonist's name "Offred" itself is emblematic of this dispossession. It is a compound meaning "Of-Fred," indicating possession by a Commander named Fred. The prefix 'Of' is a universal marker for all Handmaids, followed by the first name of their assigned male guardian. This renaming signifies a complete loss of individual identity and autonomy, reducing women to mere extensions of male ownership. Their survival depends entirely on the mercy, sympathy, and whims of the Commander's household, rendering their existence fragile and contingent. This systemic dehumanization is poignantly captured in the protagonist Offred's reflection during a private conversation with the Commander in the novel as, "If my life is bearable, maybe what they're doing is all right after all" (Atwood 193). Here,

Offred contemplates the way the illusion of comfort and stability can function as a tool of oppression, subtly coercing her into complicity. This moment reveals how authoritarian regimes do not merely impose external control but also manipulate the inner world of the oppressed by reshaping their thoughts, emotions, and moral judgements. The Commander's casual response, "Yes, I do. I would prefer it" (Atwood 193) further underscores the performative nature of his authority. He is not seeking justice or ethical clarity, but rather a form of moral absolution that preserves his power and comforts his conscience. This interaction resonates with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender identities are not innate or fixed but are socially constructed through repeated acts and discursive practices. Butler argues, "The relation between masculine and feminine cannot be represented in a signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified" (Butler 15). In this context, Offred's role as a Handmaid is not an inherent identity but a coerced performance scripted by the ideological apparatus of Gilead. Her behaviors, speech, dress, and even thoughts are regulated to conform to the role expected of her, illustrating how identity under patriarchy becomes not only externally imposed but internally performed under duress.

Furthermore, Offred acknowledges the one form of power she retains: "What I have on him is the possibility of my own death. What I have on him is his guilt. At last" (Atwood 194). In this moment, she recognizes that survival is not solely about physical endurance but also about preserving psychological agency. This assertion of mental autonomy, however subtle, becomes a vital form of resistance. Judith Butler similarly argues that women's subjugation is maintained by systems that define their existence through male authority, "Men could not settle the question of women because they would then be acting as both judge and party to the case" (Butler 15). The Commander exemplifies this contradiction and he treats Offred's suffering as a personal moral dilemma, not as a reflection of systemic injustice, thereby echoing the historical erasure of women's voices in patriarchal discourse. By viewing this passage through Butler's lens, it becomes evident that Offred's struggle transcends mere survival; it is about reclaiming her identity from a regime intent on erasing it. This theme aligns with broader feminist arguments that gender roles are socially constructed, not biologically predetermined. Offred's small yet significant acts of defiance and her thoughts, observations, and awareness of power dynamics which constitute a form of resistance against Gilead's rigid gender hierarchy, revealing that even within systems of total control, psychological resistance remains possible. Atwood also portrays how patriarchal regimes manipulate women into becoming enforcers of their own subjugation. The character of officer's wife Serena Joy exemplifies this internalized patriarchy. Though she knows her husband Fred is infertile, she coerces Offred into secretly sleeping with their driver, Nick, in the hope of conceiving a child and Serena secretly plotted

this, only to pass it off as Fred's child. Despite the enormous risk this poses to Offred under Gilead's draconian laws, she complies, driven by a survival instinct shaped by fear and hope. Serena's complicity illustrates how women, under patriarchal authority, can become cruel participants in the oppression of other women, acting as extensions of male power rather than as allies. The novel concludes ambiguously, with Offred being taken away in a van and her fate unknown. Whether she is being rescued or led to execution is left unresolved, underscoring the precariousness of women's survival under patriarchal rule. Atwood deliberately leaves the ending open-ended, compelling readers to grapple with the uncertainty of justice and freedom in such a society. Thus, The Handmaid's Tale powerfully explores the themes of identity and survival within a patriarchal dystopia. Through Offred's experiences, Atwood reveals how totalitarian systems reduce women to roles, how resistance can exist in thought and choice, and how patriarchy can pit women against each other. Ultimately, the novel is a stark reminder of the resilience required to preserve selfhood in the face of systemic erasure.

In *The Lowland*, Jhumpa Lahiri introduces the central character Gauri as a woman shaped and shadowed by the intersecting forces of political violence, cultural expectation, and personal longing. Born and raised in Calcutta, Gauri marries Udayan, a passionate and ideologically driven member of the Naxalite movement. Their union is brief and tragic and Udayan is killed in a police encounter due to his revolutionary activities. In the aftermath of his death, Gauri is absorbed into the household of her in-laws, who, in an act intended to preserve honor and stability, arrange her marriage to Udayan's younger brother, Subhash, A quiet, dutiful man pursuing his education in the United States, specifically Rhode Island. Subhash offers Gauri refuge in a foreign land. Yet their marriage is one of obligation, not affection. Pregnant with Udayan's child, Gauri relocates to the U.S. with Subhash, where she gives birth to her daughter Bela. In this new environment, Gauri's internal conflict intensifies; she remains emotionally detached from Subhash and gradually distances herself from Bela as well. Rather than conforming to the roles of wife or mother as prescribed by societal norms, Gauri seeks emancipation through philosophical study and academic life. Her journey becomes a complex negotiation of identity and survival, as she attempts to liberate herself from the familial, cultural, and historical bonds that have defined her existence.

Further in the novel, Jhumpa Lahiri presents a new exploration of identity and survival through the character of Gauri, a woman caught between the gravitational pull of cultural tradition and the silent assertion of individual autonomy. Unlike overt resistance or rebellion, Gauri's journey unfolds through an introspective, often painful process of withdrawal from domestic roles, cultural expectations, and even from her daughter Bela. Yet, this retreat is not simply abandonment; it is a radical redefinition of selfhood. Gauri's

experience echoes the psychological dimensions of survival that we observed in Offred's narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but in a context shaped by postcolonial displacement and intellectual estrangement.

After her husband Udayan's death, Gauri is uprooted from her politically charged life in Calcutta and transplanted into the academic landscape of Rhode Island. This shift is not just geographical but existential. It dislocates her sense of identity and fractures her prescribed role as a widow and mother. Her retreat into intellectualism, symbolized by her immersion in philosophical study, marks a turning point in her self-conception, she began to see herself not as a widow or a mother, but as a scholar, a person of thought (Lahiri 284). This transformation is not an escape from reality but a strategy for survival. It is an effort to construct an identity independent of the relational roles that history and family have imposed upon her. Postcolonial feminist critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have articulated the layered oppression faced by women in postcolonial societies that caught between the residue of colonial structures and the rigidity of patriarchal traditions. Spivak's claim that "the subaltern cannot speak" resonates deeply with Gauri's narrative.

The emotional crescendo in Gauri and Subhash's relationship culminates in his long-suppressed outburst, provoked by Gauri's visible detachment from her daughter Bela:

The day he broke his silence he said, My mother was right. You don't deserve to be a parent. The privilege was wasted on you. She apologized, she told him it would never happen again. Though she hated him for insulting her, she knew that his reaction was justified, and that he would never forgive her for what she'd done" (The Lowland 211).

This moment encapsulates the emotional chasm that defines their strained relationship. Subhash's judgment is not merely personal and it echoes a broader cultural script that casts motherhood as the apex of feminine identity and moral worth. To fail as a mother, within this framework, is to fail as a woman. Gauri's apology is complex: it reflects not genuine remorse in the conventional sense, but a bitter acknowledgement of the gap between what is expected of her and what she is capable of embodying. Her silence in this passage is thus not an absence of voice but a deliberate non-compliance with performative norms. It is a rejection of a role assigned without her consent, and one she cannot emotionally sustain. Her refusal to participate in the emotional labor of motherhood is not a product of coldness or negligence, but a form of psychological survival, one that reflects her interior trauma and her quest to live beyond roles scripted by patriarchy and culture. Gauri's silence, withdrawal, and academic immersion are acts of redefinition, signaling her attempt to forge an identity outside the normative structures of womanhood that confine her. As such, her resistance is not demonstrative but quietly radical like her husband Udayan. She asserts her right to think, to retreat, and to exist on her own terms, even if that means being labeled inadequate or immoral by others.

This internal defiance resonates with postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's conceptualization of the subaltern woman, especially as interpreted by Sangeeta Ray in *Spivak: In Other Words*. Ray critiques how even well-intentioned conversations around women's roles often remain bound by unacknowledged structures of power and location that divide the "I" from the "you" and fracture the possibility of a shared "us":

This then allows one to 'learn how to have public conversations with each other, arguing from a vision about the common ("what I want for us") rather than from identity ("who I am") and from explicitly postulated norms and potential common values rather than from false essentialisms or unreconstructed private interest.' In the failed interview, the desire to argue from a position of 'what I want for us' is troubled by what seems to be a denial of the significant differences in terms of location between the I and the you that constitutes the us. Unexamined benevolence is the danger. (Ray 15).

Ray's insight offers a critical lens through which to read Gauri's predicament. Subhash's rebuked though sincere and possibly justified from his standpoint and embodies what Ray terms "unexamined benevolence." He assumes the moral high ground based on his identity as Bela's legal father and as a man enacting a protective, nurturing role. Yet, his judgment fails to account for Gauri's historical, emotional, and psychological location as a woman displaced by political violence, coerced into a second marriage, and burdened by normative roles that efface her subjectivity. His perception of what Gauri ought to be as a parent, as a wife, is rooted in a common value system that suppresses the complexity of Gauri's trauma.

Thus, Ray's and Spivak's framework helps reveal that Gauri is not simply failing to meet expectations more she is refusing to be defined by them. The perceived failure of Gauri's motherhood is the symptom, not the cause, of her deeper existential struggle to survive on her own terms. Her silence is a boundary, a line drawn between her interiority and the oppressive performativity demanded by culture, family, and even well-meaning companions like Subhash. Lahiri, through Gauri, critiques the liberal humanist tendency to speak for the "other" without understanding her unique condition of marginality. In this sense, Gauri is not voiceless; rather, she withholds her voice from systems that do not deserve it.

Gauri's estrangement from her daughter Bela introduces a moral complexity that Lahiri does not attempt to resolve. Unlike Offred, whose maternal instincts are forcibly repressed by a totalitarian regime, Gauri relinquishes motherhood voluntarily, believing that stepping away is necessary for both her survival and her daughter's future. This controversial decision unsettles normative ideals of maternal devotion, compelling readers to reconsider whether identity and survival can coexist within roles that demand emotional self-erasure. In refusing to be consumed by her prescribed identity, Gauri reclaims a measure of autonomy, even as

it isolates her from the very relationships that once defined her. Moreover, Gauri's journey reveals the paradoxes embedded in diasporic female experience. Her relocation to the United States does not liberate her from patriarchal expectations; rather, it reconfigures them. In the West, she finds the space to reinvent herself intellectually, yet she also experiences a new kind of alienation, an identity crisis compounded by cultural dislocation, emotional detachment, and guilt. This duality reflects a central postcolonial feminist insight that mobility and education do not automatically equate to emancipation. Moreover they can create liminal spaces where survival is no longer about physical safety, but about preserving psychological coherence in the face of fragmented identity. Through Gauri, Lahiri complicates the discourse on survival by showing that endurance may demand ethical ambiguity and emotional rupture. Gauri survives not by conforming to her social roles, but by rejecting them even when that rejection entails deep personal loss. Her intellectual pursuits become the medium through which she reclaims a voice, albeit one that is often inaudible to those around her. Much like Offred's internal resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gauri's survival in *The Low Land* is an act of quiet rebellion against structures. Both cultural and personal expectations seek to define her in reductive terms.

Ultimately, Lahiri's portrayal of Gauri extends the thematic concerns raised by Atwood, how patriarchal and historical legacies shape women's identities, and how survival often requires a negotiation with silence, guilt, and autonomy. Both novels interrogate the myth of the ideal woman, that can be it the obedient Handmaid or the selfless mother and offer instead a more complex vision of female resilience. In choosing thought over submission and solitude over conformity, Gauri articulates a form of survival that does not celebrate endurance for its own sake, but one that insists on the right to self-fashioning, even at great personal cost.

In *Burnt Shadows* (2019) by Kamila Shamsie, the protagonist Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese woman, becomes a transnational figure who navigates through some of the most harrowing geopolitical crises of the twentieth century. Born in Nagasaki, Hiroko's identity is first defined through love and her relationship with Konrad Weiss, a German man living in Japan before the Second World War. The atomic bombing of Nagasaki, which kills Konrad, initiates Hiroko's lifelong journey of survival through loss, displacement, and reinvention. From Japan to India, from Pakistan to the United States, Hiroko embodies a fluid identity that transcends national, cultural, and gendered boundaries. Her evolution from a grieving lover to a resilient mother and autonomous woman foregrounds the central theme of identity construction through trauma and adaptation. In the wake of relentless loss, Hiroko emerges not only as a survivor but as a witness to the brutal legacies of war, colonialism, and ideological violence.

Unlike other characters in the novel who seek refuge in nostalgia or ideological fervor,

Hiroko chooses to exist in the present. Her strength lies in adaptability rather than escapism. Despite the catastrophic loss of her lover Konrad in Nagasaki, she does not anchor herself in victimhood. Instead, Hiroko embodies a resilient identity formed through pain, migration, and memory. Her survival is not passive endurance but an active reconfiguration of the self. Each geographical displacement from Nagasaki to Delhi, then to Karachi, and finally to New York brings with it a fresh layer to her identity. Yet, none of these places wholly define her. Moreover, Hiroko becomes a mosaic of all her lived experiences, Japanese by origin, cosmopolitan by identity.

Judith Butler, drawing upon Freud's theory in *The Ego and the Id*, explains how identity, particularly gendered identity, is not inherently stable but constructed through internalizations born of loss. Freud suggests that melancholia does not merely reflect pathological mourning but forms the basis of character: "An object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego—that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by identification" (Butler 74). Butler extends this to argue that identification through loss is central to ego formation and survival. Hiroko's psychological trajectory mirrors this theoretical framework. After Konrad's death, she wears his dressing gown, both a literal and symbolic act of incorporating the lost beloved into her selfhood. Her grief becomes identity and her mourning, survival. This form of melancholic internalization, as Butler and Freud both note, becomes not a weakening of the self but a foundational aspect of how the subject survives trauma and reshapes identity. "There's only one person left in this world who I love. She can come to see me if I'm there.' … 'Everyone dead, except one? Allah, what have we Afghans done to deserve such sorrows? (Shamsie 322)" This scene, in which Hiroko's only son Raza speaks of Hiroko, crystallizes the emotional axis of the novel, Hiroko as both personal and moral anchor. She is not only the last surviving family member but the emotional reservoir that Raza returns to after being adrift in ideological violence. His yearning for Hiroko is a testimony to her silent resilience and enduring emotional presence, underlining how identity rooted in compassion and memory can outlast nationalistic chaos and betrayal. Hiroko's life, scarred by atomic warfare, partition violence, and post-9/11 geopolitics, reveals how personal identity is shaped less by heritage and more by resilience. Her journey affirms Butler's assertion that subjectivity emerges through "acts of becoming" rather than through inherent being. Hiroko does not cling to any one culture, role, or ideology. Instead, she embodies a transnational ethic, one that allows her to survive loss not by forgetting but by internalizing it and transforming it into moral clarity and maternal love. Her silence is not submission, but a quiet form of resistance against nationalism, against patriarchal expectations, and against reductive identities. In *Burnt Shadows*, Hiroko stands not merely as a survivor of history but as its ethical conscience.

Conclusion

Through a comparative exploration of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri, and *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie, this article has examined how the constructs of identity and survival are negotiated by women protagonists amid repressive regimes, political violence, and personal trauma. Offred, Gauri, and Hiroko emerge not as static victims of historical forces, but as complex agents who continuously reconstruct their selves in response to dislocation, loss, and systemic constraints. Their identities are neither essential nor fixed; rather, as Judith Butler and Freud suggest, these are continuously forged through experiences of mourning, internalization, and resistance. Offred's resistance manifests through language and memory within the theocratic dystopia of Gilead; her very survival becomes an act of subversion against imposed gender scripts. Gauri, in contrast, withdraws from traditional roles of wifehood and motherhood, asserting a different kind of autonomy through intellectual detachment, even as she grapples with guilt and emotional alienation. Hiroko, crossing continents and histories, embodies a deeply ethical identity formed through repeated encounters with loss yet she adapts, carries her grief within, and chooses life over victimhood. In each narrative, identity is inextricable from survival, and survival itself is framed as both an emotional and political act.

These women challenge cultural essentialisms and hegemonic expectations, what Spivak terms the "false benevolence" of normative discourses by articulating an identity that transcends binaries of East/West, self/other, woman/mother. Ultimately, this study shows that survival, for these women, is not just biological endurance but a radical reassertion of self-identity against the backdrop of historical erasure and ideological violence. In their quiet rebellions, emotional adaptations, and deliberate silences, Offred, Gauri, and Hiroko reimagine what it means to exist meaningfully in a fractured world.

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