

Distorted Shadows: Power And Subjugated Women In Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is in postmodern and dystopian fiction in relation to Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. It sets out to examine the representations and roles women in the novel. It is important to analyze patriarchal discourses that position women as the inferiors in the power relations. This study is especially significant because it is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to adopt Foucauldian feminist reading of the novel. The research approach adopted in this paper includes feminist analysis of power, discourse and female subjects in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It draws on Foucault's concepts of discourse, power, surveillance, and the panopticon. However, the paper adopts a feminist perspective in applying these concepts. The paper concludes that subjecting women in the novel is a systematic process, which produces them as always the inferiors.

Keywords: power, discourse, surveillance, women, masculine domination

Date of Submission: 01-02-2018

Date of acceptance: 19-02-2018

In a dystopian oppressing world, female identities as well as their roles are constructed by a discourse, which serves as a vessel of male power, along with discipline, surveillance, and knowledge. All of which are apparatuses of power that work systematically to produce female individuals as subjects, and to maintain and enhance that power as well. In her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Canadian writer Margret Atwood portrays such a world, where women are subjugated to a discourse of oppression and male domination. Dystopian or anti-utopian literature is literature "which situates itself in direct opposition to utopia¹ thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. [... It] also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems"(Booker 3).²

Written in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* coincides with a rise of religious traditions and conservative revival that follows the sexual revolution and the women movements in the United States, in the 1960s and 1970s. Atwood explores the apocalyptic outcomes of such religious conservatives taking power and starting to construct social formations and values that hold women in dominated positions. She also criticizes the former conditions of anarchy that, in a way, endanger women and dominate them as well. In the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that replaces the United States, the system sets new social formations, in which women play certain roles such as Wives, Aunts, Marthas, and Handmaids. It begins with a religious movement called "Sons of Jacob" that unexpectedly takes over the country and starts constituting new rules that forbid women from working and having their own money. After a failing attempt to escape the new Gilead, Offred and her family are caught and separated. She, then, is sent to The Red Center, where she is prepared to become a Handmaid, and never sees her family again. Offred narrates her story and the stories of other women of Gilead; their routines, their whispers, and hopes. Being a female subject under the new regime's strict rules, she is denied the right of choosing, possessing, communicating, forming love relationship and even friendship. The only role for her, as a Handmaid, is to serve her Commander and his wife and bear children for them. Through Offred's flashbacks and fragmentations of the past, the readers come to know about her former life, former family, former friends, but never her former / real name.

This paper discusses how women are constructed as subjects by the discourse of Gilead's system in Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Such a study is important in order to examine the systematic work of discourse, which serves to produce, control and exploit women. The research approach adopted in this paper includes analysis of the female protagonist in the novel, her narration, her daily routines, and her relationships with male characters and

¹The term utopia was first applied to a literary genre by Sir Thomas More when he named his imaginary republic *Utopia*. It means a "place where all is well". See *Utopia* in *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*.

²For more information about dystopian literature: (M. Keith Booker. *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and a Research Guide*. London: Greenwood P, 1994) 3.

other female characters. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notions of power, discourse, discipline, and surveillance, while applying a feminist perspective, the research also discusses how female identities and roles are produced by such exercises. The main conclusion drawn from this study is that Atwood's dystopian world subjugates women to a male-dominated discourse.

I. DISCOURSE, IDENTITIES, AND SUBJECT-POSITION:

In the Republic of Gilead, women are "classified and identified by dominant discourses" according to their roles in the society (Sawicki 43). There are the Wives and the daughters of the Commanders and other officials, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, or domestic servants, who cannot conceive, and Econowives, the women of poorer men, and "these women are not divided into functions" as "[t]hey have to do everything; if they can" (Atwood 28). However, these classes of women are recognized by what they wear:

There are other women with baskets, some in red [Handmaids], 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're called. Sometimes there is a woman all in black, a widow. There used to be more of them, but they seem to be diminishing. You don't see the Commanders' Wives on the sidewalks. Only in cars. (32).

Their seats are also separated: "Wives and daughters on the folding wooden chairs placed towards the back, Econowives and Marthas around the edges and on the library steps, and Handmaids at the front, where everyone can keep an eye on us" (282). Fiona Tolan argues that "each of the characters is categorised in a manner that is seen as limiting and dehumanising. Social status is colour-coded, and the women of Offred's household are easily inventoried" (150). Such categorization and differentiation in clothes and places between women indicate the discrimination among classes within the same sex.

At The Red Center, the first institution introduced, women are reconstructed through the process of constitutionalizing femininity. Aunt Lydia and the other Aunts produce a certain image, which all females there should live up to. By comparing now to the old world, while emphasizing only the negative aspects of the latter, they warn women not to be their former selves, "You must realize that they are defeated women" and that "women were not protected then" (Atwood 54; 32). Aunt Lydia recalls the differences: "Consider the alternatives.... You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women" back then when they are "a society dying... of too much choice," but now women run out of choice, and of possibilities (124; 33). The discourse portrays this lack of choice as a state of freedom, which indeed is a paradox, nevertheless, an allusion of freedom is provided: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (32). What the discourse implies here, is that the former kind of freedom; the freedom *to* choose, is a dangerous one that results in chaos and immorality. But the current kind, which lacks the very basic element of freedom, is a positive one; it frees them *from* immorality and corruption. The discourse deliberately ignores the inseparable link between freedom, responsibility, and morality.

At the Red Center, they *become* the good women and worthy of whatever decided for them by the new discourse. Their identities are reconstructed by that discourse, given new names - consisting of two words: *of* and their Commander's name, Of Fred for example, new roles, and new purposes. Between these two statements of Offred; "I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, [...] What I must present is a made thing, not something born", and "sitting in our rows, eyes down, [...] We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives" lies the process of reconstructing one's identity as a *thing*, a *subject* (Atwood 75; 199). Foucault argues that the process of "production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures" (*Archaeology* 216). All of the system's institutions and the social networks contribute to such a process, as a result, the female individuals are reproduced as subjects. At the same time, they themselves contribute to that very process, as stated by Foucault: "power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who "do not have it"; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them" (*Discipline* 27).

The first characteristic of discourse, according to Foucault, is that "the discourse linked to the exercise of power" those who exercise power produce discourse, which constitutes identities and forms individuals as subjects (*Archaeology* 218). Therefore, power is accepted:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (Foucault, *Power* 119).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred resists the system's discourse, but eventually she gets defeated and broken. Her resistance fades away, her power vanishes, and she lets the discourse sink in: "I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce. I know this can't be right but I think it anyway. Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I've resisted, comes flooding in" (Atwood 295). This is exactly what they plan to and predict from the beginning: "Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (31).

The process of producing a discourse is well organized, according to Foucault, controlled, distributed and redistributed through out all institutions as well as the social networks. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the government of Gilead controls all of the discourse channels; the Red Center, as a religious and educational institution, the news and the media as a communication institution, and the speeches of the Commanders and their Wives. While Offred wonders about the truth of such discourse: "who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked",

"[she watches] it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none" (Atwood 89). One of the Commander's speeches is "about victory and sacrifice"(226), which corresponds to "*activity and passivity*" in Cixous and Clement's words: "we see that "victory always comes down to the same thing: things get hierarchal. Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organization subject to man. Male privilege, shown in the opposition between *activity and passivity*" (64). After the speech, "there's a long prayer about unworthy vessels" (Atwood 226). Indeed, what colors most of their discourses is the image of Handmaids as vessels; "You must be a worthy vessel" or "sacred vessels", because they are "for breeding purpose" (74:143).

For that "sacred" purpose, women are portrayed as empty, which is not as negative as it indicates, for their holy mission is to be fulfilled: "What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies. [...] Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled" (Atwood 201). The symbol of emptiness emphasizes the process of evacuating the female subjects from themselves, their identities, memories, hopes and purposes. They are being reconstructed and reshaped to become productive subjects. To be fulfilled and productive is to have a new meaning for their life, which is a delusive replacement for that very state of emptiness. Thus, "the only word she knows is to 'serve', and indeed, she serves" (Cixous and Clement 32-33). This productivity is the ultimate purpose of discourse and power, as Foucault argues: "It becomes a matter of obtaining productive service from individuals in their concrete lives" (*Power* 125).

II. DISCIPLINED AND PUNISHED WOMEN:

The female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* are constituted as subjects by the exercise of discipline and punish. What makes the Republic of Gilead holds power and continuous control of women is the state of fear it creates. According to Foucault, the subject is involved in the political power: "They invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, [...] The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (*Discipline* 25-26). The women in Gilead are both *productive* and *subjected*. Hence, "the feminine body - subject - is constructed; in doing this, they produce a "practiced and subjected" body, that is, a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed" (Bartky 71). The first steps of discipline are carried out by the Aunts in the Red Center. The females there follow strict routines and rules, they "[have] had lessons" in which they recognize the danger in being females; "But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison" (Atwood 129; 80). They also learn how to walk, to kneel, to behave, to obey, and to serve; "From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs. We recited that, three times, after dessert" (123).

The state of fear they create is established and maintained through the Guardians of the Faith, who are everywhere in their uniforms, and the Eyes, the secret police force. However, "Guardians aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions" (Atwood 27). Their inevitable presence is to make sure no one goes where he/she is not supposed to, or does what he/she is not allowed to: "We're not allowed on, there are Guardians now, there's no official reason for us to go down those steps" (39). This leads them to being *trapped*, in the Republic of Gilead, which is enhanced furthermore by the Wall that surrounds the Republic, with bodies hanged on it "like birds with their wings clipped, like flightless birds, wrecked angels. It's hard to take your eyes off them" (286). The symbolic use of birds contradicts with the lack of freedom inside the Wall, which is emphasized by the words "clipped wings" and "flightless". Such description reflects the function of the Wall that imprisons them and the Wings of the Handmaids that limit their vision. They also force women to watch public executions, to let them see without any doubt what kind of punish is waiting for those who dare to rebel, or break rules; "I've seen it before, the white bag placed over the head, the woman helped up onto the high stool as if she's being helped up the steps of a bus, steadied there, the noose adjusted delicately around the neck, like a vestment, the stool kicked away" (285). After such traumatic experiences, Offred eventually accepts their subjugation: "I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce" (295). Moreover, she "is truly victimized by oppression beyond self-destruction, but she also participates in the "Salvaging Ceremony," in which a man is torn to pieces by a crowd of Maenad-like women" (Rigney 63). This is the result of witnessing public executions that "stimulated passions in otherwise reasonable people, by familiarizing them with scenes of agony, brutality, and suffering" (Masur 97).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the female bodies are controlled and disciplined through a set of *alienating* procedures. They are not allowed to form any kind of love relations, or to interact with male characters, unless it is planned and monitored by the system, for Handmaids' justification of existence is only to bear the Commanders' children when needed. As Karen Rain states: "Since our sexuality has been constructed for the most part through social structures over which we have had no control, we all 'consent' to sexual desires and activities which are alienating to at least some degree" (qtd. in Sawicki 37). Such alienating activities are what Offred, the other Handmaids, and the wives find themselves trapped in. Moreover, their bodies become alienated too: "My nakedness is strange to me already" (Atwood 71). One of the ways they establish that is by eliminating every thing that could be tempting; "in my nightgown, long-sleeved even in summer, to keep us from the temptations of our own flesh, to keep us from hugging ourselves, bare-armed" (198). Even the names of shops are decided to be "too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone" (33).

Not only the relationships between men and women that are forbidden, but rather any kind of friendship, any kind of human interaction as a matter of fact, is forbidden: "Friendships were suspicious, we knew it, we avoided each other during the mealtime line-ups in the cafeteria and in the halls between classes" (Atwood 79). A general condition

of distrust and suspicion is established. Thus, through all of these procedures, a female subject in Gilead is “manipulated, shaped, trained, [and] obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces” (Foucault, *Discipline* 136). On her daily walks for shopping, Offred is accompanied with another; Ofglen: “A shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket” because women are not supposed to walk around alone, only in pairs (Atwood 26). However, they do not speak to each other unless it is absolutely necessary, and they do not engage in any personal communication, nor do they exchange any information about their personal lives or even about their houses and Commanders.

III. THE EYES VS. THE WINGS:

The female subjects in Gilead are under a constant *surveillance*, by which their disciplinary, subjugation, and productivity are ensured, because “control this rigid and precise cannot be maintained without a minute and relentless surveillance” (Bartky 63). This role of surveillance is mostly taken by the Eyes, the secret force of Gilead, “a net for the unwary, the Eyes of God run over all the earth” (Atwood 200). However, they manage to establish a state of *self-surveillance*, in which, the women find themselves acting as if they are being watched, even if they are not, because they suspect any one around to be an Eye; “Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps he saw the look on my face and mistook it for something else. Really what I wanted was the cigarette. Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye” (Atwood 25). Such suspicion is an ultimate effect of surveillance, which is organized and distributed: “to induce in the [subject] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action” (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). This corresponds to the colonial *gaze* “within which the identification, objectification and subjection of the subject are simultaneously enacted: the imperial [or the masculine] gaze defines the identity of the [female] subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalternity and powerlessness” (Ashcroft et al. 207). Such processes of identifying and colonizing the female subjects are established furthermore in the *colonies*, where women are named *unwomen*.

Opposed to the *gaze* of the Eyes, there are the Wings of the Handmaids, which surround their faces and prevent them from *seeing* the world around, only in a distorted vision; “Given our wings, our blinkers, it’s hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps” (Atwood 39). Their vision of themselves is distorted as well: “If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, [...] and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something” (14). Such a distorted vision recalls the Marxist notion of *camera obscura*, in which ideology constructs subjects and their consciousness and perspectives of themselves and of their realities.³ Nevertheless, the Handmaids are “totally seen, without ever seeing”, this is because “the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer” (Foucault, *Discipline* 202; Bartky 67). Such sovereignty is a male-privilege, exercised by the Commanders, the Eyes, the Guardians and all other male subjects in Gilead.

IV. POWER/KNOWLEDGE:

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, exercising power is inevitably and directly interwoven with constructing *knowledge*, in which subjects and their beliefs, perspectives, identities, and classifications are all constituted and “demonstrated to be true and had assumed the status of definitively acquired knowledge, and [...] accepted without either proof or adequate demonstration” (Foucault, *Archeology* 181). First of all, the subjects’ faith and beliefs are not freely chosen but rather enforced; the official doctrine in Gilead is orthodoxy. It is strictly forbidden not to be an orthodox, and a sound reason for execution: “only two hanging on it today: one Catholic, not a priest though, placarded with an upside-down cross, and some other sect I don’t recognize.” (Atwood 206). Moreover, knowledge is controlled through eradicating the former sources of antecedent order. Books, universities, and arts disappear in the new system; “Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers anymore, and the university is closed” (31). Instead, the only sources of knowledge left for use are the ones produced by the new system and its institutions that turn faith and knowledge into a product to be consumed, like Holy Rollers, which are machines for printing prayers.

Because things like truth and knowledge are not “outside power” and they are “produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint [which] induce regular effects of power”, the men exercising power in Gilead claim authority of such production (Foucault, *Power* 131). This authority as a “set of rules governing political actions, issued by those who are entitled to speak”, thus, it generally has “excluded females and values associated with the feminine” (Jones 119). However, the Aunts at the Red Center have a certain degree of authority, but in fact, they only contribute “to the association of the authoritative with a male voice” (120). Because of this very role, the Aunts are exceptions for some rules that prevent women from what is considered masculine activities. Therefore, they are “allowed to read and write,” while the other women “can be read to [...] by him [the Commander], but [they] cannot

³ For more discussion on Marxist concept of ideology, see: *Ideology in Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*.

read" (Atwood 135; 95). Through this set of rules and regulations, which determines who has the authority of speaking, female subjects are deprived of the *power* of words; "He has something we don't have, he has the word" (96).

V. CONCLUSION

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts a dystopian world, where women are subjugated by the male-dominant discourse of Gilead and its institutions and social networks. The paper's main concern is to "analyze power relationships, both personal and societal" between the male oppressors and the oppressed females, the dominant and the dominated, and how such relations are established (Palumbo 22). However, subjugating women is maintained by a series of processes including: constitutionalizing femininity, identifying and classifying female subjects, disciplining and alienating the female bodies, constant and internalizing surveillance, and constructing knowledge. The Commanders, their Wives, the Aunts, as well as the Handmaids and the other women in Gilead participate in the process of producing, distributing, and redistributing discourse. All of those systematic procedures, which are explored and discussed in the paper, are set to achieve the ultimate purpose of the regime of Gilead; to construct female subjects that are both subjugated and productive. Although the female subjects in Gilead are oppressed and victimized by the dominant discourse, they are engaged in exercising power and reproducing the very discourse that oppresses and subjugates them.

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Nuha S. Alotaibi " Distorted Shadows: Power And Subjugated Women In Margret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." *IOSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 23 no. 2, 2018, pp. 35-39.