

Structures of Power and Modes of Resistance: A Neoliberal Critique in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract. This study examines how Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* enlightens us on the interaction between neoliberal policies and authoritarian regimes. In the fictional Gilead society, women lose all their rights and become nothing but tools for reproduction under the cover of a political and religious system. The ruling power relies on the use of fear, constant surveillance, and strict social roles to create order and repress opposition. In this research, Michel Foucault's theory on surveillance, especially the panopticon, Judith Butler's view of gender as performance, and Naomi Klein's view that crises are exploited to usher in harsh policies are used to examine the way Gilead exercises control through identity construction and manipulation of disordered circumstances. The novel also addresses the commodification of fertility and the use of language and religion as instruments of power. Despite the violence of this regime, there are also processes of resistance that are forged experienced through memory, narrative, and passive insubordination. Therefore, Atwood's novel is a warning of the threats posed by unchecked power and the pernicious aspects built into neoliberal logic, even as it suggests that gestures of resistance and humanity are still possible.



Keywords: neoliberalism, authoritarianism, gender performativity, surveillance, resistance, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Naomi Klein.

المخلص. تتناول هذه الدراسة كيف تُثير رواية مارجريت أوتود حكاية الجارية العلاقة بين السياسات النيولبيرالية والأنظمة الاستبدادية. ففي مجتمع جلعاد الخيالي، تقعد النساء جميع حقوقهن ويصبحن مجرد أدوات للإنجاب تحت غطاء نظام سياسي وديني. تعتمد السلطة الحاكمة على الخوف والمراقبة المستمرة والأدوار الاجتماعية الصارمة لفرض النظام وقمع المعارضة. تُستخدم في هذا البحث نظرية ميشيل فوكو حول المراقبة، خصوصاً مفهوم "البانوبتيكون"، إلى جانب رؤية جوديث باتلر للنوع الاجتماعي كأداء، ورؤية نعومي كلاين التي ترى أن الأزمات تُستغل لفرض سياسات قمعية، لتحليل كيفية استخدام جلعاد للهوية وظروف الفوضى كأدوات للسيطرة. كما تتناول الرواية أيضاً تسليع الخصوبة، واستخدام اللغة والدين كأدوات للهيمنة. وعلى الرغم من العنف الذي يمارسه هذا النظام، إلا أن هناك أشكالاً من المقاومة تتشكل من خلال الذاكرة، والسر، والعصيان السليبي. وبذلك تُعد رواية أوتود تحذيراً من أخطار السلطة غير الخاضعة للمساءلة، والجوانب السامة الكامنة في منطق النيولبيرالية، في الوقت ذاته الذي تشير فيه إلى أن بقايا من المقاومة والإنسانية ما تزال ممكنة

1. Introduction

"The Handmaid's Tale" is a dystopian novel based on a world that highlights the threats of totalitarianism and patriarchal control combined with economic control. Based in the Republic of Gilead in a future America in turmoil and under religious control. Women are stripped of their rights and are forced into servitude for the states interest and economic benefit. Atwoods dystopian novel intertwines events and feminist concerns to produce an engaging critique of society building a vision that speaks to current fears about neoliberal power relations (Atwood, 1985).

This paper contends that The Handmaid's Tale is interpretable as a critique of neoliberal ideologies insofar as it lays bare their connection to authoritarianism, economic control, and women's oppression, in addition to the many modes in which resistance is possible within such a regime. The discussion takes into account four broad aspects of the Gilead system: its totalitarian design, the commodification of women's identity, the pervasiveness of surveillance, and differential scales of factors for resistance. Through its analysis of these terms, this paper looks to argue that Atwood's dystopia is both





a warning of what can happen when neoliberal energies are allowed to run unchecked and a testament to the resilience of human agency even in the presence of deeply entrenched systems of oppression.

2. Neoliberalism and Gilead's Economic system

2.1. What is Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an economic and political paradigm that supports free markets, less government control, and privatization (Harvey, 2005). However, in practice, it often increases inequality and gives more power to the elites. When paired with authoritarian strategies, it can help the suppression of citizens and undermine democratic ideals. In dystopian societies, this pairing is used to rationalize oppressive and destructive actions of the state.

This paper employs a variety of theories to investigate these issues. Michel Foucault's panopticon theory is employed to show how constant observation influences people's behavior, individuals begin to police themselves, thereby helping authoritarian regimes. (Foucault, 1977, pp. 195-228). In alignment with this view, Judith Butler's gender performativity theory states how social norms and repeated behaviors form and preserve gender identities.

According to Butler (1990, pp. 25-34) these identities are not innate, rather they are continuously produced through performance, allowing power structures to manipulate and control them. In her book, *The Shock Doctrine* (2007, pp. 3-32), Naomi Klein exposes how governments exploit crises to implement radical neoliberal reforms these shocks allow leaders to tighten their grip and permanently change existing systems.

Dystopian literature, like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is best suited to reflect on the prevailing social and economic issues. These stories offer a speculative critique of how neoliberal and authoritarian practices can intersect. This approach allows for an investigation of how economic systems interact with issues of gender, surveillance, and resistance in dystopian settings.

2.2. Neoliberalism and Gilead's power structure

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the republic of Gilead is ruled by a rigid hierarchy that displays some aspects of Neoliberalism by which human potential is used for profit. Power in Gilead is wielded mainly by an elite group that controls the production and reproduction, showing neoliberal tendencies for wealth accumulation and hierarchical organization.





Efficiency, productivity, and the regulation of labor in Gilead are more than just economic imperatives, they are mechanisms for maintaining social stability and it supports the authoritarian ambitions of the state. As it is, the political and economic structures implemented in Gilead are a metaphor for the ways in which the policies of neoliberal ideologies can enable the centralization of power, limit individual rights, embed systemic inequalities.

(Atwood, 1985; Harvey, 2005).

2.3. The Economic Disempowerment of Women

A key part of Gilead's economy is the active marginalization of women, and it is achieved specifically through the removal of their economic autonomy. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, characters like Offred endure through the confiscation of private property- like bank accounts- showing a wider attempt to erase any form of economic empowerment.

This novel is a representation of actual neoliberal policies that have systemically excluded women through wage disparities, unpaid labor, and inadequate maternity provisions. The economic marginalization of the structure in the narrative replicates historical events, including the neoliberal reforms implemented during the rule of Margaret Thatcher in Britain.

According to critics, the reforms intensified economic inequalities and destroyed social welfare regimes (Harvey, 2005). Barring women from economic decision-making and activity in Gilead and specific current policies points to the way neoliberal rationales are exploration of such dynamics in Atwood's novel brings to the forefront the criticism of neoliberalism as not only an economic theory but also as a force for intensifying social and gender inequalities.

3. Gender, Bio politics, and The Commodification of Women

3.1. The Role of Women in Gilead's Society

Margaret Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) presents a rigid hierarchical society where women are assigned to specific roles- Handmaids, Marthas, Wives, Aunts, and Econowives- each intended to sustain the state's political and economic objectives. Handmaids are valued exclusively for their reproductive capacity, reduced to biological instruments. Wives hold symbolic domestic status with no real authority.





Marthas are confined to domestic service, while Econowives are burdened with multiple duties and occupy a marginal position. Aunts act as agents of patriarchal socialization to ensure women conform to prescribed roles (Atwood, 1985, p.142). These divisions align with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which argues that gender is not an innate identity, but a role enforced socially which is repeated under normative pressure (Butler, 1990, p. 25)

3.2. The Handmaids as Reproductive Commodities

The regime commodifies Handmaids as reproductive tools, assigning value based only on fertility. The state exercises total control over their bodies and reproductive functions treating them as state property (Atwood, 1985, p.112). This framework mirrors real world instances of reproductive regulation, including sterilization programs targeting marginalized women in the United States (Ladd-Taylor, 1997, p.136). In both cases, the state asserts authority over reproduction to uphold its hierarchical order.

3.3. The Language of Control and Oppression

Language functions as an apparatus of power in Gilead. Prohibitions on reading, speaking freely and using personal names systematically erase identity and prevent dissent (Atwood, 1985, p.183). This manipulation reflects George Orwell's concept of Newspeak, where language is weaponized to narrow thought and enforce ideological conformity (Orwell, 1949, p.46). Foucault (1977, p. 27) emphasizes that discourse forms power and shapes what can be said and thought. By regulating language, Gilead secures compliance through linguistic constraint further entrenching state control.

4. Surveillance, Fear, and The Panopticon in Gilead

4.1. The Role of The Eyes; State Control and Surveillance

Atwood illustrates surveillance as a foundational element of Gileadean control. The omnipresence of —Eyes— ensures that citizens check their own behavior, predicting observation and punishment. This aligns with

Foucault's (1977, p.201) description of the panopticon in which the possibility of constant observation induces self-discipline. Gilead cultivates fear as a behavioral regulator transforming individuals in participants in their own oppression.





4.2. Indoctrination and Psychological Control

Beyond surveillance, the regime institutes psychological control through propaganda and ideological training. Red Centers function as indoctrination facilities, conditioning Handmaids to accept subjugation as duty. Aunt Lydia enforces ideological norms asserting, there is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from (Atwood, 1985, p.24). such control parallels historical re-education systems and modern media manipulation. Foucault (1977, p. 136) shows discipline as a technique that molds behavior and belief simultaneously a dynamic clearly at play in Gilead.

4.3. The Role of Fear in Enforcing Compliance

Fear uses as a deliberate strategy for societal regulation. Public executions, Salvagings, and Particutions function as spectacles of terror, reinforcing submission through performative violence (Atwood, 1985, p.275). These events echo the disciplinary rituals discussed by Foucault (1977, p.57). By institutionalizing terror, Gilead restricts mobility and discourages resistance, normalizing authoritarian rule.

5. Forms of Resistance in The Handmaid's Tale

5.1. Small-Scale Acts of Defiance

Atwood portrays everyday defiance as an essential form of resistance. Offred's narration, recollection of her past, secret reading of forbidden words, and sexual autonomy function as quiet rebellions (Atwood, 1985, pp.

52-54, 99-100). Moira's escape exemplifies open defiance and embodies hope (Atwood, 1985, pp. 133-135). Michel de Certeau (1984, pp. 29-42) describes such acts as —tactics that subvert dominant power through ordinary actions.

5.2. Collective Resistance: Mayday and Underground Movements

Mayday is organized resistance within Gilead. Though covert its presence helps escapes and challenges state authority (Atwood, 1985, pp.191-192). Historical parallels include the Underground Railroad and World War II resistance movements (Whitehead, 2016, pp. 73-75). Such networks arise under repressive regimes, showing the power of collective dissent.

5.3. The Power of Narrative and Testimony



Offred's storytelling serves as a radical act of self-assertion. Her recorded testimony, later interpreted in the —Historical Notes‖ functions as evidence against Gilead's attempt to erase personal histories (Atwood, 1985, pp.299-

311). Gill and Orgad (2018, pp. 1315-1316) link narrative to resistance in contemporary contexts, particularly the —MeToo‖ movement, where personal accounts reclaim voice and agency. In this light, narrative becomes a weapon against ideological erasure and a path toward social memory and justice.

Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale paints a chilling picture of a world where neoliberal values team up with patriarchal systems to strip women of autonomy and identity. In Gilead, women's bodies are state-owned property, useful only for reproduction. This reflects a deeper critique of neoliberalism's tendency to prioritize markets over people. David Harvey points out that such systems favor the powerful while pushing the vulnerable to the margins something clearly visible in Gilead's strict class divisions and gender-based oppression. At the same time, Michel Foucault's idea of the panopticon helps explain how constant surveillance keeps people in check. Gilead uses this same method using surveillance and indoctrination to sustain its totalitarian regime thereby standing for Foucault's principles for disciplinary power.

The novel's warnings feel especially urgent nowadays, as debates over reproductive rights, surveillance, and the effects of unchecked capitalism continue. Harvey warns that neoliberal policies can quietly erode democracy and increase inequality, while Foucault's concept about power dynamics of regulation and observation provide a theoretical framework to further understand how contemporary societies are able to perpetuate regimes of subordination and present them as practices of order and efficiency.

Atwood's story urges its readers to stay alert. Thus, the narrative serves not only as a fictional account it is a call to resist systems that dress up domination as discipline, and to protect the freedoms of human.

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