

Sexual Oppression and Religious Extremism in Margaret Atwood's the Handmaid's Tale

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Abstract. The Exploration of contemporary societies reveal how man's life has been destroyed in our age with wars on extremism, sexual oppression, nuclear contamination, etc. However, human beings pretend to be civilized and modernized in our time; the history reveals many wars that have demolished populations over ethnicity and religious. In this case there are many literary works that attempt to expose the human catastrophes of our age. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a good example conveys a contemporary government by religious fanatics who seize fertile women in an effort to control the valuable resource since pollution and nuclear disaster rendered many women –and men– infertile. The narrator is an unremarkable woman before the religious government –Republic of Gilead– comes into control, and it is her pragmatic response to the turmoil that makes the book a considerable read that illustrates the catastrophes of our era.

Keywords: Surveillance, Docile Body, Extremism.

1. Introduction

An Investigation in contemporary history reveals how man's life has been ruined in our age with wars on extremism, sexual oppression, nuclear contamination, etc. However, human beings pretend to be civilized and modernized in our time; the history reveals many wars that have destroyed populations over ethnicity and religious. Nazi Germany may be an obvious place to start, but there are others: the Croats and the Serbs, Ireland's ongoing struggles between the Catholics and Protestants, Bosnia's disastrous religious warfare, the Turks and the Armenians, and any of a number of Reformations and Crusades. "Comfort Women" enslaved by the

Japanese Imperial Army in order to provide sexual outlets for soldiers who have been telling their tales publicly to a world audience and the "Gender Treachery" (homosexuality) which was a hanging offense. The extremist wars as the negative side of contemporary history are not the only catastrophe of our age; the risk of environmental disasters including nuclear contamination also threatens our life. We have become increasingly aware of the potential for nuclear disaster, bioterrorism, chemical warfare, environmental terrorism, etc. An investigation into the effects of atomic warfare on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or perhaps the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on its local community and the entire planet are clear examples of the nuclear catastrophes in our time and the innocent people, animal and plants who were the victims of these superpower policies.

Atwood composed *The Handmaid's Tale* with the aim to expose the desperations of people in modern era. Atwood herself has indicated that part of the book was inspired by a trip to Afghanistan in the late 1970s. She and her husband were impressed by the beauty of the country and by the silence of its women, who rarely spoke or looked directly at them. This predates the more current history of the Taliban, of course, but the ideas were taking root even as they visited historical sites. She found that the religious extremism, sexual oppression, nuclear catastrophes are the big "Things" that have moved the world from contentment into despair. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood imparts any type of fanaticism that results in radical homogeneity. *The*

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Handmaid's Tale shows a society that is colonized by a Republic that ironically coalesces two extremist ideologies: the Puritanical right that denotes women proper place in the home –like many extremist countries – as the property of men, and the feminist groups that protest against the objectification of women and their bodies under patriarchy. And the fundamental extremists who want to control every aspect of people's life and have constant power on society – totalitarian governments. Offred the narrator of the story records her memories of the different forms of oppression that happens in the Gileadean Republic. The story begins with a terrorist attack that kills the President and most Congress, a movement calling itself the "Sons of Jacob" that make a revolution to establish a new republic. The story is presented from the point of view of a woman called Offred (a patronymic name that means "Of Fred", referring to the man she serves.) The Commander is the high ranking official in Gilead and Offred serves as his Handmaid.

The Handmaid's Tale is a good model of a docile society with the complexities of body image. Atwood uses the female body as a treatment of the mind/body concept and analyses the way in which her character responds to, and resists, its destructive effects. The bodies of women in Atwood's novel such as the handmaids are severely scrutinized to show how a body can be docile. As Foucault introduces, how he sees the human bodies are those accustomed to being disciplined and regarded as docile ones, and human bodies become docile so as to reach the controlling power's goal of order and regulation. That is, the energy of the body is controlled, disciplined and developed and later is reversed to be a restraint, a power of subjection.

2. Docile Body in Gileadean Society

The women in Gilead like the men are disciplined and organized. They are under the surveillance of the Eyes –Glidean secret police; there are posts everywhere with Guardians and machines that control and supervise everyone; no one is allowed to move freely in the city without passes. The control in Gilead is an extreme form of what Foucault calls a "carceral texture of society [with its] capture of the body and its perpetual observation" (1995: 304). The Glidean

Republic, like the prison in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, justifies society's disciplinary technologies and carceral forms. The female bodies in the novel are controlled both spatially and physically and by all means docile. As all the Handmaids are the object of surveillance, their movements, bodies, minds and attitudes are the targets of others, including men of different social categories, Commanders, Guardians, Eyes and women as Aunts, Wives, even the Handmaids' that unwillingly support the system of surveillance by spying on each other.

In Gilead society, femininity is constructed only through the female's self-restraint and purification of the body, wherefore, discipline and punishment are useful for female bodies to make them respectable in male dominated society. In Red Center Offred learns from Aunt Lydia, who reminds all Handmaids "The Republic of Gilead knows no bound. Gilead is within you." (Atwood, 1996: 32) This powerful statement indicates how much Offred and other Handmaids internalize the teaching and behave in accordance with other's expectation, for they are forced to remember: "The posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive" (1996: 89).

Besides self-erasing their minds and bodies from physical movements, the Handmaids as useful vehicles for bearing children have to restrain themselves in eating. In other words, they are not the possessor of their bodies and their existence is merely for the usability of their bodies, as the Gilead society does not allow them to corrupt their bodies with anything. Although Handmaids seem to have a bit freedom in going around, they have literally no freedom in aspects of their life from diet to thinking, for instance their diet is severely planned. Offred describes herself as a "prize pig" or "a thing," that her body is also expected to remain slender so as to remain in their working position.

The Handmaid's bodies, furthermore, is turned to one body. In the Red Center the Handmaids are re-educated to reverse their view toward female body as a body of production, body of "freedom to" body of "freedom from" various things done with body, in other word, from liberated body back to restrained body. Since Gilead's new belief infuses new thought in society, the Aunts teach the Handmaids to recognize their bodies as one unison body that is the property of the nation and a body that is to be given freedom from, rather than a body that is free to do anything.

All the strict control of Gileadean women and in particular Handmaids' mind and body embodies Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and the docile body. Gilead's discipline borrows Foucault's words that "the individual body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on other. Discipline is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine" (1995:164). In this carceral society in Gilead, as I have attempted to illustrate, women's identities have no meaning; they are completely alienated from their nature and identity. In Gilead's society identities are simplified into few special roles, with each serving only one role and all forming an "efficient machine" of household or procreation.

3. Surveillance and Social Control

Atwood's novel is in many ways a classical example of dystopian society; the evident lack of freedom, the constant surveillance, the impossibility of escape and the hierarchical categorization of society are just a number of characteristic features that immediately come to mind. There are various power relations that play an apparent role in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Foucault's analysis of power relation is a good link to clarify and criticize power relations in different levels of fundamental society. Foucault asserts "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And "Power," insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement"(1978:93). This statement illustrates Foucault's argument that power is not something static, someone's property; something localized something homogenous or essentially juridical; in fact, according to Foucault power operates through the exercise of control.

To discipline the society first the crisis that faces the Gileadean state like cultural memory must be removed. While there had been a profound influence in the population that threatened the existence of the new state, without destroying cultural memory and historical awareness the Gileadean state could not survive. Freedom then is defined as the capacity to tell and speak of the injustices that render the female body dismembered, whereas, surveillance is a way in which personal details are collected, checked and transmitted to manage people and population. Therefore, Gileadean authority attempts to erase the past, the culture and history to achieve the power of surveillance and govern the society in a totalitarian manner.

4. Power and Extremism in Gileadean Republic

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts a dystopian society. Atwood had not intended to write a feminist work, she was interested in totalitarian system which women as margins become the victim of their society. On one hand, *The Handmaid's Tale* deals with a number of female characters and their circumstances as the margins in society who are being sexually abused in the male dominated society, a considerable issue for feminist scholars, on the other hand, she was mainly interested on the destiny of humans in totalitarian conditions not specifically men or women. The aim of this dystopian fiction is to admonish the reader and make them think about all the catastrophes in their society. *The Handmaid's Tale* definitely works as a tale, where Atwood attempts to warn the reader of the inequalities in our world: the lack of freedom, constant surveillance, antihuman behavior and fundamental beliefs that are merely some of the misfortunes of our age.

The Handmaid's Tale is a collection of diaries written by an individual who is restricted in a fundamental regime. Offred uses the language of past that she is used to it, however, the language of the past is an opposing discourse to the new language of the authority.

The official language seeks to reject and repress the previous language and replace it with biblical discourse. Gilead as a fundamental regime attempts to abuse the biblical and religious values as their basic ideology to establish the social norms. Offred's diary performs to be an explicit deconstructive scrip of the social and conventional norms that mock the present society through language. The evident of the official language used in Gilead comes from Offred's commentary and explanation of the new realm. The powerful regime can ignore the past but it is never possible to erase the human memories which serve to threaten the authority. Although actions and deeds can be controlled; minds and thoughts are not a system that can be easily dominated because people are not completely concomitant with the beliefs of the new realms.

In Foucault's term, knowledge is power and power has control over knowledge, therefore the Republic forces the transitional generation to gradually accept the ideal system of the Republic. The regime believes in future they will have ultimate control over the past generation's thought and belief in order to disempower their attack against the official language.

As a means to gain the power of language, the authority manipulates the language for their own purposes. For instance, Gilead believes the kind of freedom existed in past was some of the reasons that anarchy occurred. Aunt Lydia tells the handmaids: "There's more than one kind of freedom, 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." (Atwood,1996:34) By underestimating discourses of the past, the Republic can control and reinforce the language. As a matter of fact, language is the foundation for thoughts and those who can control the language can also restrict the thought, therefore the concept of "freedom" in Gilead for future generation will only exist as "freedom from". "Freedom to" which is the concept of freedom we know it, will no longer exist and the usage of the word "freedom to" will be strictly forbidden in future generation.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts a society which establishes a rigid social belief through the domination of language. However, Offred, the protagonist deconstructs the language because she is not bounded to the struggle for domination of language and has control over the social reality. Offred narrates her diary in a language of the past and in this way she explores the opposing discourse to resist against the social authority. Therefore, regardless to what level of power the society achieves by the end of the novel power is undermined through the words and discourses of language used by the narrator. The reader also realizes the reality of Gileadean society through the leaning experience of the narrator.

5. Conclusion

Margret Atwood claims: "There's not a single detail in the book that does not have a corresponding reality, either in contemporary conditions or historical fact" (McCombs,1988: 284). Men have always held power over women; even now they possess control over women. There are few societies in the world which are not patriarchal. There are many totalitarian societies in the world, communist or religious extremist societies which have constant control on their citizens' mind and behavior.

However, power, control and oppression are concepts that stand out in patriarchal societies; they have a wide range in history of the world, and in the society of today. Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* describes such societies of our time. One might question why anyone would want to control another person, and use their power as a mark of superiority? In history whenever men gained authority over others, they utilized their power to bring the others under their domination. In Gilead society men have reached a position of extreme superiority in contrast to women, they use their authority to show their importance.

The society of Gilead is built on the biblical notion that men are more important than women, "for Adam was first formed, then Eve", (Bloom, 2004:233) and in totalitarian society, the rulers believe those who have power, have the right to control every facet of life, from economics and politics to each individual's ideas and beliefs. Men knew how to use their power, and by this knowledge they used and abused other people. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood makes a delicate pun on the word "man" as the general meaning of human being and at the same time the specific meaning as a male figure: "Men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children" (1996:316). Atwood shows how women lost all their rights in life, even the right to their own bodies; they were picked out by the regime to function as handmaids for rich families, with no right to object or choose. All totalitarian regimes are fundamentally the same.

Although men held the power in the society in Gilead one may see that it does not matter how much one oppresses someone else, the human spirit could resist being completely controlled. Offred managed to find her freedom; she recorded her story for the world to know; her words encouraging justice and power in itself. No matter, the aunts brainwashed the handmaids to believe that their former freedom, when they could choose their own way of life following their interest, was a dangerous one; Offred finds her way by struggling for freedom and resisting the oppression. For the oppressed women freedom gets a new meaning in their new society, playing scrabble or reading a forbidden paper from the old days could now symbolize

freedom. These examples of how much freedom is valued in such a limited society make us understand how valuable the right to live a life in freedom is. However, freedom is a relative concept, and must never be seen as fundamental in a fair society, but must be limited with civil law which categorizes the human right and prevents society from falling into anarchy.

6. Reference

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