



# Reproductive Surveillance And Power Dynamics: Exploring Biopower In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

**Binitha Rose Benny**

**Research Scholar**

**NSS Hindu College Changanacherry**

**Dr Priyadarshini S**

**Assistant Professor and HOD**

**NSS Hindu College  
Changanacherry**

## ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to explore Michel Foucault's concept of Biopower in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood. This dystopian novel portrays a totalitarian society named Gilead where women are denied their bodily autonomy by objectifying them as commodities for reproduction. Biopower is the system of operating power on a population by regulating and controlling their bodies. This happens in a normative pattern that affects the population in a devastating manner. In the novel, Gilead's oppressive regime enforces strict gender roles and religious doctrines to justify the commodification of women's body for reproductive purpose. The state establishes control and surveillance over the population by subjecting women to reproductive servitude in the name of cultural and religious norms. Thus women's body becomes a contested terrain of domination. The paper aims to provide an understanding about the biopower mechanisms established by an oppressive state in the name of social welfare and societal stability. The paper also highlights the intersection of power, gender, race, class and religious discourses in a hierarchical world. By exploring the biopower mechanisms in the novel, the paper serves as a powerful warning against the dangers of power structures that tend to control and commodify individual bodies and their reproductive capacities in the name of maintaining order and control in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** *Biopower, Body, Surveillance, Power*

## **Reproductive Surveillance and Power Dynamics: Exploring Biopower in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

There is always a widespread assumption that 'Might is Right'. The mightier ones are the ones with whom power vests. There are two types of Power existing in the world. The one which is overt, as in the case of military dominance and the one which is subtle, as in the case of cultural norms and social expectations. Power also creates an imbalance in the society.

Those who hold more power tend to control the other with less authority resulting in violation and

suppression of human rights. This concept can be understood by examining the theories of Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and social theorist. His works mainly dealt with theories of power, knowledge and social structures. At this juncture lies the concept of Biopower elucidated by him in his work *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault defines Biopower as the mechanisms through which power operates on a population on a large scale by regulating and taking control of their bodies. The state appears to establish its control over the population in a subtle manner that it regulates the body, health, reproduction and sexuality of an individual. The people are subjected to surveillance and their lives are regulated in the process. Often, this happens in a normative pattern in the name of social welfare and societal reforms. As Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*: "For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (Foucault 143). This statement clearly explains the shift that has happened in the society, where the state takes control over the biological aspects of human life.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault defines Biopower as the "numerous and

diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations".

(140) Biopower is a system of oppression which operates in a very subtle and normal way that it is so deceiving in nature. It doesn't operate through direct violence but through a strategic pattern that it totally affects the life of every individual as well as the whole population. Thus, body becomes an object of control, its controls not only the productivity of the body but also its ability to reproduce.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a dystopian society where women's body is objectified and commodified as mere vessels for reproduction. "We were the vessels, that's all. Our bodies were not our own." (Atwood 174) The novel is set in the land of Gilead, where women are denied autonomy, self expression and they are subjected to oppressive regimes by the state. In Gilead, most of the women have become infertile due to environmental hazards and radiation. The story is narrated by Offred, a Handmaid. There is a strict hierarchical division among women in that state. The Wives, the Marthas, the Handmaids, the Aunts and the Econowives are the various social classes in the state of Gilead. The oppressive regime of Gilead forces Handmaids (fertile women) to bear children for the Commanders. In Gilead, the reproductive ability of a woman is heavily exploited and they are subjected to various forms of oppression by the state. Women are considered as mere commodities meant to reproduce, thus confining them to rigid biological roles. In such an oppressive structure, her only value lies in producing offsprings. "They don't want us to think too much. They want us to be happy in our servitude, as they call it. But it's not happy, it's just survival." (183) Biopower manifests in a vivid manner in the state of Gilead where women are confined to some strict rules in the name of maintaining order and preserving the dignity of elite people. The state's control over reproduction is a stark example of biopower, as it exploits women's reproductive capacities for its own benefit.

This paper explores how women's body becomes a contested site of domination in a society that justifies its rule in the name of cultural and religious norms. In the novel, we can see that the fundamentalist theocratic regime of Gilead propagates an unusual fear among the women. They insist that it's the duty of a women to reproduce. Biopower operates through an omnipresent surveillance which ensures compliance and obedience. Handmaids are constantly surveilled by the Eyes. As Offred reflects: "The Eyes of God run all over the earth" (Atwood 19). The eyes metaphorically refer to the divine surveillance. The Handmaids

, who assimilate these thoughts in their minds fear the wrath of God. Thus, they internalize the notions propagated by the theocratic regime and subject themselves to the state. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault comes up with the concept of Panopticon which serves as a metaphor for Surveillance. Thus, Individual succumbs to the views perpetrated by the Society as they fear of being watched by a Divine presence.

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (Foucault 202)

The state also employs the manipulation of biblical narratives to exert power over women's body. The exploitation is justified in the name of cultural and religious discourses. The regime exerts its biopower by twisting religious doctrines for exploiting women's bodies. "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth" (Atwood 88) is the bible quote which is repeated constantly in the novel. "The Bible, like all sacred scripture, is vulnerable to manipulation. Its stories have been interpreted and reinterpreted,

sometimes to bless, but often to justify domination and subordination." (Trible1) . Thus in the state of Gilead, Biblical quotes are twisted in such a way that the religious text itself turns into a tool of oppression. The religious doctrines are used to justify state's control over women's body. The fusion of power and religion can be clearly seen in the novel. Foucault points out that biopolitical control often impersonate as "a matter of salvation for the race and the species" (Foucault 241). The Handmaids internalize their subservience and often believed in the biblical saying " Blessed be the fruit" (Atwood 18). Thus, religious doctrines are manipulated by the state to justify the exploitation and subjugation of women.

The Handmaids's are denied all sorts of freedom and they are thrown to reproductive servitude. Their only job is to bear children for the elite class. The protagonist of the novel is a Handmaid named 'Offred' . The Handmaid's are stripped of their original identities and are known by the name of their commander. The name Offred signifies ownership and its means that Offred belongs to her commander Fred ( Of Fred). Thus, she is denied of basic human rights and her only role is procreation. As Offred explains: "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. We're two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (136). Thus, women's body becomes an object of utility by the state.

The Handmaids are considered as commodities. They are described as mere vessels to reproduce. "Women are transformed into commodities, into objects that can be owned, controlled, and disposed of at will."(Huckles 113) The very act of reproduction is sanctioned by the state in a ceremonious manner. The sexual intercourse between the Handmaid and the Commander is done like a ritual and its done in a dehumanizing manner . "They think we're like cattle, or breeding machines. We're not supposed to have feelings or desires, just a function to fulfill." (Atwood 211). "Women have very little idea of how much men hate them... because they are treated as sexual objects and commodities." (Greer 14) There is no love or passion involved in the process. Offred describes about it:

Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of

my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing.

Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and

only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I

haven't signed up for (94)

The above passage suggests that the state does not pay any value to women. They are used as tools for reproduction. Their bodies are exploited and commodified by the regime to meet the needs of the elite. There is no love or mutual affection involved. This highlights how biopower reduces bodies to mere biological functions. As Silvia Federici puts forth:

Women's reproductive labour has been one of the most significant sites of exploitation, where the body itself becomes a commodity, producing not only goods and services but the labor force itself. The alienation of women from their reproductive functions reflects a deep-seated form of bodily commodification. (Federici 97)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the social status of the women determines their subjugation. In the novel, there exists a hierarchy among women which in turn contributes a subordination within the structure of a gender oppression. The wife of the Commander, the Privileged Serena Joy who has become barren shifts all her frustration in controlling Offred's body.

Thus, she reinforces the oppression against the under privileged women character in the novel. This is evident when she says: ""As for my husband, she said, he's just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part. It's final." (Atwood 16) . Thus, she asserts her dominance in the household. She asserts her dominance over Offred by this statement. This is clearly explained by Nancy Fraser in her book *Fortunes of Feminism*: "The regulation of bodies and reproduction by the state intersects with class and gender hierarchies, creating layers of oppression where those in privileged positions can exercise control over those in more subordinate roles." (Sabsay)

In the novel, the characters like Aunt Lydia tries to instill in poor underprivileged women a sense of inferiority. They indoctrinate strict gender roles over the women. Women are forced to internalize the adhered roles. They do it not through violence but through internalization. "A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. [...] Think of yourselves as pearls"

(Atwood 144). This is spoken by one of the Aunts in the novel during the indoctrination of Handmaids. The Handmaids are made to believe that they are precious and valued. They are exploited by manipulating them to believe that it's a blessing to take part in the divine process .Thus ,we can see an instance of woman becoming enemy to other by instilling gender roles . This is still happening today, where mothers, aunts, and relatives try to internalize traditional gender roles in their children. As Bell Hooks notes, "The movement to end sexism must be a movement to end the sexism that women themselves hold." (Hooks 92) . Thus Biopower is again imposed on the population in Gilead by registering ideas of gender roles on them.

In the novel, Biopower manifests in various ways. Its not just gendered but also intersects with race, class, culture and religion. Women in the novel faces different types of subjugation. There is a segregation of women characters based on their social class.The division between the Commanders' Wives, Marthas (domestic workers), and Econowives (poor women with no specific role) reflects the intersections of class and gender within the oppressive framework. As Foucault notes, "Biopower is exercised over populations, but it is not equally distributed. Different groups and classes experience power differently, with state control over reproductive capacities amplifying the inequalities that already exist within society." (Foucault 143). If the Handmaid's face reproductive servitude, the Marthas and the poor women are subjected to subservience. They are denied autonomy and self expression. Subjugation is experienced by different women in different way in the novel. While, Wives of the commanders enjoy some privileges over the Handmaids and Marthas, they are still dominated by the patriarchal society. The theory of Intersectionality is relevant in the contest of the novel. Intersectionality refers to the system in which multiple forms of oppression interact with each other resulting in subjugation and marginalization of disadvantaged.This theory which was formulated Kimberle Crenshaw is important in understanding about the layers of discrimination faced by women in the state of Gilead. In the novel, women of color are excluded from Gilead's reproductive system. Here, race and gender intersects with each other to form particular form of oppression. As Crenshaw points out : "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."(Crenshaw). Thus , through the exploitation of gender, race and class, the totalitarian regimes takes a biopolitical control over the population in Gilead.

The paper discusses about the biopower experienced by women in the oppressive regime of Gilead.The paper clearly analyses how women's body is subjugated and discriminated in the name of religious and cultural reforms. The biopower experienced by the women appears to be very normative and its done in a subtle manner. The paper also delve into the concept of Intesectionality that creates multiple layers of Oppression. The paper also aims to give an understanding about various power structures that manipulate and exploit bodies to gain control over the population.The paper also warns against the normalizing nature of power structures and inspires people to resist the regimes that seek to subjugate and dehumanize the population. Its also serves as a powerful critique of the hegemonic power structures that tortures population in the contemporary world.

## Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. McClelland and Stewart, 2011.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *JSTOR*, vol. 43, no. 6, July 1991, pp. 1241-99. [www.jstor.org/stable/1229039](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039). Accessed 16 Sept 2024.
- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. Autonomedia, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vintage, 1990. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Penguin UK, 2019. Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. ebook ed., Fourth Estate,2020, Kindle.
- Hooks, Bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Simon and Schuster, 2004. Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. ebook ed., Routledge,2014, Kindle. Sabsay, Leticia. "Nancy Fraser: Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis." *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, Feb. 2014, pp. 323-29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-014-9258-0>.

- Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Augsburg Fortress, 1984.

