

HIERARCHY OF PAIN IN GILEAD: EXPLORING MARXISM AND PANOPTICISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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Abstract

The universality of surveillance has introduced new realms of observation and control over our us. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a dystopian society where constant observation pervades even to women's bodies and their reproductive functions, depriving them of identity, agency, and autonomy. This commodification of women results in the deprival of their identity and agency, particularly the aspect of motherhood. Through the narrative, Atwood explores how commodification and the resultant continuous surveillance challenge the personal freedom of the handmaids who are hired to bear the babies of elite-class people. The themes of Panopticism and Marxism in *The Handmaid's Tale* question the agency of women in the narrative, which is caused by class distinction and pervasive surveillance. The panoptic control structure ingrained in the Republic of Gilead continuously monitors the handmaids' daily activities. The paper analyzes the effect of such surveillance and control on their identity, agency, and psyches. It explores the control imposed on the handmaids, who belong predominantly to financially challenged backgrounds, by drawing parallels to the Marxist aspects of class distinctions and commodification of individuals.

Keywords: Surveillance, commodification, identity, agency, autonomy.

The complex tapestry of class distinction, commodification of individuals, and exploitation in society is vividly examined through a Marxist analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. This commodification and exploitation have had a profound impact on the psyches of the women in this narrative. The class hierarchy existing in the Republic of Gilead, based on one's ability to contribute to the betterment of the community as a whole, reflects society's materialistic attitude.

This novel's setting is the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian theocracy that has overthrown the US government. Social demarcations and a rigid caste system characterize Gilead. The power, identity, autonomy, and agency of women, especially those of the lower class, are put at stake in this society. Thus, this is fertile ground for the Marxist analysis of class division and the commodification of women. Gilead's omnipresent surveillance infrastructure can be closely aligned with Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon structure. Michel Foucault's idea of Panopticism echoes throughout the ever-pervading control exerted over the handmaids and other lower-class women.

Through the lives of the handmaids in Gilead, Atwood emphasizes how the panoptic and Marxist systems result in the loss of their identity as individuals. This also shows how they are stripped of their agency and autonomy over their bodies just because they are to give birth to a baby. The individuality of these handmaids is consciously ignored to such an extent that any impact of these repressive measures on their psyches as well. This combined analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a perfect illustration of the effect of such commodification and control on a person and society as a whole.

In Marxism, identity is defined based on social and economic classes. Thus, class distinction is one of the key aspects of Marxism. The class distinction explores the fundamental demarcation of society into different classes. An individual's interests, identity, and consciousness are shaped by the class to which he belongs. Thus, from a Marxist perspective, identity is not static but is a dynamic and social construct that is determined by socio-political conditions.

In Marxist theory, society is divided into two main classes based on their relationship with the means of production. The class that enjoys ownership of the means of production is called the bourgeoisie, and the working class, which does not own any means of production and sells its labor power to the bourgeoisie, is called the proletariat. The class identity determines one's relation to the means of production. The capitalists seek to maximize their profit at the cost of the wages of the proletariat, while the proletariat demands better wages and improved working conditions, which will affect the capitalists' profit. The proletariat, thus, ends up being exploited by the capitalists.

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, this class conflict arose after the theocratic government had overpowered the US government. The Sons of Jacob changed the entire political scenario. Their policies gave way to conflicts among race, class, and gender. The newly-organized class system has vested the authority of the administration in the upper-class men, the commanders. The commanders are the ones who "own" the handmaids, with their power and status in society. Thus, the commanders can be seen as the owners of the means of production, the bourgeoisie, in the hierarchy of society. The

handmaids represent the proletarians, who sell their labor power for their living. Those women who are incapable of bearing a child or stand against the Gilead policy is declared to be Unwomen and are forcefully sent to Colonies. So, the Handmaids live in society at the cost of their labor power—their ability to reproduce.

Commodification is a prominent Marxist concept in which non-tradable things are treated as commodities or tradable objects that can be bought and sold. This transformation process from non-tradable to tradable objects is the basis for the capitalist mode of production.

The handmaids' identities are questioned due to the commodification of their individuality. They are forced to get pregnant for the elite couple, against their wishes, and are made to live in the commanders' house, who "own" them. They are deprived of their minimal human rights, being forbidden from reading, writing, speaking, and walking freely. They are not allowed to go outside the Commanders' house other than to the shop or the doctor.

The primary level of commodification occurs when they are deprived of their names. In the Republic of Gilead, they are not allowed to use their names but rather are addressed with the names of their Commanders. To show that they are the possessions of the Commanders, their real names are changed and are addressed in terms of their Commanders. The protagonist has forgotten her real name after the theocratic regime took charge. She is now addressed as "Offred," which implies that she is the property of her Commander, Fred. Others are also given names according to their commanders, such as Ofglen, owned by Glen, and Ofwarren, owned by Warren.

Their identity as an individual is questioned. They are being exploited for the benefit of the Commanders and their Wives. They are subjugated by a patriarchal society, which considers women as mere baby-bearing vessels rather than individuals. Martin Kheel notes: "Women's fertility is also increasingly being exploited by the male-dominated medical establishment, which now routinely 'harvests' women's eggs." (334).

"I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource." (Atwood,71).

The four digits and the eye tattooed on her ankle are indications of her being commodified to be under the ownership of the Commander. She is denied the authority to use her name, which is her identity. She is also left with a mark of their authority over her body in the "eye" tattooed on her ankle. This implies that she is always under their ownership. Thus, she is reduced to being a national resource, which is of great importance to the state's existence but is too limited and thus under strict control.

The Marxist aspect of false consciousness can be analyzed while exploring how the ideologies and practices of the theocratic regime have been inculcated into the minds of the handmaids. This defines how proletarians are misled by the ideological and institutional beliefs and practices of the capitalists. The bourgeoisie imparts their dominant ideology, which justifies the class oppression to which the proletariat is subjected in capitalist society. These beliefs are internalized by them and eventually cultivate a misconception about the reality of their exploitation by the capitalists. Thus, they fail to understand their interests and accept the capitalists' ideology.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, many characters, especially women, internalize the oppressive and unjustifiable policies of Gilead. The Aunts, who indoctrinate and train women to be handmaids,

fully trust Gilead's ideology and try to impart it to the handmaids. They are below the Wives of Commanders but above the handmaids in the hierarchy of society. They have the privilege to read and write, unlike the handmaids. Aunt Lydia and Aunt Elizabeth keep a continuous watch over the handmaids.

Aunt Lydia gives lectures to the handmaids, emphasizing the importance of their role in contributing to the decreasing population of the country. "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,120).

She tries to make the handmaids believe that they are contributing to the betterment of society by being the handmaids and by letting others subjugate and exploit them. The Aunts try to control the handmaids according to the norms of Gilead. As a result of their blind adherence to Gilead's autocratic regime, they try to normalize the victimization of the handmaids.

"You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.... She said: Because they won't want things they can't have." (Atwood,123).

They are conditioned to believe that their value depends on their ability to reproduce. This narrows down their worth as individuals and forces them to see themselves as mere commodities, which are used by society. This ultimately affects their identity as women.

The internalization of the class discrimination experienced by lower-class people is evident in their acceptance of the color-coded uniforms assigned. They are given a specific color, according to their societal duties and not as per their wishes. The blue color is assigned to the Wives of the Commanders, green to Martha, khaki to Aunts, red and white to handmaids, and multicolored dress for the Econowives, wives of poor workers. The color of the dress determines one's role in society. This shows that they lack individuality as a person and are known by their societal role.

The theocratic regime uses religion as a tool to impose its rules on people, especially women. They justify the policies of the theocratic regime by quoting passages in the Bible. "Religion, which Karl Marx called 'the opiate of the masses,' is an ideology that helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life, or at least tolerant of it, much as a tranquilizer might do." (Tyson,76). Even before the act of sex between the Commander and Offred, the Bible is read. This makes people consider their sufferings as a test by God and not as the result of the rule of an oppressive regime. The supporters of the theocratic regime see resistance or rebellion against its policies as immoral or against God himself. This reflects the moral framework the theocratic authority constructs around its oppressive policies. The people, especially the handmaids, thus lack the autonomy to take a stand for themselves amidst the oppression.

The women who are appointed to do the household chores at the Commander's house are called "Marthas," alluding to the disciple of Jesus Christ, according to the New Testament. The police who guard the household of the Commanders are called "Guardians of the Faith," and the soldiers are called "Angels." The Commanders are credited with the name "Commanders of the Faithful." This may be an attempt to justify their rule over lower-class people. They may be trying to inculcate in the people the thought that they are completely ruling according to religious norms. Everything, including the decisions of the government,

is defined in terms of religion, thus blurring the line between politics and religion.

According to Louis Althusser, the ISAs, or the Ideological State Apparatus, are vested with the role of reinforcing the ideology of the ruling or upper class for others in society. A variety of social institutions, such as education, religion, family, media, and culture, are included in it. These social institutions work to maintain the power of the ruling class in society by shaping their understanding of society and its ideology. The ISAs reinforce the class system and capitalist exploitation by reproducing the social conditions beneficial to the ruling class.

Education institutions or schools as an ISA may justify the policies of the capitalist system, thus facilitating the capitalist mode of production and economic inequalities. They serve to sustain the existing class system by perpetuating the social relations of production in society. The Red Center as an educational institution is a medium to impose social control over handmaids by inducing the dominant ideology of the autocrats in lower-class people. In Gilead, Aunts are required to train and indoctrinate the women to become handmaids by inculcating biblical stories and the policies of the regime in them. They train them at the Red Center by demonstrating the steep decrease in the population due to environmental pollution and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as their role in contributing to the population and overall betterment of the Republic. By inducing these policies into them, they are forced to direct their perception of society in the way the authority wants. This ultimately results in the loss of individuality among the handmaids.

The autocratic regime of Gilead uses Christianity in a varied form as an ISA to enforce their religious policies on the handmaids. The sons of Jacob have found scriptural precedent to justify their actions. The handmaids are taught the stories of Rachel and Leah from the Bible at the Red Center. They are taught it to justify their actions. "Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knee, that I may also have children by her". This extract is read to the handmaids. The continuous exposure to this makes them internalize the ideology of Gilead that their sole purpose is to contribute to the declining population of the state. This internalization also contributes to their identity formation as handmaids.

The Commanders read these references and say a prayer even before the Ceremony when the Commander and his handmaid indulge in the act of sex. The story of Jacob and his wives may make the handmaids think that when one cannot bear a child, it is justifiable for a woman to bear a child for her. They may be trying to glorify the exploitation they are causing the handmaids by using biblical references.

The handmaids are deprived of basic human rights to read and write and are restricted from using anything that makes them look charming or attractive. "We are containers; it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut." (Atwood,103). Thus, they use butter to soften and moisturize their skin. They are made to internalize the thought that they are useful only because of their ability to procreate. "Each month I watch for blood fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own." (Atwood,79). This thought affects their ideology and consciousness. Ultimately, they become the capitalists who facilitate the commodification of their individuality.

In the Republic of Gilead, the media serves to propagate control within society by censoring reality. In this dystopian setup, the government uses the media as a tool to enforce its ideologies by limiting commoners' access to information. People are exposed only to information that reinforces governmental policies. This censorship helps the government maintain its oppressive rules and retain its power and control over others.

During the creation of Gilead, the state was in the midst of chaos. After the President was shot to death, a state of emergency was declared by the army. Even in such a chaotic situation, news was circulated stating that everything was under control. Censoring was also implemented in newspapers, and some were closed down for security reasons. Thus, people were unable to derive a complete and clear picture of society's situation.

According to Althusser, the Repressive State Apparatus refers to the systems and structures that use repressive measures to enforce order and control. Repressive State Apparatus operates through institutions such as police, military force, and government. The depiction of RSAs in literary works focuses on the role of these institutions of power in repressing one's individuality. Such repressions are represented through themes of political power, which has the authority to restrict freedom of speech, and resistance through fear and intimidation.

Many aspects of the narrative, such as the Eyes, the aunts, Salvaging, and Particution align with the concept of RSA. The secret police force, Eyes, is below the Commanders in the social hierarchy. They have the authority to maintain continuous surveillance over everyone, especially women, and the power to arrest and punish anyone who defies the state's rules and regulations. They can arrest someone if they suspect that person to be a spy who is working against the theocratic government. They use their power to sustain the power of the ruling class.

The Aunts are also part of RSA, as they use violent measures to exert power over the handmaids. They brutally punished Moira when she tried to escape from the Red Center. "They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that, the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes, your feet and your hands are not essential." (Atwood,98). They not only train and indoctrinate the handmaids by inculcating the glorified version of the theocratic policies but also punish the handmaids for any attempts at resistance from them. They are given cattle prods that sling on thongs from their leather belts to control the handmaids. Like the Eyes, they also seek to maintain the power of the Commanders by repressing others in the lower class.

Salvaging, or public execution, is another repressive measure used by the state. The bodies of the hanged are displayed on the wall to instill fear in others. Anyone who is found guilty of committing any crime is executed publicly. Women's Salvaging is done separately inside the building, which used to be the university, during the pre-Gilead days. A handmaid is usually executed for sins such as unchastity or an attempt on the life of her commander or his wife. A Commander's wife is usually not executed unless she tries to kill any handmaid. She can do almost anything to the handmaids other than attempt to kill them, especially when she is pregnant. The fear instilled in the minds of people by seeing the dead bodies hanging on the walls has a profound impact on their psyche. They start to cultivate a feeling that they will be hanged to death for any crime, as they are helpless to fight for themselves. This results in a kind of self-policing among the people, especially the handmaids.

Particution is another repressive measure used to punish anyone guilty of raping or committing grave crimes, such as rape. In Particution, the accused is beaten to death by the

handmaids. Before getting beaten up by them, he will be brutally tortured by the Guardians, and he won't be able to stand on his own. Offred remembers one Guardian being beaten to death after being accused of raping a pregnant woman, whose baby died lately. This punishment is so cruel that the accused is not given a chance to clarify his part.

The Marxist aspect of alienation refers to the alienation of people from aspects of human nature due to their lives in a capitalist society. It is usually in four forms: alienation from the product of labor, the working process, one's self, and others.

The handmaids are alienated from the product of their labor, the baby. They are commodified and valued only for their reproductive capacity. The impact of the alienation of their baby at such an infant stage is consciously ignored by the ruling class of Gilead. The selfishness of the elite class is evident in their treatment of the handmaids.

"She'll be allowed to nurse the baby for a few months; they believe in mother's milk. After that she'll be transferred to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward." (Atwood,133).

They are alienated from their baby during the initial months of their birth, and they are forbidden from maintaining any kind of relationship with the child. The handmaids are also alienated from the process of their labor. They are merely being used up by the ruling class for their labor power. They are forced to indulge in the act of sex to conceive a baby for the elite couple. This implies that they do not control the process of labor. They are made to do monthly checkups, urine tests, hormone tests, cancer smears, and blood tests. Even though these monthly checkups are not new to them, the difference lies in the fact that they are obligatory in the Republic of Gilead. This adds to their pervasive control, under the pretext of pregnancy.

They are alienated from themselves in Gilead. They adorn the identity of a handmaid by accepting a name in terms of their Commanders' names. They are deprived of themselves and their identity once they start doing their labor. The protagonist, Offred, had forgotten her real name at one point. This implies that she is alienated from herself in Gilead. This affects their identity and their psyche as they feel distanced from themselves. This alienation makes them aware of the extent of the commodification to which they are victims.

They are also alienated from others around them. They are not allowed to interact with anyone based on their interests. Each handmaid is allotted a pair, with whom she is permitted to go shopping or to see the doctor. Aunts also accompany them during their visit to the doctor. Other than the permitted interaction, they are not allowed to utter a single word or roam around as they wish. The autocratic regime of Gilead questions their agency, and Offred is "restricted to the private domestic spaces and relegated to the margins of a political structure which denies her existence as an individual" (Howells,93). Even the allotted pair must not talk about anything offensive, according to Gilead policies. Even a minor interaction is controlled by those in power. This results in the loss of their individuality as they are fully under the control of those in power.

All the Marxist aspects are interrelated in the narrative. The commodification is due to class discrimination, which ultimately leads to the false consciousness of the handmaids. By accepting the new ideology of Gilead, they distance themselves from themselves. Thus, all these elements contribute to the loss of identity, individual agency, and autonomy. This loss also has an intense impact on their psyches.

Michel Foucault's Panopticism is permeating Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. It refers to a control system where individuals are forced to self-monitor and regulate their behavior. Unlike Bentham's architectural infrastructure of the Panopticon, Foucault's Panopticism causes a psychological impact due to its constant surveillance. Thus, people regulate their behavior according to societal norms because they believe they are under surveillance, which ultimately results in the loss of agency over themselves.

In literature, Panopticism is used as a metaphor for a society that emphasizes surveillance and power. The characters who are under panoptic control internalize the surveillance and police themselves, thus embodying the panoptic principle of power through visibility. The continuous surveillance also affects the psyche of those who are surveilled. This psychological impact is manifested in their thoughts, actions, and emotions.

Through the concept of Panopticism, Atwood delved deep into the power dynamics and subjugation of individuals through different methods of control, both psychological and physical. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the network of secret police called the Eyes, the ubiquitous Aunts who are given the duty to indoctrinate and train the handmaids to make them a perfect fit for society, exercise power and control over the people in the Republic of Gilead, especially over women. The handmaids are subjected to rigorous monitoring to ensure that they comply with the reproductive duties that are enforced upon them. Under panoptic control, they internalize the surveillance and police themselves, thus embodying the panoptic principle of power through visibility.

The Eyes of God are the primary force of Panopticism. Their omnipresence instills fear and awareness among the handmaids, which results in the self-regulation of their behavior. The police, as an institution included in the Repressive State Apparatus, control people by inducing a fear of repressive punishments. They are vested with the power to arrest anyone without any further explanation to others.

"Under his Eye," she says. The right farewell. "Under His Eye," I reply, and she gives a little nod. (Atwood,50).

After shopping, Ofglen and Offred bid goodbye with these words. This implies that the people in the Republic of Gilead are always being watched and thus under control. This symbolizes their complete lack of authority and agency. This alludes to Big Brother, the character in George Orwell's 1984. The Eyes remind people, especially lower-class people, that the big brother is always watching them. They are deprived of their freedom to voice their opinions. Anything expressed against the Gilead government makes them face grave consequences.

The Eyes patrol through the roads of Gilead in their black van with a white-winged eye painted on its side. The van doesn't have a siren, which makes it difficult for people to spot its location. This enhances the amount of fear it creates in people. Thus, they ensure that they always self-regulate their behavior. The name "Eyes" symbolizes the pervasive surveillance of the secret police in Gilead, which is akin to the eternal watchfulness of God. An eye is tattooed on the ankle of the handmaids, along with the four digits. This is meant to remind them that they are under the watch of the "Eyes." They are restricted by every means in the Republic of Gilead. In the theocracy of Gilead, the eyes of the state and of God are considered to be equal.

The realization that they lost their agency over their bodies has an intense impact on their psyches as well. The random recollections by the protagonist, Offred, about her past life with Luke and her child might be an indication of her troubled psyche. She thinks about her daughter, whom she worries might

have forgotten her. Whenever she sees anyone being executed, she anxiously looks to make sure that it is not Luke. All these random connections that she makes with the happenings in Gilead reflect the depth of the impact of her being victimized on her psyche.

The Aunts are above the handmaids in the social hierarchy and have a prominent role in exerting panoptic control over the handmaids. They are vested with the diverse functions of indoctrinating and training the women to become handmaids and regulating them according to the norms of Gilead by keeping them under their pervasive control. They train the handmaids in such a way that they internalize the enforced control exerted over them. They use religious principles and references to substantiate their aspects. They always try to glorify the rules imposed by the autocratic regime. As part of the indoctrination, they make them internalize that, as handmaids, they are contributing to the betterment of the state as a whole. This results in the loss of their autonomy over themselves. "Gilead strips women of their autonomy, and hence all women are relegated to the margins of the political structure." (Khan,4). They also have the authority to punish the handmaids if they resist the Gilead norms. The gravity of the punishment that Moira gets for trying to escape from them shows the level of power they have over the handmaids. This also implies the loss of identity and autonomy for the handmaids. They are aware of the fact that they are under surveillance. Thus, they forgo their agency over their lives and bodies due to their fear for the system.

The daily activities of the handmaids, including their sleep, are under surveillance. Their bodily autonomy is completely lost once they become handmaids. The Ceremony, the monthly act of sex, is also a result of a kind of surveillance over their bodies. the Ceremony, conducted under the pretext of Rachel, Leah, and Jacob from the Bible, is a primary proof of the loss of the handmaids' autonomy over their bodies. It is conducted on the days of ovulation of the handmaids so as to increase their chances of conception. This implies the hidden struggle of the handmaids. They are required to share every aspect of their bodies, according to rules. As women, they are denied their right to privacy regarding their bodily matters.

During Ceremony, the Commander and the handmaid would indulge in sex in the presence of the Commander's Wife. She is the one who controls the process. It can neither be termed as lovemaking nor as rape. They are not even allowed to kiss each other during intercourse, as kissing is a sign of love, and they are not allowed to have any feelings for each other. It cannot be considered rape, as Offred assures that nothing is happening to her against her consent. The handmaids are commodified as a result of their control over their bodies. They are compelled to indulge in sex without a tinge of emotional attachment to the man. The bodily autonomy of the handmaids being questioned is evident from Serena Joy's gripping of Offred's hand during sex with the Commander.

The handmaids are victimized because of both their class and gender. The main cause of the steep decline in Gilead's population is the sterility of men, especially those belonging to the upper class. Due to their dominance, they are unwilling to accept it and blame them for such a plight. Initially, the handmaids, including the protagonist Offred, are unaware of this fact and indulge in the act of sex. Later, they are forced to have sex with other men who are fertile. Usually, it is the Wives of the Commanders who force them to indulge in sex with another man so that they can be freed from their service. Thus, they are exploited by both men and women of Gilead. Their bodily

autonomy is questioned in a situation where they are forced to indulge in sex with anyone for others' benefit.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts the Republic of Gilead with an ambiance of enforced discipline resulting from the pervasive surveillance that veils the autonomy of the handmaids. The effective blending of the theories of Panopticism and Marxism in analyzing the functioning of the Republic of Gilead helps in the adept illustration of the lives of the handmaids in that society. The Handmaids are stripped of their identity and agency through the enigmatic rule of the autocratic regime. The Republic of Gilead, resembling Bentham's Panopticon in its infrastructure and functioning, inculcates fear and paranoia into the minds of the state's citizens. The working of Gilead also holds a mirror, which reflects Marx's critique of capitalist exploitation, where the handmaids are reduced to mere vessels for reproduction and are devalued for their economic function. Through the lens of these theories, Atwood reveals how intersecting systems of power can crush individual spirits, urging readers to confront the terrifying consequences of unchecked control.

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