
**Bodily (in)justices: Hegemony of dismemberment in Atwood's
*The Handmaid's Tale***

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Abstract:

The governance of the bodies of individuals in a society is symptomatic of the machinations of power in place. After all, the law-making authority of the government to decide which body may be designated as "normal," "abnormal," or even "queer" itself demonstrates that the biological body is deeply entrenched in the political spirit of ruling a society. This paper examines one form of governance represented in Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* that utilizes the female body and its reproductive function to ensure the continuation of a highly ordered, regulated, and subjugated population. The paper intends to dissect this dystopian fiction from the lens of disability studies by arguing that the cultural, political, and social governance of the Republic of Gilead is founded on the enforcement of dismemberment. Disability in *The Handmaid's Tale* is reconfigured as a necessary form of governance, weaponized as a form of punishment, surveillance, exemplar, and resistance. The ability to turn off subjects physically, mentally, and pathologically is what ensures the seamless functioning of the Republic of Gilead.

Keywords: disability, reproduction, body politics, dystopia, power.

Introduction:

The body cannot be divorced from the systematic matrix of political systems such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, and caste; instead, it finds its actualization within the ideology of the systems in place, whether in compliance or resistance. The body is a textured entity that functions across biology, sociology, and political economy. It is the crisis of the body that is also the overarching premise of Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a scathing and poignant critical satire of the governing misogyny in a patriarchal social system that desires to contain and control women as livestock for birthing. The novel has been celebrated, studied, and critiqued for its strong feminist position, dystopian subversive politics, and speculative quality of a cautionary tale. Hardly has any attention been given to the underlying theme of disabling body ideology that is simmering within the narrative. The premise of this current paper is to dissect this dystopian fiction from the lens of disability studies by arguing that the cultural, political, and social governance of the Republic of Gilead is founded on the

enforcement of dismemberment. Disability in *The Handmaid's Tale* is reconfigured as a necessary form of governance, where it is weaponized as a form of punishment, surveillance, exemplar, and also as resistance. The ability to turn off subjects physically, mentally, and pathologically ensures the seamless functioning of the Republic of Gilead.

The Handmaid's Tale takes place in a futuristic 1980s North-eastern United States in the Fascist Republic of Gilead, where the mode of politics resonates with the history of American Puritanism. The novel is a stream-of-consciousness postmodern narrative narrated from the perspective of Offred, a handmaid within such a prohibitive regime. Through Offred's confessional interior narrative, her analyses of the pre-Gilead times, and the present predicament of gender relations, Atwood reveals the indignity and terror of living under a futuristic regime controlled by Christian fundamentalists. The narrator is one of the several "handmaids" who, because of their "viable ovaries," are transferred to the houses of the "Commanders of the Faith," where they are to perform periodically programmed sexual intercourse with the Commander. This church-state regime of Gilead justifies such an unorthodox practice out of the necessity to overcome a fertility crisis among the dwindling Caucasian population due to increasing pollution in the environment. As one of the novel's epigrams suggests, the polygamy of the Old Testament is used as a legitimization of the bio-environmental crisis. Adhering to the precedent set in Genesis, Commander Fred's wife, Serena Joy, arranges and supervises this sexual intercourse, in which the handmaid is sermonized, desexualized, and dehumanized, and both the wife and the handmaid are obliged to participate. The alternative to opposing this State arrangement is the banishment of the handmaids to the colonies, a space where women clean up radioactive waste as slave laborers. The dictums of state policy of Gilead thus relegate sex as a material commodity exchanged for survival. Amin Malek, in her essay "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition," notes some of the salient features of this novel that characterize it within the genre of dystopian fiction. The architecture of Gilead reverberates any classic dystopia that is precipitated on power: power as the prohibition or perversion of human potential, power in its absolute form that tolerates no flaws in the pattern it imposes on the citizens of its society. Malek rightly states that the slippery slope element of dystopian fiction "shows, in extreme terms, power functioning efficiently and mercilessly to its optimal totalitarian limit" (4). The purpose of dystopia is not to alienate the readers from their contemporary society, create a reality beyond recognition, or provide a tantalizing escape, but rather to hyperbolize certain tendencies of modern society to make it impossible to ignore the present injustices that are consensually accepted. Dystopian societies are consumed and controlled by regressive fundamentalist ideology that is coerced into its citizens. Gilead is erected on misogyny, both in its theocracy and politics. The State reduces the handmaids to the State of biological slavery as they function as

We are all for breeding purposes. We aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary, everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us... We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices (Atwood 66).

Gilead not only reduces handmaids to their biological utility but also effectively effaces their individual identity and labels them according to the name of their Commanders, hence the names Of-Fred, Of-Glen, Of-Wayne, Of-Warren. The women then become possessed articles owned by these men who can exercise their sexual mastery over them.

Dystopia is linguistically understood as the antonym for utopia, but it would be extremely reductive thinking to assume that a dystopia is the antithesis of a utopia. In fact, interestingly, every dystopia ever conceived purports itself as a utopia, functioning under the notion that their fixation with drastic forms of governance would ensure an ideal state of being. The dystopic setting is also not the inverse of the current social system of the contemporary readers. It is the extended proportion of the present socio-political scenario. Since the conceptualization of the body is at the center of the locus in this dystopia, it is crucial to examine the ways in which the norm for this body has been reconfigured and re-normalized. When it comes to denoting a body, one must be wary of what constitutes the "normal" body. There is immense power in the idea of the normal body and more so in power to authorize normalcy. If a disabled body is evaluated to be in a state of negative, a lack, or a deficiency, then the normal was the central mode from which it deviated. Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) focused on the ideas of "normalcy" and "the normate". Normalcy and normative are ideological and bureaucratic constructions defining a subject position that might appear to be mundanely simple and understood by all, but in fact, it is a fabricated State. The idea of the normal body is developed through methods of measurement, testing, and bureaucratization, which- for Davis- sets up the implication that "the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm". Subsequently, "with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviation or extremes," and as a result, "when we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants" (Davis 23). Garland-Thomson outlines "the normative" as "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (75).

In the Republic of Gilead, the ideas of normal have been reconfigured to make a new norm normalized among its citizens. With the natural environment being polluted and unsustainable towards fertility, infertile women such as the Wives of the Commander have become the norm. Among feminist disability discourse, the ability to procreate is considered to be an indispensable marker of being a complete woman.

Thus, infertile women would be considered to be disabled in her capacity to be a woman. But in Gilead, infertile Wives are the norm, which is compensated by the fertility of the handmaids that serve as surrogates of pregnancy. Deviance from this norm is rewarded with ostracization, persecution or even execution. The anatomy of the handmaids are indeed their destiny where maternity is both an ardent wish and a fear. Handmaids must fulfill their role as viable surrogates, or else they will be discarded after three unsuccessful attempts at pregnancy. The Handmaids are a precious deviation from the norm that are valued for their worth as long as they are useful, as worded by Aunt Martha "A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get" (Atwood 124). Deviation from a handmaid would mean the State would be unable to produce children. The lexicology for disability in Gilead is "an unwoman" and "an unbaby." An "unwoman" is a handmaid who cannot produce children or has rebelled against the state-ordered insemination ritual with Commanders and is considered bereft of womanly qualities in the Republic of Gilead and are thus ostracised to the colonies, which is a radioactive space where women are made into slaves and due to the hazardous environment develop tumors and cancerous outgrowths and eventually perish. An "unbaby" is a deformed baby born with a certain disability. An "unbaby" or a "shredder" is described with monstrous images such as "with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or no arms, or webbed hands and feet" (Atwood 200). Apart from this grotesque description, there is a lack of knowledge as to what happens to the "unbaby" as they are systematically made invisible from society. Offred notes, "We didn't know exactly what would happen to the babies that didn't get passed, that were declared Unbabies. But we knew they were put somewhere, quickly away" (Atwood 123). These neologisms of disability in Gilead lead to two implications. Firstly, the normative of the able-body and disabled bodies are constantly constructed and re-constructed to suit the larger ideological agenda of a State. "Ordinary," the Handmaids are told, "is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary now, but after a time, it will" (Atwood 253). Secondly, the body's deformity, which does not contribute to the productivity of the State, is silently and quickly sequestered from sight.

Through the political governance of the Republic of Gilead, a study on the relationship between disability and power comes to the front. As illustrated thus far, the State possesses the power to ordain what constitutes the realm of "normality" and "disability" according to the mode of social organization instituted. The ability to disable its citizens physically, mentally, and pathologically is also another effective measure to not just institute but also maintain the power of the State. Shelly Tremain in her work *Foucault and the Government of Disability* notes that governance involves a host of "practices, procedures, and policies that created, classified, codified, managed, and controlled some people that are divided from others and *objectivized* as physically impaired, insane, handicapped, mentally ill, retarded, and deaf" (6). For instance, the insemination ritual between the handmaid and the Commander is a way to filter out "unwomen" and "unbabies" from Gilead. Further, she invokes Foucault's coining of the term "governmentalities". Governmentality is

the rationality of the government, a system of thinking about the practices of government that have the capacity to rationalize the activity to those who practice it and to those upon whom it is practiced and render this practice applicable and acceptable (Tremain 11). The insemination ritual is justified through Genesis 30:1-3 cited in the epigram that mentions the parable of Jacob and Rachel. Since Rachel could not bear him children, she insisted he copulate with her handmaid, Bilhah. This biblical story is the license to the governance of Gilead. Further, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* also conceptualise the idea of "biopower" or "power over life." He notes that biopower is a power that is "exercised rather than possessed...is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated" (Foucault 27). He adds that all the authorities exercising individual control function by branding binaries of mad/sane, dangerous/harmless, normal/abnormal (199).

The character of Janine in the novel is a testament to the ways in which power function and disables its subjects in a government. Janine is a handmaid named Ofwarren. She was formerly raped in the pre-Gilead times and, since then, has a tenuous hold on reality and is often seen to be in an infantilized mental state. Her physical trauma has rendered her mentally incapable of independent decision-making and functioning. Her mental disability is capitalized on by Aunt Lydia, who uses her gullible mental framework and orders her to spy on the other girls and get information about any rebellion. Her complicity to this is also her psychological need to be protected at all costs. When Janine/Ofwarren gets pregnant with Commander Warren's child, she blatantly displays a rounded abdomen during the late months of pregnancy. This is an unwomanly behavior in the eyes of Gilead, and thus, as a punishment, the Aunt blinds her of her left eye since they cannot cause any other bodily retribution due to her pregnancy. Her mental and vulnerable cognitive disability was used as a method of surveillance. Now, her State-inflicted disability of partial blindness is used as an exemplar to show the State's power to punish deviant behavior. Aunt Lydia, in a very sinister statement, commends, "Very good, Janine. You are an example" (Atwood 82). It is interesting to note that Atwood titled this novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, with allusion to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where there is the Parson's Tale and the Summoner's Tale, to name a few. Among them, the most notorious is The Wife of Bath's Tale, who was also incidentally made deaf in her left ear because she tore three pages from the Bible that her third husband, Jankyns, was reading. This medieval method of exemplar tradition that punishes an individual with a disability and makes them a spectacle to deter others from deviating from the norm is also performed in Gilead. When Janine gave birth to her baby, Angela, she felt actualized as a woman because "she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward" (Atwood 137). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt says, "Terror is no longer used as a means to exterminate and frighten but as an instrument to rule masses of people who are perfectly obedient" (6). Later, when her baby turns out to have what appears to be Down's Syndrome, her baby is declared an Unbaby. Janine blames herself for this and her eyes are described to turn "loose" denoting her chronic madness as she

benignly smiles and leaves for the colony, since she is no longer physically and mentally fit to produce healthy children.

Atwood's protagonist, Offred, writes, "Humanity is so adaptable, my mother would say. Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations" (131). The study of dystopian fiction, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, resists this very sense of normalized nonchalance by highlighting the modes and methods of governance that disable its citizens.

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