

Representation of Female Body in the Social Context of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985) explore the notion of femininity in the context of a dystopian society of Gilead. In this totalitarian society, women are defined by reproduction ability of their bodies. Exploitation, objectification and alienation of the handmaid's body can be explored in both the text and the context within which the novel has been written. In this novel, the negative and instrumental view towards female body can be explored in the light of biological and social contexts. The underlying assumption of these discourses is that female body can be manipulated and appropriated by patriarchal ideology in the name of religion and social reform. Tracing views on body in history, religion, society and the novel itself, this paper attempts to explore how female body is represented and perceived. The following study focuses on the ways each of biological and social views try to define female body with certain functions and consequently identify women based on deterministic gendered ideologies It also discusses the body's potential to act as an empowering force to oppose different manifestations of power.

Keywords: *The Handmaid's Tale*, body, gendered views, social context, power, dystopia

1. INTRODUCTION

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood, the Canadian novelist, was published in 1985, a time that witnessed some social and political controversies like International Conservatism, Religious Fundamentalism, Equal Rights Amendment, and so on. The freedom-seeking aura and social revolutions of the 1960s were countered by restraint and international conservatism during 1980s. The Moral Majority was an organization established in 1980s as a support to religious fundamentalist agenda. Its goals were first introduced by Jerry Falwell (1980) and the organization was opposed to some issues like Equal Rights Amendment which called for the equality of women and men and supported the abortion right which was considered a threat to family structure and family values. Moral Majority was also opposed to pornography due to Christian beliefs and focused on teaching religious doctrines at schools and the public (pp. 257-263). The changes in social life worried feminists because they believed that women's rights and achievements in 1970s would be lost.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women and their bodies have been the focus of many arguments. Set in the dystopian future, the novel pictures the totalitarian republic of Gilead in which people are divided by sex and class. In this patriarchal society, women are used as mere objects for reproduction purposes. Written in 1980s, the novel criticizes a dystopian Christian theocracy in which the female body is exploited in the name of religion and social reforms. The novel portrays the dystopian society of Gilead founded by religious extremists who advocate the traditional view of gender roles and subjugation of women which is against the liberationist outlooks of feminists. Reflecting a dystopian society in which decrease in birthrate, infertility and horror of nuclear power change the world, the novel criticizes the utopian world wished by powerful governments. Focusing on female body from different biological and social aspects, this paper tries to investigate how female body is perceived, oppressed and exploited by different means of power. Studies on representation of women as second sex, as an opposing view to the deterministic biological view of female body, constitutes the theoretical backbone of this paper. Arguments on representing sexual subordination as a cultural

division have also been used to support the social view of the body. To further support our argument, we also make some references to other scholars/critics as well. Patriarchal manifestations of biblical texts have been referred to for analyzing the religious representation of body in history and the novel. Some views on policing and regulation of body and also notion of surveillance as a dominant apparatus have been employed as theories discussing the political oppression of the body.

In the novel, representation and oppression of the female body can be examined in two aspects: biological and social. Biological representation discusses the deterministic views regarding nature and culture and the essential view of the female body as child bearer. Social outlook is further explored by certain religious, patriarchal and political backgrounds and the way each oppresses and commodifies the body with their own practices.

1.1 Biological Representation of the Body

Biological deterministic outlooks claim that women's different biological functions, for instance their ability to procreate, assign them to different social tasks. In this sense, sex is a quality defined by nature and thus gender inequality and male dominance are justified. Opposing these representations, De Beauvoir (1949/2010) believes that woman's body is not enough to define her and give her individual identity. Biology cannot answer all the reasons for woman's otherness. Hence, her body should be examined as a reality put within history and society she is interpreted in. She claims that women are not naturally child bearers; women give birth when certain situations leave them no choice but being a mother, for instance, when marriage is imposed on them and abortion is legally banned. The woman is not a mere productive means; she is a "sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object, an Other..." (p.58). The insufficient biological views show how other factors are involved in representation of female body as a mere productive asset with no control on its natural features. Gendered outlooks regarding the passivity of the female body assert how social and cultural aspects define body in their own views.

The biological view of female body cannot be separated from its social representation. Defining women by their breeding ability is a manifestation of patriarchal power. According to Turner (1984/2008), social and sexual subordination of women is explained by two arguments: nature/culture argument and property argument. Since women have the reproduction ability, they are associated with nature and in this sense have an inferior or sub-social status to men who are associated with culture. Distinguishing women in natural category from men in social category is itself a cultural division, thus the subordinated role of women is not only a physiological matter but also a cultural interpretation. In the novel, there are numerous passages in which the handmaids are recurrently reminded that what is important in their body is their womb and their ability to reproduce. Their physical beauty does not matter; it is just a surface and what is essential is the inside of their bodies. For instance, when Moira, one of the handmaids and Offred's close friend in college, attempts to escape, she is punished by having her feet beaten. Aunt Lydia, who has been given certain power in the regime to command and assist the handmaids in their duties, reminds others that any damage to body parts even permanent is not a problem, because the state cares only for their essential useful reproduction organs: "For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential" (Atwood, 1985/1996, p. 102). The body is perceived by the handmaids within the same ideological framework. Offred reflects on her body and mentions that the handmaids are considered as "containers" which the inside is the important part. The outside of body is "like the [hard and wrinkled] shell of a nut" (Atwood, p. 107). Offred considers her body as a machine to produce and views the act of childbearing as her duty, an expectation needed to be fulfilled, so each time the result is negative, she considers this as her "failure":

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons, of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. (Atwood, pp. 83-84)

These examples show how the reproduction organs are considered as the only essential and determining factor in keeping the handmaids alive. Their body is expected to provide the means of male pleasure and reproduction. Without it, they are nobody.

1.2 Social Representation of the Body

Social representation of female body can be understood under the biological assumptions mentioned earlier. Women's unbreakable link with nature makes them associated with the body, but men who represent culture are associated with the mind. As Butler (1990) also indicates, in Christian and Cartesian ideology body has negative and animalistic associations and is inferior to the soul. Body is understood as "inert matter signifying ... a profane void, the fallen state: deception, sin, the premonitional metaphors of hell and the eternal feminine", it is not considered as an autonomous self-conscious entity but a "mute facticity" in need of immaterial or transcendental essence to give

meaning and value to it (p. 176). In this sense, body has always suffered, been oppressed and weakened by the siege and power of domination in different ways.

The ceremonious copulation between Offred and the Commander, head of the household and military official of the Eye, is a “social” duty, a natural course necessary to be taken. It is pictured as “indecorous”, “embarrassing” process. Offred describes herself as if she is an instrument, an object whose sole function is breeding and there remains no feeling in the act of copulation. She describes herself as “being on an operating table” and “on stage”. She is aware of her hairy legs, her armpits, but these do not matter anymore. The act of copulation gives her a negative feeling towards her body; she feels “uncouth” because it is not what she used to experience (Atwood, pp. 169-170). The reproduction ability is the only valuable function for women in Gilead. Lack of attention to this role is considered a negative attitude held by women of the past. In flashbacks, Offred compares her own situation with that of the past. The Aunts remind the handmaids that they have survived the horrible past and their current situation is protection from any harm that could happen to the women in that time. In the regular meetings set for the purpose of indoctrinating the handmaids, Aunt Lydia shows a graph of past declined birth rates and names those women who did not believe in the future as “lazy women” and “sluts” since they used to expose themselves to men and considered breeding a senseless activity. She considers these excuses as “wickedness” (Atwood, p. 123). In this sense, women of the past are not even considered as women and the failure in breeding makes them “Unwoman”.

The negative view towards female body is also supported by different religious, patriarchal and political ideology to be explored in the following sections. The religious and patriarchal views define women mostly in their breeding function and focus on the representation of women as passive and inferior to men. The political ideology attempts to control and intrude female body in the name of social reforms. In the novel, these outlooks are interrelated, but for a more comprehensive discussion each has been discussed under a separate heading.

1.2.1 Religious Views

Religious texts represent significant symbols concerning gender. Many instances express male as powerful and female as defiant and passive. The Bible is the basic sacred text used in the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The patriarchal representation of women in the Bible is seen as sacred, a law given directly by God. In the Old Testament, women are treated as inferior members of society; they are not addressed directly and mostly remain anonymous. Like children and slaves, women's status is dependent on male society and is indirectly addressed by the responsibilities defined for them or the property relationships to the male head. The law considers men as the only capable members of society and excludes women as mere objects of obedience. As Ruether (1982) indicates, the divine law to patriarchy becomes naturalized in the New Testament. Male dominance over women and their unquestionable leadership is regarded as the same headship of God over creation. “The subjugation of the woman to the man is analogous to the subjugation of the body to its head ... The male leaders of society are God's representatives on earth. Because God is father, women cannot represent God” (pp. 56-58). Different relations of patriarchal subjugation in the forms of kings, masters, husbands and fathers are seen as essential divine decree. In this hierarchal representation, male is directly related to God, but women are addressed through the ownership and leadership of male over them. Christian ideology has a significant role in women's oppression and representing them as valueless objects at the service of males. For instance, in the Old and New Testaments, women are subordinated to men: “The man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man”; “Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man” (1 Corinthians 2:8-9, King James Version). And, “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body” (Ephesians 5:23).

Larson (1989) indicates that in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood represents a dystopian society of Gilead as “a post historical, post-human era grounded in richer strata of literary, historical and biblical interpretation...” (p. 34). The Republic of Gilead, a misogynistic, racist, patriarchal and totalitarian theocracy, came to rule in the 1980s against the liberation movements, and established a dystopian society as a manifestation of power in the West. The law established by the pervasive dictatorial power is forced in the name of divine law and legitimizes itself in the face of society. The recurrent references to the Bible show how the religious ideology is used and misused for applying insidious goals. The intertextual nature of the novel stylistically alludes to the scriptural discourse; “modes of figuration ... in myth, legend, and the patriarchal narratives, the parallelistic and antithetical structures of Hebrew poetry, the Mosaic and Household codes, proverbs and wisdom, gospel, parable, prayer, hymn, beatitudes, sermon, epistle, apocalypse, and prophecy” are the techniques used by Atwood in order to give her novel a many-voicedness quality (Larson, 1989, p. 35). The allusions used in the novel, like the role of childbearing are taken from Genesis to Revelation.

The handmaid's reproduction function is reminiscent of the biblical story of barren Rachel offering her servant Bilhah to Jacob. When Rachel learned that she could bear Jacob no children, she told her husband: “Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her” (Genesis 30:1-3). As the quoted part implies, the handmaid offers her sexual service as a duty and the offspring of this intercourse is given to her mistress. The barren wife is considered worthless and she is redeemed only when she takes the credit of the handmaid's

child. This biblical allusion used as the opening of ceremony between the Commander, his wife Serena Joy and Offred shows the instrumental use of handmaids in the process of childbearing.

Lerner (1986) also explores the creation of patriarchy during history and focuses on the notion of gender difference in religious contexts. The patriarchal and hierarchal structure of family in biblical texts shows the authority of male head over the family. This authority is practiced in different aspects of family life. The man is the master of the house and the wife is considered as his possessions along with his servants and his animals. She could be sold as a slave or a prostitute any time the master wishes. Gilead government follows the same patriarchal view about women: controlling women's body for the aim of reproduction and benefiting the male society. The rigid rules are the same, but the names are changed and justified by the religious laws. For instance, the sex ceremony is considered as a "sacred" opportunity not a rape (Raschke, 1995, p. 257). Gilead criticizes and blames the pornographic society of the past in which women's body is commodified. As the novel portrays, Gilead is doing the same by seeing women as wombs, important and useful only for their reproduction ability. Offred contemplates this before her illegal entrance to the Commander's room, "We are for breeding purposes ... There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, ... there are to be no thresholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all..." (Atwood, p.146).

The recurrent emphasis on covering the body signifies that veiling can become one of the means of body control. As stated, in most religions, gender difference is fundamental, essential and legitimized by the divine law. Gender inequality is enforced by different practices. For instance, in Christianity women are supposed to cover their heads but men are not, because they represent God:

... the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman *is* the man; and the head of Christ *is* God... For a man indeed ought not to cover *his* head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. (1 Corinthians 11.3-9)

The style of clothing is one of the controlling apparatuses in confining the handmaid's body. Veiling can be approached from different views. Feminist theories and political theories "view the body as a sign" (Van Wichelen, 2012, p. 211). They want to uncover the representation and signification of veiled body. Feminists see veil as a religious practice and focus to explore how it affects women's agency, but political theories look at the veil in a way it affects liberal democracy. In this sense, the veil becomes a "mediated symbol which can be used as pawn in ideological struggles or as a tool for collective mobilization ... Deployed in political struggles by institutions, groups or communities, the veiled body becomes ideology or rhetoric, and are devices for a political construction of meaning" (p. 211). Thus, the veil can be regarded as a sign of female body which is affected and identified by different religious, political and gendered practices. The veil, Bensalama notes, can also make women into a sign by "negation of the body of a woman" (as cited in Van Wichelen, p. 214). Here the veil is not simply a sign, but something that makes individuals represent certain kinds of ideologies in social or political spaces. Furthermore, the veil can have feminine, moral, religious and political dimensions. It both conceals women from being seen and also prevents them from seeing. In a larger scope, this kind of effacement is linked to disempowering and oppression of female society. The veil can represent the force of male gaze, male fantasy and curiosity to penetrate and have access to interiority of women's body. The veil can also suggest the male fear of female sexuality. The red veil covers women from seeing but exposes them to male as available walking vaginas.

Clothing as a way of maintaining unique identity is abolished in the novel. The style of clothing of the handmaids shows the indistinguishable unity with each other and can be considered as a sign of depersonalization. In Gilead, women wear different colored veils according to assigned status. The handmaids are required to wear fully covered red gowns similar to nun's garments:

Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (Atwood, p. 18)

This kind of clothing has been traditionally derived from Biblical veil and is intended by the patriarchal system to "preserve modesty and to conceal femininity" (Kaler, 1989, p. 50). The obliteration of self makes the handmaids invisible entities who are kept from seeing and being seen. Invisibility is valued because it is the sign of modesty, and it is protective because "to be seen is to be penetrated. What [they] must be ... is impenetrable" (Atwood, p.39). Gilead society sees this kind of veiling as a way of protecting and benefitting the handmaid's body from intrusion or damage. In the highly controlled society of Gilead, veiling and covering body parts is mandatory and any intrusion to see behind the covers means crossing the boundaries within which women are defined. The mirrors have been avoided for the handmaids, since they should not care for their beauty and any kind of reflection could be considered as an intrusion to

their veiled body. Even the red color is associated with negative image, “it’s a red dress [Rita] disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck” (Atwood, p. 19). There is one mirror on the hall wall which reflects Offred not as a complete human being but a shadowy figure. Offred is obsessed with her body and always seeks a way to free her restrained body and reunite with it. Absence of mirrors to look at herself makes her disembodied. But when she sees her reflection in the mirror, she cannot even locate herself in the body which defines her so completely, “I can see it ... a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, ... A Sister, dipped in blood” (Atwood, p. 19).

Aunt Lydia reminds the handmaids that any kind of intrusion like rape is women’s fault and no one else’s. Women in the past are objectified: they used to “oil themselves like roast meat” in public with bare legs. When woman’s body is uncovered and exposed to men’s eyes, anything “distasteful or filthy or horrible” could happen to her. “A successful life ... was one that avoided things, excluded things. Such things do not happen to nice women” (Atwood, p. 65). Seeing the Japanese tourists visiting Gilead, Offred remembers the freedom she once had. She describes the short skirts, high-heeled shoes, uncovered exposed hairs and lipsticks as sexual, and compared to her fully covered clothes, these women seem “nearly naked” and “blatant”. She cannot take her eyes away from these women; she is both fascinated and repelled: “They seem undressed ... I used to dress like that. That was freedom. Westernized, they used to call it” (Atwood, p. 38). It seems that the handmaid’s naked body is vulnerable in every situation even when they are alone. Bathroom is the only place where they can put off their clothes and see their body without any cover. In her clothes, Offred has lost the sense of her body that her nakedness feels strange to her. Now she detests looking at her body because she thinks it is the only organ which defines her and makes her what she is now:

The bath is a requirement, but it is also a luxury. Merely to lift off the heavy white wings and the veil, is a luxury. My hair is long now, untrimmed. Hair must be long but covered. My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, ... without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely. (Atwood, p.72)

As the quoted parts signify, women’s freedom in Gilead is taken away from them by forcing them to cover their bodies. As stated before, confining the handmaids’ bodies in their special clothes can have many implications, but in the context of Gilead society, the religious justification is the main root to its social and political practices.

1.2.2 Political Views

Political views are considered as other determining factor in representing the body. Imprisonment and surveillance of the body can be explored in the light of political purposes. This section explores the ways power infliction on the body determines different practices and roles for it and how these practices are influenced by social and religious views of the body. As different representations of the body have depicted so far, the body is not a single entity; it is a concept affected by social context. Political views are one of the essential parts regarding the body in the novel. The female body in Atwood’s novels is defined in the culture which is absolutely political. These bodies are the “coded bodies that tell the story of the subject’s experience within a political economy that seeks to consume them, convert them into consumers in turn, shrink them, neutralize them, silence them, and contain them physically or metaphorically” (Davies, 2006, p. 62). This puts the body as the site of power relation and posits women within the power structures they live. The recurrent emphasis on surveillance is manifested in the imprisonment of female body in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Female body is closely watched, highly controlled and oppressed by the patriarchal system which considers them as danger or attack. In this atmosphere, women seek freedom in order to articulate the experience of surveillance and self-surveillance. They view themselves through men’s eyes; the gaze is internalized and in this sense makes them become the “policemen of the very power structure that excludes them ... and alienated from the very bodies by which they have been trapped” (Davies, p.62).

The body is the target of power since it is regulated and administered by its practices. The administrative, judicial, penal and educational methods of discipline are employed during history in order to preserve the life of the body. The body is invested with a significance concerning social well-being and requires constant and detailed policing and regulation (Featherstone, Hepworth, & Turner, 1991, p. 232). In the novel, methods of discipline are practiced in different shapes. From the very beginning, the description shows that the handmaids are kept in enclosed spaces like barracks or prisons, “we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had ... army-issue blankets, [the Aunts] patrolled; [with] electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts (Atwood, pp. 13-14). Offred is aware of the exercise of power in Gilead. She knows that she is an object in the hand of the state. She does not have any freedom or power over the government. She offers her body to be used because she knows she has no choice. In the novel, it is understood that Offred has no news from her child since her stay in the Commander’s house. She asks Serena Joy about her child, but Serena Joy holds the news and uses it as a

leverage to enforce her into copulation with Nick, Commander's chauffeur and a Guardian, not mentioning that Offred is never going to see her child again. It seems that Offred is resigning to the imposed rules which are more powerful to her:

I don't want pain. I don't want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don't want to be a doll hung up on the Wall, I don't want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power. (Atwood, p. 298)

Disciplinary practices and social intervention in the forms of clinical, sexual and penal methods all are centered on the body as a machine; "its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities, the exertion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls..." (Featherstone et al., 1991, p.233). The disciplinary functions of society in private and public sphere aim to use the body as a political force for its productivity and obedience. The body in this case becomes a passive entity which is acted upon in institutional settings and is regulated for facilitating social reproduction.

Cooper (1995) employs Foucault's clinical eye to explore the gaze of the doctor as a surveillance apparatus for controlling and oppressing the female body. In her study, she looks into the way women in Gilead have been depersonalized in the eyes of patriarchal authority. In this novel, surveillance is represented in two ways: "masculine sexuality" and "patriarchal dictatorship". Sexual observation is a way of political control, domination and surveillance by intruding female body. In this way, the doctor's regular examinations and visual knowledge in inspecting the inner body of the handmaids is considered as "the medical representative of the entire surveillance system of Gilead-the clinical eye". The Eye has the freedom and permission to enter the very private aspects of Gilead's people, and it can be said that in a larger scope, the medical gaze stands for "the patriarchal gaze of totalitarianism". In the oppressive male dominated society of Gilead, the women's body becomes "the site of male fear, anxiety, and desire" and the sexual organs get their political meaning by the constant obsession of male society in observing, controlling, oppressing and destroying the female body in different contexts (pp. 52-53). The novel shows the handmaids' constant check-ups by the doctors and also their intrusion in the process of childbirth. In her pregnancy check-ups, Offred feels the doctor's intrusion of her body, "He's taken off the glove ... He lifts the shift ... His hand is between my legs ... Give me children, or else I die" (Atwood, pp. 70-71).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women's lack of ownership can be considered as a way of inflicting power and appropriation. Handmaids are deprived of any personal rights and even their own names are taken from them. The masculine form of names assigned to them reflects the master-servant relationship to their Commanders. For instance, the name "Offred" signifies many meanings: "[She is] 'offered' as a sacrifice for her society; she is 'of red' since she wears ... red...; she is 'Of red' because she is the scarlet woman of Revelations; she is 'Off red' when she ... [have] sexual relationship with Nick..." (Kaler, 1989, p. 47).

Furthermore, women deprivation of full ownership of their body alienates the body from the individual. Offred states, "My self is a thing I must now compose ... What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (Atwood, p.76). This represents how body becomes alienated when it is possessed. Offred's body is reduced to a thing, it becomes a property which is made and owned by the Commander and ultimately is used for the benefits of the nation. Her body is likened to an animal which is tied up and numbered as a sign of ownership. There is a tattoo on her ankle that defines her as scarce resource, "Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade ... I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource (Atwood, p.75). Offred is objectified also when she spends the night with the Commander after the party in Jezebels, a hidden nightclub held for the elite: "He's stroking my body now, ... cat stroke along the left flank, down the left leg..., his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership" (Atwood, p. 266). The way the Commander treats her shows how her body is alienated from herself and is treated as a property.

Alienation of handmaid's body and lack of ownership can also be manifested in the fragmented view of the body. As mentioned in the religious views section, veiling is the basic way of handmaid's clothing. It can be argued that this kind of representation has created a fragmented view of body and resulted in objectification of the handmaids. The handmaids are required to cover almost all parts of their body and only a fragment of their face is visible. Visibility makes them vulnerable and exposed to violation and penetration:

What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes. I know better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes, [the interpreter]'ll be telling them that ... to stare at them through the lens of a camera is, for them, an experience of violation. (Atwood, p. 39)

The fragmented view of the body is explored by Mills (1995) in her feminist stylistic approach. This kind of representation is wildly seen in pornographic literature and some beauty magazines. The primary effects of fragmentation technique are depersonalization, objectification and reducing the body to its parts. Mills claims that

fragmentation of female perspectives is associated with male focalization; since the female is not considered as a “unified conscious physical being”, she is recurrently represented as the object of the male gaze (p. 171). The handmaids are isolated and used only for their reproduction abilities. They are walking wombs and their reproduction function justifies male gaze and its intrusion. The body parts (womb, vagina, etc.) rather than the whole body become the agency and leave women passive beings. Jeffries (2007) believes that isolating body parts especially those related to sexual or reproduction functions equals sex to self and subsequently influences women’s self-perceptions to these social functions (p. 71). In the novel, there are some references to the handmaid’s body as a fragmented entity. The main purpose of keeping the handmaids is evident in the Gilead’s doctrines, and the reproductive body parts are recurrently emphasized in social practices. For instance, Aunt Lydia states that “For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (Atwood, p. 102). Here Aunt Lydia is referring to the womb and its breeding function as the primary body part useful for the state’s goals. Offred understands the reproductive function of her body and views her body as a container containing two separate sections; inside and outside: “We are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (Atwood, p. 107). In her meetings with the Commander, Offred reminds her primary role: “We are two-legged wombs, that’s all ...” (Atwood, p. 146). She compares her present perception of her body with that of past and points to her essential role of her body as a mean to reproduction: “I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping” (Atwood, p. 84). These examples represent how handmaid’s body parts are perceived and isolated to act according to religious, social and political purposes.

1.3 Body as an Empowering Force

It is worth noting that despite all the restrictions on the body, Offred is aware of the role her body plays and she enjoys her ability in using its power against men. Throughout the novel, it is understood that Offred is obsessed with her body; she craves for knowing things and participating in the activities she is forbidden from like reading, playing, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse with Nick. Participating in these illegal acts shows that “she is led by her body; its sensuous and maternal memories and appetite resist regulation and maintain her subjectivity” and this can be a means to her survival (Sceats, 2003, p. 113). Offred describes her secret meetings with the Commanders and Nick as “illegal”. She thinks having any relationship with Nick is dangerous but daring, like “shouting” or “shooting someone” (Atwood, p. 109).

It is paradoxical to note that Offred’s body can be used as an empowering force. For instance, Offred exposes her body to the guards who have only their eyes to touch women. She is conscious about her passiveness; nonetheless, she enjoys the power she has to manipulate men. The male society of Gilead do not have any access to women, so any confrontation with female body is hard for them because it leaves them with erotic imagination only:

... What if I were to peel off my red shroud and show myself to him ... I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It’s like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I’m ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, ... Then I find I’m not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. (Atwood, p.32)

These textual evidences from the novel represent that resistance is possible in the same situation it occurs. Offred’s body is always under the scrutiny, control and intrusion of power apparatuses, but she uses this body as a site to resist the limitation. By writing the story of her confinement, Offred returns to her body “which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display-the ailing or dead figure, ... the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions” (Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen, 1976, p. 880). By participating in illegal activities, crossing the lines defined by Gilead society and also writing the experience of her confinement, Offred is able to assert that her body is no longer a detached entity from her and its capabilities could break the ties it was made up.

1.4 Conclusion

As the paper attempted to suggest, the female body is the site of different shapes of powers. The body is constantly punished, abused, instrumentalized, intruded and scrutinized in various ways. Since the female body is considered as the core essence of Atwood’s novel, this study has attempted to focus on different representation of body in the light of biological and social assumptions. Biological view of the body focuses on the essential inequality of sexes and emphasizes on women’s deterministic natural qualities like childbearing. The handmaids are defined by their reproduction ability and fertility is the key to their survival. Religious practices, here those referred in the Bible, reflect the patriarchal ideology and negative outlooks toward women. Recurrent biblical allusions represent the instrumental use of handmaid’s body for reproduction and the patriarchal sexist view on inferiority of women. Social context of the time supports the commodified view of the body and the way it is objectified, fragmented and oppressed by different means of control in the name of social reforms. The handmaids are kept as sex slaves and are deprived of their right to possess whatever belongs to them. Different apparatuses of power like the “eye”, Commanders, and doctors are the

manifestation of totalitarian society. Although the handmaid's body is constantly under surveillance of the state, it could act as empowering force to resist its imprisonment. Offred's narration of the experience of subjugation and domination of her body as her defiance against the patriarchal society of Gilead is the evidence of possibility of liberation within this dystopian society.

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