

**Margaret Atwood's Female Docile Bodies:  
A Foucauldian Reading of *The Handmaid's Tale***

MARTA CEREZO MORENO  
*UNED*

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* sheds light on the understanding of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and primarily on the functioning of the Gileadean power strategies that turn the Handmaids into female docile bodies. Foucault analyses the gradual substitution of the spectacle of the scaffold, inherent to the punitive systems up to the end of the eighteenth century, for a penal reform based on a subtle physical discipline which gets to be in command of the citizens' souls. This paper aims to show how, at the same time that Atwood is constantly aware of the Foucauldian theory that resistance inhabits within the same mechanisms of power, in *The Handmaid's Tale* the author also sticks together both punitive systems explored by Foucault in order to create an extremely suppressive social organization that holds the most repressive tactics of each penal practice in order to rule the Handmaid's bodies and behaviour.

"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 1996: 298).

Offred's words exemplify the appalling effects that the totalitarian regime of the Republic of Gilead has on women classed as Handmaids, strictly trained to become reproductive machines for a barren society. In order to control them and make them productive, the political machinery of this system uses power techniques projected to deprive the Handmaids of their souls and turn them into isolated social objects. Offred's words show herself turned into what Michel Foucault called a docile body in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1975), that is, a body "that may be subjected, used, transformed, improved" (1991: 136). *Discipline and Punish* sheds light on the understanding of the functioning of the Gileadean power strategies that turn the Handmaids into female docile bodies unable to join their forces so as to resist patriarchal oppression. *Discipline and Punish* explains the gradual transformation of penal systems and their respective social structures from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century throughout Europe and North America. It analyses the progressive substitution of the spectacle of the scaffold, inherent to the punitive systems up to the end of the eighteenth century, for a penal reform with political tactics based on subtle physical discipline. Such a penal reform does not rely on public corporal extreme violence, but its effects are even more oppressive since this system

gets to be in command of the citizens' own souls. This paper aims to show how in her novel Atwood sticks together both punitive systems explored by Foucault. She creates an extremely suppressive and patriarchal social organization that holds the most repressive tactics of each penal practice and applies them to control the Handmaids through the ruling and exploitation of their female bodies.

One of the central Gileadean power techniques locates itself in the image of the Wall, from where Offred collects thoughts of exemplary public executions and deprivation of liberty. Atwood endows Gileadean punitive methods with power strategies that went along with the violent public ceremonies celebrated up till the end of the eighteenth century and described in the first part of *Discipline and Punish*. In Atwood's novel Offred is repeatedly confronted to the Wall and, while observing the executed bodies hanging on it, she concludes: "We're supposed to look ... Sometimes they'll be there for days so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them ... They must be made into examples for the rest" (Atwood 1996: 41). Offred's description of the corpses indicates she metaphorically sees herself hooked on the Wall. The corpses' heads are covered by white bags on which terrifying smiles are drawn by blood. This description symbolically portrays the image of a Handmaid dressed in red with a white wimple on her head as described by Offred: "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us" (Atwood 1996: 18). The strict ideological control that this regime means to exercise over the Handmaids is translated into gloomy metaphors by Atwood. However, by a recurring metamorphosis of such images, in Offred's narration we constantly find the Foucauldian theory that resistance inhabits within the same mechanisms of power (Foucault 1990: 95). Offred uses sordid details that denote subjugation in Gilead and transforms them into a route of escape. For example, while watching the Wall, Offred relates the colour of the corpses' blood to the colour of the tulips she sees everyday in the garden (Atwood 1996: 43). The threatening image of blood turns then into a liberating metaphor. Flowers are turned into repetitive images of insubordination that help Offred to keep in touch with a reality quite different from the one imposed on her.

This system, as the Aunts repeat, intends to turn tyrannical images as the Wall into ordinary daily life spectacles that strengthen the power system of Gilead by weakening the Handmaids' will (Atwood 1996: 43). Accordingly, they paradoxically turn, as this Wall, into another active and cruel element of such organization. As a controlling mechanism, Foucault points out how the spectators of public executions were allowed to attack the convict as a sign of loyalty to and complicity with authority. In Gilead such technique is reflected through the Handmaids' signs of connivance with the executions of members of their own class and through their brutal attack on a Guard falsely accused of rape. As Barbara Hill Rigney states, in Gilead "collusion is insured; the individual is truly a part of the whole and shares responsibility for every aspect of the system, including the perpetration of atrocity" (1987: 114).

Foucault remarks that the extreme violence of the torments sometimes turned the offender into the victim. This purported an obvious challenge to authority. Atwood is constantly aware of this Foucauldian power-resistance theory since the extreme cruelty of such public crimes is envisioned by Offred, not only as a reminder of "what could happen to us if we get into trouble" (Atwood 1996: 295), but also "of the unjustness and brutality of the regime" (Atwood 1996: 295). Offred's re-

mark alludes to the main reason why penal reformers decided to abolish the spectacle of the scaffold: the fact that, progressively, such cruel ceremonies, symbols of royal authority, turned into images of the crime itself (Foucault 1991: 9). This inversion of roles was completed by the effect caused by the gallows speeches, broadsheets, almanacs and bulletins, that recorded the lives, crimes and sentences of criminals. Though calculated to exert an ideological control on the population, their extreme popularity turned them into “everyday epics of illegalities” (Foucault 1991: 68). The Republic of Gilead silences the offenders by manipulating the mass media, the twentieth century alternative for the broadsheets and bulletins. However, the only idea of crime is enough to arise thoughts of rebellion amongst the Handmaids that view the transgressions of others as “a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all” (Atwood 1996: 287).

Resistance against Gileadean policy is intended to be abolished not just by means of public violence but also by means of what Foucault describes as the essence of the disciplinary system, originated by the end of the eighteenth century and considered the foundation of penal systems and social organizations of our modern era in Western societies. Tortured bodies disappeared for this new punitive order. However, through much more discreet physical penalties such as imprisonment, confinement, forced labour, penal servitude, deportation, rationing of food, sexual deprivation, rigid rules, strict time-tables and a constant surveillance, the body started working as an intermediary in order to deprive the individual of the slightest exercise of freedom. The individual would end up losing control over a soul that was then considered a social construct, a docile instrument and an effect of power.

Foucault explains how such disciplinary measures were implemented at the newly designed prisons. But his most disturbing idea is his definition of the prison as a “microcosm of a perfect society” (1991: 238). Depicted as a locus of terror but also as a locus of discipline, Gilead is presented as a duplication of the coercive and disciplinary prisons and “punitive cities” (Foucault 1991: 113) that the penal reformers aspired to impress on society. The image of the Handmaids is portrayed as the most frightful icon of a female docile body that suffers “an infinitesimal control over the active body” (Foucault 1991: 137). They are not allowed to talk, think, laugh, write, read, see, sing, touch or feel any kind of pleasure. They are only allowed to procreate and be profitable to the regime. This follows the Foucauldian statement that the new disciplinary systems intended to turn docile bodies into rentable social properties. While describing the tortures they would suffer, Offred remarks: “They didn’t care what they did to your feet and hands ... Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (Atwood 1996: 102).

Thus, as Eleonora Rao points out, “what the patriarchal oligarchy in Gilead regards as natural, that is woman as ‘mother’, is in fact shown to be a cultural construct” (1993: 19). The control of the Handmaid’s activities is regulated by disciplinary cycles of ritual repetition based on a female corporal imperative, their monthly cycles. Menstruation turns into a symbol of despair and failure in a world in which Handmaids are simply labelled as “two legged-wombs” (Atwood 1996: 146). We encounter then a narrative that shows a female body “taken apart into fragments according to fertility, sexuality, age, or whatever, and controlled and monitored in each fragment” (Willmot 1995: 175). Controlled

by their own subjugated docile bodies, barrenness will immediately confer the Handmaids the identity of Unwomen to be deported to the Colonies and condemned to forced labour by the cleaning of toxic wastes and corpses. These controlling and punitive tactics turn the Handmaids into exploitable objects of a system that classifies them as “national resources” (Atwood 1996: 75). By marking their fragmented bodies with a small tattoo on their ankles with four digits and an eye, their docility is thus completed.

The image of the eye symbolizes Gilead’s Orwellian surveillance methods which are a replica of the regulations of Foucault’s theory of Panopticism. The Handmaids are treated as prisoners surrounded by sentries, floodlights, barbed wire, chain-link fences, hidden microphones, electronic alarm systems and are constantly watched from everywhere not only by a male gaze that objectifies them (Stein 1999: 81), but primarily by an even more threatening female gaze. The authoritarian techniques of this regime turn the Handmaids into spies of each other by creating what Foucault calls a “micro-physics of power” (1991: 26), a social network where power is situated everywhere at strategic positions giving even temporary authority to those who are currently dominated. Through the shaping of the Handmaids’ behaviour by disciplinary techniques, Gilead constructs a society that rewards betrayal by disguising it as a sign of loyalty to the system avoiding thus the birth of a strong female opposition and “a sense of unity” (Rao 1993: 20) against the regime. The oligarchy of Gilead impedes the origin of a common defiant female voice by segregating the Handmaids. Foucault analyses isolation as one of the most effective instruments of discipline. Seclusion and silence in any disciplinary system are designed to transform the subject’s conduct and morality since isolation “provides an intimate exchange between the convict and the power that is exercised over him” (Foucault 1991: 237). Offred’s room is then another crucial image in the novel since it symbolizes the cruel cage in which the Handmaids are forced to live in solitude and silence. Such confinement helps the system to turn Offred’s conscience into an isolated ideological construct, “a made thing, not something born” (Atwood 1996: 76).

However, the room is one of those images that suffers a crucial Atwoodian metamorphosis that again turns submission into resistance. Depicted as a gloomy, prison-like cell without privacy that she initially refuses as hers, Offred’s room gradually helps her to find a way out by transforming the few elements that she finds in this space into liberating instruments that take her back to her past. One of those elements is ironically a plastered blank space within an ornament in the shape of a wreath that she finds on the ceiling and that she transforms into “a face where the eye has been taken out” (Atwood 1996: 17). Inserted within the Foucauldian power-subversion polarity, the image of the eye is now transformed into an element, not of surveillance and horror, but of liberation since it is by the repeated mental connections she establishes with this absent eye on the ceiling that she can momentarily break away from its role as Handmaid and be a free human being again.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* could be analysed as a novel of Offred’s mental resistance. However, as we have seen, we encounter a lack of an effective and strong collective female struggle against this regime. Foucault’s analysis of different punitive systems helps us to understand Atwood’s acute construction of an authoritarian Republic that combines horror with subtle and discreet methods of discipline in order to create a society in which women are defined as mere objects of production

and where there is not a powerful sense of female comradeship. As J.B. Bouson states, “Atwood’s novel has the power to make women readers anxious” (1996: 123) since Gilead constructs a culture of women where they are physically and mentally attacked mainly by other women. References to the pre-Gileadean era, that is, references to Offred’s past, a time that we, as readers, are constantly invited to compare with our own time, are continuously reminding us that our future might not be very different from Offred’s present. For example, female readers are never at ease while encountering passages such as the following one where Offred reflects on her past life:

We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with as they used to say, but they were other women, and the men who did such things were other men . . . We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories. (Atwood 1996: 66-67)

Nowadays, it is impossible not to consider such lines as a direct attack on female readers who are sometimes guilty of ignoring though not of ignorance. This silent complicity on our part wanes the crucial role of subversion in the Foucauldian power-resistance binary that Atwood has shown in her novel. She is recurrently warning us of the ultimate and frightening consequences of the absence of a strong female allegiance by constructing Gilead, a society where women like Offred, who, like most of us now, lived at the gaps of the stories, now inhabit right at the center of the main headlines.

### Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret 1996 (1985): *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Vintage.
- Bouson, J.B 1996: “A Feminist and Psychoanalytic Approach in a Women’s College”. *Approaches to Teaching Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale and Other Works*. Ed. Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman and Shannon Hengen. New York: The Modern Language Association. 123-127.
- Foucault, Michel 1990 (1976): *The History of Sexuality I*. London: Penguin Books.
- 1991 (1975): *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin Books.
- Glenn Willmot 1995: “O Say, Can You See: *The Handmaid’s Tale* in Novel and Film”. *Various Atwoods*. Ed. Lorraine M. York. Ontario: Anansi. 167-190.
- Rao, Eleonora 1993: *Strategies for Identity. The Fiction of Margaret Atwood*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Rigney, Barbara H. 1987: *Women Writers. Margaret Atwood*. London: Macmillan Education LTD.
- Stein, Karen F. 1999: *Margaret Atwood Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers.