

**Reframing the Pillars of Power: The Incarnation of Language and Pleasure
in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

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Abstract

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a well-accomplished novel that won countless awards and became a part of the canon soon after publication in 1985. This dystopian fiction circles around Offred, a handmaid living under a totalitarian regime. The subjects in this regime are meticulously monitored. Power is exercised vastly on every terrain it has access to in this dystopia. This paper investigates the vehicles of power in light of the contemporary media scholar and cultural critic John Fiske's cultural theories. Language, a significant terrain of power, is analysed both as a vehicle of power and an opposing force. Furthermore, we will illuminate how pleasure and discipline are involved in the exercise of power within the Republic of Gilead. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, resistance is still producing itself even under a totalitarian government, and the subjects under that regime constantly display resistance wherever possible. Therefore, they can be considered neither as neutral objects nor as commodities. Moreover, we will demonstrate how pleasure is a significant cause for subordination of and resistance by the subjects. Lastly, this article elucidates how subjects resist the dominant power through Guerrilla Tactics.

Keywords: discipline, language, pleasure, power, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Among the critically acclaimed works of Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* managed to become a bestseller shortly after its publication in 1985. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a narrative of the enslavement of the female body and soul in a wasteland of patriarchal dominance. In this world, a totalitarian political force has overthrown the United States' government and has established itself as an oppressive regime called the Republic of Gilead. Atwood depicts a dystopia in which the sterility of humankind has become a global concern. It is a place where "women are totally under the control of male members of the patriarchal society" (Zarrinjooe & Kalantarian, 2017, p. 66). Moreover, liberty and individuality are empty signifiers in the context of Gilead. Even names and identities are imposed on the subjects by the system. In this dystopia, "women have no rights over their physical and emotional selves" (Tennant, 2019, p. 12), and they are considered as means for reproduction and are enchained to the dominant patriarchal ideology. These women are called handmaids and they "are fertile women young enough to bear children" (Tennant, 2019, p. 12). The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to elaborate on how power and language become two significant pillars of identity making. Moreover, we intend to illustrate the contribution of pleasure in localising and imperialising power.

With its long history, dystopian fiction provides an excellent framework to study the concept of power and sexual politics under which oppressive dystopian forces control the subject and the body. The bodies of handmaids in this context become a site for investigations. Moreover, "dystopias essentially deal with power" (Bloom, 2004, p. 82). Most dystopian fiction deals with the socio-political subject and in recent decades, due to environmental concerns, some works of dystopian fiction have portrayed a post-apocalyptic world resulting from global warming and environmental crises. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the radiation, pollution, and subjugation create a perfect dystopia for examining the circulation and implementation of political power by a totalitarian regime. Furthermore, "dystopias are notable for the obsessiveness, if not the finesse, with which their elites attempt to eliminate dissent" (Hanson, 1994, p. 56). In *The Handmaid's Tale* such obsessiveness is portrayed at its utmost. Offred, the protagonist, is a woman forced to comply with the rules oppressing the female body under the extreme inculcation of subjugation.

In the light of Fiske's cultural theories, *The Handmaid's Tale* will be analysed to illuminate how power works within Gilead's oppressive system and how this regime constructs subjects and identities in the novel. In this context, Cultural Studies is to be regarded as "the expression of a projected alliance between various social groups" (Jameson, 1993, p. 17). Our approach within the paradigms of Cultural Studies attempts to illustrate how power works in Gilead and how two decisive forces (people and the dominant power) are constantly at war with one another. *The Handmaid's Tale* calls for much critical analysis regarding the concept of power. "Atwood explores in her novels the ways in which individuals become implicated in power relationships" (Özdemir, 2003, p. 57). On the other hand, Atwood depicts a society where women are under extreme tyranny, allowing numerous feministic readings of the novel. "Atwood seeks to examine the political nature of language use" (Hogsette, 1997, p. 265) by depicting the power of language in shaping identities. It is, therefore, intended to illuminate some of the recent research conducted on these two issues. It is a fact that one cannot live outside of an ideology since "subjectivity is primarily an experience" (Mansfield, 2000, p. 6), and all our experiences are taking place within ideologies. In our everyday lives, we are surrounded by countless discourses which sometimes are in an alliance and sometimes in opposition to one another. This leads to a network of interrelated ideological discourses. Mirzayee (2019) draws a link between the Bible and the ideology being practised in the Republic of Gilead; she asserts, "the leaders of Gilead have found scriptural justifications for

their treatment of women” (p. 117). The ideology serving a totalitarian government must always be more potent than any form of government since the hegemony needs that kind of superiority to take precedence over subjects’ civil and human rights. To win people’s consent in such an authoritarian state, in this case, Gilead, is almost impossible because “...religious beliefs stop being what they are and become instead something else: an ideology” (Rachik, 2009, p. 347). Religion does not become a vehicle of ideology. Instead, it becomes *the ideology* itself.

Many tenets of critical approaches concerning the essence of power and how power works in its sociological sense are derived primarily from Marxism and as McQuarie & Spaulding (1989) point out “the concept of power occupies a central place in Marxist theory” (p. 347). In this regard, Roozbeh (2018) investigates the novel in terms of Marxist theories considering the handmaids to be commodities. He further argues that “not only do they [not] possess anything in the society of the proletariat but also they themselves are considered like commodities and goods which are possessed by the bourgeoisie” (p. 19). This assumption is quite radical and extreme. It is indeed reasonable to address the similarities between handmaids and the proletarians. The significant advantage of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is that it “rejects the negative discourse patterns of male-oriented dystopian fiction” (Briedik, 2021, p. 59). Atwood’s narrative illustrates the active participation of female characters in the foundation of power relations. Consequently, this participation destabilizes the male-oriented dystopia.

Zarrinjooee and Kalantarian analyse the novel in the light of Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist theory. They claim the central discourse of oppression for women is biology: “in *The Handmaid’s Tale* biology is the key factor for woman’s oppression. Patriarchy has always convinced women concerning their biology” (Zarrinjooee & Kalantarian, 2017, p. 68), asserting that women are biologically inferior. Nevertheless, the fundamental justification of tyranny and oppression both on male and female subjects is rooted in an extreme religious ideology. Atwood’s Gilead was “a society that valued many of the same rigid Old Testament principles” (Moldovan, 2020, p. 104). Even for the justification of the role of women as only child bearers, references to different versions of the Bible are given: “the biblical story in which the barren Rachel directs her husband Jacob to ‘go in unto’ her servant Billah” (Neuman, 2006, p. 857). The biblical references are to feed the dominant ideology. “Atwood looks at the patriarchal biblical history from the perspective of its female ‘victims’, however, only some men in this tale are given some privileges” (Staels, 1995, p. 455). Even during sexual intercourse, which is conducted in a ceremonial sense for particular men, they are not entitled to orgasmic pleasure. In other words, with the female body/subject in shackles, men’s bodies/identities would eventually become mere sperm vehicles for producing more children. One after the other, these children would be transformed and shaped into hosts for the parasitic regime.

The Republic of Gilead does not maintain power only through the apparatuses of religious ideology. Other than the repressive state apparatuses, the ideological apparatuses are also at hand to tighten the grasp of dominance over the subjects. Language is indeed a robust vehicle in the formation of an ideology since “language becomes the site of power in order to practice its objectives” (Namjoo, 2019, p. 87). Kouhestani endeavours to elucidate the role of language and discourse in shaping and cementing ideology in the novel. She argues that “language is the foundation for thoughts and those who can control the language can also restrict the thought” (2013, p. 612). Furthermore, Kouhestani claims that Offred “has strict control over her own language” (2013, p. 612). She does not have a language of her own, and there is no language of one’s own. It is in the essence of language to be multiaccental. Therefore, what is

consequential is how language is practised in different social contexts. This, in turn, validates the multiaccentuality of the language. This notion will be further explored in relation to the subjugation and resistance in Gilead.

The Localising and Imperialising Power

Power is not just a social agent which determines almost everything we encounter regularly in our everyday lives. Power “is a systematic set of operations upon people which works to ensure the maintenance of social order” (Fiske, 2011, p. 11). Maintaining social order is not necessarily limited to the social contexts. However, as Foucault (1992) states, “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, p. 93). An entity that determines almost everything in a social context and exists everywhere and controls our understanding of knowledge, truth, and reality assiduously represents itself in the thoughts and feelings of every individual. Fiske divides power into two oppositional categories. On the one hand, it deals with “imperialising power” (Fiske, 2016, p. 11), which is the power of the dominant that aims to enlarge its scope of dominance, and on the other hand, there exists “localising power” (Fiske, 2016, p. 11), which aims to preserve a space for every individual as an opposite force to imperialising power.

Deeply rooted in Marxism, Cultural Studies has established itself in interdisciplinary fields from literature to sociology. “It would be a mistake to see cultural studies as a new discipline” (Turner, 2009, p. 9) since many tenets of cultural studies have existed long before the formation of cultural studies as a school of thought. Cultural studies’ revolutionary significance in theory is how it creates links between fields of study to shape a comprehensive understanding of the subject it probes. Moreover, it does not, in any sense, limit itself to one field of study. “Cultural Studies was in part the consequence of the deconstructive impact of mass culture itself in the human sciences” (Beverley, 1992, p. 19). For decades, Marxist theorists were largely concerned with the concept of power as possession of the bourgeoisie class; popular culture was usually seen as a result of the dominant ideology.

Culture is where meaning is constantly being produced and reproduced. The production and reproduction of meaning are equal to constant binary forces at stake. “Culture is the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved” (Fiske, 2011, p. 1). In this sense, individuals become subjects to the production of meaning since it directly involves shaping their identities. Moreover, “there has been an intellectual tradition dedicated to analysing the role that culture plays in both resistance and repression” (McClennen, 2011, p. 192). Therefore, cultural critics can mainly focus on the formation of power, how it works, and how resistance is born in social contexts. This is done by understanding culture and how it provokes meaning as an agent of resistance and sometimes of power. “Culture... is a constant succession of social practices; it is therefore inherently political” (Fiske, 2011, p. 1). Analysing these constant social practices leads to a better understanding of power and meaning, which illustrates the idea of subject formation. The localising power is the power of the subordinate. Therefore, it fails to act as efficiently as the imperialising power. Nevertheless, it is far from being ineffective. The production of meaning takes place constantly in both of these oppositional powers. On the one hand, the imperialising power attempts to enhance hegemony. On the other hand, the localising power seeks to provide space in which individuals can define themselves through personal preferences rather than collective hegemony. “Any social system... needs a system of meanings and values... to hold it in place or to help motivate it to change” (Fiske, 2016, p. 13).

The influence of the localising power depends mainly on how imperialising power has managed to induce hegemony.

Power utilises everything at hand to ensure the stability of the terrain it dominates, including the realm of meaning. For this reason, it contributes largely to the formation of culture, which involves “the constant process of producing meanings” (Fiske, 2011, p. 1). In Althusserian terms, it uses both ideological and repressive state apparatuses. A repressive form of power that has been successfully hegemonized is discipline. “Discipline is the means by which people’s consciousness and behaviour are adapted to the requirements of power as it is applied in a specific social organisation” (Fiske, 2016, p. 56). Power does not rely only on one thing to ensure its maintenance, and discipline is what proves to be quite efficient in sustaining subordination. The fundamental place where discipline is practised is the body, “for the body is the primary site of social experience” (Fiske, 2016, p. 41). Therefore, it is the most fundamental and significant site of physical struggle. Foucault (1992) considers a disciplined society “populated by docile, obedient, normalised subjects” (p. 255) which is a society where bodies are thoroughly disciplined. If the dominant power has enough authority over the dominant culture, it can determine the production of meanings in the social context which directly contributes to the identity of the subjects. Gilead, in this sense, seeks to enlarge its control over the realm of meaning.

Whatever that takes place in a social context is in the terrain of language. This includes knowledge and truth. They are both the products of the language of a specific episteme. Language creates meaning and therefore it is “a crucial site of struggle, for all our circulation systems it is the one with the widest terrain of operation” (Fiske, 2016, p. 30). The struggle in the terrain of language is interminable. It never stops operating since meaning never stops being produced. “Though it is available to all members of a society, it is neither neutral nor equally available” (Fiske, 2016, p. 30). Offred and other maids have very little access to the language, which in return deprived them of contributing to their independent subjectivity. This availability of language determines the power of the dominant and the imperial. To whomever language is available, there is a path to create knowledge, truth, and a sense of reality. Language creates a network of meanings which in turn create a social structure. This social structure is dominated by power relations that dominate the subject through producing meaning. These “meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved” (Fiske, 2011, p. 1). Consequently, the purpose of creating meanings is to construct identities.

The Multiaccentuality of Language

Language permits the existence of discourse, and the shaping of hegemony begins with discourse. Through this, the subject becomes “an effect of power relations but also actively participates in and affirms those practices that emanate from and support that power configuration” (Rae, 2021, p. 90). Rae adds, the subject “is not fully determined by those power relations and so is able to reflect on and act in accordance with or against them” (p. 90). Though language is available primarily to the imperialising power, it appears to be in service of localising power. “Language is multiaccentual. That is, it always has the potential to be spoken with different accents that inflect its meanings towards the interests of different social formations” (Fiske, 2016, p. 31). This multiaccentuality of language accounts for constant resistance to the imperialising power. As a result, “this imperialising use of language represses this multiaccentual potential and attempts to establish the singular accent” (Fiske, 2016, p. 31). This imperialising power reproduces itself through hegemony or in a repressive act. Power fails

to cope with what is unknown. It also fails to cope with too much differentiation, for power seeks to identify and eradicate the opposing force.

Exercising power for the party which utilises power is always pleasurable. In other words, pleasure resides in exercising power to bend the subversive; “pleasure exists only in opposition to unpleasure” (Fiske, 2016, p. 31). Hence, what becomes pleasurable for those in charge of power is unpleasure to those who have no access to power. Humans are unconsciously resistant to power and that resistance gives them a sense of pleasure. “Pleasure is closely related to power; for the powerless, the pleasure in resisting/ evading power is at least as great as the pleasure of exerting power for the powerful” (Fiske, 2011, p. 17). Resisting/evading power occurs on several grounds. It appears primarily in producing meaning where the subjects create oppositional meanings in relation to the imperialising power. “Within the production and circulation of these meanings lies pleasure” (Fiske, 2011, p. 17). Thus, the subjects physically and mentally resist the discipline, and that gives them a sense of pleasure. This form of pleasure does not need to be explicit in the eyes of the imperialising power. This form of resistance repeats and restructures itself just as language is being used in an everlasting play of signifiers. Therefore, the resistance is provoked as a result of the pleasure it generates. This cycle of provoking and stimulating resistance and pleasure occurs as the language itself is used in an endless flow.

Representation of Discipline as a Vehicle of Power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Every political body depends mainly on discipline as a potent force that acts as a corrective agent and creates norms among different social ranks. The normal is what power can control since, firstly, the normal is known, limited, and framed. Furthermore, it always reacts the same to the performativity of power. Thus, the normal can always be subjugated without opposition. “The known can be controlled, and the unknown is beyond control” (Fiske, 2011, p. 17). *The Handmaid’s Tale* represents a totalitarian governing system that exploits everything at hand to ensure its subjects’ subjugation and the perpetual maintenance of the normal. The attempt to discipline is through control, and control occurs where possible. “Gilead regime utilises the totalitarian theocracy to subjugate women and use their bodies as political instruments which can produce future generation” (Sadeghi & Mirzapour, 2020, p. 3). The physical body of the subject becomes highly significant in the process of discipline.

As earlier stated, the body is the site of control and discipline. Offred is a handmaid who has lost her sense of identity under the control of the imperialising power. “I’m remembering my feet on these sidewalks... and what I used to wear on them. Sometimes, it was shoes for running, with cushioned soles and breathing holes” (Atwood, 2019, p. 33), she says. Offred, as a subject produced by and living under this totalitarian government, is banned from wearing whatever she likes. She is to wear only what the government desires. She feels alienated from her own self because of her inability to use whatever commodity she wishes to choose. This creates an identity crisis since “all commodities are consumed as much for their meanings, identities, and pleasures as they are for their material function” (Fiske, 2011, p. 4). What the capitalist world has given us is a sense of belonging to the commodities we use. It gives us pleasure since it defines our individuality. Having eliminated all these commodities creates alienation. In Offred’s case, as with all women under totalitarian regimes, the body is a realm that, if conquered, the subject is to be dominated and crippled at the mercy of the patriarchy’s imperialising power. The Gilead regime limits bodies to define the desirable subject and controls them. However, limits put into place and forcefully exercised create the potency for transgression. As Shams (2020) observes, “for transgression to be possible, there need to be

limits” (p. 76), and this takes us to “the intertwined interplay of transgression and limits” (p. 76). In other words, “wherever there is a limit, there lies a possibility for transgressing that limit, which reveals the instability of the limit that is there to be transgressed” (Shams, 2020, p. 76). Thus, in the body politic of Gilead, the female body is a battleground of forces, patriarchy against the transgressing female identity.

On the other hand, the reasoning to forbid commodities for individuals by the Republic of Gilead is quite remarkable. “We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice” (Atwood, 2019, p. 34). Aunt Lydia represents the Republic of Gilead; Offred quotes her on many occasions to illustrate the justifications of the imperialising power. The imperialising power feels threatened since it lacks the resources to cope with individual differences and impede transgressions. That is why the power of Gilead seeks homogeneity. However, “the changes in a regime of power must occur at all levels, and finally, must occur at the most micro level, that of the body” (Fiske, 2016, p. 55). The bodies in Gilead are the smallest constituent segments of the body politic. Therefore, there is a constant struggle in the process to preserve control over one’s body. The body that transgresses the norms reveals the vulnerability of the imperialising power. “The staging of transgression unfolds a paradox inherent in our existence.” That paradox, according to Shams, is that despite “being constructed as affected, regulated and vulnerable beings, we can resist” what forces us into coercion (2020, p. 76), and bend or break the very norms that define our body and existence within a political regime.

From this stance, culture is an opponent of the power bloc and can be seen as “a relatively unified, relatively stable alliance of social forces” (Fiske, 2011, p. 8). Utilising the power bloc, the imperialising power attempts to create a unified society “to control, structure, and minimise social differences so that they serve its interests” (Fiske, 2011, p. 8). Similarly, when Aunt Lydia argues that too much liberty is something despicable, it is because freedom is a threat to the Republic of Gilead’s power. “If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values. You must cultivate poverty of spirit” (Atwood, 2019, p. 76). Once more, the imperialising power attempts to hegemonize its subjects by creating a discourse that appears to be for the benefit of its subject. This discourse prioritises the spirit over the body to deny the body the freedom it desires. In other words, Aunt Lydia introduces liberty as a threat, and then she defers any desires for liberty to the afterlife’s spiritual journey. Lydia’s religious stance divorces the perception of the normal body and the self from any thoughts of freedom. She creates an ‘other’ body which desires nothing but the poverty of spirit and champions it as the best state of the self and spirit. This religious discourse proves to be among the most convincing discourses because this discourse controls the body and the spirit of the subject by making the ‘other’ body. This other body is then denied existence through the norms. The other body diverges from what an ideal subject needs to be; it transgresses the norms of the imposed ideology and challenges the unity of power.

Discipline begins with control over the body, but, it does not stop there. It goes beyond the individual’s body and is at its utmost condition in the Republic of Gilead. It is not just about controlling the body to bring order and discipline. Power controls knowledge’s formation and circulation as well, and “the most powerful knowledge is disciplinary.” Discipline produces this knowledge, and “it disciplines... its object” (Fiske, 2016, p. 68). Shams (2020) argues that “the subject is performatively constructed through power relations and in ethical relation to the other (human or non-human)” (p. 43). The oppressive regime of Gilead is the non-human other that imposes the definitive norms on the human body to destroy the ‘other’ body. This regime also removes the ethical relations and replaces them with distorted norms that serve its interests

in oppressing bodies and minds. After the destruction of ethical relations, the body under this regime transgresses the boundaries of the normal body to become ‘other’ to the imperialising power. Since the self is incoherent and unstable, it transgresses the imposed limit to make the political regime unstable and incoherent and bring back the eradicated ethical relations. “Wherever there is a limit, there lies a possibility for transgression of that limit, which reveals the instability of the limit that is there to be transgressed” (Shams, 2020, p. 49). The Republic of Gilead begins by eliminating all the knowledge that resists its ideology, including the previous government’s knowledge because the former networks of knowledge are clear threats to its existence. A replacement for the old knowledge is needed to redefine the body and self and circulate the knowledge of what the Republic of Gilead can tolerate. Therefore, it creates knowledge as a means of control and a tenet of hegemony, which can be understood through Foucauldian episteme. Gilead’s regime creates and circulates the knowledge it desires. Then, it makes sure all bodies abide by this knowledge. They will face disciplinary actions that entail the created knowledge if they do not. “Non-coercive control can only be exercised over people through such knowledge” (Fiske, 2016, p. 68). Although the Republic of Gilead is an absolutist system, it constantly needs disciplinary knowledge that keeps the body and mentality in check. The knowledge and the power entailing it create counterforces as well.

Power is constantly being practised when discipline is exercised on individuals. Discipline, however, becomes multifunctional when practised. It involves both elements of submission and empowerment. The empowerment generates resistance against the centralising political oppression. “A disciplined person is one who submits him or herself to the power of a particular way of knowing/ behaving in order to participate in that power” (Fiske, 2016, p. 62). Whenever the subjects yield to the discipline, they participate in that form of power since there might be a form of privilege for the well-disciplined subjects. In other words, subjects that are well embedded and disciplined within the power-knowledge network can transgress the system’s limits. In this sense, power also constructs intelligibly gendered identities: “intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (Butler, 1989, p. 22). In this vein, Janine represents an intelligible gendered identity who corresponds directly and indirectly to the needs of the dominant social norms. “It’s Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. She told the same story last week. She seemed almost proud of it, while she was telling. It may not even be true” (Atwood, 2019, p. 86). A female body invaded and abused by patriarchal order is the law of the republic being upheld. The female subjects are enslaved bodily and sexually.

Being invaded in the Republic of Gilead for the handmaids is a rule. Testifying to this horrible rule and professing the power it holds over subjects are themselves forms of surveillance and control of the subjects and, as Foucault (1992) puts it, a must for Western man, who “has become a confessing animal” (p. 59). Moreover, confessing is a way to establish and circulate a specific body of knowledge. This knowledge proposes that if a woman is raped, she is to be blamed for it. This notion defines and places women as inferior beings cursed with strong, seductive power. On the other hand, Janine is quite aware of the circumstances of consenting to the discipline. The narrator seems doubtful whether Janine is truthful concerning her horrifying experience. Because power gives pleasure, and that’s what Janine is after. “Disciplined individuals have to be constantly examined” (Fiske, 2016, p. 73). This is why testifying takes place every week, and this is why Janine repeatedly retells the same story. She is aware of this interminable process, the fact that she is constantly being tested and acts accordingly. There is a pleasure for a subordinate male “in exerting power over others, especially women” (Fiske, 2010, p. 40). Even the self is subjected to this imposed pleasure. As

Fiske asserts, “the pleasures of conformity by which power and its disciplinary thrust are internalised are real pleasures and are widely experienced” (2010, p. 40). Therefore, this form of acknowledging and letting themselves be dominated by the power produced a public realm of pleasure for the handmaids.

Another instance where disciplinary knowledge is practised is at the table before dinner when the commander takes out a book and recites verses from a presumably distorted version of *The Bible*. “I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking” (Atwood, 2019, p. 105). Offred is cognizant of the so-called *Bible*’s unreliability. It is the only knowledge obtainable, and she has no access to any sort of knowledge apart from this one to resist the dominant power. Religion here proves to be a strong apparatus for Gilead’s regime to take over a subject’s mind and body “The Gileadean regime abuses women and does so in many ways that echo past abuses of women” (Tennant, 2019, p. 75). Consequently, the root of all justifications is within religious discourse combined with the political and sexual dominance rather than the biological and physical condition of women as Zarinjooee and Kalantarian (2017, p. 68) stated. The female body is too dangerous and mesmerising for the Gileadean body politic. Therefore, women are put in chains bodily and mentally by dominating the body and practising the imperialising knowledge. The Gileadean power is fortified through the biblical knowledge’s circulation. This oppressing power breaks women into many pieces, preventing them from conceiving their bodies and identities outside the religious discourse. Afterwards, this patriarchal oppression interpolates women into its own network, only to later hail them as subordinate subjects whenever it wishes.

Language, All Too Language; A Double Agent

Previously, the reliability and availability of language were analysed. “Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said” (Atwood, 2019, p. 14). The Republic of Gilead has meticulously exploited language for its own interest. “In Gilead, as in many other totalitarian dystopias, access to the written word is strongly controlled” (Dam & Polak, 2021, p. 176). These exploitations are aligned with religious and patriarchal discourses. As an instance, the handmaids are not allowed to leave the place, and they are not allowed to go for a walk without permission, they are held captive in a place deprived of all human rights. Naming this imprisonment as a privilege is how hegemony comes to its discursive being. The knowledge here is conceived “not as something internal to the agent, but rather as an externally given and structured set of ‘claims’, or as Foucault would have it, ‘statements’” (Miller, 1990, p. 117). The power of the discourse is imposed on and then internalised in the handmaids through the production of an authoritative set of statements. When meaning is produced, there must be a form of relevance since “the aim of this productivity is, therefore, to produce meanings that are relevant to everyday life” (Fiske, 2011, p. 6). In this sense, only creating meaning without any relevance is ineffective, and as a result, the imperialising power must hold to something which makes the meaning, meaningful, and that is in this case, hegemonic religious discourse.

In this totalitarian system where everything is under control, it seems that those in possession of the imperialising power are more aware of how language works, therefore, they have prohibited any form of writing: “writing is in any case forbidden” (Atwood, 2019, p. 50). Previously, it was argued that language is not available equally to every individual. The availability of language directly affects the efficiency of both the imperialising and the localising power. Language is multiaccultural, and it is potentially capable of being in service of the imperialising and the localising power simultaneously. This is why writing for handmaids, who are the subjects of the imperialising power, is forbidden. The imperialising

power cannot eradicate the multiaccentuality of language, as a result, it attempts to limit its use. This limit makes one master and the other slave. As it was stated earlier, the handmaids have only one source of reading and that is FAITH. This as well limits the use and availability of language for its subjects. In contrast, “the Aunts are allowed to read and write” (Atwood, 2019, p. 148). The language is most available to the imperialising assets. These Aunts are those assets and consequently, they are exploiting language as much as they can. The uses of the imperialising and localising power are different. “The imperialising use of language represses this multiaccentual potential and attempts to establish the singular accent of the power-bloc as the only, the natural, the correct one... Localising power, on the other hand, exploits the multiaccentuality” (Fiske, 2016, p. 31). The localising power resists the imperialising power consistently; the subjects of the localising power in the novel are the handmaids. Although they are forbidden from writing and reading freely, they seek to form a resistance to the dominant power. “Resistance is itself a form of power” (Fiske, 2016, p. 76), and it is also necessary for the existence of power. The imperialising power never risks losing control; that is why it constantly monitors pain and pleasure of the body through owning the production of meaning. “Anything out of control is always a potential threat, and always calls up moral, legal, and aesthetic powers to discipline it. The signs of the subordinate out of control terrify the forces of order” (Fiske, 2010, p. 56). Power and resistance must be continuously struggling in various terrains of their existence to hold on to their existence.

Offred, the protagonist of the novel, seems to be conscious of the essence of language. “We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives” (Atwood, 2019, p. 130). Framing the subject by using language in the dominant ideology is occurring. Handmaids are given their names and identities, and consequently, it is expected of them to act accordingly. Offred is literally *of Fred*, and Fred is presumably the name of the commander who is in charge of the household. By giving such names, the dominant ideology aims to present identities which do not exist independently; rather, their existence depends on the commander in this case. To remove the sense of having an independent self, even mirrors are banned in the Republic of Gilead, and as a result, the subjects eventually become unfamiliar with themselves. Thus they must embark on a path that help them see themselves as an independent existence. “My self is a thing I must compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (Atwood, 2019, p. 79). The self is becoming an alienated and broken object. Trapping and controlling these broken objects is much easier this way. Giving them identities and names and framing their selves are all done to smooth the process of discipline and control.

Resistance and the Exploitation of Pleasure

The patriarchal tone and whip of the Republic defines a rigid hegemony to control pleasure and inflict pain. Everything else is recognised to lie outside social order and thus is to be eradicated. Offred represents the subordinated people. All we know concerning the Republic of Gilead is through her, and she shares all her actions, thoughts, and feelings with us. “I want to steal something... I am out of place. This is entirely illegal... I am doing something on my own” (Atwood, 2019, p. 114). Offred is resisting the dominant power. She attempts to steal a knife without ever needing it. The issue here is not her demand and a need for a knife. It is the exercise of resistance that gives her inner pleasure. Offred resents her subordination, and as a result, she seeks to find a form of solace/pleasure through this action. What she does is illegal because it is against the dominant power. Through this action, she feels that she is given some freedom to choose for herself rather than be told what to do. As Fiske argues, “the least politically active are the bodily pleasures of evasion, the dogged refusal of the dominant ideology and its discipline” (2011, p. 8). Gilead is tightly ordered and finding a way out of this

order is problematic and perilous. The sort of resistance Offred is practising is fighting the suppressing power on the level of meaning production and the circulation of power. She resists the patriarchal tone and, at the same time, risks a minimum level of danger. This is what de Carteau calls the “Guerrilla Tactics” (2011, p. 56). These “tactics are the art of the weak: they never challenge the powerful in open warfare” (Fiske, 2010, p. 16). The pleasure Offred finds from stealing a knife and breaking the order encourages her to perform more of such sorts of actions. When the commander proposes to take her out to the club, she accepts the offer though she could have resisted: “I know without being told what he’s proposing is risky, for him but especially for me; but I want to go anyway. I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things” (Atwood, 2019, p. 263). This, she does as a person who has once experienced the pleasure within the resistance. She continues to take action against the dominant power and every time she does so, she takes a riskier chance of her own destruction.

The utmost condition of resistance for Offred is when she continuously sleeps with Nick illegally; a crime that, if known, leads to both Offred and Nick’s execution. Consequently, through this resistance, it can be argued that Offred and the rest of the handmaids are more than commodities since commodities cannot resist the dominant power. Handmaids are extremely subordinated through ideological and repressive state apparatuses, yet it would be a mistake to ignore all these sorts of pleasure and consider the handmaids merely as objects and commodities. Through Guerrilla tactics, the handmaids can invade and subvert power without taking radical actions. “Resistance is easiest and most pleasurable when what is to be resisted is clear and unambiguous” (Fiske, 2011, p. 36). In the Republic of Gilead, everything is ordered, set, and straightforward. This is because, through such discipline, control is achieved quite easier than when there is heterogeneity of voices. There is only one voice in the Republic of Gilead, and that voice is the voice of the dominant. The downside of this straightforwardness is that it reveals itself distinctly for the subjects to resist it, and the dominant voice gradually becomes unstable, and its limits transgressed. As a result, resistance becomes the most pleasurable since everything is clear and all laws and regulations are absolute.

Conclusion

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it can be argued that language, pleasure, and discipline are highly intertwined in the fabric and practice of power. Power is divided into two categories. The first one is the imperialising power that resides in the hands of the dominant. In the course of this novel, the dominant is the power of the commander, wives, eyes, and aunts. The second category is the localising power, which is the power of the subordinated. Those in charge of the imperialising power have more control over power in general, and they also have more access to the language. They exercise power so that they can enlarge the domain of their power. They attempt to preserve power through language, discourse, and discipline. The religious discourse is the primary source of their power. Whatever they do is justified through the religious discourse. Moreover, they attempt to create hegemony and instil discipline through language. The religious discourse justifies their action in a hegemonic sense. Whatever they do is presented as a privilege of the subordinated people. Supported through biblical references, the Republic of Gilead envisage a nirvana for those who conform to the dominant ideology. Opposite to the imperialising power is the localising power. Those in charge of localising power are the subordinated people, and in the course of the novel, they are the handmaids. They have little access to the language since reading is limited to one book, and writing is forbidden for them. As a result, their access to power is quite limited compared to the imperialising power.

On the other hand, as the representative of the imperialising power, the aunts attempt to create a single, dominant, homogenous voice. Moreover, as the representative of the localising power, the handmaids attempt to create heterogeneity of voices. This conflict is endless, yet the localising power's concern is not to overthrow the voice of the imperialising power. Instead, it aims to create a space for the handmaids to shape their own identities and their own voices. The pleasure they receive within the realm of resistance encourages the subjugated bodies in the novel, specifically Offred. Pleasure is felt since she revolts against being a neutral object of the dominant power. She refuses to be seen merely as a commodity. This is why it can be argued that Offred and the rest of the handmaids, or at least those for whom hegemony has not taken place, are neither objects nor commodities but actual agents of resistance. They resist and revolt against the dominant power where it is possible. This pleasure is not only given to the subordinated. Those who participate in the action of power also feel pleasure. Janine conformed to the needs of the dominant power. As a result, she was included in the discourse of power.

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