

## **Docile Body in Gileadean Society in *The Handmaid's Tale* By Margaret Atwood**

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### **Abstract :**

Michel Foucault states that the body is 'directly involved in a political field' that power relations 'have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs' (Foucault 1995: 25). The women in Gilead have transformed in the docile bodies due to the disciplined and organized life. They are under constant surveillance of the Eyes- Gileadean secret police. These secret police are placed everywhere with guardians and electronic devices that supervise and control everyone. No one is allowed to move freely in the city without passes. The control in Gilead is an extreme form of what Foucault calls a carceral texture of society, capture of body and its perpetual observation. The bodies are controlled both spatially and physically. The female bodies in the novel whether Wives, the Marthas and Offred's are by all means docile.

### **Key Words: Docile body, discipline, surveillance**

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and literary critic, developed the concept of docile bodies which states that the individual "becomes the principle of his own subjection", playing both the roles of the observer and the object of observation. Foucault (2004) argues that those who are constantly under observation and discipline develop a self-regulating mechanism and that "the constant pressure acts even before offences, mistakes or crimes have been committed". As he points out, "the external look becomes an internalized" one and the objects of observation monitor themselves. Consequently, the identity of the one exercising power or observing the object loses importance because the individuals operate the machine of observation and discipline themselves.

Docility happens when a group of people are continuously under watch that their discipline becomes internalized and they no longer have the capacity to struggle against. When people enter into this state, they become docile bodies.

As stated by Foucault, the handmaids in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood are object of surveillance because their every movement, bodies, minds and attitudes are the target of others including men of different categories such as Commanders, guardians, Eyes and women like Aunts, Wives, even the handmaids that support the system of surveillance by spying on each other. Furthermore, the handmaids' bodies are turned into one body. The Rachel and Leah Center, informally known as The Red Center, is a place where the Handmaids are trained for their new role in The Republic of Gilead. In the Red Center, the handmaids are educated to reverse their views towards female body as a body of production, body of 'freedom to' and body of 'freedom from'. It means that various things are done with body in other words, from liberated body back to restrained body. In Red Centers, the Aunts teach the handmaids to recognize their bodies as one unison body that is the property of the nation. A body that is to be given 'freedom from' rather than the body that is free to do anything. Their minds and bodies are self-erased from physical movements. They are only the machines of bearing children. They are not the possessor of their bodies; their resistance is merely for usability of their bodies. The Gileadean society does not allow them to corrupt their bodies with anything. *The Handmaid's Tale* is an excellent example of a docile society with complexity of body image. The bodies of women such as the handmaids are severely examined to show how body can be docile. The energy of body is controlled, disciplined

and developed and later on reversed to be a control power of subjection. A body can be docile is illustrated with severe scrutiny of women bodies specially Handmaids'. Michel Foucault states that human bodies become docile due to the controlling power's goal of order and regulation.

Foucault's concept of the docile body is that it can be made to be both useful and intelligible. Gilead's control over all the female and especially the handmaids, focusing on the site of the female body make them docile. Gilead's disciplinary technologies such as categorize the female bodies, define women's roles in a household as such that of the Commanders' households, constrain and put under surveillance women's movements, knowledge, language and even thinking are used to make the women body useful and intelligible.

Handmaids are disciplined and brainwashed with all the doctrines to achieve the total surveillance. Moira, the distinctly rebellious woman, is punished due to her uncooperative behavior. When the Aunts realize that she may remain her position as a backlash against Gilead society, she is sent to Jezebel's, the underground night club where Commanders and powerful figures of the country make amusement such as sex service.

The women in Gilead are disciplined and organized. First of all, wherever they go, they are under the surveillance of the Eyes. There are posts everywhere in the heart of Gilead, with Guardians and machines like the computer to control and supervise everyone; not any one is allowed to travel freely in the city without passes. While closing schools, churches and libraries, the national machine provides the 'wall,' the dead bodies as "zeroes" on the wall, as well as the ceremony of public execution, as a means of education and a warning sign against any possible violation of rules and disloyalty. Under such strict surveillance of the Gileadeans' bodily actions, Offred, the protagonist of the novel, is afraid of being caught at her secret rebellion such as her quiet communication with Ofglen. The spatial control in Gilead is an unique example of the form of what Foucault calls a "carceral texture of society [with its] capture of the body and its perpetual observation" (304). The existence of the wall, like the prison in Foucault's analysis, justifies society's disciplinary technologies and carceral forms. Situated in this carceral texture, the female bodies, whether they be those of the Wives, the Marthas' or Moira's and Offred's, are by all means docile due to the spatial and physical control on their bodies. With a closer look on the life of the Marthas and the Wife in her Commander's compound, it is noticed that the most conformed women devote their energy and bodies to domestic affairs. Women are still subject to social impositions about their role and their place in society. Their position as wives and mothers is more accepted than as providers of the home, and this view of society becomes the view that women have of themselves.

Pornographic films are used as a disciplinary technology to stop the handmaids from having sexual desire. The Aunts demonstrate how the female body is manipulated during the pre-Gilead time to prove that the female body is more privileged in Gilead society. Various female body parts are shown as a cruel proof of how women's bodies are abused and insulted. The Aunts use the porno film just as an extreme measure to brainwash the handmaids. It also justifies their overall control in the totalitarian. The Aunts states that Gilead society makes the female body useful with their intelligible traits. Even though the Aunts put emphasis on the abuse of the female body in the old time, it is exactly the Aunts that carry out the punishment on the rebellious women through discipline and physical punishment on their bodies. The tortures on the Handmaids' bodies are as abusive as shown in the film. Offred recalls the time after Moira was snatched back to the Red Center from her first escape, her feet were beaten swollen by the steel cables: "It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. [ ] After that the hands. They

didn't care what they did to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent" (Atwood .P.92).

The Handmaids are also supposed to restrain themselves in eating along with having decent and self-erasing physical movements. All the Handmaids are on a regime of diet; they are not allowed to take coffee, cigarette and anything in excess. As they exist because their bodies are usable and useful, the Gilead society does not allow them to corrupt their bodies with anything. Although the Handmaids seem to have a bit more freedom in going around, they have literally no freedom in aspects going from diet to thinking

Moreover, we see that the mind-and-body-control is expressed and practiced in their language also to ensure that they focus on their function of procreation and conform to the image of feminine self-restraint-and-denial. Their awareness of being watched everywhere they go is reinforced in the farewell they bid each other: "Under His Eye." All salutes and sayings are related to the sexual functions of the handmaids' bodies, and this can also be seen in their greetings – "Blessed be the fruit;" "May the God open" (19) Likewise, images with reproduction are everywhere so as to do with their self-restraint in both appearance, sex and foods . Besides lessons in the forms of praises and confirmation, Handmaids are also warned them against men. The Handmaids are told that "All Flesh is weak," that men could be tempted just as they themselves could be used as "sex machines." Frequently, the Aunts remind the Handmaids that none of the body parts is as essential as their wombs; and as the female body has somehow been instrumentalized and reduced as a reproductive machine, so does the sexual desire can be seen as removed and unnecessary. These teachings and sayings in a word, impose on the handmaids' mind and body an idea to keep focused on their bodies' main function of procreation for the state. Being forced to be useful as well as completely intelligible, the handmaids' bodies, furthermore, are turned into one body. In the re-education session in the Red Center, the handmaids are taught to reverse views toward the female body as a body/product of "freedom to" to one body of "freedom from"; in other words, from liberated bodies back to controlled bodies

The woman body is treated as if there was only one body, a collective female body by Gileadean authority. Women are seen, not as individuals, but as different groups of social roles. No matter what social status one woman has, her body means nothing but its function, and she is replaceable by anyone with the same function.

In a nutshell it can be said that all the strict control of Gileadean women's, particularly , Handmaids' mind and body embodies to an extreme Foucault's theory of disciplinary power. To make women's bodies useful but not dangerous, Gilead's discipline, to borrow Foucault's words, "is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine".

#### **Reference:**

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