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Surveilled and Silenced:

a Study about Acquiring and Maintaining Power

in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Abstract

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood indirectly exposes frightening and undemocratic traits in societies of our time when she applies them to a fictive future in which these factors have caused horrible consequences. A group of men has formed a new state, "Gilead", in which they ruthlessly control the population. This essay studies how this dictating power gains and, essentially, maintains power in the fictive society. The essay argues, and comes to the conclusion, that by surveilling the population and by restricting its means of communication the dictatorship is able to control the people and keep them docile.

Keywords

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Surveillance, Silenced, Restrictions, Communication, Watching, Internalized watcher, Scaffolding, Dictatorship, Power.

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Introduction

People living in democracies may find it difficult to relate to societies where discriminatory actions are a part of the everyday life. News programmes from such countries can seem distant geographically, socially as well as culturally. Gilead, the scene of the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), is a state that has gone from being a democratic and freedom-loving country to a dictatorship where most people live in fear.

Atwood's novel clearly exposes methods that are common when dictators usurp and maintain power, turning a democracy into a tyrannical regime. Consequently, the novel may bring an understanding about such countries by showing what differentiates them from more equal societies. The fact that the narrator is a person without any formal power who is experiencing Gilead from its worst side makes the story all the more powerful. Many methods are utilized by the dictating regime in Gilead to keep the population submissive and in order. Perpetual surveillance and restrictions of communication are obvious techniques that the regime uses to keep the population docile. My purpose with this essay is to analyze how they use these techniques and what the consequences are.

I will start out by clarifying the genre of this novel. In an interview with Margaret Atwood for *The Guardian*, the reporter suggested that *The Handmaid's Tale* should be placed in the genre of science fiction. However, Atwood herself replied that she would rather like to see the novel as speculative fiction:

Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen ... For me, the science fiction label belongs on books with things in them that we can't yet do, such as going through a wormhole in space to another universe; and speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to

hand, such as DNA identification and credit cards, and that takes place on Planet Earth (“Aliens Have Taken the Place of Angels”)

Atwood’s purpose seems to have been to scare her readers and harshly tell them to wake up and take a look at the world and see where we are heading. As such it is a dystopian novel.

David W. Sisk’s definition is thus applicable to *The Handmaid’s Tale*:

[it] is always set in the future, suggesting that there is yet time to reverse trends that concern the author. Dystopia is a hopeful genre, which deliberately scares us for our own good: it does not exist in a vacuum, but shows the reader frightening visions of what might arise from events he or she can clearly see in the contemporary world. (167)

The novel’s setting is not entirely unlike the western world. The story is geographically set in Gilead, a biblical name that means "hill of testimony" or "mount of witness" - a new republic, located somewhere within the borders of the USA. As in many dystopias, it takes you a few chapters to gather enough information to understand the regime and the population. More information is gradually revealed about what has happened and how the people ended up where they are. The story is set in a reasonably near future as is suggested by the existence of atomic power plant accidents, toxic waste, pollution and a mutant strain of syphilis causing sterility and the death of a great number of people. A fundamentalist Christian group decides that they have had enough of misery and take advantage of the situation easily taking control of the republic by killing the entire government (they blame a Muslim group). The male leaders of this Christian group, the Commanders, form and rule the new republic. To solve the sterility problem and, consequently, the lack of children, they train and use so called handmaids. A handmaid is one of few fertile women in Gilead. After she has gone through training she will be distributed to one of the Commanders and used for reproduction. Her

rights are close to none and she can be compared to a slave. Had it not been for her working ovaries, she would be seen as worthless. If a Handmaid is lucky enough to conceive a healthy child, she is not allowed to keep it. The child is for the Commander and his wife. If she does not conceive, she might face the same threat that most old and sick persons and people of the “wrong” religion as well as homosexuals and other law-breaking people do and risk being executed or sent to work in “the colonies” which is more or less synonymous with death.

Surveillance

Surveillance is fundamental when it comes to keeping the Gileadean population docile. The phenomenon originated with Jeremy Bentham, a prominent political philosopher in nineteenth-century Europe. He created the concept “Panopticon” (of Greek origin meaning “all-seeing eye”) which is still used when studying surveillance. Bentham received the idea in 1786 when visiting his brother’s workshop in Belarus. The workshop’s employees were spread out in a circle and in its centre was the manager’s office from where he could constantly watch all the workers (20). Bentham’s idea was to employ this structure for the construction of a prison. With a high tower in the middle of a yard, the concrete manifestation of the Panopticon, all the individual cells and prisoners would be under secret observation. The purpose was to internalize a watcher within the prisoners. Even if they were not being constantly watched, they would feel as if they were, which would keep them docile and deter them from doing bad things (15-24, 54-56). His opinion about prison sentences was that they should be penitentiary rather than punishing (89-90). However the Panopticon was not an exclusively architectural idea but involved a transparent utopian system which Bentham wished to implement in all of society’s institutions such as schools and hospitals. Institutions where people are trained were especially important since he believed that a person could be formed or reshaped (87-88).

Bentham’s idea of the Panopticon might not have been as renowned as it is in

contemporary research if it had not been for the philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault. He applied Bentham's concept on his own research about discipline and punishment and its development during the last 200 years in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975). He sees the idea of Bentham's transparent society as a system of power which is built on discipline (135-228) claiming that society is permeated by a *carceral continuum* in which the prison is the highest level of surveillance but not the only level. The levels continue through prisoner probation and parole via societies' security arrangements such as the police but also through schools, everyday work and domestic lives (297-300). The physical tower of the Panopticon is thus turned into an abstract concept of power relations between people and different institutions in society.

In Watching Women, Falling Women on power, dialogue and feminism in three novels by Margaret Atwood, Katarina Gregersdotter refers to Foucault's notion of the Panopticon. Gregersdotter argues that *watching* is a central action for acquiring and maintaining power and that watched subjects turn into objects in the eyes of the watcher (13-14). According to Foucault, "the major effect of the Panopticon... [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). As Gregersdotter points out, "the issue here is, thus, not actually *being seen*, but the *conviction* that one is being seen. . . . That the watcher is perceived as being invisible equals the understanding that the watcher is present everywhere. The presence of an actual watcher is not as important as the *sense* of the presence of a watcher" (19). In Gilead, the state has erected many buildings similar to Bentham's Panopticon tower: towers with armed guards, high posts with floodlights mechanically sweeping the ground and the borders around Gilead are outlined by walls and armed guards.

Physical surveillance of this kind is important in order to internalize a watcher in their subjugated population. In addition, surveillance is carefully structured. In order to keep a

prison institution calm and tidy, Bentham thought that prisoners should be separated (9). In Gilead people are isolated from friends and family and put into different social groups with different assignments (25). The Gileadean society is structured like a feudal society in medieval Europe, which alleviates what Foucault calls a carceral continuum (297-300). At the top there are Commanders, who are in possession of all the power in the state. At the second highest layer in society are the Eyes, which is a fitting name for this male military group “who sees all.” Next come the Aunts, a female group who is responsible for the training of women into Handmaids. Below them there are different groups separated by skin color, religion or occupation. Near the bottom the Handmaids are to be found. All the groups have their own uniforms. The Handmaids wear long red dresses with long sleeves since it is important not to tempt anyone. While the Eyes attain power by seeing and knowing, the Handmaids’ experience is quite the opposite, which is why they wear hats with blinkers on them outdoors (HT, 52). This hierarchic network keeps everyone involved in the Commanders’ cause since everyone has someone to report to. The Handmaids and other exposed groups at the bottom are the ones that act most out of fear and self-preservation. Even in the same societal layer trust is a rare phenomenon. This system disciplines the population and implements a transparency all the way from the top to the bottom. Thus, surveillance in Gilead is both physical and mental. Moreover it exists between people. This “social” surveillance contributes to strengthening the internalized watcher.

To be categorized and put into a group and treated accordingly is offensive and demeaning. Another tool, directed solely against women, to suppress their individuality and discourage independent thinking is the patriarchal categorization. The Handmaids do not even have their own names; they are named after their present master, their Commander. The patronymic Offred means that she is the Handmaid *of Fred* (We are not told Offred’s real name but it is implied that it is June). Married women of a reasonably high class are called

Wives. Girls are called Daughters and women who are married to less rich and powerful men than Commanders are called Econowives (HT, 34-35). With these labels women stand out merely as the property of men.

As mentioned earlier, the Commanders are at the top of the power pyramid but to ensure that the population is kept docile, they have implemented the Christian god as their ally employing him as a judging eye. Norberto Bobbio, claims that, “a power founded on force alone may be considered effective but not legitimate” (81) and he goes on to pose the following question, “if power is founded exclusively on force then how can we distinguish political power from that of a band of robbers?” (82). The Christian oligarchy in Gilead took the power over Gilead by force, justifying their action by referring to Christian beliefs (HT, 165). They modify ordinary Christian beliefs to build a better foundation for their cause. However, the god that crawls from the top of the Panopticon into the very heart of the internalized watcher in the subjugates’ bodies is not the forgiving and caring god that Christians usually believe in. The rulers have altered passages of the bible and turned god into an omnipresent and judging power in favour of their agenda.

Bobbio mentions different principles of legitimating force and questionable methods that societies all over the world have been using to obtain power. To construct and support his theory about what the strongest principle is, he uses the English Philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s statement: “Authority and not Reason makes the Law” (84) and he comes to the following conclusion: “In a pyramidal conception of authority the ultimate authority is the will of God” (84). This illusion of “God’s will” is what the Commanders are convincing their subjects that they practice in Gilead. Katharina Harju is of a similar opinion claiming that, “in the Gileadean society it is the bible that controls the government, it is a holy text and nobody except the people from the higher social class are allowed to own one” (HT, 7). Harju seems to think that the government is the way it is *because of* the bible while it may also be argued

that the government is legitimated to act the way they do *thanks to* the bible.

Biblical passages are detached from their original context in order to serve the purpose of the authorities. Offred cites one of the altered biblical passages that she and the other Handmaids were fed every day during their Handmaid training via speakers. The parts, about meekness and silence are the ones that appear most frequently in Offred's world: "*Blessed be the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom in heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent. I knew they made that up...*" (HT 100).

When studying punishment and discipline in prisons, Foucault noticed that the main punishment for misbehaving inmates was to lock them up in their cells. He quotes Ducpetiaux who states that "isolation is the best means of acting on the moral nature ... it is there above all that the voice of religion, even if it has never spoken to their hearts, recovers all its emotional power" (qtd. in Foucault 294). Foucault comments that "the entire parapenal institution... culminates in the cell, on the walls of which are written in black letters: 'God sees you'" (294). This form of isolation in their rooms is what the Handmaids endure many hours a day. It might be a way to leave them alone with their internalized watcher making sure they stay on track with the Commanders' "moral nature." The only written word Offred has access to is printed on her pillow and it seems as if she is constantly devouring it due to her lack of all other texts: "I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes on the print: FAITH. It's the only thing they've given me to read" (HT, 67). This obsessive repeating and reflecting over the word is probably part of the plan to keep Offred docile.

One of the first steps of this plan is the training of the women who have been chosen to be Handmaids, go through. The aunts who train the Handmaids constantly remind them how deficient society was in the past. Norberto Bobbio believes that negative reminding and positive promising is essential for any ruler: "While reference to past history constitutes one of the criteria for the legitimating of existing (constituted power), the reference to future

history is one of the criteria for the legitimating of aspirant (constituting) power” (85). Even when alone, Offred often speaks as if she has internalized this kind of propaganda from the aunts. For instance, she repeats the aunts’ choice of words as she talks about the time before Gilead implying that it was dangerous for women to go out running after dark: “women were not protected then” (HT, 34) suggesting that women are now. On her way home from shopping she passes a few Japanese tourists, who wear summer clothes and make-up. Offred comments: “I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this” (HT, 28).

The future is often referred to through television, a medium which the regime controls completely. Like many dictatorships, they are anxious to use media to convince their subject citizens that they are justified in their actions and that they can be trusted, which is why they manufacture news that make them seem protective, just and kind. The anchor man is a person whom Offred describes as follows:

His manner is kindly, fatherly; he gazes out at us from the screen, looking, with his tan and his white hair and candid eyes, wise wrinkles around them, like everybody’s ideal grandfather. What he’s telling us, his level smile implies, is for our own good. Everything will be all right soon. I promise. There will be peace. You must trust. You must go to sleep like good children (HT, 93)

To put a trustworthy and experienced man in the position of a news anchor is a clever strategy. People trust what they see on television and doubts are minimized with the stereotype of an ideal grandfather. In short, it is a comforting way to legitimate power and control people’s minds. Foucault describes the evolution of punishment stating that since 1760, the focus has slowly gone from inflicting damage to the body to focusing on the soul, “punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” (16). Such

forms of control is important when it comes to keeping prisoners lenient and also, hopefully, making them improve before they are released. Offred and her equals are mentally trained, fed with information and constantly watched which keeps them meek (HT).

However, the regime does not only use non-corporal methods. In medieval Europe, it was common to torture and execute criminals in public. Foucault writes about the function of such punishments and the reasons for making people watch:

People were summoned as spectators: they were assembled to observe public exhibitions and amendes honorables; pillories, gallows and scaffolds were erected in public squares or by the roadside; sometimes the corpses of the executed persons were displayed for several days near the scenes of their crimes. Not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes. Because they must be made to be afraid; but also because they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and because they must to a certain extent take part in it. (58)

The equivalent to the scaffold in Gilead is “the wall.” Close to a church in Gilead there is a red brick wall. On the top of the wall, there is broken glass in concrete and the gates are guarded by soldiers. Floodlights mounted on metal posts above it search the area. What is really frightening are the hooks in the wall. These hooks are for hanging up dead people on display to remind people of the threat to their protected society. People are supposed to learn the lesson without doing anything they are not supposed to. Moreover, they should also feel that it is necessary to be rid of rebels and be reminded that the rulers are needed, caring and protective of their people. The individuals who are executed and hung up on the wall may have committed crimes such as adultery, practising a different religion than Christianity or been engaged in conspiratorial behaviour or breaking any of the arbitrary rules such as

“gender treachery” (homosexuality), in Gilead. Offred expresses her feelings about walking past the wall and noticing that no one was hanging on it: “Somehow the wall is even more foreboding when it’s empty like this. When there’s someone hanging on it at least you know the worst. But vacant, it is also potential, like a storm approaching” (HT, 174). The people walking past the wall are constantly reminded of the regime’s power.

Foucault explains how the medieval king washed his hands of horrid actions such as executions in order for him not to be seen simply as a ruthless and arbitrary executioner: “The executioner may have been, in a sense, the king's sword, but he shared the infamy of his adversary. The sovereign power that enjoined him to kill, and which through him did kill, was not present in him; it was not identified with his own ruthlessness” (53). By placing an already detested figure in the role of the king’s sword, the people focused more on the sword itself than the owner of it. In Gilead this is taken one step further in the execution method “participation” (a combined term made out of participation and execution) when the Handmaids themselves become the regime’s sword. Sisk writes that “the State uses games as a social ritual to control the population. In Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* [sic], the repressed Handmaids vent their near-hysteria in a ‘Participation’ by tearing a ‘traitor’ to pieces” (93). First the Handmaids are told about the horrible crimes a convicted criminal supposedly has committed, and quite often these stories seem to be lies about terrible crimes such as brutal rapes (even though the convict is probably simply someone who is a nuisance for the regime), to excite and enrage the maids. Then, when they are furious enough, they are allowed to do whatever they want with the ‘criminal,’ which is beating him to death (HT, 279-280). The convict has no chance to defend himself either verbally or physically. Foucault further explains why crowds used to gather around the scaffolds:

It was not simply to witness the sufferings of the condemned man or to excite the anger of the executioner: it was also to hear an individual who had nothing

more to lose curse the judges, the laws, the government and religion. The public execution allowed the luxury of these momentary saturnalia, when nothing remained to prohibit or to punish. Under the protection of imminent death, the criminal could say everything and the crowd cheered (60)

The convict in *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to be drugged (279-280) and is, consequently, robbed of his democratic right to any last statement, which might question the leaders of Gilead. By letting the Handmaids execute the convict the leaders lure them into being accomplices in their crime. The internalized watcher, who shares the regime's agenda, plays a role in justifying this behaviour. In such moments the conviction grows stronger that this was the right thing to do because if it was not –you just murdered someone. A yet simpler way to ease one's conscience is to claim that the act was carried out in self-defence. A Handmaid who had refused to participate, would probably have been the next person to be particutioned. To conclude the discussion about the function of public executions, I will quote Foucault's argument that “[it] has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted” (48).

Restrictions of communication

Literacy and freedom of the press are cornerstones in a democratic society and the means of acquiring and spreading information. In Gilead the people are prohibited not only to speak freely and/or critically about the regime but, are also forbidden to read and to write. This is a means of preventing people from finding, uniting and cooperating with other displeased subjugates. Furthermore, it makes it harder to critically assess messages, statements or altered passages from the bible that the Commanders convey.

Knowledge is power. Without free speech or access to anything written, it is impossible to acquire knowledge and power. The philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey claims that “the most notable distinction between living and inanimate things is that the former maintain themselves by renewal” (1). Without documentation every generation would have to start from scratch. Development in and of society is, to a large extent based on research built on already existing research or what is known as the learning theory of scaffolding (not to be confused with Foucault’s kind of scaffolds). This is closely related to the philosopher Lev Vygotskij’s pedagogic theory about the zone of proximal development. The theory of scaffolding sees the process of gaining knowledge and of learning as building a construction from the bottom. It is necessary to build every layer in order to learn more (Daniels 59). In a democratic society, information is everywhere and anyone can construct their own scaffolds of whatever material they find interesting and build it as high as they endure. In Gilead the fundamental religious scaffold is given to you but there is no material of information or knowledge to add to it or to question it with; there is nothing else to build with. This way, people’s scaffolds stay at one low layer and the citizens’ development into critically thinking and questioning individuals is prevented.

In the long run a society without education would stagnate in its evolution and might even

move backwards. Dewey writes about a frightening future of barbarism and savagery that could happen unless an educational transmission from old to young is ensured (3-4). This is a thought that does not seem to have occurred to a Commander who says that “our biggest mistake was teaching them to read. We won’t do that again” (HT, 307). As the quote implies, reading is not forbidden to everyone. The fact that the Commander regards the teaching of reading to people who, in his opinion, clearly should not be literate, as their biggest mistake suggests that the Commanders are aware of the importance of their prohibition for common people (this particular quote may originate from the bible and “they” are women). It would have been easier if they had not been able to read from the start of the Gileadean era. Sisk claims that “the Commanders of the republic of Gilead do not wish to give even the appearance of a process but rather describe their regime as completely static” (117). Giving the people a static image of the present state renders it impossible for them to question it as long as they have nothing to compare with.

When Offred enters her Commander’s office for the first time, she has not seen anything written for a long time. Consequently, she is stunned by the sight of all of his books: “All around the walls there are bookcases. They’re filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can’t come in here. It’s an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare” (HT, 137). The books signify knowledge and power to the owner. To have a pen in Gilead is also to have power. Most people are reduced to secretly scratching on surfaces with whatever they can find to be able to leave a message for someone. One day, Offred finds such a message in her closet (HT, 62). Elisabeth Mahoney argues that, “this tiny writing occupies a tenuous place; it is only ‘scratched’ skin-deep, almost tattooed ‘with a pin’ in the darkest corner. The tools for writing, a pin or a fingernail, are the antithesis of ... his typewriter; the women are writing primitively” (Sceats and Cunningham 33). Not being allowed the possession of a pen must be devastating for women’s self-esteem in Gilead.

If we assume that not needing is power, women's desperate need to express themselves places them in an inferior position, which gives the pen-owning Commanders power. The significance assigned to the pen as a writing tool is deeply Freudian and implies that Offred suffers from penis envy. When Offred has learnt to know her Commander, she is allowed to borrow his pen for a while and Offred makes a Freudian play with words about her envy of the Commander's pen:

The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another center motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal. (HT 186)

In addition to books and pens, the Commander has a scrabble game in his office. He challenges Offred to a few games (HT 138-138, 144) and it is during these sittings that they become privately acquainted. It is clear that the Commander takes great pleasure in watching and objectifying Offred during these sessions and having her watch him. Sisk interprets the scrabble sessions as opportunities for the commander to remind Offred of his power, by allowing her to read and by not following the rules of the game. Furthermore, he sees three different games take place simultaneously:

On the surface we see scrabble. . . . Beneath the literal game, Offred and the Commander spar intellectually and emotionally. He controls the situation, and Offred wonders why a man with his power would take such a risk to indulge in simple play. . . . third level. . . . directly applies to the second level of mental fencing that Offred and the Commander conduct. Language is not only figuratively at issue, but literally as well. (117)

Conclusion

How then are the Commanders of Gilead able to stay in control? To start with, the initial steps of overthrowing the government and separating and labeling the people were essential.

Furthermore, implicating the support of a judging god who inhabits the soul of every internalized watcher in addition to the traditional and altered biblical values play a significant part along with training (brain washing) and making people participate in such things as executions. However the secret for maintaining the state and keeping the people from uniting and rebelling lies in surveillance and the restrictions of communication.

A thesis that connects secularism, democracies and globalized cultures may not be waterproof. For one thing, there are many religious people in democratic countries and atheists in dictatorships. Furthermore, all globalized countries do not have freedom of speech. However, those phenomena might be connected to some extent. I would like to argue that what the regime in Gilead does is to stop and even, in some sense, reverse globalization for its population. According to sociologist David Martin, “the essence of globalization is the increasing speed of movement as people, ideas, images and capital take advantage of modern means of communication. As we all know, what began with road, canal and railway is now communication by jet and internet” (26). Communication for people in Gilead is restricted in all of these areas; they are not allowed to move as they wish, go abroad, to handle currency or information sources. Moreover, their ideas are completely controlled and to send messages is impossible. Consequently, the rest of the world is out of reach. Since it is not possible to access critical information or different views on religion, the Commanders’ Christianity remains largely unchallenged and secularism is prevented.

Foucault claims that “the soul is the prison of the body” (30) and since the rulers of Gilead has implemented internalized watchers in its citizens, thus controlling the souls of the people, the souls are imprisoned not once but their bodies are incarcerated twofold – by

physical walls and guards but also by their very own soul. Gilead has become a prison of both the soul and the body and you can go nowhere neither physically nor mentally.

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