

**The Collapse of The idea of the American Dream
in Margaret Atwood's Novel The Handmaid's Tale**
انهيار فكرة الحلم الأمريكي في رواية حكاية الخادمة لما格丽ت أتوود

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Abstract:

In the United States that transformed in to a theocratic totalitarian regime named Gilead, "The Handmaid's Tale" takes its setting. The novel unfolds a dystopian future where women are victimized by a new political order, which is distantly far from the American democratic ideals that are extracted from the utopian visions of "The American Dream. In Gilead, notions of Justice, Freedom, individualism, civil and reproductive rights find no place under the governmental surveillance. Instead, the reader is faced with an unjust patriarchal system, where women are disfranchised, silenced, possessed and dehumanized. This paper is an attempt at shedding light on the failure of the concept of "The American Dream" in Atwood's novel , by applying a Foucauldian feminist reading to the novel, concepts of docile body, power, surveillance and oppression are evident, in order to draw a full understanding of that utopian dream that shift into dystopia

Keywords: Dystopia, American Dream, Atwood, Foucault, Feminism

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ملخص :

تدور أحداث رواية «حكاية الخادمة» لمارغريت أتوود في مستقبل ديستوبي تحولت فيه الولايات المتحدة إلى نظام ثيوقراطي شمولي هو جمهورية جلعاد. تصوّر الرواية مجتمعاً تخلّى عن المثل الديمقراطية التي شكّلت في الأصل الرؤية الطوباوية للحلم الأمريكي. في جلعاد، تسحق مفاهيم العدالة والحرية والفردانية والحقوق المدنية ويُصدّم القارئ بنظام أبوي والإنجابية تحت وطأة المراقبة المستمرة وسيطرة الدولة يهْمُش النساء ويُسكّتهن ويمتلكهن وينزع عنهن إنسانيتهن. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى دراسة انهيار الحلم الأمريكي في الرواية من خلال تطبيق قراءة نسوية فوكولوية، مستعينةً بمفاهيم الجسد الخاضع والسلطة والمراقبة والقمع، لتوضيح كيف يتحول الحلم الطوباوي إلى ديستوبيا

الكلمات المفتاحية: دسيتوبيا، أتوود، الحلم الأمريكي، فوكو، النسوية

1- Introduction

Dystopian texts are characterised by their depiction of grim futures, where totalitarian regimes, environmental disasters, and other catastrophic events reshape human existence. Although the genre emerged in the late nineteenth century, the twentieth century was widely regarded as a dystopian age, and the twenty-first century seems no more promising, as several scholars have noted. Margaret Atwood is one of the most influential contemporary Canadian writers, and her engagement with politics and feminist movements has enriched her literary output with profound reflections on political, societal, and gender issues. *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, is among the most significant feminist dystopian novels that continue to attract critical and popular attention; the novel experienced a surge in sales during the Trump presidency and gained further visibility after being adapted into a television series by Hulu.

The novel is not a straightforward feminist dystopia; its power lies in its setting: the United States after its democracy and cherished national ideals have collapsed, giving way to the Republic of Gilead. To understand what has been lost, one must first grasp the utopian promises that preceded the collapse. America has long been associated with utopian notions or “the Promised Land”, the new Garden of Eden and the concept of the American Dream is central among them, reflecting the national ethos of the United States. James Truslow Adams coined the term in 1931 in his book *Epic of America*, describing it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or

achievement. [...] a dream of social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams, 1931). Historically, the roots of the American Dream go back to the Puritans and the Founding Fathers, who believed that spiritual integrity combined with material success, could be a sign of divine favour.

The political and cultural context of the 1980s renders Atwood’s dystopian vision more pointed. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is thought to have been inspired by Atwood’s trip to Afghanistan in the late 1970s, but it also resonates with a turbulent period in American history. The indirect election of Ronald Reagan coincided with the rise of the Iranian theocracy, and Reagan “inherited a troubled economy, deindustrializing culture, and an increase in cost of governmental entitlement” (Jadwin, 2009, p. 27). At the same time, an evangelical Christian political movement known as the Moral Majority called for a return to conservative values. Jadwin (2009) explains that this movement advanced an agenda that sought to suppress opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, reinforce a traditional patriarchal family model, and promote the censorship of media outlets accused of pushing an “anti-family” message. These efforts directly opposed the women’s rights movement and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, questions of women’s fertility and abortion became highly contentious, as the movement emphasised “the right of the fetus” over a woman’s right to choose, contributing to a growing sense of danger around reproductive rights and an escalation of domestic violence.

As evangelical political action committees grew in influence, a direct war on feminism was declared, threatening decades of hard-won gains. The theocratic conservatism of this period is reflected in the authoritarian government of Gilead or the United States after its globally admired democracy and ideals have vanished. Although Atwood has resisted being labelled a feminist writer, her novel vividly imagines what might happen if such extremist conservative forces were to take total control. In Gilead, society treats women as little more than sexual tools, domestic servants, or, if they are fertile, child-bearing vessels. The Handmaids are not only ritually raped by their commanders, but in front of their wives too. As readers follow Offred’s tragic journey from the Red Centre to the household of Serena Joy and the Commander her previous life comes to seem like a distant dream, swallowed by a nightmarish reality. Did she once enjoy the freedoms of an American citizen? Did she ever hope for a successful career,

financial security, and a happy family? If so, how did she cope with the collapse of that dream?

The present article seeks to demonstrate that the regime of Gilead entirely forecloses any possibility of fulfilling the American Dream. The oppressive patriarchal system strips women of their civil, political, economic, and reproductive freedoms. To achieve this, the study employs a Foucauldian feminist reading, as outlined in the Methods section below. The Results section then applies this framework to the novel, focusing on totalitarianism, surveillance, and the production of docile bodies, before the Discussion draws out the implications of these findings for our understanding of the American Dream's failure.

2- Methods

This article adopts a qualitative literary analysis grounded in a Foucauldian feminist framework. The method consists of a close reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, guided by Michel Foucault's concepts of power, surveillance, docile bodies, and oppression, and informed by feminist dystopian theory. The choice of a Foucauldian lens is deliberate: Foucault's work provides a vocabulary for analysing how power operates not only through laws and institutions but through everyday practices, bodily discipline, and the internalisation of surveillance. Feminist dystopian scholarship, meanwhile, offers a generic context that clarifies why the dystopian mode is particularly suited to exposing patriarchal violence.

The study of dystopia as a literary field began to develop in the 1960s, when critics turned their attention to the implications of utopian writing. According to Sargent (2011), the term dystopia is often used interchangeably with anti-utopia or negative utopia, in opposition to utopia or eu-topia (the good place). It designates a fictional society where oppressive conditions or adverse social and political developments dominate, or it serves as a satirical critique of utopian aspirations by exposing their inherent contradictions. Dystopian narratives emerged more clearly in the early twentieth century, as global perspectives on human nature and society shifted, but their roots go further back: Vieira (2010) notes that the sceptical spirit of eighteenth-century intellectuals gave birth to anti-utopias, which questioned the coherence and desirability of utopian dreaming. The two world wars, the rise of totalitarian regimes, and the use of nuclear weapons then fuelled a wave of dystopian literature that directly reflected society's disillusionment with utopian ideas.

Literary dystopias often borrow narrative strategies from utopias and critical utopias while interrogating contemporary anxieties. Moylan (2003) distinguishes between “utopian dystopias,” which retain a horizon of hope, and “anti-utopian dystopias,” which offer no alternative to the oppressive conditions they depict. Within this generic landscape, Booker (1994) argues that dystopian fiction is “a natural genre for feminist writers” (p. 337), because women have endured patriarchal oppression across cultures. Feminist dystopian texts flourished particularly after the consolidation of feminist theory in the West, providing a space where women’s issues could be debated and the systematic mistreatment of women could be challenged. Scholars generally agree that the twentieth century marked a decisive shift from utopian to dystopian paradigms, and that dystopian narratives serve a didactic purpose, critically interrogating current social, political, and ideological structures. As Moylan (2003) emphasises, “the dystopian imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle ... for writers with ethical and political concern for warning us of the terrible socio-political tendencies.”(p.56) Feminist authors, including Margaret Atwood, have therefore used the dystopian setting to examine the destructive effects of patriarchy on women.

To this feminist dystopian frame, the article adds Foucault’s analytics of power. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) claims that “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (p. 93). Power, he argues, penetrates the deepest fabric of everyday life, shaping bodies, regulating conduct, and permeating discourse and daily routines (Foucault, 1980). Two mechanisms are particularly relevant: surveillance and the production of what Foucault calls “docile bodies”; bodies that can be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. Enclosed spaces and strictly regulated societies produce such bodies, making them objects of a power that operates through discipline rather than overt violence. These concepts are directly applicable to Atwood’s *Gilead*, where the theocratic state exercises total control over women’s movement, reproduction, and self-perception. The methodology therefore consists of reading key episodes and images in the novel; the Eyes, the Ceremony, the naming of Handmaids, the restrictions on language and movement through the twin lenses of feminist dystopian critique and Foucauldian power analysis. This combined framework makes visible the mechanisms by which the utopian promise of the American Dream is systematically dismantled in Atwood’s dystopian world.

3- Results

Totalitarianism and Surveillance

Politically, the American Dream has long been tied to democracy, which safeguards liberty and individual rights by allowing citizens a role in shaping legislation. In Atwood's Gilead, democracy has been eradicated and a totalitarian regime established by a religiously extremist group. Totalitarianism, as the term suggests, implies "total" control over society, where the actions and even thoughts of individuals are constantly supervised. Booker (2013) identifies the central feature of totalitarian regimes as "the desire for complete control over the hearts and bodies, minds and souls, of the citizens of the nations" (p. 119). Gottlieb (2001) notes that dystopian systems limit individuality not only by demanding unquestioning obedience but also by fostering a quasi-religious veneration of the state ideology.

Under such a system, individuals are subjected to punitive control exercised through surveillance and violence. In the novel, the oppressive regime practises constant surveillance through the "Eyes," a network of secret police working undercover. The power of the gaze compels citizens to live in fear, treating one another with suspicion because they are never certain who might be an informer. This system creates a condition of self-surveillance: "the women find themselves acting as if they are being watched, even if they are not, because they suspect anyone around to be an Eye" (Alotaibi, 2018, p. 38). Offred's own narration reveals her constant vigilance; she monitors her speech, her posture, and even her thoughts, knowing that any deviation can be fatal. Public executions and bodies displayed on the Wall serve as warnings. In such a climate, freedom of thought and expression cornerstones of the American Dream disappear, and the individual self dissolves into a fearful, obedient mass.

Docile Bodies in a Patriarchal Society

The American Dream once promised a life of prosperity, equality, and justice. In contrast, Offred's world is a prison-like society in which women endure marginalisation, exploitation, and systematic discrimination. The Foucauldian concept of docile bodies illuminates how this subjugation is achieved on the most intimate level.

Under Gilead's theocratic regime, women live in a deeply patriarchal order. In simple terms, patriarchy is a social system that

concentrates power in male hands; men are expected to rule, while women are confined to subordinate roles. In Gilead, women are completely excluded from the structures of power. The regime legitimises universal male authority and casts women as the “Other,” defined only in relation to men. De Beauvoir’s insight that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” finds a chilling illustration here. Bahman (2017) observes that Atwood reduces women to their biological functions, presenting them primarily as productive bodies valued for their fertility. In this patriarchal society, the state exercises strict control over women’s reproductive capacities, making their biology the central justification for their systematic subjugation.

Male domination is reinforced through a binary opposition where women especially the Handmaids are treated as possessions. The very names of the Handmaids, such as “Offred” (meaning “of Fred”), erase personal identity and indicate total male ownership. The process of silencing and repressing women is achieved by imposing a strict dress code, limiting their use of language, and denying them any access to financial resources. Offred’s memories of her former life as a financially independent woman with a career and a family highlight the radical reversal of the American Dream: the ideals of self-determination and equal opportunity have been entirely annihilated.

Foucault argues that enclosed spaces and strictly regulated societies produce “docile bodies.” In Gilead, the Handmaids’ bodies become the primary symbols of oppression. Women are categorised according to the function of their bodies, but the Handmaids suffer a double form of victimisation: they are violated by Commanders, Aunts, and even Wives. Their bodies are expected to breed children, yet they are forbidden to raise them. Dressed completely in red, they have no right to wash or care for their own bodies except during the monthly “Ceremony”; a ritualised rape conducted in the presence of the Commander’s Wife, during which any emotional or physical pleasure is forbidden. The Handmaid’s body is treated as a national resource that must be kept pure and disciplined.

Kouhestani (2013) notes that in Gilead, femininity is defined through practices of self-denial and bodily purification; discipline and punishment are imposed on women’s bodies to render them acceptable and controllable within a male-dominated society. Offred’s description of the Ceremony, of lying between Serena Joy’s legs, and of the mechanical, passionless act of reproduction illustrates the complete denial of bodily autonomy. The reproductive rights and personal

freedoms that the American Dream supposedly guarantees are brutally violated, leading the Handmaids into a profound psychological alienation from their own bodies and from the world around

3- discussion:

The findings of this Foucauldian feminist reading confirm that Gilead's social and political structures are designed to make the realization of the American Dream impossible. Total surveillance eliminates the individual liberty on which the dream depends; the reduction of women to reproductive vessels destroys the promise of equal opportunity; and the transformation of female bodies into docile, disciplined objects negates the self-determination that the dream enshrines. Far from being incidental cruelties, these mechanisms are fundamental to the regime's operation. Gilead does not simply fail to live up to the American Dream; it is built upon its systematic dismantling.

These results contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between utopian rhetoric and dystopian practice. The American Dream, as a national ethos, has always contained a utopian dimension; the belief that a better, fuller life is attainable through effort and virtue. Atwood's novel reveals how easily that utopian dimension can be inverted when the state claims the authority to define what a "better" life looks like and for whom. The dystopian imagination, as Moylan (2003) argues, serves a prophetic function, and *The Handmaid's Tale* fulfills this function by showing that the erosion of democratic ideals is not a distant abstraction but a concrete process that operates through the control of bodies, speech, and space. The novel's cultural context the rise of the Moral Majority, the backlash against feminism, the debate over reproductive rights, anchors this warning in historical reality.

Limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The analysis is confined to a Foucauldian feminist lens, which foregrounds power, discipline, and embodiment. Other theoretical frameworks intersectional, psychoanalytic, or eco-critical might illuminate additional dimensions of the novel's dystopian world. Moreover, the study focuses on the novel's portrayal of women's oppression; a more

comprehensive account might also examine the construction of masculinity and the complicity of female characters such as the Aunts and Wives. Future research could also compare Atwood's dystopian vision with those of other late-twentieth-century feminist writers to trace the evolution of the genre's political critique.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the article's central conclusion stands. Atwood's cautionary vision warns of the fragility of democratic values and the ease with which they can be replaced by a regime of absolute control. *The Handmaid's Tale* remains a gripping dystopian narrative precisely because it exposes how a utopian promise "the American Dream" can be inverted into a nightmarish dystopia when power is concentrated, dissent is surveilled, and human beings are reduced to their biological functions. The novel thus serves as both a literary achievement and a political intervention, compelling readers to recognize that the freedoms enshrined in the American Dream are never secure; they must be continually defended against the forces that would transform them into instruments of oppression.

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