



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**English Literature**

**PHENOMENA OF BODY POLITICS AND WOMEN'S OBJECTIFICATION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

**KEY WORDS:**

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The phrase 'body politics' is used to refer to laws and conversations involving the body. Body politics includes both the societal control of the human body as well as the policies involved in managing it. Thus, body politics play a crucial role in the reproduction process because they encompass the various means and means by which populations manage reproduction. One of the most important figures in the field of body politics is the thinker named Michel Foucault. He contends that sex and sexuality have become political as cultures have begun using 'biopower', which he defines as "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" to influence people's behavior and quality of life. An exercise of biopower is any action taken by a ruling entity with the intention of preserving the lives of the populace or even the species. But the ongoing tensions and disputes are still reflected in the discussions surrounding the politics of female body portrayal. Women have, in fact, always been seen as objects and have only seldom been recognized as legitimate subjects of cultural expression. Berger defines female nudity, as "Men act and women appear men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at". (1972:47). In both intellectual discourse and urban social life, the female body is a topic of debate and curiosity. A woman's body is portrayed in commercials, women's magazines, catwalks, mainstream movies, and other media as sensual, seductive, exotic, and often a 'desirable other'. Male or female, the public's 'gaze' is constantly fantasizing on how the woman will next dress, embellish, preserve, manipulate, or mould her body to perfection. All of this enhances the allure and mystique surrounding the idea of the feminine body. In addition, the woman's body is mistreated and violated; she is raped and assaulted both outside and within her house. She is subjected to vicious attacks on her body, leaving her psychologically scarred and traumatized. To confront her with her personhood that she is less than the physically stronger masculine other she is physically disempowered.

The female body seems to have the potential to be both a cause for celebration and oppression. When the body is celebrated, it simply means that the desire finds its fulfillment in both the impressions of the body and in the gaze of the other. The female body is unquestionably the place to start for any in-depth analysis of femininity since it is the surface on which the contexts of the ideal or desirable woman are inscribed by culture and society. The major goal of the complicated process of socializing females is to instill in them suitable moral standards, such as humility and self-denial, and to teach them to prioritize serving others in their lives. In the social environment of today's culture, which places gender at the centre, the female body is unquestionably crucial. This acknowledges the psychological construction of gender identity and, consequently, of femininity. However, my focus is on how woman, as her embodied self, is characterized by the outside, what techniques and methods she employs to manipulate and change this social construction, and the degree to which she participates in it. If gender identity is formed, then it is evidently not psychology or genetics but rather, as Judith Butler says, culture that 'becomes destiny' (1990:8).

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a prominent novel of Margaret Atwood explores the ideas of complacency, patriarchy and the subjugation of women's body through the interplay of power and other repressive instrument. A common discourse on the existence of women revolves around the idea that how the body of woman has been constructed, constituted and controlled. Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* (1976) has mentioned the reality of the construction and subjugation of woman's body. Similarly, Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) has underlined the socio-pragmatic existence of women's body. She holds that the body of a woman is the site of economic, social, political and cultural rites. In other words these realities engrave profoundly upon the body of the women to circumscribe and to hegemonize it. Many other theorists of gender studies and queer theories have explained this phenomenon of construction, controlled and subjugation of women's body. The theorists who belong to the world of gender studies and contextualizes the philosophy of structuralism explains that body of a woman is the construct of historical, economic, political and cultural realities. These realities along with some historical contexts engrave deeply upon the body and they define the existence of women's body. Judith Butler in her famous text *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) have explained the existence of women's body within the complex structure of socio-economic, historical, political and cultural realities. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler elaborates the idea that the patriarchal order determines the performative dimensions of women which constitutes the existence of her body. Similarly in her *Bodies That Matter* she adumbrates a woman creates the history through spatio-temporal realities of her body. She writes about the existential reality of the body itself. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also delineated the condition of a woman's body through the philosophy of alienation. Further Toril Moi in her *Sexual Textual Politics* has explained the fact that the body of a woman has the rhizomatic relationship with economy, patriarchy, politics and culture. The woman participated in economic reproduction but she never controls the means of production. Her body is treated as a product of the labour where the patriarchy enjoys its economic freedom. This makes woman an object of desire rather than a subject of her own desire.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the female body will be used to demonstrate sexual politics. From Atwood's perspective, patriarchal civilizations have enslaved female bodies. In her novels, she depicts the anguish of the women who inhabit her female roles. Atwood in her *The Handmaid's Tale* has represented the process through which the women have been brought to the lowest strata of economic class as they have not been allowed to own property, capital, money or wealth. Moreover, they are also denied of their rights to have control over their reproductive functions. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital*, also known as *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867) have explained that the capitalist owns complete control over the means of production that is why they control the structure of base, superstructure and infrastructure. In social and economic order, the structure of

power called patriarchy doesn't provide right to women to have express and explicit control over the means of production. However, they work as an object in the entire process of capital production or in the process of fetishization. Further it creates a situation of alienation amid the reality of labor surplus and the condition of exploitation. Friedrich Engels in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) has explained that the body of a woman is used to create private property and sometime the body itself becomes an object of private property for the patriarchal order. Atwood's protagonist is repressed as a character who is not allowed to own property or capital which places her either lowest rank as proletariat or populace. The novel has explicitly explained that the protagonist is deprived of her control over her own body. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her famous text *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) has explained that in the great chain of economic exercise, the condition of a woman is that of a labor. She draws a parallel between the body of a woman and the work of labor. She expounds the great fact that the labor in the process of economic reproduction feels alienated after the attainment of fetish by the capitalist. Similarly in a social matrix, particularly in a family, the woman experiences a very close relationship with the bearing of the child. However, after the reproduction of the child, she feels the same condition of alienation as the labor force experiences. Atwood in her novel clearly manifested that a woman doesn't own control over her own body. Therefore, she experiences the power of oppression and the force of governance upon her body from other sources. Thomas Hobbes' the *Leviathan: Or The Matter, Forme and Power of Commonwealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (1651) has argued that women in the matrix of social contract is controlled by her body on which the superego exercises its oppressive rules and the society codifies and engraves everything trenchantly upon the body of the women. Michel Foucault in his *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1966) and *The Hermeneutics of the Self* (1980) has explained that women's body is an object of biopolitics and governmentality. Further, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1957) has also explained the process of control, particularly the body of the human being. Furthermore, there are some organize politics: mentalities, rationalities, and techniques through which the body is controlled and governed.

In addition, analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale* revolves around gender. Women in Gilead society are denied their right to personal autonomy and are required to perform various tasks for the state. Many women were infertile in the middle of the 1980s in the United States as a result of pollution and nuclear accidents. The government was taken over by the Gilead Republic. The new system categorizes women into various groups. Women are divided into distinct social categories based on their ages, fertility, and various social duties. *The Handmaid's Tale* refers to the female body as being national property. This might be interpreted in terms of certain female body functions in a culture with a rigid hierarchy like Gilead. The Gilead government assigns colorful clothes to women of various social classes. Seven groups of ladies with various color attire may be identified: the Marthas in pale green, acting as chefs; the Econowives in the striped outfits made of the colors red, blue, and green; among them, the Widows dressed in black; the Wives dressed in blue; the Aunts dressed in khaki with electronic cattle prods on their leather belts; the 'Unwoman', who will either starve to death or contract unidentified illnesses in the Colonies, are shown primarily in grey; the Handmaids in red, as Offred says, "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us" (14).

The objectification of women's body in patriarchal society is Margaret Atwood's main focus in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the book, women are treated like slaves and subjected to strict supervision in every area of their life. In her work Atwood

demonstrates the second-class position of women in the society. She paints a picture of a world where women lack choice, independence and opinion. Atwood creates a picture of a society where women are held captive both physically and psychologically. Men are their lords and women are their slaves. Atwood portrays a Patriarchal society, where women are viewed as formless objects that society molds to serve the demands of males. She tries to demonstrate how women are devalued in patriarchal civilizations and are only used for sexual gratification and for procreation. The patriarchal rules stripped women of everything, including their identities, and made them the property of males. Through this book, Atwood hopes to help readers comprehend how society has treated women over time. She demonstrates that sexuality is the primary factor of in limiting women, the primary source of their oppression and victimization and the primary reason for their subordinate status in the patriarchal society.

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