

## Emotional Surveillance and the Regulation of Desire in The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

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### Abstract:

This paper explores the mechanisms of emotional surveillance and the regulation of desire in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel that examines how authoritarian regimes extend control beyond physical bodies into the emotional and psychological domains of individuals. Set in the theocratic Republic of Gilead, the narrative reveals how power operates through strict monitoring of behaviour, language, and even thought, ultimately reshaping personal desires to align with state ideology. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism and feminist critiques of bio politics, this study analyses how emotional repression, enforced rituals, and internalized surveillance function as tools of domination. The research highlights the role of fear, guilt, and religious doctrine in controlling women's sexuality and autonomy. Through a close reading of key characters, particularly Off red, the paper demonstrates how desire becomes both a site of resistance and vulnerability. The findings suggest that emotional surveillance is central to maintaining totalitarian control, as it ensures compliance not merely through coercion but through psychological conditioning. The paper concludes that Atwood's work offers a powerful critique of systems that regulate identity and desire, making it highly relevant to contemporary discussions on surveillance, gender politics, and state power.

**Keywords:** Emotional surveillance, desire regulation, dystopia, patriarchy, control, resistance, Gilead, feminism, Bio-politics, panopticism

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### Introduction

Dystopian literature often serves as a mirror reflecting the anxieties and structures of real-world societies. *The Handmaid's Tale* stands as a seminal work in this tradition, presenting a chilling vision of a society where the state exerts total control over women's bodies and identities. However, the novel's power lies not only in its depiction of physical oppression but also in its exploration of psychological domination—specifically, the ways in which emotions and desires are monitored, suppressed, and reshaped. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized how dystopian texts anticipate contemporary concerns about digital surveillance, gender politics, and ideological control, reinforcing the continued relevance of Atwood's

narrative in the 21st century (*Banet-Weiser, 2018; Zuboff, 2019*).

In the Republic of Gilead, surveillance operates at multiple levels. While physical surveillance is evident through institutions such as the Eyes and rigid social hierarchies, emotional surveillance is more insidious. It manifests through language restrictions, prescribed roles, and ritualized behaviours that regulate how individuals feel and express themselves. Women, particularly Handmaids, are denied not only autonomy over their bodies but also control over their emotional lives. Desire—whether sexual, intellectual, or emotional—is tightly regulated to prevent deviation from state norms. Contemporary theorists such as Shoshana Zuboff highlight how modern

systems of surveillance capitalism similarly extend into personal and emotional domains, shaping human behaviour in subtle yet pervasive ways.

This paper argues that emotional surveillance is a central mechanism of control in Gilead, functioning alongside physical surveillance to enforce conformity. By examining how desire is regulated and manipulated, the study sheds light on the broader implications of authoritarian power structures. The analysis is grounded in theoretical perspectives that emphasize the relationship between power, knowledge, and the body, particularly the works of Michel Foucault and contemporary feminist scholars such as Judith Butler. Recent interdisciplinary studies in surveillance studies and feminist theory further support this framework, demonstrating how power increasingly operates through the regulation of identity, affect, and embodied experience in both literary and real-world contexts (Lyon, 2018; Gill, 2021).

### Objectives

1. To analyse emotional surveillance and the regulation of desire in *The Handmaid's Tale*, focusing on how control is exercised within Gilead.
2. To examine the relationship between power, gender, and psychological control, particularly in shaping individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours.
3. To explore forms of resistance and situate the novel within broader theoretical frameworks of surveillance and bio politics.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in textual analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, focusing on key passages that reveal emotional control and the regulation of desire. It also draws on secondary sources, including feminist theory and philosophical discussions of surveillance and power. Through close reading and thematic analysis, the study identifies patterns of emotional repression and constrained desire within the narrative. It

applies Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism to examine how surveillance operates both externally and internally. Insights from feminist criticism further illuminate the gendered dimensions of control, offering a deeper understanding of the novel's social and ideological implications.

### Emotional Surveillance in Gilead

#### The Architecture of Control

In Gilead, surveillance extends far beyond physical monitoring, deeply infiltrating the emotional and psychological dimensions of human existence. The regime deliberately creates an environment in which individuals internalize authority, leading them to continuously observe and regulate their own thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. This form of control closely reflects the ideas of Michel Foucault, particularly his concept of the panoptic on, where the mere possibility of constant observation compels individuals to discipline themselves even in the absence of direct enforcement. Within such a system, power becomes largely invisible yet omnipresent, shaping inner consciousness and fostering self-regulation. Contemporary scholarship on surveillance, especially the work of Shoshana Zuboff, further suggests that modern forms of power similarly operate through internalized monitoring and behavioural conditioning (Zuboff, 2019; Lyon, 2018).

Handmaids, in particular, are conditioned to suppress personal feelings and conform strictly to prescribed social roles. Their emotional lives are tightly controlled, leaving minimal space for individuality or self-expression. Language itself becomes a powerful tool of domination, as formulaic expressions such as "Blessed be the fruit" replace genuine and spontaneous communication. This restriction of language not only standardizes interactions but also limits the articulation of dissent, desire, and personal identity. Consequently, emotional expression is significantly diminished, reinforcing obedience and ensuring that the state maintains authority not only over physical bodies but also over the minds and

inner lives of its subjects. Recent feminist and cultural studies scholars have emphasized how such linguistic and emotional regulation mirrors contemporary concerns about ideological control, gender discipline, and affective governance in modern societies (*Gill, 2021; Banet-Weiser, 2018*).

### **Rituals as Emotional Conditioning**

Rituals such as the Ceremony clearly illustrate how emotional surveillance functions in Gilead. These highly structured practices are designed not only to enforce obedience but also to normalize deeply oppressive conditions, gradually eroding individual autonomy. By embedding such acts within a rigid religious framework, the state presents them as sacred duties rather than violations, transforming coercion into perceived moral responsibility. This strategic use of religion discourages resistance, as any form of dissent is framed as both a social and spiritual transgression. Recent scholarship in feminist and cultural studies highlights how ideological systems continue to naturalize control by linking morality with obedience, thereby reinforcing structures of domination (*Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2021*).

The Ceremony, in particular, serves as a powerful mechanism for regulating both physical and emotional behaviour. While its primary function is reproductive, it also dictates the emotional conduct of those involved. Handmaids are expected to remain passive, detached, and silent, suppressing all personal feelings and desires. Any display of emotion is implicitly discouraged, reinforcing the expectation of complete submission. Over time, this repeated suppression results in emotional numbness, where individuals become disconnected from their own inner experiences. This detachment further strengthens the regime's control, ensuring compliance not just in action, but also in thought and feeling. Contemporary theorists such as Sara Ahmed have argued that the regulation of emotions plays a crucial role in maintaining social order, while surveillance scholars emphasize how power increasingly operates through

affective and psychological conditioning (*Lyon, 2018; Zuboff, 2019*).

### **Regulation of Desire**

#### **Sexual Desire as a Threat**

In Gilead, desire is perceived as a potentially disruptive force that threatens the stability of the regime and must therefore be strictly controlled. Female sexuality, in particular, is heavily regulated, with Handmaids reduced to their reproductive function and assigned the sole role of bearing children for elite families. Any expression of desire that exists beyond this narrow, state-sanctioned purpose is viewed as dangerous and subversive. By limiting women's roles to biological reproduction, the regime seeks to eliminate individuality, autonomy, and emotional complexity. Contemporary feminist theorists, including Judith Butler, argue that such regulation of bodies and desires is central to maintaining systems of power, while recent studies on bio politics further emphasize how states exercise control through the management of reproduction and sexuality (*Gill, 2021; Feder, 2014*).

Within this oppressive framework, off red's memories of her past life become especially significant. Her recollections of love, intimacy, and personal freedom stand in stark contrast to the rigid control imposed by Gilead. These memories serve not only as a reminder of what has been lost but also as a quiet form of resistance against the regime's attempt to erase personal identity. By holding onto these experiences, off red preserves a sense of self that the state cannot fully extinguish, demonstrating how memory itself can challenge systems of control and sustain inner resilience. Recent interdisciplinary research on memory and trauma also suggests that personal recollection can function as a form of resistance against oppressive systems by preserving identity and emotional continuity (*Hirsch, 2012; Smith, 2020*).

#### **Emotional Desire and Attachment**

Beyond the regulation of sexual desire, Gilead also imposes strict limitations on emotional attachments. The regime carefully monitors interpersonal relationships to

prevent the formation of meaningful bonds that might challenge its authority. By separating families and prohibiting romantic relationships, the state ensures that individuals remain isolated and emotionally dependent on its structures. This deliberate fragmentation of personal connections reinforces loyalty to the regime, leaving little room for trust, intimacy, or collective resistance. Contemporary scholars of surveillance and affect argue that modern systems of power increasingly regulate not only behaviour but also emotional life, shaping attachments and social bonds to maintain control (*Lyon, 2018; Zuboff, 2019*). Within this restrictive environment, off red's relationship with Nick emerges as a subtle yet significant act of defiance. Their connection represents a form of desire that exists beyond the rigid boundaries imposed by Gilead, demonstrating that genuine emotional and physical intimacy can still persist despite oppressive control. However, this relationship is inherently risky, as it exposes both individuals to severe consequences if discovered. The secrecy surrounding their bond underscores the pervasive nature of emotional surveillance and highlights the constant tension between human desire and authoritarian regulation. Feminist theorists such as Lauren Berlant emphasize how intimate relationships can become sites of both vulnerability and resistance within oppressive systems, revealing the complex interplay between power, desire, and emotional life (*Berlant, 2011; Gill, 2021*).

### **Internalization of Surveillance**

#### **Self-Regulation and Fear**

One of the most powerful features of emotional surveillance in Gilead is its internalization by individuals themselves. Over time, people begin to monitor and regulate their own thoughts and emotions, driven by the fear of punishment for even unspoken or imagined dissent. This process creates a culture of intense self-censorship, where individuals suppress not only their actions but also their inner feelings, making resistance increasingly difficult. The

constant awareness of potential surveillance leads to a form of psychological control that is far more pervasive than external enforcement alone. This dynamic closely reflects the theories of Michel Foucault, while contemporary scholars of surveillance such as Shoshana Zuboff argue that modern systems similarly rely on internalized monitoring and behavioural conditioning (*Zuboff, 2019; Lyon, 2018*).

Off red's narrative vividly illustrates this internal struggle. She frequently reflects on her own thoughts, questioning whether they are safe or dangerous, even when they remain unexpressed. This ongoing self-examination reveals the deep psychological impact of living under such an oppressive regime. The fear of being watched is no longer confined to physical spaces but becomes embedded within the mind itself. As a result, surveillance transforms into a self-sustaining system, where individuals unknowingly participate in their own control, reinforcing the authority of the state. Recent work in affect theory and feminist studies further emphasizes how such internalized control shapes subjectivity and emotional life under systems of domination (*Gill, 2021; Ahmed, 2014*).

### **Guilt and Religious Doctrine**

Religion plays a central role in regulating desire within Gilead, serving as a powerful tool for legitimizing control. The state frames its rules and restrictions as expressions of divine will, thereby giving its authority a sacred and unquestionable status. Through selective interpretation of religious texts, obedience is presented as a moral duty, while any deviation is condemned as sinful. Women, in particular, are conditioned to perceive their natural desires—whether emotional, intellectual, or sexual—as sources of guilt and moral failure. This internalization of religious doctrine reinforces compliance, as individuals come to believe that their subjugation is not only socially necessary but also spiritually justified. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and scholars of gender and power argue that such ideological conditioning is

central to sustaining patriarchal authority (*Butler, 1990; Gill, 2021*).

Such manipulation of belief systems ensures that control operates not only externally but also internally. Individuals do not simply obey out of fear of punishment; they begin to accept their oppression as morally right and inevitable. This results in a deeply ingrained sense of guilt and self-surveillance, which discourages resistance. Over time, this moral conditioning weakens the capacity for rebellion, making the regime's authority appear both natural and divinely sanctioned. Contemporary scholars, including Sara Ahmed, emphasize how emotions like guilt and shame are socially produced and politically mobilized to regulate behaviour and maintain systems of domination (*Ahmed, 2014; Zuboff, 2019*).

### **Desire as Resistance**

#### **Memory and Identity**

Despite the pervasive mechanisms of control in Gilead, desire continues to survive as a subtle yet powerful form of resistance. The regime may attempt to regulate bodies, thoughts, and emotions, but it cannot entirely extinguish the inner life of individuals. In this context, Offred's memories of her past become deeply significant. Her recollections of love, freedom, relationships, and personal choice act as a source of emotional strength, helping her preserve a sense of identity that the state seeks to erase. These memories provide a contrast between her former life and her present condition, highlighting the extent of her loss while also sustaining hope. Scholars of memory and identity, such as Marianne Hirsch, argue that memory functions as a crucial means of preserving subjectivity under conditions of oppression (*Hirsch, 2012; Smith, 2020*).

Rather than being mere reflections of nostalgia, these memories function as acts of quiet defiance. By remembering who she once was, Offred resists the imposed identity of a Handmaid and refuses complete psychological submission. Her inner world becomes a private space where the state's authority cannot fully penetrate. In this way, desire—expressed through memory and

longing—emerges as a form of resistance that challenges the regime's attempt to control individuality and human experience. Contemporary feminist theorists, including Sara Ahmed, emphasize how emotions and affect can operate as sites of resistance, enabling individuals to challenge dominant power structures even within highly controlled environments (*Ahmed, 2014; Gill, 2021*).

#### **Small Acts of Defiance**

Acts of defiance in Gilead, though often small and hidden, reveal the enduring resilience of human desire. Secret conversations, stolen glances, and forbidden relationships become meaningful expressions of resistance against a system designed to suppress individuality and emotional freedom. These actions may appear minor on the surface, yet they carry profound significance, as they challenge the rigid structures of control imposed by the state. By engaging in such acts, individuals assert their humanity and reclaim a sense of agency, even within an environment of constant surveillance. Scholars of power and resistance, including Michel de Certeau, have described such everyday acts as "tactics" through which individuals subtly resist dominant systems (*de Certeau, 1984; Scott, 1985*).

These moments of quiet rebellion also highlight the limitations of authoritarian power. While the regime seeks to regulate not only behaviour but also thought and emotion, it cannot entirely eliminate the human capacity for connection, longing, and resistance. Each act of defiance represents a refusal to fully internalize the state's authority and an effort to preserve personal identity. In this way, seemingly insignificant gestures become powerful symbols of resistance, demonstrating that desire, no matter how constrained, continues to persist and challenge systems of emotional surveillance. Contemporary theorists such as James C. Scott emphasize how hidden forms of resistance play a crucial role in undermining oppressive structures from within (*Scott, 1985; Gill, 2021*).

### **The Power of Storytelling**

Off red's narrative functions as a powerful act of resistance within the oppressive structure of Gilead. In a society where women are denied a voice and reduced to prescribed roles, the very act of telling her story becomes a means of asserting her individuality and reclaiming her sense of self. Through her narration, off red preserves her experiences, thoughts, and emotions—elements that the regime seeks to suppress or erase entirely. By articulating her inner life, she resists being defined solely by the identity imposed upon her as a Handmaid. Scholars of gender and discourse, including Judith Butler, emphasize how narrative and self-expression play a crucial role in constructing and reclaiming identity within oppressive systems (*Butler, 1997; Gill, 2021*).

Storytelling, in this context, becomes more than a personal expression; it transforms into a subtle yet significant challenge to the authority of the state. Gilead attempts to control not only actions but also truth, memory, and history. By recounting her experiences, Off red disrupts this control, offering an alternative perspective that exposes the realities of oppression. Her narrative creates a space where memory and identity can survive, demonstrating that even in conditions of extreme surveillance, the human voice can endure and resist domination. Contemporary theorists such as Shoshana Zuboff and scholars of memory studies further highlight how storytelling can resist systems that seek to dominate knowledge and personal experience (*Zuboff, 2019; Hirsch, 2012*).

### **Discussion**

The analysis demonstrates that emotional surveillance operates as a fundamental pillar of Gilead's power structure, extending control beyond visible actions into the hidden realms of thought and feeling. By shaping not only what individuals do but also how they think and feel, the state establishes a deeper and more pervasive form of domination. This internalized control proves more effective than mere physical coercion, as it

discourages resistance before it can even emerge. When individuals begin to regulate their own emotions and censor their thoughts, the need for constant external enforcement diminishes, allowing authority to function more efficiently and invisibly.

The regulation of desire plays a crucial role in reinforcing this system of control. By strictly limiting both sexual and emotional expression, the regime prevents individuals from forming meaningful identities, relationships, and attachments that might challenge its authority. Desire, which naturally fosters connection, individuality, and agency, is therefore suppressed to maintain order and obedience. However, the persistence of desire within individuals reveals the inherent limitations of such control. Despite the regime's efforts, human emotions, memories, and longings continue to surface, often in subtle and hidden ways. This suggests that while emotional surveillance can significantly constrain personal freedom, it cannot fully extinguish the fundamental human capacity for feeling, connection, and resistance.

### **Conclusion**

The Handmaid's Tale offers a powerful exploration of emotional surveillance and the regulation of desire, revealing how deeply authoritarian regimes can penetrate individual lives. Through its portrayal of Gilead, the novel shows that true power extends beyond the control of physical bodies to the shaping of thoughts, emotions, and inner consciousness. By regulating both external behaviour and internal experience, the regime establishes a comprehensive system of domination that limits personal freedom at every level. This study concludes that while emotional surveillance is an effective and pervasive tool of control, it is not entirely absolute. Human elements such as desire, memory, and identity continue to endure despite systematic repression, creating spaces for resistance and self-preservation. These inner resources challenge the totalizing ambitions of the regime and suggest the possibility of change. The work of Margaret Atwood remains

highly relevant today, serving as a cautionary reflection on systems that attempt to regulate not only actions but also the inner lives of individuals.

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