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## **Othering in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Dehumanization, Marginalization, and Resistance**

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### **Abstract:**

Margaret Atwood's dystopian masterpiece, *The Handmaid's Tale*, intricately weaves a narrative that explores the profound consequences of othering within a totalitarian society. This paper delves into the multifaceted dimensions of 'othering,' unravelling the dehumanization, marginalization, and poignant acts of resistance within the novel. The society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* is stratified by a rigid hierarchy, where particular groups, notably the Handmaids, are systematically relegated to the margins. This research paper delves into the intricate layers of dehumanization and marginalization within the dystopian society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*. By shedding light on the psychological impact of pervasive labels, enforced uniforms, and omnipresent surveillance, the paper unravels the complex mechanisms employed to perpetuate 'othering.' This research explores how characters navigate and confront an oppressive force, highlighting the enduring human capacity for resilience and defiance. This paper aims to offer a compelling examination of the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of othering in a dystopian context through a comprehensive analysis of Atwood's masterful narrative, providing insights into the profound effects on individual identity and collective resistance.

**Keywords:** Othering, Dehumanization, Marginalization, Resistance, Surveillance.

## Introduction:

Set in a dystopian landscape where the echoes of power, language, and resistance reverberate, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) invites us to navigate a world fraught with intricacies of 'othering.' As we embark on this analytical journey, our exploration hinges on the illuminating perspectives of three eminent theorists—Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Judith Butler. Each of these writers contributes unique insights that collectively deepen our understanding of the nuanced layers of dehumanization, marginalization, and, ultimately, resistance within the novel's oppressive regime.

Michel Foucault's seminal works, particularly *Discipline and Punish* and the panopticon concept, serve as an intellectual compass to navigate the pervasive surveillance mechanisms woven into the fabric of the dystopian society. Foucault's exploration of disciplinary power unveils how the "team of Eyes" (Atwood 98) and the "Aunts" (Atwood 10), through constant scrutiny, regulate behaviour, enforce conformity, and, in turn, foster a culture of othering. The panopticon becomes a metaphorical gaze that not only disciplines but also shapes the characters' psyche, encapsulating the psychological impact of living under relentless surveillance.

Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978) lends its critical lens to the sociocultural dimensions of othering within "The Handmaid's Tale." As the narrative unfolds, Said's theories guide our examination of linguistic constructs and cultural categorizations, mainly through the lens of labeling within society. The deliberate categorization of individuals as "Handmaids," (27) "Marthas," (17) and "Econowives" (33) becomes a manifestation of Said's insights. This illustrates how language becomes a potent tool for constructing and perpetuating stereotypes, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical structures that underpin the regime.

Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, as expounded in *Gender Trouble* (1990), adds another layer to our exploration by examining how the characters within the novel negotiate their identities within prescribed gender roles. Butler's lens of performative acts unveils how characters like Offred and Serena Joy navigate and resist the gendered expectations imposed upon them. This theoretical perspective enriches our analysis by probing the intersections of power, identity, and agency within the intricate tapestry of the dystopian narrative.

The convergence of Foucault's surveillance, Said's discourse analysis, and Butler's gender performativity will serve as a theoretical framework to unravel the profound complexities of othering. Through this multidimensional exploration, we aim not only to dissect the mechanisms of oppression but also to spotlight the resilient threads of resistance woven into the fabric of the human spirit within a society marked by systemic othering.

### **Surveillance and Panoptic Power: Foucault's Gaze in *The Handmaid's Tale***

In the dystopian realm of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Michel Foucault's concept of panopticons materializes as a chilling reality, manifesting through the omnipresent surveillance apparatus that dictates every facet of the characters' lives. The "Eyes" (98) and the "Aunts" (10) function as the invisible wardens of the panopticon, their gaze penetrating every corner of the society, regulating behaviour, and enforcing conformity. Central to Foucault's theory is that visibility is a trap, and the constant awareness of being watched alters individuals' behaviour. "In the perfect camp, all power would be exercised solely through exact observation; each gaze would form a part of the overall functioning of power" (Foucault 171). In the novel, this is palpable in the lives of the Handmaids, whose every move is scrutinizing. "It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere" (Foucault 214). "The Red Centre" (Atwood 36), a panoptic institution, epitomizes this pervasive surveillance. The Aunts, functioning as the agents of the panopticon, not only monitor but actively participate in disciplining the Handmaids. "One may traverse one after the other. Discipline is an art of rank, a technique for transforming arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations" (Foucault 146). The training sessions become a theatrical spectacle where the Handmaids internalize the gaze, knowing they are always subject to scrutiny. "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (Foucault 170). This internalization of the gaze is crucial for the success of the panoptic power – the disciplined become their own enforcers. Offred's frequent reflections on the 'Eyes,' the symbolic representation of the regime's surveillance, emphasize the psychological weight of being under constant scrutiny. The 'Eyes' are both a physical presence and a haunting metaphor, an ever-watchful entity that lurks in the background, reminding individuals of the consequences of deviating from the established norms. Even when the "Eyes"

are not visible to Offred, her awareness of them emphasizes the subtle influence of panoptic power. This influence extends beyond mere physical observation, encompassing the pervasive anxiety associated with the feeling of being constantly watched. “From the master of discipline to him who is subjected to it the relation is one of signalization: it is a question not of understanding the injunction but of perceiving the signal and reacting to it immediately, according to a more or less artificial, prearranged code” (Foucault 166).

The ‘Eyes’ extend beyond physical surveillance; they embody the societal gaze that permeates every interaction. The fear of being reported, of one’s actions being scrutinized, creates an atmosphere of self-censorship. The characters become complicit in their subjugation, adjusting their behaviour to align with the perceived expectations of the regime. Offred’s internal monologue reflects this internalized surveillance, exemplifying how the panoptic power extends beyond the visible authorities to become a pervasive force shaping thoughts and actions. The ‘Aunts,’ who wield the authority of the panopticon, epitomize Foucault’s concept of capillary power—power that operates at the micro-level, embedded in everyday practices “of what he calls ‘micro practices’” (Fraser 272). The ‘Aunts’ regulate not only the physical actions of the Handmaids but also their thoughts and beliefs. It is evident in the indoctrination sessions where the ‘Aunts’ employ language as a disciplinary tool, reinforcing the regime’s ideology and manipulating perception. “Discipline makes possible the operation of a relational power that sustains itself by its mechanism and which, for the spectacle of public events, substitutes the uninterrupted play of calculated gazes” (Foucault 177). The novel showcases how capillary power, exerted through intimate relationships and discourse, reinforces the panoptic structure, making resistance seem futile. The Handmaids, aware of the consequences of nonconformity, internalize the panoptic gaze as a form of self-surveillance. Offred’s thoughts become a battleground where the regime’s discourse clashes with her inner resistance. The regime’s manipulation of language, evident in the renaming of institutions and the creation of a new vocabulary, contributes to the internalization of its ideology. This linguistic manipulation, a form of capillary power, solidifies the panoptic structure by shaping not only actions but also the very thoughts of the individuals under surveillance.

Foucault’s panopticism, manifested in the constant surveillance and internalization of the gaze, establishes a power dynamic. “The Panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power” (Foucault 204) that extends beyond physical control. It infiltrates the characters ‘psyche shaping

their perceptions and actions. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, panoptic power serves not only to maintain order but also as a tool for controlling the narrative. In this dystopian reality, the gaze of the panopticon becomes a force that penetrates every layer of society, moulding individuals into compliant subjects. "Following Foucault, this is itself tied to the emergence of disciplinary power that shapes behaviour through a subtle form of "soul training." Many authors have subsequently identified panoptic dynamics in assorted surveillance measures that throw some light on what is happening within the surveillance "gaze." But, as other authors show, serious questions remain about the relevance of several aspects of Foucault's model as it pertains to contemporary surveillance" (Ball, Kirstie, et al. 15).

The panoptic power, as manifested through surveillance, linguistic manipulation, and ritualized practices, operates as a multifaceted mechanism of othering in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Subjected to the panoptic gaze, the characters grapple not only with physical constraints but also with a pervasive sense of being marked as the 'other.' Whether through the visual marker of their attire, the linguistic constructs imposed upon them, or the dehumanizing rituals they endure, the Handmaids become a living embodiment of otherness within the dystopian society. The panoptic power, intertwined with the dynamics of othering, ensures that the Handmaids exist on the fringes of societal norms, perpetuating their subjugation within the rigid hierarchy of Gilead.

### **Discursive Constructs and Cultural Categorizations: 'Saidian' Othering in *The Handmaid's Tale***

In the tapestry of Gilead's dystopian society, Edward Said's theories on Orientalism find resonance, unravelling the intricacies of othering woven into the fabric of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The deliberate linguistic constructs and cultural categorizations within the regime's discourse become potent tools for shaping perceptions, reinforcing hierarchies, and perpetuating the cycle of othering. Said's exploration of how societies construct and perpetuate stereotypes about the "other" becomes particularly poignant as we delve into the linguistic manipulation pervasive in the novel. The regime, with its authoritarian control, constructs a narrative that not only shapes the perception of reality but also reinforces the societal divisions fundamental to Gilead. The renaming of institutions, events, and even daily life is a linguistic strategy to reshape the narrative according to the regime's ideology. The Red Centre, initially a place of training and indoctrination, is an example of this linguistic othering. The term "Red Centre" emphasizes not only the Handmaids'

distinctive attire, described as "red dresses and white wings" (Atwood 35), but also associates their training with blood—a metaphor for fertility and reproduction. It underscores the Handmaids' role in the society's reproductive system, emphasizing their function as bearers of children. This deliberate choice of language creates a discourse perpetuating stereotypes, reinforcing the societal perception that sets the Handmaids apart as a distinct category.

Moreover, creating a new vocabulary further solidifies the linguistic boundary between the Handmaids and the rest of society. Terms like "Commander" (1), "Wife" (1) and "Martha" (16) not only label individuals but also encapsulate their societal roles. This linguistic categorization becomes a form of cultural othering, marking the Handmaids with titles that define their functions within the regime- "because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture" (Said 272). The power of words, as seen through Said's lens, extends beyond mere labels; it shapes perceptions, moulds thoughts, and enforces the regime's narrative. "Yet the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture, in some cases for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental. This process of conversion is a disciplined one. it is taught, it has its societies, periodicals, traditions, vocabulary, rhetoric, all in basic ways connected to and supplied by the prevailing cultural and political norms..." (Said 67-68). The deliberate choice of language becomes a subtle yet potent tool for constructing and perpetuating stereotypes that reinforce the hierarchical structures of Gilead.

The cultural othering within *The Handmaid's Tale* exemplified by manipulating religious symbolism to justify and reinforce societal norms. The regime's interpretation of the Bible becomes a cultural construct that justifies the oppression of women and the stratification of society- "the Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?" (Atwood 103). The Ceremony, a ritualized form of sexual othering, is framed within a religious discourse that positions it as a sacred duty rather than a dehumanizing act. This cultural appropriation of religious symbols becomes a powerful instrument for justifying and perpetuating the regime's narrative. The Handmaids, as vessels for the state, are culturally categorized through this religious lens, reinforcing their marginalized status.

Said's concept of the "Oriental" as a constructed stereotype finds echoes in the way the regime constructs the image of the Handmaids. The societal perception of the Handmaids as the "other" is not based on reality but on a carefully crafted narrative that serves the regime's interests. This deliberate construction of the Handmaids' identity as reproductive vessels becomes a cultural categorization that positions them as a distinct and subordinate group within Gilead. "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 156). The narrative's emphasis on the Handmaids' fertility reinforces the Orientalist trope of exoticizing and commodifying the "other," reducing them to a singular dimension defined by their reproductive capabilities. The Handmaids' distinct attire serves as a visual marker, perpetuating the cultural othering that distinguishes them from the rest of society. The "red habit" (Atwood 128) serves as a symbol not just of the Handmaids' assigned role but also of their cultural categorization. This visual marker reinforces the regime's narrative of the Handmaids as a distinct group, contributing to perpetuating stereotypes that shape societal perceptions. The attire becomes a cultural construct that visually enforces the societal divisions inherent in Gilead.

In conclusion, Saidian othering in *The Handmaid's Tale* is evident through deliberate linguistic constructs, cultural categorizations, and symbolic manipulations that define the narrative. The regime's linguistic strategies contribute to a discourse that perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces societal divisions. The cultural appropriation of religious symbols justifies the oppression of women and reinforces their marginalized status. The visual markers, such as the Handmaids' distinctive attire, become potent tools for enforcing the regime's narrative through cultural othering. In this dystopian world, Said's theories illuminate the mechanisms through which language and cultural constructs become instruments for shaping perceptions, perpetuating stereotypes, and sustaining the cycle of othering within Gilead's authoritarian regime.

### **Unraveling Threads of Otherness and Gender Performativity in *The Handmaid's Tale***

Butler's theory of gender performativity becomes a lens through which we understand how the Handmaids, in their assigned roles, engage in a complex dance of performing and subverting gender norms. "What senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a repeated performance. This repetition is at once reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming



stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is affected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject" (Butler 178-179). The Ceremony, with its ritualized form of sexual othering, becomes a poignant illustration of how gender identity is not innate but rather a performative act. "...But they need to be here, they all need to be here, the Ceremony demands it. We are all obliged to sit through this, one way or another" (Atwood 95). The Handmaids, in their reproductive roles, navigate the expectations of femininity imposed upon them, performing a script dictated by the regime. "Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (Butler 178). Within the confines of otherness, a potent undercurrent of resistance weaves its way through the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale*, challenging the imposed categorizations and subverting the oppressive norms of Gilead. Offred, the novel's protagonist becomes a focal point for exploring resistance within the confines of Gilead's rigid societal structure. Her internal monologue, a clandestine space for her thoughts and memories, becomes a refuge where she subtly challenges the imposed otherness." It was clear from internal evidence that she was among the first wave of women recruited for reproductive purposes and allotted to those who both required such services and could lay claim to them through their position in the elite" (Atwood 340). The act of remembering her past life and cherishing her individual experiences becomes an act of defiance against a regime that seeks to erase personal histories. "The surviving records of the time are spotty, as the Gileadean regime was in the habit of wiping its own computers and destroying printouts after various purges and internal upheavals, but some printouts remain. Some indeed were smuggled to England, for propaganda use by the various Save-the-Women societies, of which there were many in the British Isles at that time" (Atwood 340). Offred's ability to resist through mental subversion exemplifies how an agency can persist even in the face of relentless othering. The secret relationships formed among the Handmaids, especially Offred's connection with Ofglen, showcase the strength of solidarity in resisting otherness. "We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:" (Atwood 10). This collective agency allows

them to subvert the isolating effects of othering, finding strength in their shared experiences and challenges to the regime's narrative.

The underground network known as "Mayday" (Atwood 343) becomes a symbol of organized resistance, allowing individuals to challenge the societal categorizations imposed upon them actively. By participating in 'Mayday,' characters like Offred and Nick engage in acts of subversion that extend beyond individual resistance to collective defiance. Mayday becomes a manifestation of an agency against the othering mechanisms of the regime, offering a glimmer of hope for those seeking to reclaim their autonomy. The character of Moira emerges as a beacon of unyielding resistance, challenging the imposed otherness with a tenacity that refuses to extinguish. Moira's escape from the Red Center, her refusal to conform to societal expectations, and her determined quest for freedom demonstrate how agency can disrupt the narrative of othering. Moira's resilience becomes a source of inspiration for Offred and a testament to the potential for individual resistance in the face of oppressive societal norms. The novel portrays a spectrum of agency that challenges the dehumanizing effects of othering. In the dystopian landscape of Gilead, the thread of resistance becomes a powerful force, weaving through the fabric of otherness and offering a glimmer of hope for those seeking to reclaim their autonomy and individuality.

## Conclusion

This research paper has delved into the nuances of othering, drawing upon the theories of Michel Foucault, and Edward Said, while also exploring the agency of characters within the dystopian landscape. As we unravel the threads of otherness in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it becomes evident that the novel is not merely a depiction of a bleak and dehumanizing future but a poignant exploration of the enduring human spirit. The characters' resilience and resistance testify to the indomitable nature of agency, even in the face of oppressive societal norms. In conclusion, this exploration provides a nuanced understanding of how otherness both shapes and disrupts lives. It also highlights the persistent efforts of individuals to strive for autonomy and reclaim their identities in a society that seeks to erase them.

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