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**Transcultural Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences (TJHSS)** is a journal committed to disseminate a new range of interdisciplinary and transcultural topics in Humanities and social sciences. It is an open access, peer reviewed and refereed journal, published by Badr University in Cairo, BUC, to provide original and updated knowledge platform of international scholars interested in multi-inter disciplinary researches in all languages and from the widest range of world cultures. It's an online academic journal that offers print on demand services.

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To promote interdisciplinary studies in the fields of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences and provide a reliable academically trusted and approved venue of publishing Language and culture research.

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## A Foucauldian Reading of Utopias/Dystopias in Selected Novels by Margaret Atwood

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to examine the validity of utopian systems by investigating Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), *The Testaments* (2019) and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015). Set in different ages, the selected novels discuss the changes that happen in the lives of different characters who live in utopian societies that eventually turn into dystopias. The theoretical framework applied in this study is Michel Foucault's theory of power specifically the concepts of surveillance, discourse, and governmentality. 'Surveillance' is the continuous observation and assessment of citizens. 'Discourse' is the language that shapes a society's relationships and constitute knowledge and meaning. Lastly, 'governmentality' is implementing certain rules and regulations in order to manipulate the minds of the citizens. These three concepts allow the people in authority to control the lives of the citizens. The study proves the futility of applying utopian systems in the real world as they always fail and turn into dystopias instead.

**Keywords:** dystopia, discourse, surveillance and assessment, governmentality

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of a utopia has been a debatable issue ever since its emergence in Plato's *Republic*. The word utopia "stems from the two Greek words eutopos, meaning "the good place," and ou-topos, meaning "no place"" (Gulick 5). Hence, the ambiguity or the confusion of understanding of the word is raised. How can the "the good place" be a "no place" that does not exist at the same time? This suggests the duality of meaning of the word. "Does the choice of this particular term mean that any society that strives for perfection is doomed inevitably to fail, to cease to exist, and thus, ironically, to make More's term accurate after all?" (Gulick 5). Thus, a utopia is the perfect, ideal place which operates successfully and at the same time, does not exist. Moreover, a utopia is usually characterized by being remote and isolated from other countries of the real world. It is not a place that has a certain location or can be reached by any means of transportation.

Ever since Plato's introduction of the notion of a utopia, thinkers and writers have attempted to offer their different visions of utopias which aim at creating a better world. Nevertheless, history has shown that the different utopian visions have never proved to be a success. Contrary to expectations, the result has always been a dystopia. In general, citizens in a dystopian society suffer from the living conditions that are being imposed on them. Some dystopian novels focus on the oppression of a certain social class or gender whilst others portray the social conditions that all citizens suffer from. Whether the formation and implementation of a utopian society within the ruling system is beneficial or not is a controversial issue that needs investigation, yet writers are still trying to create utopias. "If utopia could be thought of as the dream of heaven realized on Earth- as originally set out in Thomas More 1516 work of that name- dystopia represented a version of hell as a projected societal future" (Domingo 725). This means that although creating a utopia is supposed to achieve the vision of the people in authority of heaven on

earth, a dystopia results in creating hell instead of the promising future they had in mind. As a result, a utopia and a dystopia may be considered as polar opposites such as Heaven and Hell. While a utopia is intended to become a Paradise-like society in which life is perfect, a dystopia is a miserable place in which life becomes unbearable (Pospíšil 14). In other words, a dystopia is not only the opposite of the utopia, but also a failed attempt of creating a utopian society

Since the paper discusses dystopian novels of the Canadian author Margaret Atwood, it is important to foreground Atwood's definition of the terms utopia and dystopia. Atwood believes that within each utopia, there is a hidden dystopia and within each dystopia, there is a concealed utopia. As a result, Atwood has coined a new word 'Ustopia' which combines both words utopia and dystopia. "Ustopia is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia- the imagined perfect society and its opposite- because, in my view, each contains a latent vision of the other" (Atwood, *Dire Cartographies* 8). Thus, according to Atwood, a utopia and a dystopia are interrelated in the sense that each one of them contains elements of the other.

Michel Foucault discussed the concept of power in many of his books such as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and *The History of Sexuality*. Nevertheless, he does not provide a straightforward answer to the question 'what is power?' Instead, he provides several definitions of the term. He believes that there is no one concrete definition of power as it operates on so many levels and is omnipresent in all kinds of relationships such as the relationship between an employee and his boss, a child and its mother, a husband and his wife. For the purpose of this research, Foucault's theory of power will be examined to prove that utopian systems eventually result in dystopias that cannot be implemented in real life. This will be achieved by specifically analysing Foucault's concepts of Discourse, Surveillance and Governmentality in the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), *The Testaments* (2019) and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) by Margaret Atwood.

## 2. FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE

The term discourse has a wide range of definitions. Discourse can mean verbal communication or conversation, a formal written text on a certain subject or a unit of text that linguists use to analyse written sentences or utterances (Mills, *Discourse* 2). Also, "discourse is a set of sanctioned statements... that have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think" (Mills, *Discourse* 62). This means that discourse has a direct effect on the actions and behaviours of people. Accordingly, the individuals can be controlled and manipulated through discourse. Throughout his works, Foucault does not provide only one solid meaning of discourse, but he rather defines it on different levels. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault mentions that he has added several meanings to the word discourse "treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements" (80). According to Foucault, this means that discourse refers to the statements which have meaning and effect. By "individualizable group of statements", he means a number of similar statements that can be grouped together to form a specific type of discourse such as feminine discourse or racist discourse. In his definition of discourse, Foucault sheds light on the relationship between discourse and power. In one of his works, he mentions that power produces a certain kind of discourse that is used as the one and only truth for the operation of a certain society. Furthermore, Foucault "thinks of discourse (or discourses) in terms of bodies of knowledge" (McHoul and Grace 26). This means that Foucault's definition of the term discourse is not only confined to the words that have meaning and effect. He

rather views the term in a wider sense that moves the concept away from just a group of words or utterances that are related to “language (in the sense of a linguistic system or grammar) and closer towards the concept of discipline” (McHoul and Grace 26). As the discourse is produced by the people in authority through legal entities such as schools, universities and laws, citizens who are less powerful than those in authority should use it as the sole truth (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 94). The following is a discussion of the concept of discourse in Atwood’s selected novels in light of Foucault’s theory of power. The three main points that will be focused on are propaganda, play on words by creating new words and eliminating old ones, and usage of specific terms instead of the literal meanings of the words.

### **Discourse in Atwood’s Dystopias**

The concept of discourse is an important element in the dystopian societies in Atwood’s selected novels. In order to manipulate the citizens’ minds, the people in authority produce certain discourse that serves the government’s purpose and motivations. “The effect of this discourse...is the development of a whole new realm of discourse attending to the definition of what is ‘normal’ and what is not, what is available for individuals to do, think, say and be and what is not” (Clegg 32). As such, discourse serves as a means for those in authority to control the citizens. Discourse always imposes on the citizens certain ideas as normal and others as incorrect or abnormal. Because some words in the discourse allowed by the government disappear and new ones emerge, the actions of the citizens start to differ from what they were usually used to before this change in discourse happens. Thus, the citizens start to use new words while old words disappear. It is also important to highlight that discourse maintains the power relations within a dystopian society. Specific discourse that is created by the authorities and used within a dystopia serves as a hindrance to the rise of an opposing strategy or stream of thought that may challenge the power of the people in authority.

### ***The Use of Propaganda to Manipulate Citizens***

Firstly, the term propaganda means communicating specific information that may not be necessarily true to make people believe and internalize certain ideas as true. Mostly, propaganda in dystopian societies is used to incorporate inaccurate and untrue concepts and ideas into the minds of the citizens in order to easily manipulate them. The use of propaganda to manipulate the people’s minds is an important characteristic of a dystopian society which is apparent in Atwood’s selected novels. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, propaganda is used to control the kind of information that citizens are exposed to. Offred narrates that on the day of the Ceremony, Serena Joy, the Commander’s Wife, allows her and the other servants to watch the news on television. However, “[t]he televised broadcasting she is allowed to watch is state-controlled and broadcasts only government-friendly content and at the same time it does not reveal any negative news of the wars the republic is involved in” (Pettersson 9). This shows that in order to manipulate the minds of the citizens, the government only provides the kind of news that they want the citizens to know or believe in. Thus, the news does not give any negative information about the war that Gilead is involved in as a means of keeping the citizens ignorant of what is really taking place in this war. Also, this news “does not show any news of an organized resistance” (Pettersson 9) against the government of Gilead. Consequently, the citizens believe that they live in peace and there are no opposing thought groups fighting for the destruction of Gilead. Offred narrates “who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale* 82). Because Serena Joy is

the one in charge in the house, she is allowed to choose the kind of shows and news that the members of her household can watch. As such, Serena Joy serves as the government's mouthpiece in the house of Commander Fred. She ensures that her household members watch the fake news which is being aired on the television. As Serena Joy believes the fake news herself, she expects Offred and the Marthas to believe that the news is true.

Similarly, in *The Testaments* there are important incidents that highlight the effect of propaganda on the citizens. For example, Agnes realizes that the story of the death of the first husband of Paula, her stepmother, is untrue. The well-known story that was known in Gilead is that the Handmaid in Paula's house was "dangerously unbalanced and had stolen a skewer from the kitchen and killed Commander Saunders in an unprovoked attack. The Handmaid has escaped, but had been caught and hanged, and her dead body had been displayed on the Wall" (Atwood, *Testaments* 305). Nevertheless, after joining Ardua Hall, Agnes finds a blue folder that contains crime records of some of the Wives. When she reads the folder, she realizes that the truth is totally different than the story that had been circulated among the citizens in Gilead. The truth about the death of Paula's first husband is that Paula and Commander Kyle, Agnes' father, "had been having an affair" (306) even before the death of Agnes' mother. The story recorded in the folder that Agnes has access to when she joins Ardua Hall was as follows:

Paula had befriended the Handmaid and offered to help her escape from Gilead since she knew how unhappy the girl was. She'd even provided her with a map and directions, and names of several Mayday contacts along the way. After The Handmaid had set out, Paula had skewered Commander Saunders herself. That was why she'd had so much blood on her, not from putting his trousers back on. In fact, he had never taken them off, or not on that night. She'd bribed the Martha to back up the murderous Handmaid story, combining the bribe with threats. Then she'd called the Angels and accused the Handmaid, and the rest had followed. The unfortunate girl was found wandering the streets in despair, since the map was inaccurate, and the Mayday contacts turned out not to exist. (Atwood, *Testaments* 306)

The fact that the truth about the story of the death of Paula's husband has been hidden proves that in the Gilead society, propaganda is used to manipulate the truths and convince the citizens of untrue stories as being true. Thus, this proves that the people in authority manipulate the truths to serve their own benefits. The people in authority do not want other Wives to be motivated to get rid of their husbands and have affairs with other men. The authorities in Gilead want all people to think that Gilead citizens are happy with their lives. As a result, they hid the truth about the death of Commander Saunders, Paula's first husband, and communicated a lie that they want all people to believe.

Likewise, propaganda is used in *The Heart Goes Last*. Charmaine and Stan's first encounter with the Consilience/Positron project is through an advertisement on TV. Everything they get to know about the project is through the media. For example, all the ads on TV always focus on how this project is beneficial to the society. "Help solve the nation's problems of joblessness and crime while solving your own! Accentuate the positive" (Atwood, *Heart Goes Last*, 35). This proves that through propaganda, the founders of the project will attempt to persuade the citizens with certain ideas. The above-mentioned quote asserts that the Consilience/Positron project will solve all the nation's problems along with the problems of the individuals. As such, it is only natural that helpless people like Charmaine and Stan will be convinced that this project is their safe haven.

### ***Play on Words as a Method of Control***

Secondly, another essential characteristic of dystopian societies is the play on words. In most dystopian societies, the people in authority control the discourse used in order to manipulate the minds of the citizens. This happens through eliminating old words and forbidding their usage and creating new words. Thus, the ideas and concepts in the minds of the citizens become twisted and deviate from their original meaning. In his concept of discourse, Foucault argues that the emergence of new words and the disappearance of others do not happen haphazardly. On the contrary, the people in authority produce their own system of discourse to be able to control the actions and behaviours of the citizens. The act of eliminating words and creating new ones can be referred to as “verbal hygiene” (Cavalcanti 154). This verbal hygiene is an act of filtering the existing language or discourse that is being used by the citizens. Its aim is to make the citizens use the appropriate kind of words instead of using inappropriate words that may oppose the motives and benefits of the people in authority. This verbal hygiene makes the citizens embrace the new discourse created by the people in authority. As the whole style of living is being altered, it is only natural to use a new set of discourse that is in line with the new living system.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, those in control restrict and prohibit the use of certain words according to their own benefits. The authorities in Gilead prevent the use of certain words to indoctrinate the people with certain ideologies. As Gilead is a patriarchal society, it always blames women for all the shortcomings of society. This is apparent in the fact that people should not call men who are unable to have children as “sterile”. It is a forbidden word. Offred narrates her experience as the doctor calls some men ‘sterile’. She says, “[o]r they’re sterile.” I almost gasp: he’s said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale* 61). Because Gilead is a patriarchal society, the government ensures that men are never responsible for anything that harms society. As such, if a Handmaid fails in providing the Commander with children, it is because this Handmaid is barren and not because the Commander is sterile.

Furthermore, the Gildean governing system creates new words to describe some professions. For example, in *The Testaments*, the group of girls whose job is to attract Canadians to join Gilead are named “Pearl Girls” (Atwood, *Testaments* 44). Daisy describes them as “the young women in long silvery dresses and white hats who called themselves Pearl Girls and said they were missionaries doing God’s work for Gilead” (44). The name given to these missionary girls along with their costumes evoke feelings of purity and innocence to those who deal with them. This makes it easier for these girls to manipulate the minds of the Canadians and convince them to join Gilead.

Another technique of the play on words in dystopian societies is focusing on and repeating certain words. This also happens to convince the citizens with certain concepts that the people in authority want to propagate. In *The Heart Goes Last*, the authorities describe the Consilience/Positron town as “[a]n ultra, ultra important experiment; the think-tankers use the word ultra at least ten times” (Atwood 49). The repetition of the word “ultra” in this quote is intended by the authorities to convince the citizens of the extreme importance of the project. Moreover, they say, “[i]f it succeeds – and it has to succeed, and it can succeed if they all work together – it could be the salvation, not only of the many regions that have been so hard-hit in recent times but eventually, if this model comes to be adopted at the highest levels, of the nation as a whole” (Atwood 49). This foregrounds that by using certain words, the authorities attempt to persuade the citizens that this project is the solution for all their problems. The repetition of the word “succeed” sheds light on the importance of this project. For Charmaine and Stan, this

project becomes the haven that will snatch them away from their insecurities and problems.

### *Usage of Specific Terms*

Thirdly, dystopian societies also tend to use specific terms to serve their own purposes. Instead of using the literal meanings of words, they use their metaphorical meanings to cover up for the real actions happening in these societies. The following quotation shows that the society of Gilead uses specific terms to describe people's professions:

The servants who are employed by the Wives are called the 'Marthas', the 'Aunts' are those women who educate and instruct the handmaids and the 'Jezebels' are the official prostitutes for men of higher classes. The 'Econowives' of the lower classes do not have servants and so they have to take up the role of both Wife and Martha. Lastly, there is a group of older and/or rebellious 'Unwomen', who are not fit to bear children and who are used as 'disposable workers' to clear the colonies of toxic waste. (Desmet 70)

This quote shows that specific terms such as 'Marthas', 'Aunts', 'Jezebels' and 'Econowives' are used to describe certain professions. These professions do not exist outside of the society of Gilead. As a result, those in authority use these specific terms to manipulate the citizens into believing that their jobs, despite existing only in these particular societies, are very important and beneficial to the welfare of the society.

Atwood also uses the same technique of labelling entities to serve the authorities' own purposes in *The Heart Goes Last*. This is obvious as the police in Consilience/Positron is called "Surveillance" (Atwood, *Heart Goes Last* 68). This implies that the job of the police is just to view or monitor the people's actions in order to prevent any crime from taking place. In other words, the police acts as the citizens' own safety guards. The two couples who live together in the same house are known as the "Alternates" (57). As the events of the novel unfold, the reader gets to know that Charmaine's "Special Procedure" (188) is a process of killing people. This shows that the authorities attempt to brainwash the people's minds by using words that are not harsh to cover up for their horrendous acts. Also, the creation of new words is important in dystopias. The government in dystopian societies start to form new terms that they use as labels for certain objects. For example, in Consilience/Positron they name the currency used "Posidollars" (57) which is a combination of both the words Positron and dollars.

These examples from Atwood's selected novels highlight Foucault's concept of discourse within power. "Foucault focuses on the range of professional discourses that increasingly limit, define and normalize the 'vocabularies of motive' (Mills 1940) ...for making sensible and accountable what it is that people should do, can do and thus do" (Clegg 32). The techniques of propaganda, play on words and the usage of specific terms form the new discourse that the government imposes on society to exploit the citizens and control what they should and should not do. Consequently, the new set of words which is introduced serves the government's real, hidden purposes and motivations, which the citizens are unaware of. As such, Atwood manages to portray that the manipulation of language by those in authority "is a vital prerequisite for the achievement of power" (Gulick 103).

### **3. FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF SURVEILLANCE**

In addition, Foucault argues that one way of exercising power over others is by constantly surveying their actions and monitoring them. "Foucault (1977) sees the methods of surveillance and assessment of individuals that were first developed in the state institutions such as prisons, as effective tools developed for the orderly regimentations of



others” (Clegg 30). Thus, Foucault regards the surveillance and assessment of individuals that were incorporated in prisons as effective tools or methods for incorporating order in a society. Similarly, Atwood’s novels show how the surveillance and assessment of citizens help in maintaining an organized and disciplined society. The three main points that will be examined in Atwood’s novels are: the Panopticon Procedure as a means of monitoring citizens, the physical and verbal barriers that citizens face and the citizens’ fear of punishment as a result of committing crimes or errors.

### **The Panopticon Procedure**

The concept of Panoptism was firstly used in schools and barracks to ensure the implementation of order then it became generalized later on (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 71). It is mainly based on the idea of isolation and enclosure of a certain group of people from their surroundings. As such, the Panopticon is:

an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200)

This means that the Panopticon serves as a means of surveying individuals whether a prisoner, a madman, a patient, a worker or even a pupil. Because of its architectural divisions, the Panopticon allows the authority in charge to control the activities and actions of the prisoners. Although most of the time the individuals may not be spied upon or monitored, their behavior is controlled as they believe that those in power are constantly monitoring their actions. Consequently, implementing the Panopticon procedure in any utopian society helps in controlling and manipulating the behaviours of the citizens and makes applying the system implemented by the government easier.

### ***The Panopticon Procedure in Atwood’s Dystopias***

In light of Foucault’s concept of surveillance and assessment, one of the features of a dystopian society is the implementation of the Panopticon procedure. Unfortunately, citizens who live in a dystopian community are always under constant surveillance. Everything they do is monitored. Their actions are recorded. It is as if each person is constantly imprisoned in a Panopticon-like milieu where all his/her actions are being monitored. For example, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred explains that the door of her room in the Commander’s house must not be totally shut. This is because she must not have any private life. Her everyday activities, if there are any, must be known to everybody in the house. Offred narrates that “Cora brings my supper, covered, on a tray. She knocks at the door before entering. I like her for that, it means she thinks I have some of what we used to call privacy left” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale* 65). This shows that although, privacy is now an unknown concept in Gilead, some of the Marthas still treat the Handmaids in a humane manner as if they still have privacy as they used to before living in Gilead.

Likewise, the confinement of citizens in a panopticon- like milieu is also portrayed in *The Heart Goes Last*. This is evident in the fact that Charmaine mentions that members of the police, named Surveillance, are always riding black cars in the streets of the town in order to constantly monitor and assess the actions of the citizens even in the streets. It is also

worth mentioning that when Stan casually sees a black Surveillance car in the street near his house, he feels tensed and does not know how to act. One morning, while he was raking some leaves in the lawn near his house, Stan sees “the odd black Surveillance car, gliding past silently as a shark. Is it protocol to give them a friendly wave?” (Atwood, *Heart Goes Last* 96). This shows that even a trivial act such as waving to the Surveillance cars is accurately calculated by Stan as he fears that this may be the wrong action. As a result, “Stan has decided against it: better to pretend they’re invisible. Anyway, who’s inside? Those cars may be remote-controlled, like drones” (Atwood 96). Thus, Stan pretends that these cars are invisible and goes on with raking the lawn.

In the same way, the technique of the Panopticon is shown in the very first chapter of *The Testaments*, when Aunt Lydia, one of the founders of Gilead, mentions that she has to avoid the surveillance cameras while writing her testaments. “That’s enough inscribing for today. My hand hurts, my back aches, and my nightly cup of hot milk awaits me. I’ll stash this screed in its hiding place, avoiding the surveillance cameras- I know where they are, having placed them myself” (Atwood, *Testaments* 5). This quote serves as a confession from the people in authority that all places, including where they live, are being continuously monitored.

### **Physical and Verbal Barriers in Atwood’s Dystopias**

Moreover, to limit the capabilities and creativity of the citizens, those in authority impose particular physical and verbal barriers on the citizens. The fact that citizens are being monitored all the time and the different barriers they face allow the government to oppress the citizens and ensure their obedience. This is similar to what Foucault believes which is that “[o]bedience’ is central to an analysis of the production of power in organizations” (Clegg 38). This means that exercising power over others helps in making the subjects or citizens obedient.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood manages to portray the different kinds of barriers that are being imposed on the citizens. The Handmaids are faced with different kinds of physical and verbal barriers:

Physical barriers such as soldiers and barricades prevent free movement from place to place. Linguistic barriers are also abundant because written words do not exist in this world, having been replaced by less “dangerous” images. Finally, Offred’s restrictive clothing, her “wings”, forms a barrier, limiting her vision and perception and thus controlling her behavior. (Gulick 25)

This proves that the physical and verbal barriers that are imposed on the Handmaids affect their behaviours. Because a Handmaid feels incarcerated, she will always seek help to attain her freedom and break-free from all these barriers and restrictions.

Atwood also successfully shows that characters in *The Heart Goes Last* are faced with different kinds of barriers. For instance, the first encounter of Charmaine and Stan with the Consilience/Positron project was through an advertisement on TV. They only got in real contact with the founders of the project during the introductory workshops prior to joining the project. Afterwards all the meetings that took place in Consilience/Positron were through TVs. The citizens never attended any meetings in reality. Also, all the news that the citizens get about the town are communicated to them through advertisements on TV. Televisions here serve as the barrier that detaches citizens like Charmaine and Stan from those in authority. “On the evening before the December 1 switchover day, there’s another Town Meeting. Not that anyone actually meets up: they watch on closed-circuit TV, whether they’re inside Positron Prison or out of it” (Atwood, *Heart Goes Last* 107).

This quotation proves that televisions served as barriers for the citizens. Through their advertisements and meetings on TVs, those in charge manage to control the minds of the citizens and convince them that this project is very beneficial.

### **The Citizens' Fear of Punishment**

As a result of the constant surveillance and assessment, the citizens start to internalize a feeling of fear of being punished by the government. Thus, the citizens start to undertake certain actions and abandon others in an attempt to spare themselves the harsh consequences that would follow their wrongdoings. This is in alignment with Foucault's concept that whether they are really being monitored or not, the citizens start to adopt a certain docile behavior which is exactly what the government seeks to achieve to keep its subjects obedient. This happens mainly because constant surveillance of the citizens creates a hierarchy of power in which citizens are the weakest and those in authority are the strongest entity (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 191).

In Gilead, the Handmaids are not supposed to ride trains or the subway. Offred narrates that they are "not allowed on, there are Guardians now, there's no official reason for us to go down those steps, ride on the trains under the river, into the main city. Why would we want to go from here to there? We would be up to no good and they would know it" (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale* 31). This shows that the Handmaids need official permits to pass through certain areas of Gilead. Also, the quote implies that they are always being monitored. This proves that even though they are not being currently under surveillance, those in authority would know that the Handmaids have broken the rules. As Offred and her twin Handmaid fear being punished for breaking rules, they opt for not passing through this restricted area of Gilead.

Hence, Foucault's concept of the surveillance and assessments of citizens is applied in the selected novels of Atwood. In both the dystopian societies of Gilead and Consilience/Positron, citizens are enclosed within the dystopian societies without having any contact with or knowledge of the outside world. They live in a Panopticon-like milieu in which they are always being monitored and assessed. Also, the citizens face physical and verbal barriers that limit their freedom and actions. As a result of their entrapment and constant surveillance, the citizens' actions are always controlled as they fear being punished for their wrongdoings. "Disciplinary power is itself invisible yet renders its subjects hyper-visible in order to tighten its grip" (Heyes 173). This means that even though surveillance may sometimes be invisible, the citizens feel that they are always being monitored. Thus, their actions are calculated.

#### **4. FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF GOVERNMENTALITY**

Additionally, it is customary for any society to operate according to certain rules and systems dictated by its government. These rules help in maintaining order and preventing chaos within a society. Similarly, in dystopian societies, the government controls the citizens by implementing a set of rules and laws that serves its own interests and benefits. These laws help the government control the actions of the citizens and manipulate their minds in order to make them compliant and obedient. In his article, "The Subject and Power", Foucault, explains "'Government'" did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick" (790). As explained in this quote, the word 'government' does not only refer to political issues, but it also refers to how the conduct and behavior of some individuals or groups can be controlled or managed. Also, the term governmentality means: "the means by which that shaping of someone else's activities is

achieved” (Mills, *Michel Foucault* 47). This means that governmentality means the way by which a person’s activity is shaped or constructed. Also, governmentality seems to make the laws enforced by the authorities as laws constructed for the public good of the people. Thus, in order to control the citizens and prevent anyone from deviating, the government imposes a set of laws that ensures the obedience and conformity of all people. The government will not succeed in totally controlling the citizens except by implementing certain techniques.

### **Governmentality in Atwood’s Dystopias**

Atwood manages successfully to adopt Foucault’s concept of Governmentality in her dystopian societies by shedding light on some techniques such as stratifying society into different social classes, withholding information from the citizens, disallowing the individuality of citizens and the citizens’ fear of the outside world.

#### ***Stratifying Society into Different Classes***

Firstly, stratifying the social classes into the all-knowing, powerful government and the amenable citizens is achieved in dystopian societies through labelling people according to their categorical classification. Consequently, some people are treated better than others according to the social class that they belong to. In order to ensure that order and discipline are maintained within the dystopian societies, Atwood divides citizens in each novel into several classes. For example, in Consilience town in *The Heart Goes Last*, citizens are either civilians for a month, prisoners for another month or people in authority such as the founders of the Consilience/Positron project. In addition, in both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*, Gilead operates by stratifying society into social classes with one specific class being dominant over the others. It is mainly governed by the Commanders who are being helped by the Aunts and the Wives. The Wives’ power lies only within the household by commanding the Marthas and Handmaids. The role of the Aunts may be considered more extensive as they are responsible for teaching the Handmaids and they also handle their issues after being assigned to the families of the Commanders.

#### ***Withholding Information from Citizens***

Secondly, power and knowledge co-exist together. There is no power without knowledge and no knowledge without power. Thus, in dystopias, the people in authority are always powerful as they have a huge amount of knowledge of what is happening in society as a whole. They always know the hidden motives and secrets of creating this dystopian society. As a result, those in authority tend to withhold certain information from the people in order to make them ignorant and eventually weak.

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 27)

This quote reflects Foucault’s belief that the relationship between knowledge and power is intertwined. Thus, people in authority are always knowledgeable and powerful as opposed to the citizens who are always unknowledgeable and eventually weak.

As a lot of information is withheld from the Handmaids, sometimes they do not even ask questions, because they know that they will not be provided with satisfying answers. For instance, Offred mentions that when she finds that her twin Handmaid who accompanies her to the shopping trips has been replaced, she does not ask where did the older one go.

This woman has been my partner for two weeks. I don't know what happened to the one before. On a certain day she simply wasn't there anymore, and this one was there in her place. It isn't the sort of thing you ask questions about, because the answers are not usually answers you want to know. Anyway there wouldn't be an answer. (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale* 19)

This shows that the authorities are in control of the kind and amount of information that is communicated to the people. As Offred knows that she will not be provided by a proper answer to this question, she chooses to remain silent and not ask about the other Handmaid.

Furthermore, Agnes narrates that even when she joined Ardua Hall, she could not have full access to all the information she wants. Only the Aunts had access to all bloodline information. Thus, only the Aunts knew the original families of the Handmaids. Thus, when Agnes finds her bloodline file on her desk, she still cannot know who her parents are:

The name underneath had been blanked out, using heavy blue ink. There was an updated notation, however: Mother of Agnes Jemima, now Aunt Victoria. Escaped to Canada. Currently working for Mayday terrorist intelligence. Two elimination attempts made (failed). Location currently unknown. Underneath that, it said Biological Father, but his name, too, had been redacted. There was no picture. The notation said: Currently in Canada. Said to be a Mayday operative. Location unknown. (Atwood, *Testaments* 330)

This quotation proves that only those in authority have full data of anything in Gilead including bloodlines. Even though Agnes is a Supplicant, she still cannot be provided with full information regarding her parentage. All the information she gets from this file is that both her biological mother and father are in Canada, working for the terrorist group Mayday, who attempts to overthrow the government of Gilead.

Similarly, in *The Heart Goes Last*, Charmaine does not know why she is doing the Special Procedure. She does not know what happens to the bodies after this procedure is undertaken. She just does what she is instructed to do. In fact, Charmaine is an embodiment of the obedient citizen who does not question the authorities. In addition, when Charmaine finds out that she will relocate her husband, Stan, she starts wondering what kind of crime did he commit. This shows that as a citizen, Charmaine is supposed to obey the orders of the authorities even if it was to kill her own husband. She thinks about not performing the Special Procedure on Stan; however, she fears the consequences of disobeying those in authority. Thus, she relocates him.

Thirdly, despite their attempts in seeking perfection, dystopian societies do not allow for individuality or dissent. All people are supposed to be similar in every aspect. Irving Howe writes that dystopian books "try to present a world in which individuality has become obsolete and personality a sign of subversion. The major figures of such books are necessarily Grotesques" (308). This shows that in dystopian societies, individuality is a sign of disobedience. Anyone who tries to be different or distinguish herself or himself from the rest of the society, will be breaking the rules. Thus, this person should be punished. For example, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, citizens are supposed to wear clothes of certain color according to the social class they belong to. As such, all Commanders, Wives and Handmaids wear similar clothes. "There are several umbrellas in it: black, for the Commander, blue, for the Commander's Wife, and the one assigned to me, which is red" (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale* 9). This shows that each category of citizens is identified by a certain color. The choice of the color is also controlled by the authorities. The

citizens do not choose the color they prefer, but rather they have to give in and accept whatever is being chosen for them.

Likewise, Charmaine and Stan in *The Heart Goes Last* are equally prevented from being distinguished like Offred. When they join the prison as prisoners, they are forced to wear the orange outfits just like everybody else. Moreover, the founders of the project encourage the citizens to “[w]ork with like-minded others” (Atwood, *Heart Goes Last* 35). Although working with like-minded people is used by the authorities as a motivator, it in fact prevents the citizens from standing out among the crowds. Instead of choosing the job they like, the citizens will be forced to work with people with similar abilities. Thus, the chance of becoming better than the others is very minimal.

### ***Prohibiting Individuality and Dissent of Citizens***

Fourthly, not only do dystopian societies prevent individuality and dissent, but also they instill fear of the outside world in the citizens. Anything that lies outside the borders of the towns becomes hideous and harmful. As a result, citizens are totally convinced that their state and place which they live in is the best for them. For example, in Gilead, women who are unable to conceive are transferred to the colonies. They become labelled as the ‘Unwomen’. Thus, the Handmaids are always threatened with being transferred to the colonies if they fail to have children. Offred narrates how afraid she is when the doctor tries to seduce her into having a physical affair with him. She says, “[h]e could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, have me shipped off to the Colonies, with the Unwomen” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale* 61). It is obvious that ‘the Unwomen’ are considered a taboo. They are something to be ashamed of. Consequently, the Handmaids are convinced that their condition is better than that of the Unwomen.

Moreover, the isolation of the citizens from their outer surroundings helps in instilling a feeling of fear in the citizens. This is in keeping with Foucault’s concept of enclosure which means the confinement of each city by a wall or barrack to isolate the citizens from the outside world. For instance, in *The Testaments*, Becka informs Agnes that at a certain point in time, they should leave Gilead in order to visit Canada with the “Pearl Girls” (291) to convince Canadians to join Gilead. Agnes replies “[w]e go outside Gilead? Isn’t it scary to be that far away? Isn’t Gilead really big?” It would be like falling out of the world, for surely Gilead had no edges” (291). Due to their lack of knowledge, citizens in Gilead not only fear the outside surroundings of Gilead, but they also believe that the world ends within the borders of the city. They believe that nothing exists outside of Gilead as this is the only world they know. However, as Becka has joined Ardua Hall much earlier than Agnes, she knows more information about the outer surroundings of Gilead. Becka even tells Agnes ““Gilead is smaller than you think”... “It has other countries around it” (Atwood, *The Testaments* 291). The idea that there are other countries outside and around Gilead is alien to Agnes. It is very difficult for her to believe that Gilead is not the whole world and that there are other countries in the world.

Similarly, Atwood manages to portray Charmaine and Stan’s fear of the outside world. The reason that makes Charmaine and Stan join the project is because they are seeking safety. Living in their car, they always feel unsafe and insecure. They always run away from thugs and thieves. “Their car is the only barrier between them and gang rape, and not just for her, she says, considering what’s out there roaming around in the night...” (Atwood, *Heart Goes Last* 12). This shows that having limited choices, Charmaine and Stan choose to sign up for the Consilience/Positron project as it will save them from the horrendous fate that awaits them while living in their car. In this town, they have a totally different life. Thus, they avoid going back to this insecure milieu. Finally, by following

these techniques, the government ensures that the citizens will never have the courage to rebel against or overthrow the ruling system as they do not have the power or information required for such an act.

## 5. CONCLUSION

After analysing Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* and *The Heart Goes Last* in light of Michel Foucault's theory of power, it is worth mentioning that the endings of the three novels prove that societies built on the utopian concept fail and turn into dystopias. It is important to note that *The Testaments* and *The Heart Goes Last* end by the disintegration of the dystopian societies. However, *The Handmaid's Tale* has an open ending that keeps the readers gripped until they find out about the disintegration of Gilead in *The Testaments*. Nevertheless, what happens to Offred, whether she lives or dies, remains a mystery.

As the main focus of this research is applying Michel Foucault's theory of power and examining its application in the dystopian societies created by Margaret Atwood in the selected novels, it is important to discuss Michel Foucault's view about the creation of utopias. In one of his lectures, he mentions that:

Power must [be] analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98)

This quotation explains Foucault's point of view that individuals are the vehicles of power in society or are the means through which power is being operated, exercised and practiced. They help both directly and indirectly in the application of power in a society. As power is inherent in all types of different relationships, the position of power always shifts within the relationship. Foucault believes that power is not stagnant. On the contrary, it transfers from one entity to the other. This means that in a dystopian society, power will sometimes be with the government and at other times, the citizens will be more powerful than the government. This happens according to the current situation within the society itself. For example, when a dystopian society is firstly created, the government is the most powerful entity. However, after the downfall of a certain system or government, the citizens become more powerful than the government which has been overthrown. This is similar to what happens exactly in the dystopian societies in Atwood's selected novels. Both Gilead and Consilience/Positron start off as very powerful societies that control and manipulate the citizens. Later on, these dystopian societies disintegrate, and the citizens become more powerful than the people in authority.

Furthermore, Foucault defines utopias as a "society perfected or the reverse of society, but in any case, these utopias are spaces that are fundamentally and essentially unreal" (Hurley 178). This quote shows that Foucault does not believe that utopias could be applied in real life. He believes that utopias are fictional places that are unreal and cannot be applied in real life. After reading many of Foucault's books, articles, lectures, and interviews, it is concluded that Foucault never called for the creation of a utopia. However, his writings and lectures propose that he was in favour of the systems or means of forming utopias in order to ensure discipline and order in a society. Thus, his theory of

power, which is used throughout this research, shows that Foucault believes that it is possible to apply order and discipline in a society in real life.



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