



How is the body used to characterise the dystopian female identity in the patriarchal societies of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*?

Daniel Barkass-Williamson

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Passion of New Eve*'s critiques of societal attitudes towards women and their bodies has enjoyed sustained relevance, continuing to resonate with contemporary concerns surrounding the rights and expectations of women in present-day society. The novels' focus on the female body as a symbol of dystopian social satire is used as a medium that 'warns against the repercussions of current social and political trends'¹ within their respective dystopian societies. These predominantly patriarchal societies demote the importance of women and their bodies, only recognising their economic or recreational worth. When not exploited for its sexual purposes, however, the body is separated into repressed and collective forms which constitute the identity of the dystopian woman. This subordination of the female identity as an object to be repressed and collectivised highlights that 'the problem of the body is central' to dystopian fiction as it 'attempts to reconcile the desires of individual bodies with the needs of the body politic'.² Due to this connection with the dystopian body, Rousseau's body politic itself will therefore be used to determine how the homogenisation of women 'to be a single body, with a single will'³ is used in an attempt to deprive them of individual identity and subdue them accordingly. The repressed/unseen body represents the duality that the female identity endures when transitioning between the public and private spheres because the 'body [is] capable of being affected and moved by its surroundings'.⁴ In the public sphere the body is contrived, repressed under layers of societal fabrics that hide the true essence of its identity. In the private sphere nudity reveals the otherwise unseen body. In some instances the unseen body becomes a reclamation of autonomy and grants women 'freedom from'⁵ the societal claim to their bodies that when naked and thus unseen, they are 'free to'⁶ expose. In other instances, however, it merely reinforces the extent to which the patriarchy's ideology has completely consumed them.

The female citizens in both novels encounter patriarchies that enforce upon them a body politic which expects them to satisfy certain requirements in order to fulfil their place in society. This results in women not being viewed as individuals. Instead, they are regarded as collective bodies – as groups – that occupy hierarchical stages below their male counterparts, forming a 'collective entity which [creates] meanings capable of providing a framework'⁷ that ensures women only see themselves as entities within this collective body which keeps them subdued.

Gilead's handmaids are deemed a 'collective entity' because, as a social subdivision, they contribute by 'providing a framework' to society via the reproductive ability of their bodies. This collectivisation prioritises and separates the procreative functionality of the body over that of the female identity, meaning that the 'Handmaids are therefore reduced to pure bodies or "vessels," and thus denied any kind of personal identity'.⁸ Offred is aware that her body is the medium through which Gilead manifests its social anxieties, stating that 'we are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important'.⁹ She has surrendered herself to the collective body, with her use of 'we' and 'our' demonstrating that the body politic has permeated its way into her private narrative which was her only form of individual expression. The patriarchy has substituted the handmaids' identity with their meaning, creating a plural of dormant 'containers' that are 'open, waiting to be filled with everything from semen

¹ Sharon Wilson, *Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p.3.

² Naomi Jacobs, 'Dissent, Assent, and the Body in Nineteen Eighty-Four', *Utopian Studies*, 18:1 (2007), 3-20 (pp.3).

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract: Political Writings*, trans. Donald Cress, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p.203.

⁴ Veronica Vasterling, 'Body and Language: Butler, Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard on the Speaking Embodied Subject', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 11:2 (2003), 205-223 (pp.213-214).

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage Publishing, 1996), p.34.

⁶ Atwood, p.34.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), p.146.

⁸ Adelina Cataldo, 'Breaking the Circle of Dystopia: Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*', in *Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, ed. by Sharon Wilson (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp.161.

⁹ Atwood, p.107.

to language¹⁰ which they, the patriarchy, has provided by way of sexual intercourse or rhetoric of sexual servitude to them. It is evident during Offred's labour that, despite being surrounded by the red of handmaids, she is only noticed individually when her 'container'-like body is pregnant. To the patriarchy the handmaid's body gives them meaning, but to carry a body – a child – gives them identity for in that moment they are not a handmaid: they are a mother.

Another device used to ethically justify the patriarchy's interpretation of women as collective entities, who are purpose built for their socially prescribed function, is their 'dehumanisation'¹¹ of the women. This distances the body from the human identity, making it sound like an economically functioning machine that reflects their patriarchal 'view [of] the world in terms of reproductive functions'.¹² This functionality derives from the female body and becomes an identity, but that which is separate from their own. This separation between the two has led some to argue that it causes the body to become 'an ambivalent source of identification for women',¹³ whose aesthetic provides their identity. Whilst this statement is true that the body is ambivalent, it is so to the men who desire it, rather than the women who inhabit it. Offred subsequently concludes that, as a handmaid, what she must present 'is a made thing, not something born'¹⁴ because she knows what her identity is expected to be. As a member of this collective body, she has become a 'made thing' – manmade by the patriarchy whose agenda she serves without birth name or visible face, noticed only by her fertility of her own anonymised 'chalice'.¹⁵ By stating that she must not present herself as something 'born', Offred is appealing to the patriarchy's collective body that severs the human ties of birth from her own body which otherwise grants her a human identity. Offred again recognises the complementary relationship between dehumanisation and the destruction of identity, stating that 'before you kill [...] You have to create an it'.¹⁶ It is this 'it', this 'made thing', which the handmaid becomes once they are homogenised and characterised not by the people that they are, but by the body that their patriarchy sees.

In *The Passion of New Eve* it should be noted that although Beulah's society is based on a 'matriarchal religion [...] its usurpation and reappropriation of phallic power makes it merely patriarchy's inverse'¹⁷ and will therefore be analysed to assess how the collective body formed here is a response to such patriarchy. Carter's Beulah is a 'place where contrarities exist together'¹⁸ and it is here that Mother produces 'collective entities' by amalgamating the mind and body of both genders in her own image. The 'daughters'¹⁹ of Mother are the 'contrarities' that inhabit Beulah and their innate sense of gratitude towards their creator, Mother, reinforces their subdued 'one will' to serve her. Eve's conception is therefore her membership to this collective body of offspring, which she is expected to sacrifice her body to, and by extension – Mother.

Conceived underground as a prototype of Mother's idealised matriarchy, Eve validates Beulah's reading as an 'analogy to a womb [of] Mother's body'²⁰ which, as a location, she calls 'the place where I was born'.²¹ Eve considers herself born despite being surgically constructed in this analogical womb, which is reminiscent of Offred's previous 'made thing' assertion. Evelyn is stripped of human/male qualities and, as Eve, initially occupies a genderless purgatory until Mother's torturous indoctrination forces her adaption and acceptance of her new identity. Evelyn's return to this analogical womb, Beulah, becomes a 'journey backwards to the source'²² which is, according to Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*, a reflection of the male preoccupation concerning their returning back to the womb as an unfortunate fantasy.²³ Indeed, the physical proxemics of his entrance into the womb of Beulah is parodied during his rape by Mother – itself representing the collective body they form during intercourse.

¹⁰ Molly Hite, 'Writing-and Reading-the Body', *Feminist Studies*, 14:1 (1988), 120-142 (pp.133).

¹¹ Ronald Beiner, 'The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche Bernard', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 20:3 (1987), 665-666 (pp.666).

¹² Karen Stein, 'Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: The Handmaid's Tale', *The University of Rhode Island*, 148:1 (1996), 57-72 (pp.64).

¹³ Sheila Conboy, 'Scripted, Conscripted, and Circumscribed: Body Language in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale', in *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, ed. by Carol Singley and Susan Sweeney (State University of New York, 1993), pp.6.

¹⁴ Atwood, p.76.

¹⁵ Atwood, p.176.

¹⁶ Atwood, p.202.

¹⁷ Tessa Kelly, *Angela Carter's Scarred Texts* (University of Bangor Press, 1999), p.96.

¹⁸ Carter, p.48.

¹⁹ Carter, p.49.

²⁰ Nicoletta Vallorani, 'The Body of the City: Angela Carter's "The Passion of the New Eve"', *Science Fiction Studies*, 21:3 (1994), 365-379 (pp.375).

²¹ Carter, p.48.

²² Carter, p.67.

²³ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (Penguin Books, 2001), p.45.

After this, Evelyn's sex-change admits Eve into the collective body of the daughters and therefore becomes a 'born' entity. Without the male body that Evelyn's hedonistic identity is so ingrained in, the removal of this host cell consequently leaves her old identity to die with it. It is this removal of Eve's original identity which makes it easier for her to be continually collectivised within groups of women (daughters/harem) because, unlike other women discussed later in the essay, she has yet to learn how to negotiate the world as a female.

Sometimes, however, there is resistance from groups of women. These groups subvert the homogenisation of the patriarchal body politic by placing their 'body in dialectical opposition with the dominant ideology'²⁴ and instead channel the 'single will'²⁵ of their marginalised peoples to form guerrilla factions. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the Women are a unit rebelling against their oppressive government and are depicted by a 'female circle—thus ♀ with, inside it, a set of bared teeth'.²⁶ The symbol '♀' encompasses the female identity, but its circular shape and inclusion of teeth creates a vagina dentata²⁷ which shows that 'the body is appropriated by the object'²⁸ to intrinsically link the female identity with the female body as an emblem of their bodily reclamation. The vagina in its appropriated form characterises the body as an impenetrable force which (through its teeth) aims to subdue anyone who may try to alter it for their own means, be it body political or sexual. As an icon that embodies femaleness, the entire subversion of this gender symbol is therefore a feminist renovation of the collective body. The Women have birthed teeth – a new radical identity – from within the collectivised body which was otherwise used by the patriarchal body politic in an attempt to subdue them.

In both novels the body is also viewed as a repressed and unseen object that is transformed when transitioning between the private and public spheres in order to accommodate for the change in view to which it is subjected. Although the body adopts a collectivised form when in a public sphere which adheres to the socially prescribed notions outlined by Rousseau's aforementioned body politic, its private sphere presentation highlights how the body immobilises itself to negotiate the outside world.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Leilah's private and public body presents two different identities. In the public sphere she dances for men, objectifying her body and using its ambivalent eroticism to exploit their arousal and successfully support a lifestyle where she 'never lacked for money'.²⁹ Meanwhile, in her private sphere – stripped of the furs and makeup that cultivate her public image – she instead submits herself to Evelyn's sexual sadism with disastrous consequences. He narrates Leilah's transition between these spheres when she gets ready for work, stating that 'to watch her dressing herself, putting on her public face, was to witness an inversion of the ritual disrobing to which she would later submit her body for'.³⁰ Leilah is noted for applying a 'public face' when leaving the apartment, concealing her youth and innocence which Evelyn only notices after seeing her in daylight without it. By 'putting on' this face, however, Leilah is subverting the view of her body so that she may now use it to negotiate her own place in society by fulfilling the expectations of her clientele. This act is, though, a process of continual 'inversion'. Upon re-entering the private sphere, Leilah – after carefully contriving her body to negotiate its change in surroundings – renounces such clothing and Evelyn foregrounds that she will undergo a 'disrobing' that will see her 'submit her body' to him.

Leilah is successful at work because her furs and makeup distance her body – heightening it, sexually – from an otherwise ordinary female identity and presenting it as 'another unknown space to be mastered'.³¹ The ambivalence of her unseen body, repressed beneath layers of fur, creates mystery; presenting a public 'body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities'³² which makes men lust for her. However, once Evelyn has enacted upon and mastered the unknown possibilities of Leilah's body within her private sphere, her body and thus identity, shatters. The removal of such sexual ambivalence contained behind the furs and makeup that accompany her unseen body results in Evelyn's disinterest with Leilah's natural female image because it no longer has the unseen mystery

²⁴ Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.49.

²⁵ Rousseau, p.203.

²⁶ Carter, p.10.

²⁷ Jill Raitt, 'The "Vagina Dentata" and the "Immaculatus Uterus Divini Fontis"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 48:3 (1980), 415- 431 (pp.415).

²⁸ Vallorani, p.367.

²⁹ Carter, p.30.

³⁰ Carter, p.30.

³¹ Dunja Mohr, *Worlds Apart?: Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (McFarland & Company, 2005), p.95.

³² Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', *Theatre Journal*, 40:4 (1988), 519-531 (pp.525).

which had the 'power of giving significance'³³ to her identity. Ultimately it is Leilah's decision to allow Evelyn (a symbol of the hedonistic values maintained by the public sphere's patriarchy) into the private sphere of her apartment and see her otherwise unseen body that results in her becoming a 'broken thing'³⁴ after her abortion. It is ironic, then, that Leilah's survival comes at 'the cost of all the rest of her furs [and] at the price of her womb'.³⁵ The loss of her womb, as a symbol and integral anatomical feature of her womanhood, shows the lasting effects she has sustained after the collision of such spheres, which – when kept separate – had protected her body. Meanwhile, the loss of her furs that have assisted in her negotiation of the public sphere can be read as her opportunity to expose her true identity because with no way of repressing her body, she is no longer unseen and consequently rebirthed at the novel's ending as Lilith.

Another woman who has repressed her body to negotiate the public sphere is Tristessa. She represses her male genitalia 'with scotch tape'³⁶ and clothes to construct an idealised female physique that reflects (in accordance to a heteronormative patriarchal view) the identity she desires. This has resulted in her body becoming her identity. It is 'inviolable'³⁷ to speculation because Tristessa's unknown body – her true identity – is instead completely concealed so that she may embody the identity she has produced through the feminine acts of her repressed body. Unlike Leilah who teases elements of ambiguity to equally promote and protect her unknown body, Tristessa represses any idea of the unknown body so that the public sphere will be content with immediately assuming her identity. Just as Tristessa hopes, Evelyn consumes this and sees her in terms of 'body, all body, to hell with the soul'³⁸ and ignores the 'soul' which, as an integral part of the unseen body, is akin to the identity of the body that hosts it. As a prior member of the patriarchy, Tristessa's success in achieving this illusion stems from her knowledge of their views regarding the female body as a sexual object and she creates accordingly a womanly physique so perfect in its performance that it blurs any 'distinction between the [unknown] anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed'.³⁹ The repression of the body, as stated, removes any 'distinction' between the identity performed through the body and the otherwise unseen male identity is, for the purposes of the shallow patriarchy, non-existent. Her masking of the unseen body becomes an entity that she has 'separated from the consciousness that inhabits it'⁴⁰ in order to enhance and live as her female form. The separation allows for her performance to be convincing, but is it her consciousness – her innate sense of identity – which is repressed and suffers as a result. Her continual performance is another critique of the patriarchy's intrinsic connection between both body and identity that has forced 'women to think with their bodies'⁴¹ because it is, regardless of identity, their most noticed mode of expression. The presentation of the body is therefore a conscious response to the particular identity that Tristessa wants to convey, articulating an image that is in accordance to the public's expectation as to what a woman should be seen to represent.

When entering the public sphere in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is forced to wear clothing which obscures her face and body, repressing any presentation of identity or sexuality to Gilead's male population. Her clothes become a uniform that characterise her societal role whilst also limiting any chance of Offred using her body to express herself within a public sphere in which she cannot openly talk. Gilead's patriarchy use this one uniform to repress the body's feminine expression as they consider multiple garments to be tools used by women 'to trick the men into thinking they were several different women'.⁴² The patriarchy fears these different identities and considers them a threat because they 'trick' the previously mentioned body politic by creating distinguishable identities which are consequently harder to control.

Offred's occasional nudity in her private sphere, however, is used to expose the lack of individual identity one may expect her unseen body to maintain when out of the public eye. Like Tristessa, Offred therefore avoids acknowledging or looking at her unseen body when in private because of the unwanted identity attached to it. This associated identity is created through Gilead's patriarchal reproductive ideology which has manifested itself through the female body so successfully

³³ Vasterling, p.212.

³⁴ Carter, p.35.

³⁵ Carter, p.34.

³⁶ Carter, p.141.

³⁷ Carter, p.137.

³⁸ Carter, p.7.

³⁹ Butler, p.175

⁴⁰ Theo Finigan. "Into the Memory Hole' Totalitarianism and Mal d'Archive in Nineteen Eighty-Four and The Handmaid's Tale', *Fiction Studies*, 38:3, (2011), 435-459 (pp.440).

⁴¹ Vallorani, p.366.

⁴² Atwood, p.249.

that even in her private sphere, she considers it to 'determine [her] so completely'.⁴³ Even the privacy of a bathroom, Offred shuns her nude body because she 'finds her nakedness strange, so distant from her own body have the practices of this regime made her'.⁴⁴ Rather than representing an entity over which she has autonomy, the body's communal meaning makes it the extended property of Gilead – an inescapable shackle reminding her of her servitude to an omniscient regime she is a part of. This removal of autonomy over the unseen body, as a result, disconnects the handmaid from any of her remaining identity.

The female identity in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Passion of New Eve* derives entirely from the form in which the patriarchy chooses to characterise their body. Women's bodies are reduced to malleable objects which, depending on the situation, are moulded through its clothing or atmosphere to reflect the identity that the patriarchy deems appropriate. The patriarchies of both novels have used the body politic to create a collective body which homogenises women to ensure they serve a purpose in society that is in accordance to any ideological framework put forward by themselves. It is, however, a view of the body which can be subverted. Some instead use it to undermine these ideals in order to create a unified resistance for regime change which, when separated and repressed, is an otherwise impossible task to achieve. Although the source of all characterisations of women in these novels unquestionably revolves in some way around their sexual allure or functionality which is attached to their bodies, there are moments when references to the unseen body displays identities they wish to retain. The body is repressed upon entering the public sphere in an attempt to hide its true identity so that it may not be taken away and when repression is not necessarily done by the patriarchy, it is in direct response to it. The unseen body can therefore be considered the only conceivable aspect of the body which retains some identity because it cannot be seen or accessed, one would think, by the patriarchy. However, these notions of faint optimism are ultimately proved wrong. The patriarchy eventually characterises the unseen body, actively in the public sphere or by having their ideologies penetrate the private sphere: Leilah's body is broken, Eve's raped, Tristessa's extinguished and Offred's a symbol of her perpetual servitude.

Bibliography

- Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage Publishing, 1996).
- Bartkowski, Frances, *Feminist Utopias* (University of Nebraska Press, 1991).
- Beiner, Ronald, 'The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche Bernard', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 20:3 (1987), 665-666.
- Butler, Judith, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', *Theatre Journal*, 40:4 (1988), 519-531.
- Carter, Angela, *The Sadeian Woman* (Penguin Books, 2001).
- Cataldo, Adelina, 'Breaking the Circle of Dystopia: Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*', in *Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, ed. by Sharon Wilson (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp.156-208.
- Conboy, Sheila, 'Scripted, Conscripted, and Circumscribed: Body Language in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*', in *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, ed. by Carol Singley and Susan Sweeney (State University of New York, 1993), pp.349-363.
- Finigan, Theo, "'Into the Memory Hole": Totalitarianism and *Mal d'Archive* in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Science Fiction Studies*, 38:3 (2011), 435-459.
- Hammer, Stephanie Barbé, 'The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in "The Handmaid's Tale"', *Modern Language Studies*, 20:2 (1990), 39-49.
- Hite, Molly, 'Writing-and Reading-the Body', *Feminist Studies*, 14:1 (1988), 120-142.
- Hooker, Deborah, '(F)Orality, Gender, and the Environmental Ethos of Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 52:3 (2006), 275-305.
- Jacobs, Naomi, 'Dissent, Assent, and the Body in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*', *Utopian Studies*, 18:1 (2007), 3-20.
- Kelly, Tessa, *Angela Carter's Scarred Texts* (University of Bangor Press, 1999).
- Kouhestani, Maryam, 'Disciplining the Body: Power and Language in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Novel *The Handmaid's Tale*', *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 3:7, (2013), 610-613.

⁴³ Atwood, p.73.

⁴⁴ Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias* (University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p.148.

- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (London: Routledge, 2002). [trans. Colin Smith].
- Mohr, Dunja, *Worlds Apart?: Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (McFarland & Company, 2005).
- Morrison, Sarah R, 'Mothering Desire: The Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *The Madness of a Seduced Woman*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 19:1 (2000), 315–336.
- Raitt, Jill, 'The "Vagina Dentata" and the "Immaculatus Uterus Divini Fontis"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 48:3 (1980), 415- 431.
- Rogan, Alcena Madeline Davis, "Alien Sex Acts in Feminist Science Fiction: Heuristic Models for Thinking a Feminist Future of Desire." *PMLA*, 119:3 (2004), 442–456.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *On the Social Contract: Political Writings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987). [trans. Donald Cress].
- Rubenstein, Roberta, 'Intersexions: Gender Metamorphosis in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Lois Gould's *A Sea-Change*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 12:1 (1993), 103-118.
- Sargisson, Lucy, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- Sceats, Sarah, 'Oral Sex: Vampiric Transgression and the Writing of Angela Carter', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 20:1 (2001), 107–121.
- Stein, Karen, 'Margaret Atwood's *Modest Proposal: The Handmaid's Tale*', *The University of Rhode Island*, 148:1 (1996), 57-72.
- Vallorani, Nicoletta, 'The Body of the City: Angela Carter's "The Passion of the New Eve"', *Science Fiction Studies*, 21:3 (1994), 365-379.
- Vasterling, Veronica, 'Body and Language: Butler, Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard on the Speaking Embodied Subject', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 11:2 (2003), 205-223.
- Wilson, Sharon, *Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).