

Bodies in Control: Gender, Power, and Social Exclusion in the Handmaid's Tale and "Khol Do"

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Abstract

Politics of the Female Bodies: Discipline, Silence, and Violence Across Contexts

Set against the dystopian theocracy of Gilead and the socio-political upheaval of the partition era in South Asia, the texts *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Khol Do* by Saadat Hasan Manto respectively focus on how women's bodies are reduced to functional objects within systems structured by gendered, classed, and socio-political hierarchies. This paper takes a comparative analysis approach towards the representation of women's bodies as sites of control, violence, and ideological inscription in both texts.

By drawing on Michael Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, the paper explores how institutional hierarchy and power, and social forces control, regulate, and produce "docile bodies" through constant surveillance, ritual, and violence. In contrast to *The Handmaid's Tale*, where a female's body is codified under a strict theocratic structure that governs reproduction and identity through religious dogma and ideological discourse, Saadat Hasan Manto's *Khol Do* reveals a more chaotic yet equally systemic form of bodily control (that of females), where caste, class vulnerability, and the breakdown of social order during partition render Sakin's body susceptible to repeated violation.

Through Judith Butler's theory of performativity, this paper further examines the system through which women are compelled to enact according to the state-imposed identities through continuous bodily practices - whether that is through state-sanctioned rape of the handmaid's of the conditioned response of Sakina to the command "khol do." Additionally, this paper also includes Barbara Creed's notion of the "monstrous feminine" that enables an understanding of how the female body is construed as a site of control, fear, and moral regulation within patriarchal discourse. The comparative reading of the texts highlights how literature across different contexts reveals the consistent intersections of gendered oppression with class and social hierarchy, while also emphasising the need to re-examine the conditions under which women's bodies are held hostage for hierarchies and systems to persist.

Keywords: Religious dogma, ideology discourse, gender, class, social hierarchy

Introduction

Across cultural history, the female body has been used as a site where power is exercised, violently carved, and constantly negotiated upon. Rather than being merely a biological body, it has been relentlessly treated as a political text, constantly regulated, disciplined, and made to signify within dominant ideological frameworks. This is clearly visible in literary representations that expose how systems of power operate through the process of normalization, ritual, and repetition, as much as through

overt coercion. This paper presents a comparative reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and "Khol Do" by Saadat Hasan Manto, which explores how extremely different socio-political contexts - where one presents a dystopian world and the other the violence that occurred during the Partition era in South Asia - both texts foreground the female body as a site that can be exploited, controlled, and ideologically inscribed. By engaging with questions of caste, class, and social mobility along with broader concerns of gender and social inclusion, this paper argues that both texts expose how patriarchal power operates across systems, structured or chaotic, to produce docile female bodies that are expendable and compliant.

Institutional Control and Constructed Femininity

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is important to understand how bodies are regulated through surveillance, normalization of patriarchal norms, and institutional practices. According to him, modern power functions not only through repression but also through the production of "docile bodies" – bodies that internalise control and conform to norms prescribed by the patriarchal society. As Maryam Kouhestani says in her paper, "Disciplining the Body," "In Gilead society, femininity is constructed only through the female's self-restraint and purification of the body, wherefore, discipline and punishment are useful for female bodies to make them respectable in a male-dominated society," exemplifying a "carceral society" where female bodies are constantly observed and rendered obedient. This form of power is visible in the strict surveillance mechanism of Gilead, where the handmaid's movements, language, and even thoughts are subject to control. Under the regime of Gilead, women's, especially the handmaids', choices have been taken away from them, choices they could make in their lives before Gilead, as Aunt Lydia says, "We were a society dying...of too much choice" (31).

However, power does not merely discipline the body; it also produces identity, which is what happens with women under the regime of Gilead. The initialization towards the creation of a new identity for women in *The Handmaid's Tale* starts with the freezing of their bank accounts. "They have frozen them...(a)ny bank account with an F on it instead of an M" (183), says Moira in one of Offred's memory flashes, marking the beginning of institutionalized erasure of women. They are solely to be identified through their relation to the man in their lives, which, for the handmaids keep changing as they are passed on from one Commander's house to another, considered to be the "holy vessels" for human reproduction that will help in keeping the lineage of Commanders alive. They are stripped of their autonomy and reduced to their biological function, as Offred describes, "We are for breeding purposes...We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (142). They are forced to submit and follow the norms laid down by a theocratic regime. Femininity is something that is constructed in Gilead, and not produced from within. Judith Butler, in her theory of performativity, argues the same, stating that gender is not an innate quality but rather something that is a repeated performance enforced through social norms. In Gilead, femininity is constructed through ritualised acts, like the state-sanctioned rape ceremony or the regulated speech, all of which force women to adapt and enact submissive identities.

While *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a highly structured system of control, *Khol Do* by Manto presents a different, yet equally disturbing portrayal of the female body being forced to and extremely used to obedience and compliance in the moments of socio-political upheaval, where their bodies become sites of violence. Set during the partition of India, the short story portrays a world where social order has collapsed, yet patriarchal structure and power persist in even more brutal and unregulated ways. Sakina,

the central female character, represents the vulnerability of women in a state where gender intersects with class and displacement to intensify the marginalisation of already marginalised groups.

As Amara Khan et al. argue in their paper, “Subjectification of Women through Patriarchal Ideology,” women in Manto’s works are subjectified through patriarchal ideology, where their bodies are not only controlled but also commodified by decentralised forms of “micro-physical power.” They also, like Kouhestani, state Foucault’s idea about how “modern power is fragmented, and it operates through discipline and regulation of people’s actions” (517). However, unlike the centralised authority of Gilead, power in Manto’s short story operates more broadly, enacted by multiple individuals rather than a single institution of power. The repeated violence that Sakina faces highlights how power does not disappear in the absence of formal structure or institution, but rather can operate through an individual or a group of individuals, becoming even more pervasive. Her body becomes what, as Khan et al. mention in the paper, Foucault describes as an “inscribed surface,” enduring the violent marks of historical events and ideological conflicts (519).

Furthermore, even if one manages to escape or is freed from a hostile and repressive environment, the internalised performativity continues to act because of the ingrained pattern system. The traumatising moment in the short story, when the doctor instructs “khol do” for the window, but instead, Sakina’s dead body mechanically loosens her salwar, perfectly captures the extent to which trauma and violence can and have been internalised by her body. This can be analysed through Butler’s framework as a form of involuntary performativity, where the body continues to enact imposed commands and meanings beyond the individual’s control because of the absence of one’s conscious agency. Sakina’s response is not an obedient response but rather a conditioned reflex, caused by the haunting and violent events she has been subjected to, demonstrating the complete erasure of subjectivity. Her body no longer belongs to her, but rather has been transformed into an object that responds to external commands that may or may not be directed towards her.

Trauma, Violence, and Social Exclusion

The comparative analysis between these two texts highlights that even though the modalities of power are different - structured control in Gilead and tumultuous violence during Partition - the outcome remains similar, that is, the reduction of female bodies to a functional and expendable entity. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood presents a world where women are valued solely for their reproductive purposes – which if they fail to fulfil, they are labelled as “unwomen” – while in “Khol Do,” Sakina’s body is reduced to an object of repeated sexual violence. In both cases, the female body becomes the primary source to endure pain, trauma, and subordination where power is exercised and meaning is imposed.

This comparative analysis becomes even more important when we see it through the lens of caste, class, and social exclusion. Under the Republic of Gilead, women are divided into hierarchical categories: Wives, Marthas, and then Handmaids, each with different degrees of power and autonomy. Handmaids hold the lowest position; their existence is entirely controlled by the regime. This hierarchy reflects a broader institutional hierarchy of discrimination, in which an individual’s access to power is determined by their social position. Offred describes power as “who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it” (Atwood, 141), stating that power gives an individual (specifically a man here) or an institution the privilege of taking an action that affects another individual or a people without having to face any repercussions for the same. Similarly, in “Khol Do,” Sakina’s vulnerability is worsened because of her

condition as a displaced individual during Partition. Her marginalisation results as much from her gender as from her class and socio-political instability, highlighting how oppressive systems intersect to produce varying stages of vulnerability.

The violence inflicted on Sakina's body not only represents gendered oppression but also the larger collapse of the moral and social order of the society during Partition, as Raza Rumi in his paper, "Reclaiming Humanity: Women in Manto's Short Stories," highlights that women in Manto's stories often function more than merely as humans; they function as "ambiguous metaphors for humanity" (75), using his characters to expose the extreme exploitation of humanity under the pretense of protecting and upholding social institutions. Her body becomes a site that perpetuates historical trauma, representing the dehumanization that constantly shadows the communal violence she experienced. This idea aligns with Barbara Creed's notion of the "monstrous feminine," which focuses on how the female body is taken as a tool to practice fear and control in a patriarchal society. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this notion manifests itself through the regulation of women's reproductive capacities under the totalitarian regime, while in "Khol Do," it culminates in the absolute dehumanisation of the female body.

In both texts, the role of language, or lack thereof, further reinforces the mechanism of control. In the novel, the state of Gilead builds a strictly regulated linguistic institution for the society, based on biblical discourse that is used to justify oppression, take away women's agency, and limit their ability to express themselves. Offred's narration of her story, hence, becomes an act of resistance, preserving memory and identity in a system that aims to erase both, which becomes a way to hold onto the world that existed before Gilead, that is, the old "ordinary," not the new one that Aunt Lydia assured "will become ordinary" (39). In contrast, Sakina's silence in "Khol Do" is not imposed but rather emerges from her traumatic death. She is unable to express herself and the violent experiences she had faced through words, but her body, through that involuntary action, expressed the violence she was subjected to without having to utter a single word, and becomes the only medium through which her experience is communicated.

Moreover, this analysis foregrounds the persistence of patriarchal institutions across different cultural contexts and their ability to adapt to varying socio-political conditions. Whether through institutional discipline or tumultuous violence, the female body remains a reflection of the broader structure of inequality, violence, exclusion, and control across different cultural texts. These representations are not limited to the past or to fictional worlds; they represent the present-day realities of not only India but also the world beyond, where individuals and marginalised groups both continue to resist against social issues like caste, class, gender, and social inclusion that still shape the social experiences of various marginalised communities. In contemporary India, discourse around gender-based violence, caste and class discrimination, and social mobility highlights that these texts are still as relevant in the society we live in as they were when they were written, if not more. The control of women's bodies - whether through societal norms, cultural and institutional practices, or coercion - remains a critical issue, focusing on the need for continued discussions and engagements with topics of power, representation, and resistance. By analysing the dystopian world of Gilead and the historical cultural trauma caused by violence during Partition, this paper aims to highlight how literary texts can bring forth the obstinate nature of gendered oppression with class and social hierarchy.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Handmaid's Tale* and "Khol Do" both offer a powerful critique of the systems that

function to exploit women's bodies, revealing the pervasive nature of patriarchal institutions. Through the theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Butler, and Creed, this paper demonstrated how both texts expose the mechanisms by which docile bodies are created, identities are constructed, and violence is normalised in society. The discourse around the broader issues of caste, class, and social inclusion in a society provides a chance to highlight how these texts can still be seen as a reflection of the institutions humans have created that continue to produce contemporary forms of oppression. Ultimately, the female body emerges not only as a site where violence, exploitation, and control are practiced but also as a space that demands recognition, organises resistance, and rearticulates the never-ending struggle for equality and justice within humanity.

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