
“Living Dead” Bodies: Necropolitical Ethics and Reproductive Control in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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Abstract:

Necropolitical ethics examines how modern regimes govern not only through the management of life but through the moralization of violence and the selective abandonment of vulnerable populations. This paper analyzes Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a literary exploration of necropolitical power, focusing on how the Gileadean state transforms domination into duty and cruelty into moral necessity. Drawing on Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, particularly the notion of “social death,” the study examines how women, especially the Handmaids are reduced to a condition of regulated survival, stripped of political, social, and ethical recognition while being preserved solely for their reproductive utility. Through an analysis of institutionalized ceremonies, ritualized punishment, and the mechanization of faith, the paper demonstrates how Gilead reorganizes morality itself, enabling violence to appear righteous and obedience to be framed as virtue. The Handmaid emerges as a figure of the “living dead” biologically sustained yet socially erased exposing the ethical paradox at the heart of necropolitical governance, where life is preserved not for dignity but for utility. Situating Atwood’s dystopia within contemporary political contexts, the paper further argues that necropolitics is not confined to speculative fiction but resonates with present-day realities marked by reproductive surveillance, carceral expansion, and the regulation of marginalized bodies. *The Handmaid’s Tale* thus functions not only as dystopian narrative but as ethical intervention, revealing how modern power reshapes morality to legitimize domination and urging the need for alternative moral frameworks grounded in dignity, agency, and relational responsibility.

Keywords: necropolitics, social death, dystopian narrative, marginalized bodies

Introduction:

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) is a dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood in which a fundamentalist theocratic regime, Gilead, replaces democratic governance in the United States. The collapse of democratic governance is attributed to a convergence of crises religious fundamentalism, sexism, environmental degradation, nuclear conflict, and political instability (Reesman, 06) which together enable the rise of an authoritarian order. Under the pretext of saving humanity from extinction, the new regime initiates a systematic crackdown on women, stripping them of fundamental rights such as equality, employment, property ownership, and personal liberty.

In the newly formed republic of Gilead, women's social identity is determined almost entirely by their reproductive capacity. Fertile women are transformed into state-controlled resources, treated not as citizens but as national assets whose bodies serve the demographic ambitions of the regime. Society is reorganized into rigid female categories - Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, Wives, Econowives and Unwomen, each defined by its proximity to power and reproductive value. Wives occupy the highest domestic status as partners of Commanders, while Econowives belong to the lower economic classes. Handmaids and Unwomen however, constitute the most vulnerable category: women captured while attempting to escape the regime and forcibly subjected to institutional reconditioning or extermination.

Under the supervision of the Aunts, Handmaids undergo ideological training that frames reproduction as both divine duty and patriotic service. Stripped of their former identities, they are renamed according to their Commanders "Offred," "Ofglen" - a linguistic practice that erases individuality and assigns them the status of private property. Within the household, Handmaids function as temporary wombs, denied autonomy over their clothing, movement, and daily routines. Their lives are marked by confinement, ritualized sexual violence in the form of the Ceremony, and compulsory participation in community salvagings. Although envied by Wives, Econowives, and Marthas for their fertility, Handmaids occupy a position of profound social exclusion. In Achille Mbembe's terms, they exist as a socially dead population—alive yet stripped of political, social, and economic recognition. This paper argues that Gilead operates through a necro politics in which women's bodies are governed through institutionalized forms of social death, transforming morality itself into a technology of domination.

From Biopolitics to Necropolitics:

Michel Foucault traces the evolution of political power from early monarchical sovereignty to modern forms of governance. Under monarchy, power was exercised primarily through the sovereign's right over life and death, the "power of the sword", where death functioned as a mechanism of fear to ensure obedience. With the transition from agrarian economies to industrial modernity, and from monarchy to democratic governance, this model of power gradually gave way to new technologies of control. The emergence of the welfare state introduced institutions such as schools, hospitals, psychiatric facilities, mass media, and population censuses, which collectively transformed governance into a system that managed life rather than merely threatened death. This shift marked the rise of biopower a form of authority that extends into the private sphere of individual existence, regulating bodies, health, sexuality, and productivity. Although often presented as benevolent, biopower is deeply entangled with state interests: demographic data and social institutions are mobilized to regulate populations, optimize labor, and secure economic efficiency. When these techniques of life-management become central to political strategy, biopower evolves into biopolitics, where the governance of life itself becomes the primary terrain of political control.

Achille Mbembe extends Foucault's framework by arguing that biopolitics alone is insufficient to explain modern forms of mass violence such as colonial domination, genocide, and racialized extermination. For Mbembe, late modern political power operates through a convergence of disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical regimes, particularly in contexts of colonial occupation. As he observes, "late modern colonial occupation is a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical" (Mbembe 82). This fusion enables absolute domination, reducing certain populations to a condition of political invisibility and stripping them of social, economic, and legal recognition. Mbembe conceptualizes this condition as social death, a state in which individuals remain biologically alive yet are excluded from the moral and legal community of the human. Necro politics, thus names the power to decide not only who must die, but whose lives may be reduced to permanent disability. Through this framework, modern governance is exposed as capable of constructing ethical and political logics that normalize exploitation, segregation, and abandonment under the guise of necessity and order.

Central to Mbembe's argument is the role of reason in modern political domination. He defines politics as "doubly defined as a project of autonomy and as the reaching of agreement within a collective through communication and recognition," noting that "reason is the truth of the subject, and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere" (Mbembe

67). In this formulation, political authority gains legitimacy by presenting its decisions as rational, inevitable, and essential for survival. Such reasoning, however, often masks coercion as care and violence as protection. This logic is clearly visible in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the Gileadean regime mobilizes scientific discourse and religious doctrine to legitimize the subjugation of women. The Aunts frame the new order as a system of safety, offering women “freedom from” harassment, assault, and moral chaos. As Aunt Lydia declares, “There is more than one kind of freedom... Freedom to and freedom from” (Atwood 30). Here, autonomy is recoded as danger, while repression is reframed as moral security—an exemplary instance of how necropolitical ethics manipulates reality through persuasive rationalization.

Mbembe's analysis of slavery further illuminates the condition of the Handmaids. He describes slavery as a state of “triple loss—absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death” (Mbembe 75). Enslaved individuals were reduced to commodities, denied legal personhood, and severed from familial and cultural continuity. A striking parallel emerges in Gilead, where Handmaids function as transferable reproductive vessels, displaced from their families and deprived of social identity. Like enslaved women who had no claim over their children, Handmaids are forced to surrender newborns to Commanders and are then reassigned. Their clothing, diet, movement, and bodily functions are regulated by the state, rendering them instruments rather than persons: “You must be a worthy vessel,” Aunt Lydia insists (Atwood 71).

Necropolitical power, Mbembe argues, ultimately operates by “shutting down the enemy's life-support system” (83). In Gilead, women who resist patriarchal control are cast as enemies of the state. The regime begins by confiscating women's property, excluding them from employment, dismantling their familial structures, and subjecting dissenters to re-education or elimination. Even the right to die is denied: suicide is prevented because the Handmaid's body remains too valuable to lose. Life is preserved not for dignity, but for utility. Any resistance to this order is treated as treason. Male rebels face public execution, while women are subjected to forced indoctrination and social erasure. Reduced to what the regime implicitly treats as “wombs with legs,” women are governed through religious rhetoric that masks exploitation as divine duty. Their lives become a carefully regulated cycle of nutrition, surveillance, ritualized rape, and medical inspection. Through these practices, Gilead exemplifies the full operation of necropolitical ethics where domination is sustained not only through violence, but through the systematic redefinition of morality itself.

Gilead as a Necropolitical State:

Salvagings in *The Handmaid's Tale* function as public spectacles of punishment, where individuals accused of crimes against the Gileadean state are executed in full view of the population. These executions take place in open spaces such as sports stadiums, with bodies displayed anonymously heads covered and placards hung around their necks stating the alleged crime. As Offred observes, "Each has a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human fetus. They were doctors, then, in the time before, when such things were legal" (38). The highest form of crime according to the regime is feticide and rape, subjecting the accused to corporeal punishment. Ironically, the same state that enforces such executions simultaneously legitimizes ritualized sexual violence through the Ceremony, in which Handmaids are subjected to sanctioned rape for the purpose of reproduction. Through this contradiction, Gilead asserts absolute power over life and death, transforming bodies into instruments of political terror. These public deaths operate as warnings, reinforcing the consequences of dissent and consolidating necropolitical authority. Crimes such as abortion and sexual transgression are punished with exceptional severity, ostensibly in the name of protecting women. In reality, this protection serves the interests of the state rather than those of women themselves. Fertile women are treated as state property, and any perceived violation of their bodies is reframed as an attack on national resources. The regime thus redefines violence against women as a political offense, reinforcing the logic that women's worth lies not in their personhood but in their reproductive utility.

Privilege within Gilead is strictly determined by social hierarchy. Wives occupy the most protected domestic position, engaging in leisure activities such as gardening and crocheting, while cultivating social visibility through gatherings and feigned illnesses. For Marthas, Handmaids, and Econowives, however, leisure is a luxury they cannot afford. As Offred remarks, "They get sick a lot, these Wives of the Commanders...As for us, the Handmaids and even the Marthas, we avoid illness" (159). This passage reveals the vulnerability of women whose survival depends on their continued usefulness to the regime. Any decline in productivity risks reclassification as "Unwomen," a fate that leads to exile in the Colonies and almost certain death. Men, by contrast, are not evaluated through the same logic of use-value. Offred recalls a Commander's remark "Women can't add... For them, one and one and one and one don't make four" (191) which exposes the ideological devaluation of women as a category, recognized only for their reproductive function.

In Gilead, women across all classes Wives, Marthas, Econowives, and Handmaids—are confined to narrowly defined domestic and symbolic roles. They are reduced to ornaments of male authority, tasked with maintaining homes, producing children, and sustaining the appearance of moral order. Yet despite the regime’s dependence on women for its biological survival, their labor and suffering remain unacknowledged. For Handmaids, the right to live is explicitly contingent upon reproductive capacity. As Offred notes, “Any real illness... would be terminal” (159), underscoring how even minor bodily decline can result in death. Gilead’s priorities are starkly articulated by Aunt Lydia: “For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (98). What matters is not the woman, but the womb. In this system, anatomy becomes destiny, and Handmaids are treated as breeding bodies—fed, monitored, and regulated with the same logic applied to livestock. Reproductive health becomes a site of constant surveillance, where any deviation from biological productivity threatens survival. As Stillman and Johnson argue, in Gilead “the modes of personal identity formation and intersubjective relations are so weakened...that domination and control... are internalized by those subjected to the regime” (75). This internalization is evident when Offred offers to write for the Commander, only to realize that he is astonished by the suggestion: “Possibly he doesn’t remember I can” (191). The moment reveals how deeply the regime has naturalized women’s exclusion from intellectual and cultural agency, reducing them to bodies rather than thinking subjects. Through such mechanisms, Gilead sustains a necropolitical order in which women exist in a condition of regulated survival—kept alive only insofar as their bodies continue to serve the state.

Necropolitical Ethics: When Violence Becomes Moral:

In the Republic of Gilead, ceremony becomes a central mechanism through which power is exercised and morality is reshaped. Almost every aspect of life is organized through ritual, which may be broadly divided into private and public ceremonies. Private ceremonies take place within the Commander’s household and include ritualized Bible readings and the Ceremony itself. The state rewrites religious doctrine to reinforce patriarchal authority, selectively interpreting scripture to emphasize women’s reproductive duty while denying them access to religious texts. The Bible is locked away and read only by Commanders, transforming sacred knowledge into a tool of control rather than spiritual guidance.

The ritual reading of scripture before the Ceremony symbolically aligns political authority with divine sanction. As Offred notes, these readings have become empty repetitions—“the usual stories” stripped of ethical substance and reduced to ideological performance (95). Religion, in this context, does not offer moral instruction but legitimizes domination. Through this ritual framing, coercion is recoded as duty and subjugation as

obedience to a higher order. Necropolitical ethics thus operates not only through force, but through the systematic moralization of violence.

Public ceremonies serve a similar function on a larger scale. Events such as childbirth celebrations, Salvagings, and Particutions are staged as moments of national significance. Childbirth, in particular, is transformed into a collective spectacle in which the Handmaid's reproductive success is celebrated as a victory for the state rather than as a personal or familial event. As Offred reflects, the reward for successful reproduction is not freedom, but continued usefulness to the regime—transfer to another household and protection from being labeled “Unwoman” (133). In this system, fertility becomes a condition for survival, while men's role in reproduction remains largely unquestioned, revealing the gendered asymmetry of responsibility and punishment.

Salvagings, the regime's public executions, further demonstrate how Gilead fuses justice with spectacle. These events are carefully choreographed, with strict spatial arrangements that visually reproduce social hierarchy—Handmaids placed in front, Wives seated behind, and Marthas positioned at the margins. Such staging reinforces each group's relative value within the social order. The choice of location—often former sites of education—symbolically transforms spaces once associated with learning into arenas of intimidation. Public punishment thus becomes a form of political pedagogy, teaching citizens the cost of dissent.

Particutions extend this logic by compelling participation in acts of collective punishment. Framed as moral retribution, these ceremonies force Handmaids to demonstrate loyalty through involvement in state-sanctioned violence. The process converts ethical judgment into political obedience, ensuring that subjects internalize the regime's values. In this way, Gilead does not merely enforce compliance; it reshapes conscience itself. What would ordinarily be recognized as cruelty is recoded as justice, and what would be resistance is redefined as sin. Through both private and public ceremonies, Gilead constructs a moral universe in which domination is normalized and violence is sanctified. Obedience is rewarded with conditional survival, while resistance is met with ritualized punishment. These practices exemplify what can be described as necropolitical ethics—a system in which power governs not only life and death, but also the moral frameworks through which violence is made to appear necessary, righteous, and inevitable.

The Handmaid as “Living Dead”:

In Gilead, Handmaids are reduced to a condition that extends far beyond reproductive control; their daily existence is carefully structured to ensure obedience, isolation, and social erasure. In addition to their reproductive role, they are assigned minor domestic tasks such as grocery collection, using ration coupons that restrict both choice and agency. These outings, however, are among the few moments they are permitted outside their rooms. The rest of their lives unfold in enforced stillness, a condition Offred describes through imagery that dissolves the self into biological function—her body becoming a vessel organized around fertility rather than identity (79). This transformation reflects the regime’s broader strategy: to hollow out subjectivity and replace it with biological purpose. The regulation of Handmaids’ lives extends to their most basic needs. Their diet, clothing, and bodily routines are dictated in the name of health and hygiene, yet their emotional and social well-being remains entirely disregarded. What is presented as protection is, in practice, a form of confinement. As Offred reflects, even eating becomes an anxious performance shaped by surveillance and fear of punishment (71). The regime thus does not merely appropriate women’s reproductive capacities; it absorbs their entire individuality, transforming care into control and discipline into moral obligation.

This inversion of ethics is further evident in institutions such as the Soul Scrolls, where prayer, traditionally a deeply human and personal act, is mechanized and commodified. Automated devices generate prayers for purposes ranging from health to repentance, reducing spirituality to a transactional service (172). In striking contrast, while machines are granted the task of worship, women are reduced to biological instruments. The Commander’s Wife’s use of Soul Scrolls becomes both a performance of piety and a display of loyalty (172) to the regime, illustrating how faith itself is reorganized to serve political ends. In this system, machines acquire symbolic humanity, while human beings are rendered mechanical.

The visual discipline imposed on Handmaids reinforces this logic of dehumanization. Their red attire and white veils are not merely uniforms but technologies of control that restrict vision, movement, and social interaction. The veils function symbolically like blinders, narrowing perception and reinforcing ideological focus. Even language is regulated: exchanges are limited to ritualized greetings such as “Blessed be the fruit” and “Praise be,” phrases that replace genuine communication with scripted allegiance. Through this ritualization of speech and appearance, Gilead produces subjects who are visible only as functions, not as persons.

The domestic environment further reflects this necropolitical economy of value. Marthas, responsible for household labor, anxiously await the Handmaids' success in reproduction, not out of solidarity but because a child promises social stability and renewed purpose within the household. Offred recognizes this pressure when she compares herself to a reproductive worker whose worth lies in output rather than existence (140). Even nourishment becomes instrumental: food is described as "healthy" but joyless, reinforcing the idea that survival is permitted only insofar as it sustains biological productivity.

The regime's gendered logic of reproduction reveals its ethical distortion most clearly in its rejection of scientific accountability. Generals' assigned Handmaids are never subjected to scrutiny regarding fertility; instead, responsibility is placed exclusively on women. As Offred observes, "There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore... There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren" (67). This deliberate misrepresentation of reproductive reality exposes the necropolitical nature of Gilead's governance: biological truth is subordinated to ideological convenience, and women's bodies become sites where political failure is displaced. Even spatial arrangements within the household reinforce the Handmaids' invisible status. While others use the front entrance, Handmaids are directed through the back door, a symbolic gesture that marks their exclusion from social belonging. They are present yet absent, necessary yet erased. Through these layered practices of control—bodily regulation, moral inversion, technological substitution, and spatial marginalization—Gilead produces the Handmaid as a figure of the "living dead": biologically alive but socially nullified, sustained only for what her body can yield to the state. In this condition, necropolitical ethics becomes fully visible. Life is preserved not for dignity or autonomy, but for utility. Morality is reorganized to justify domination, and survival itself becomes conditional. The Handmaid thus embodies the ultimate paradox of Gilead's order: a subject who is kept alive precisely because her life has been stripped of meaning beyond biological function.

Necropolitical Ethics and Contemporary Resonances:

This chapter has examined *The Handmaid's Tale* as a powerful literary articulation of necropolitical ethics, revealing how political regimes can transform violence into morality and domination into duty. Through the institutionalization of ceremonies, the regulation of women's bodies, and the production of social death, Gilead emerges not merely as a dystopian fantasy but as a critical framework for understanding how modern power governs through selective preservation and abandonment of life. By drawing on Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, this study has shown that Gilead does not simply control bodies; it

reorganizes ethical perception itself, enabling cruelty to appear necessary, protection to resemble confinement, and obedience to masquerade as virtue.

The figure of the Handmaid, constructed as a biologically necessary yet socially erased subject, exemplifies the condition of the “living dead”—a life sustained only for its instrumental value. Her existence exposes the paradox at the heart of necropolitical governance: life is preserved not for dignity or autonomy, but for utility. In this sense, necropolitical ethics becomes a system in which morality is no longer grounded in human worth but in political expediency. The erosion of agency, the mechanization of faith, and the ritualization of violence together produce a moral universe where domination is normalized and resistance pathologized.

While Atwood’s narrative is set in a speculative future, its ethical implications resonate sharply with contemporary political realities. Across the globe, modern states increasingly regulate bodies through reproductive surveillance, carceral expansion, border control regimes, and the management of marginalized populations. Debates surrounding reproductive rights, refugee containment, mass incarceration, and biometric governance reveal how certain lives continue to be rendered disposable under the rhetoric of security, morality, and national interest. In such contexts, necropolitical ethics is not confined to fiction; it operates through everyday policies that determine whose lives are protected, whose are exposed to risk, and whose suffering is rendered invisible. The relevance of Gilead thus lies not in its extremity but in its familiarity. Its logic mirrors contemporary systems that justify inequality through moral narratives—whether framed as cultural preservation, religious duty, or social stability. The transformation of women’s bodies into sites of political investment in *The Handmaid’s Tale* anticipates ongoing struggles over bodily autonomy in the twenty-first century, where legislation and ideology continue to contest who may decide over life, reproduction, and dignity.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that necropolitical ethics offers a vital lens for reading not only Atwood’s dystopia but also the ethical failures of modern governance. By exposing how power reshapes morality to legitimize domination, *The Handmaid’s Tale* invites readers to confront the silent normalization of violence in contemporary political systems. Literature, in this sense, becomes more than representation; it becomes ethical intervention. Through its portrayal of the Handmaid as a figure of social death and resistant consciousness, Atwood’s novel challenges us to imagine alternative moral frameworks grounded not in control and utility, but in dignity, agency, and relational responsibility.

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