

The Handmaid's Tale. Discussions on Fashion Semiotics, Power and Contemporary Gender Disputes

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Abstract: This paper explores the semiotic significance of attire in Hulu's series *The Handmaid's Tale*, examining how clothing functions as a tool of power and control within the series. It further investigates the role of uniforms in contemporary society and draws parallels between modern fashion practices and subtle forms of repression and power exerted over women. By analyzing the interplay between fashion, power, and gender, this study aims to highlight the enduring impact of clothing as a medium of socio-political expression and control.

Keywords: fashion semiotics, power, gender, The Handmaid's Tale

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), has been everywhere these past eight years and mostly because it has been adapted into a critically acclaimed Hulu series which has come to an end in June 2025. The topic has had its particular impact due to a new wave in the fight for women's rights as well as the fact that the author decided to launch a sequel in 2019.

What is more, the Handmaid's attire has become a powerful symbol to demonstrate and fight against unjust laws, verdicts regarding abortion and judgements all around the globe. The legal arena is not the only context to stumble upon the red dresses, fashion caught these elements of popular culture to presumably raise awareness and have placed them in fashion runways so as to set the issue in agenda as seen in New York-based label Vaquera in its 2017 collection as well as in Vera Wang's Spring-summer 2018 collection.

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Figure 1. *Feminist activists dressed as Handmaids in front of the Washington Capitol in June 2017.* Creative Commons.



Figure 2. *Vaquera's 2017 collection, influenced by The Handmaid's Tale.* Source: *The Hollywood Reporter*.

The Handmaid's Tale (from now on THT) tells the story of a not-too-far dystopian future where most women cannot bear children and those who can are sent to recruitment centers, where they are later assigned to the house of a Commander. The Handmaid is legally raped by one of the Commanders, during an act which is called “The Ceremony”, with the presence of his wife lying underneath the maid and holding her hands while she is being penetrated so that she can get pregnant and give the infertile couple a child.

In this story, as in many other dystopian ones, such as Orwell’s “1984” (1949), control and power are visibly present through vigilance, language, uniforms and constant violent repression. Fashion, a collective activity and invisible elements attached to clothing such as values and beliefs (Kawamura, 2005) may not even be considered present because there are no collectives in that society and the only values that exist are the ones that come from the philosophy of the “Sons of Jacob”, the prevalent ideology that has been established in the Republic of Gilead's (the fictional country portrayed in the series).

In this country, there are just clothes which allow to classify people for their utility to the state or higher commands of society. Clothes have become totalitarian just like the rest of society’s functioning. There are roleplays subject to rules and these are blatant because they illustrate, more clearly than ever, that in such society, habit makes the handmaid (Eco, 1972). The not-so-far-away future of the series goes back to previous periods in time when sumptuary laws determined what was supposed to be worn by each of society’s strata.

This paper examines the semiotic implications of the series' attire, explores the exertion of power through clothing, analyzes the function of uniforms in contemporary society, and compares modern fashion's role in subtle forms of repression and power dynamics affecting women.

2. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology based on grounded theory, cultural studies, and fashion semiotics to analyze the role of clothing and appearance in THT. The analysis draws on visual and narrative elements from the series, examining the symbolic use of attire as a tool of power, identity construction and gendered oppression.

The primary source of analysis is the Hulu adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s THT, with a focus on its costume design, mise-en-scène, and character representation. The visual codes within the series are interpreted through the lens of semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1967). The essay also incorporates Foucauldian perspectives on surveillance, discipline, and power (Foucault, 1977) to unpack how fashion functions as a disciplinary mechanism of gender and power in today's society.

Additionally, the article applies a comparative analytical framework to draw parallels between the fictional world of Gilead and real-world practices in contemporary fashion and social control, including some research on the role of uniforms in contemporary society. This involves integrating scholarly sources on body politics (Bordo, 1993), consumer culture (McRobbie, 2009), and fashion theory (Entwistle, 2015; Steele, 1996; Wilson, 1985) to contextualize the series within broader socio-cultural dynamics.

The methodology emphasizes a close reading of visual elements, supported by thematic analysis of relevant episodes. Furthermore, this interpretive approach acknowledges the significance of intersectionality, understanding that the representation of women's bodies and dress is informed by overlapping structures of class, race, religion, and institutional control.

Through this interdisciplinary lens, the article aims to demonstrate how THT not only reflects authoritarian mechanisms of control through dress, but also critiques the more insidious, normalized expressions of these mechanisms within contemporary fashion culture.

3. The Semiotics of Attire in THT

In the dystopian society of Gilead, clothing functions as a critical semiotic tool that conveys complex layers of meaning related to identity, power, and control. The regime employs a strict dress code to delineate social hierarchies and enforce compliance among its citizens.

Handmaids are clad in long, flowing deep red dresses accompanied by white bonnets, symbolizing fertility and purity. The color red, traditionally associated with menstruation and childbirth, underscores their primary function as child-bearers. Red may also be connected to fire, blood, love, passion, courage and danger, and more appropriately, with Eve, the fruit of life and sin. The white bonnets, often referred to as "wings," obscure Handmaid's peripheral vision, limiting their ability to engage with the world around them and reinforcing their isolation. This attire not only signifies their role but also serves as a constant reminder of their subjugation. Additionally, there is some practical reason for the Handmaids to be wearing red and that is to stand out in a crowd in case they try to run away, so they can be easily caught.

Wives of high-ranking Commanders wear teal or blue dresses, colors historically linked to tranquility and authority. This choice of color reflects their elevated status within Gilead's social order. But blue also means sadness and subservience. These women, though highly respected and placed within Gilead's society, are at the mercy of their husbands (Minnicks, 2019) and most of them feel miserable.

Marthas are domestic servants who work at the houses of Commanders. They cannot bear children and are responsible for carrying out domestic duties as well as taking care of Handmaids and helping Wives raise children. These ladies dress in muted green, a color associated with harmony and the natural world, emphasizing their laborious roles (Arendt, 1958).

Aunts, who train and oversee the Handmaids at the training centers, don brown uniforms, symbolizing their authoritarian position as enforcers of Gilead's oppressive norms. Brown is often related to stability, security and honesty.

The Commanders do not wear specific colors. In fact, they commonly wear suits, say, shirts, vests, dark coats and ties, which are still the most powerful and ideological garments of all time (Steele, 1996).

The Eyes, secret police that work for Commanders, dress in black. Black is associated with power, fear, mystery and authority. The rest of the oppressed society wear gray. Gray is a neutral and conservative color, clearly expressed in the ones that prefer not to take a stand or that just go along the rules. It is also a color that elicits insignificance.

The semiotics of these uniforms extend beyond color symbolism. These color codes and styles are not arbitrary but are imbued with cultural and political meanings that reinforce the regime's ideologies. Dress codes within the regime recalls the way people used to dress before sumptuary laws were abolished, those of which were primarily subject to class, culture or territory distinctions.

The homogenization of attire erases individual identities, reducing citizens to their societal functions. This visual uniformity suppresses personal expression and enforces conformity, illustrating how sartorial choices can be manipulated to serve as an instrument of control with authoritarian objectives.

4. Clothing as a Tool of Power

Michel Foucault's concept of power as pervasive and embodied is evident in the Republic of Gilead's use of clothing to enforce discipline. The organization of clothing, clustering and legal codes within Gilead evinces that power is circulating everywhere. The Handmaids' uniforms act as a "panopticon", constantly reminding them of their subjugation and the omnipresence of authority. This aligns with the notion that power is exercised through subtle coercions embedded in daily life (Foucault, 1977).

Not only are the Handmaids disciplined through their clothing and bodies but also through their diet and activities (they can do the shopping and small talk with other maids but no woman in Gilead can read, they are to fulfill their only purpose of bearing children). They are made to eat certain foods which will allow them to be well nourished in case they get pregnant because children born in that country are deeply cherished. Those methods applied on Handmaids allow meticulous control of their body's operations, subjugating forces as well as imposing docility-utility relationships (Foucault, 1977). But that kind of power, which is mainly repressive, is just one aspect of a broader meaning which implies more than violence.

It is necessary to confine to a certain definition of power in foucauldian terms by referring to its

multiplicity of relations of force that are immanent to the domain wherein they are exercised, and that are constitutive of its organization; the game that through incessant struggle and confrontation transforms them, reinforces them, inverts them; the supports these relations of force find in each other, so as to form a chain or system, or, on the other hand, the gaps, the contradictions that isolate them from each other; in the end, the strategies in which they take effect, and whose general pattern or institutional crystallization is embodied in the mechanisms of the state, in the formulation of the law, in social hegemonies (Foucault, 1990, p.92).

Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere, from below (from the "capillaries" and to a lesser extent from above), but also it circulates around different strategic points within society. Power is not an institution and not a single structure, neither is it a certain strength to be endowed with; it is the name given to a complex strategic situation in a particular society (Foucault, 1990). Power is not "a thing",

something that may be acquired, seized or shared, neither is it something that may be held on to or allowed to slip away; “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1990, p.94).

The disciplinary devices in the series are apparent: those who do not follow the rules are immediately tortured, taken to radioactive uranium camps or completely eliminated from the face of the earth. Nevertheless, as Foucault (1990) once said, where there is power, there is always resistance. Two faces of the same coin. Resistance may be operating underground or just within a closed circle of a few Commanders, as can be seen when the main character Offred/June is taken to a city nightclub as the Commander’s escort all dressed in a shiny short golden dress. The rigid mechanisms of clothing in Gilead can be easily broken when wearing another group’s clothes and that happens when a Handmaid steals an Aunt’s dress and wears it to escape.

Moreover, as the series unfolds, resistance emerges and power is also perceived through purely emotional relationships, marriage, infidelity, treason, games, material possessions and so on. Yet most importantly, the dichotomy of power-resistance is illustrated through a woman’s strength (in this case Offred/June) to get her daughter back and her ability to do whatever it takes to accomplish that goal.

5. Uniformity

The clothing on the series might be compared to contemporary uniforms. Uniforms in modern contexts function to create order, signify authority, and suppress individuality. In professions such as the military, law enforcement, education and healthcare, uniforms establish a collective identity and convey legitimacy. However, they also serve to control and homogenize, often reinforcing existing power dynamics. The mutability of uniforms allows for both conformity and resistance, as individuals navigate their identities within the confines of prescribed attire. This duality reflects the complex role of uniforms as both instruments of empowerment and oppression (Hackett & Coghlan).

In educational settings, uniforms are often implemented to reduce socioeconomic disparities among students and foster a sense of belonging. However, debates persist regarding their effectiveness and potential drawbacks. Recent discussions highlight concerns over the financial burden of branded uniforms on families, prompting legislative measures to limit mandatory branded items in schools (Weale, 2025). Proponents argue that uniforms promote equality and reduce peer pressure related to clothing choices, while critics contend that they may suppress individuality and impose additional costs on families (Financial Times, 2025).

In professional contexts, uniforms serve to convey authority and expertise. For instance, medical professionals’ attire reassures patients of their competence, while military uniforms symbolize discipline and hierarchy. Yet, uniforms can also enforce conformity and obscure personal identity, raising questions about autonomy and self-expression.

Uniforms and other types of standardized clothing and dress codes in the workplace are still widely used, particularly in large corporations that try to present to the world the level of commitment their employees have towards the organization as they adhere to specific dress codes. Hotels, restaurants, airlines and private hospitals attempt to influence the behavior of

their clienteles, students and patients with various types of uniforms and dress codes (Hochschild, 1997).

Currently, clothes worn for different types of job occupations are somehow more easily identifiable. Employees in uniform make a good impression and definitely make the organization, or company they work for, look good in front of whoever they might come across during working hours but also non-working hours. Uniform is the visible sign of an institution, organization or company's power and position among others in the same field of competition.

Railway companies were the first to introduce uniforms for their employees; these clothes were intended to give them authority within the public. They functioned as a mark of official status as well as dignity, yet at the same time signaled that the officials were servants of the public (Wilson, 1985). In addition to this, in some insurance or stakeholders companies, the higher the hierarchy a person occupies, the freer they become to be able to use different sorts of clothing for work, contrary to what the low rank employees should wear.

Thus, uniforms might seem to be quite opposed to fashion, by which personality gets submerged rather than enhanced, with the exception of military uniforms which have traditionally been thought to foster machismo. But also, uniforms entail some quotes of sexual connotations regarding the forbidden and the forbidding as they play a significant role in pornographic fantasy (Wilson, 1985).

Hackett & Coghlan (2023) explore the concept of uniform mutability, examining how uniforms can simultaneously enforce conformity and allow for individual adaptation. They argue that while uniforms are designed to standardize appearance, wearers often find ways to personalize them, negotiating their identities within the constraints imposed by institutional dress codes.

Simmel (1904/1957) brilliantly anticipated the duality between individual and collective when explaining the psychological tendency towards imitation regarding fashion more than a century ago:

Thus we see that imitation in all the instances where it is a productive factor represents one of the fundamental tendencies of our character, namely, that which contents itself with similarity, with uniformity, with the adaptation of the special to the general, and accentuates the constant element in change. Conversely, wherever prominence is given to change, wherever individual differentiation, independence, and relief from generality are sought, there imitation is the negative and obstructive principle. The principle of adherence to given formulas, of being and of acting like others, is irreconcilably opposed to the striving to advance to ever new and individual forms of life; for this very reason social life represents a battle-ground, of which every inch is stubbornly contested, and social institutions may be looked upon as the peace-treaties, in which the constant antagonism of both principles has been reduced externally to a form of cooperation (Simmel, 1904 (1957), p.543).

6. Contemporary Fashion and the Subtleties of Repression

In contemporary society, fashion operates as a complex field where personal agency, identity construction, and social norms intersect. Although it is often celebrated as a domain of self-expression and freedom, fashion also functions as a powerful tool of subtle repression, particularly for women. These mechanisms are less overt than those depicted in THT, yet they are deeply embedded in everyday life and just as effective in shaping behavior.

Fashion, like power, is everywhere and increasingly democratized and diffused in the world, and although Foucault (1990) never alluded to it, but instead to the disciplinary devices of schools, prisons and hospitals, it can be said that fashion is undoubtedly capable of modeling and making bodies more docile by ordering them in time and space as well as by imposing what it should be worn and what is out of fashion, forcing a disciplining of consumption but simultaneously generating knowledge, a whole new set of ideas and discourses, and more importantly, fashion produces pleasure.

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (Foucault, 1980, p.119).

In this complex system, the contemporary way of liberation in consuming and wearing fashion poses differences in gender. While women in the series are corseted and oppressed through the clothes they are obliged to wear (as well as other cruel practices they ought to do), women in today's societies are disciplined by a whole series of politics of appearance: make-up, diet, exercise, being fashionable, being successful, bearing children, working eight hours a day and simultaneously doing domestic chores (Nannini, 2023). These days, disciplinary fashion is as powerful and demanding as clothing is in the series, but it is silent, subtle and it plays a meaningful part on gender inequality because women are still being judged by how they look, especially if sexual allegations come up but also regarding success, job promotion and identity.

Therefore, one of the most pervasive forms of control occurs through the enforcement of beauty standards. The fashion industry, in conjunction with media and advertising, promotes narrow and often unattainable ideals—extreme thinness, eternal youth, flawless skin—which generate anxiety and body dissatisfaction. As Bordo (1993) argues in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, the female body is constantly scrutinized and disciplined by cultural expectations that are internalized. Women learn to monitor and modify their bodies in accordance with socially approved appearances, creating a system of self-regulation that mirrors the disciplinary mechanisms described by Foucault (1980).

In the past decades, each body has become the focus for increasing “work” (exercise, diet, make-up, cosmetic surgery, etc.) and there is a tendency to consider it as part of one's self that is open to revision, change and transformation. The increasing healthy lifestyle regime sheds some light on the idea that people's bodies are unfinished and open to change (Featherstone, 1991). Or as Bauman (2000) once put it: the pursuit of the perfect body “is the state of perpetual self-scrutiny, self-reproach and self-deprecation, and so also of continuous anxiety”(p.78).

The self has become the long-time panoptic mysterious vigilante over each person's body (Johnson, 2021). And women are still the ones more preoccupied about how they look, in some

western countries the obsession is around the body but in Asian ones it is usually around the face, the skin and its whiteness.

The phenomenon of "power dressing" further complicates this dynamic. While adopting certain dress codes may grant women access to professional authority, these codes often align with traditionally masculine aesthetics, requiring a suppression of femininity to be taken seriously. This reinforces the association between masculinity and power, suggesting that female-coded appearances remain incompatible with authority (Bard, 2010).

Moreover, consumerism plays a significant role in fashion's repressive dynamics. For the most part of the time, the fashion industry imposes certain casual clothes that are impractical or uncomfortable but are presented in such ways, through its diverse distributional channels, such as digital marketing resources, that the system manages to prevail presenting a wide variety of new trendy casual clothes as essential and therefore increasing consumption without the slightest aversion.

The imperative to stay "on trend" and to update one's wardrobe in alignment with rapidly changing styles fosters a continuous cycle of desire, inadequacy, and consumption. McRobbie (2009) points out that the fashion and beauty industries have rebranded disciplinary practices as "empowerment". Under the guise of choice and freedom, women are encouraged to invest in self-improvement—through clothing, cosmetics, body modifications—as a moral and aesthetic obligation.

In one chapter of the first season of THT, Commander Fred gives a treat to his Handmaid Offred/June: a women's fashion magazine called "Beautify"; he allows her to read it and she instantly remembers having read some of those in the past at the airport or at a hairdresser's waiting room. Some titles on the cover say: "Surprise Fall Fashion Tips" and "Lipstick to Die For". June thinks the models look weird like zoo animals that are unaware they will soon go extinct. Then, in another opportunity, the Commander tries to calm June down by giving her another fashion magazine "Lady Fab" and he tells her: "Lists of made-up problems. No woman was ever rich enough, young enough, pretty enough or good enough", to which June answers: "We had choices then" and the Commander continues: "Now you have respect, you have protection. You can fulfill your biological destinies in peace".

This comparison lays on the table the subtlety in the disciplining of fashion consumption today which might not seem completely tangible. Even though some authors consider postmodernist fashion as liberating for women because they may choose from a wide variety of fashionable styles, and then construct personal styles that are meaningful to them (Kaiser, Nagasawa & Hutton, 1991), too many choices are not liberating enough if all of them keep on disciplining women's image under certain social commandments.

Not for a single moment should fashion be addressed as a problem, the greatest real problem that stands still are the rules and codes by which women are judged in a society that slowly and subtly allows them to make some progress socially, politically and economically, but simultaneously makes them come across plenty of new obstacles that prevent them from enjoying their conquests (Nannini, 2023).

Fashion has been a source of concern to feminists, both today and in earlier periods. Feminist theory has a long way analyzing the social and sexual division of labor, both assigning women to a subordinate position. Within feminism, fashionable dress and the beautification of the self are conventionally perceived as expressions of subordination; fashion and cosmetics fix

women visibly in their oppression. However, not only is it important to recognize that men have been as much implicated in fashion, as much “fashion victims” as women. It is also necessary to recognize that discussions on fashion as simply a feminist moral problem means missing the richness of its cultural and political meanings (Wilson, 1985).

The political subordination of women is undeniable but fashion does not submerge women to oppression, at least not as a cause-effect system; it unleashes a whole range of powerful relations for every single person and some of those are truly worthy of experiencing in societies that are supposed to encourage freedom. In this sense, contemporary fashion, while offering a language of individuality, simultaneously enforces conformity through more covert means. The mechanisms of control are not imposed through coercion but through desire, aspiration, and the illusion of autonomy. The question that could be dealt with in some other research is how much freedom do people truly have in contemporary societies regarding what they chose to wear.

7. Final considerations. Between Fiction and Reality

The parallels between Gilead's use of clothing for control and contemporary fashion's role in subtle repression highlight the enduring power of attire as a socio-political tool. Both contexts reveal how clothing can be utilized to enforce compliance, delineate social roles, and perpetuate systemic inequalities. Recognizing these intersections is crucial for understanding the mechanisms through which fashion influences identity and power relations in both fictional and real-world settings.

Clothing in THT serves as a potent symbol of power and control, reflecting broader themes of repression and identity. The series' portrayal of attire underscores the semiotic functions of fashion in enforcing societal norms. Contemporary parallels illustrate that, while overt forms of control may be less visible, subtle mechanisms of repression persist through fashion. Understanding these dynamics is essential for challenging and redefining the relationship between fashion, power, and gender in modern society.

Fashion is inexistent in the story portrayed in the series, it appears as a reminder of what once was and the organization of the Republic of Gilead is completely structured with strict norms and codes of dress and behavior. Compared to this, nowadays fashion is more present than ever through its digital marketing strategies. Nonetheless, the increasing democratization and diffusion in fashion does not necessarily guarantee equal opportunities for everyone, not to mention the fact that discipline weighs a lot heavier on certain individuals as regards the politics of appearance. Fashion consumption is also being disciplined because capitalism keeps sustaining its main goal of increasing sales and monetizing every single style and therefore persuades more consumption as well as it instills dissatisfaction with one's own image, especially on women.

THT shows the embodiment of disciplining over women's bodies who have no choice over their own bodies, where fashion has completely disappeared and they do not either have choices as to what they would like to wear. As posed earlier, power functions in every society generating different relations regarding docility-utility. Present societies are still ones that shape bodies, making them docile to serve for multiple distinctive purposes, uniforms might be an example of this process. Women's bodies are the weakest links on that discipline chain.

All in all, the fiction of THT serves as a critical mirror, exaggerating and exposing the structures that underlie everyday interactions between fashion and identity. By making visible the symbolic violence encoded in clothing, the series encourages viewers to reconsider the political dimensions of dress in everyday life.

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