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Lives Held in Suspension: Biopolitics and Sexual Governance in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract: Michel Foucault conceptualizes biopower as a mechanism of power operating through the regulation of bodies, sexuality, health, and reproduction, and biopolitics as the domain in which biopower operates. Biopolitics involves the strategies and policies that govern not only life but also the bodies of a society's subjects. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale is a compelling site to examine such biopolitical conditions, as in Gilead, rather than exclusive corporal or capital punishment, governance operates largely through the suspension of lives. This paper, by analysing the lives of Handmaids, Marthas, Jezebels, Queers, and other governed subjects in the novel, examines how people are categorized, conditioned, and controlled in Gilead, where power is exercised through permanent suspension rather than outright exclusion. This study, foregrounding the concept of biopolitics (Foucault) and extending the concepts of liminality (Victor Turner), bare life (Giorgio Agamben), and subalternity (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), advances the term *Societal Limbo* to explore dimensions not fully addressed by these existing concepts, particularly the condition of people who are either legally embedded yet socially erased or socially embedded yet legally suspended. By reading Atwood's novel alongside its television adaptation, the study demonstrates how biopolitical power facilitates prolonged suspension rather than temporary exclusion or permanent rejection.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Biopower, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Liminality, Bare Life, Societal Limbo, Foucault

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has long been studied as a narrative of theocratic patriarchy and reproductive control. However, beyond these aspects of gender oppression lies a much broader and graver discourse—the subtle mechanism of what Michel Foucault calls "modern power." In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault observes how certain agencies of power regard individuals "both as objects and as instruments of their exercise," resulting in a governance that is calculated, gentle, and apparently modest (170). Atwood's Gilead thus serves as a compelling example of this version of power, whereby the state sustains itself not only through terror but also through classification, distribution, and conditional recognition. Its authority is not concerned with punishing bodies alone but with assessing their utility and assigning them functions, thereby creating a stratified hierarchy in which life itself becomes administratively managed.

This paper reads *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of biopolitics, drawing primarily on the discourse that Foucault formulates as biopower—a form of power that operates through the regulation of sexuality, health, and reproduction (Foucault 136). Gilead exemplifies this condition, as the fertility crisis is used to justify the state's investment in women's bodies, rendering them subject to systemic surveillance, discipline, and, above all, confinement. Women in Gilead are divided into reproductive vessels, domestic labourers, disciplinary enforcers, and symbolic elites, depending on what the regime requires, while men are classified into legislators, militarized soldiers, and agents of surveillance. The entire identity of Gilead's subjects depends on their utility and functionality. Although biopolitical theory explains how Gilead optimizes and manages lives, it does not fully account for those subjects who are neither excluded nor empowered.

Many figures in Gilead, although granted recognition by the state, lack authority and autonomy, placing them in a permanent condition of institutional suspension. Much scholarship has employed the concepts of liminality and precarity to describe the marginal positions produced by the totalitarian regime; yet neither is entirely sufficient to identify the precise situation of Gilead's characters—authority without autonomy, visibility without security, and inclusion without equality.

To address this gap, this paper introduces the concept of *Societal Limbo*: an intentional political arrangement that sustains governance through conditional recognition. Unlike liminality, *Societal Limbo* is not transitional, and unlike precarity, it is not unstable. Rather, it constitutes an enduring suspension of life—a subtler mode of authoritarian enforcement.

This study, by analysing the text and the subsequent television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, examines how different categories—Handmaids, Wives, Marthas, Aunts, Angels, Jezebels, Queers, and Unwomen—occupy distinct positions within a framework of conditional existence and recognition.

The Handmaid's Tale reveals that modern authority operates not simply by silencing its subjects but by suspending them. Power survives not through total exclusion but by keeping certain bodies alive, useful, and confined within carefully measured spaces of belonging. It is within this suspended construct that *Societal Limbo* emerges as a defining mechanism of Gilead's biopolitics.

Governance of Lives in Gilead

Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), conceptualizes biopower as a striking feature of modern power that seeks to "foster or disallow life to the point of death" (138). Power, in this scenario, operates not through exclusion and elimination but through the management of bodies, behaviours, and life itself. Health, reproduction, and even sexuality become matters of state concern, treating the body as an object of political calculation. Rather than depending solely on methods of exclusion and execution, modern power structures govern populations through classification, restraint, and surveillance. This shift in the operation of authoritarian power is visible in Margaret Atwood's dystopian world, as in Gilead the regime structures its society around the reproductive crisis.

In Gilead, women's bodies are considered national resources and are classified, managed, and controlled based on their usefulness to society. While fertile women are assigned the position of Handmaids, infertile women are designated as Wives or Marthas. All others are excluded from mainstream society but not exterminated outright. Their lives are instead contained within prolonged systems of surveillance and regulation in accordance with the law. Here, biopolitics does not distribute life evenly but structures and stratifies it so that while some lives are optimized, others are omitted. Even within recognition, there is exclusion and prolonged suspension. For instance, the legal existence of Wives as privileged yet constrained and Handmaids as recognized yet erased demonstrates how Gilead's system operates managerially: instead of outright inclusion or exclusion, there is a prolonged suspension of lives. Unlike Giorgio Agamben's concept of "inclusive exclusion" (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* 22), here the subjects remain regulated within the law, as they are acknowledged, documented, and categorized but not fully recognized.

The figures in Gilead thus remain suspended within the system, as they are maintained, utilized, yet still constrained. As Atwood observes in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "better never means better for everyone; it always means worse for some" (225). While Gilead is presented by its authorities as a model society, it is in fact a golden cage for many, as subjects are confined within a rigid legal framework that not only defines but also limits their roles in society (see Table 1).

Table 1

Social groups and their legal status in Gilead

CATEGORIES	LEGAL STATUS IN GILEAD	NATURE OF EXISTENCE
COMMANDERS	Full Citizenship	Legal and sexual privilege.
CHILDREN OF HANDMAIDS	Fully recognized	Legal privilege but erased narrative.
ANGELS	Conditional recognition	Recognized but disposable.
WIVES	Fully recognized	Privileged but constrained.
MARTHAS	Recognized functionally	Preserved for usefulness.
ECONOWIVES	Marginal recognition	Conditional belonging.
AUNTS	Exceptional recognition	Authority without autonomy.
HANDMAIDS	Recognized without citizenship	Biologically preserved but erased identity.
GENDER TRAITORS	Recognized as deviants	Life under erasure.
JEZEBELS	Officially erased	Preserved without legitimacy.
UNWOMEN	Legally and socially unrecognized	Maintained until death.
MAYDAY	Criminalized	Unwarranted existence.

Thus, in Gilead, the nature of existence of its subjects is exclusively based on their utility, whereby most groups are legally erased but politically maintained. The subjects of the regime are thus neither fully expelled nor fully recognized but remain in a state of incessant suspension.

To name this condition of existence, the concept of *Societal Limbo* seems analytically necessary. The term describes preserved existence without a future, visibility without a voice, and utility without recognition.

Neither Included nor Excluded: The Erased Identities of Handmaids

Handmaids are perhaps the most precise embodiment of Gilead's biopolitical logic, as their identities are completely erased and they are maintained solely for reproductive rituals. Their value is entirely based on fertility, resulting in an existence that depends wholly on reproductive success. Handmaids are established as part of the regime's reorganization of society around reproductive efficiency, in response to the crisis of infertility in Gilead. Fertile women are forcibly recruited into serving the elite, assigned to undergo ritualized sexual ceremonies for the sake of Commanders and their Wives, who are unable to conceive. Their role is justified ethically and morally, turning the Handmaids' bodies into sites of political, judicial, and spiritual power.

Handmaids, although ritually sanctified, are reduced to mere instruments in the hands of the regime, their existence comparable to that of a rat in a maze—allowed to move freely only within prescribed limits (Atwood 158). Their red garments function as powerful symbols not only of fertility but also of confinement and erasure. Despite being central to the sustenance of Gilead, they do not occupy a stable position within its social hierarchy. They are simultaneously indispensable and disposable. In the narrator's own words, they are reduced to "two-legged wombs" and "sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 131). For them, time does not progress but repeats itself, as they are trapped in a continuous cycle of ceremony, pregnancy, and transfer:

> All things white and circular. I wait for the day to unroll, for the earth to turn, according to the round face of the implacable clock. The geometrical days, which go around and around, smoothly and oiled (Atwood 193).

Stripped of their original names, they are assigned patronymic identities rather than being abandoned. Renaming them according to their Commanders—Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren—demonstrates that they are not recognized as complete persons. Their pre-Gilead lives are officially erased: marriages are invalidated and children confiscated, forcing them into a life devoid of a past and, without doubt, a future. Their existence is confined entirely to the present. However, they are treated differently from Unwomen, who are sent to the Colonies for gradual death. Handmaids receive medical and dietary care only because they are considered essential state property. Their bodies are preserved even as their identities are erased. They are not entirely excluded from society but rather hyper-included, subjected to constant surveillance and control.

The "Eyes" permeate their daily lives, so that even when they are permitted to walk or shop, they remain under intense scrutiny. Their status further isolates them from other female categories, with fertility functioning as a double-edged sword. A successful pregnancy may elevate a Handmaid's status, whereas failure results in transfer and reassignment. They are valued only as long as they remain productive and are discarded once their utility declines. The television adaptation further

emphasizes this visually, extending the narrative beyond Offred's perspective. The red cloaks and white wings serve as striking visual markers, simultaneously signifying visibility and enforced modesty.

Viewed through a biopolitical lens, Handmaids illustrate how the body is transformed into a state resource. Rather than outright annihilation, the regime's power operates through coercion and control. This sharply contrasts with Unwomen, who are rendered entirely expendable. Thus, Gilead exemplifies what Foucault observes:

> Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate Right of Death and Power over Life dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body (Foucault, 122).

Whilst Handmaid's presence remains politically null, they are indisputably the cornerstone of Gilead's survival. This centrality without recognition is the essence of Societal Limbo as it conceptualizes not a transformational phase, but an indefinite suspension of lives. Such a suspension which reduces not only one's identity but their very core as a human being. This eternal torment is evident when Offred opines that:

> I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name; remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. I want to steal something (Atwood,95).

Ultimately, the Handmaids of Gilead embody the paradox of Regime's politics. They are visible yet voiceless, protected yet violated, important yet replaceable. Their condition is in a suspended state without an end in sight. Devoid of the past and unsure of the future, the present is nothing but an eternal void for them.

Privileged Yet Constrained: Political Immobilization of Wives and Marthas

Whilst Handmaids form the reproductive machinery of Gilead, Wives and Marthas reveal how the regime arranges gendered authority and domestic responsibility in ways that shape Gilead's social order.

Wives, although visibly privileged, are among the most tightly managed figures in the novel. Although they occupy a position of domestic authority—managing the household and commanding servants—their individual identity and autonomy depend entirely on their Commander husbands. They expose the

mechanics of biopolitical patriarchy in which, although conferred symbolic eliteness, they are denied structural authority.

The Wives' inability to conceive places them in a position where their status is often tethered to another woman's fertility. While the Handmaids represent the reproductive machinery of Gilead, Wives represent its figurative façade. Infertility in Gilead is always attributed to women, and a Wife's sterility is framed as a personal deficiency. Moreover, the Ceremony reduces them to mothers-in-waiting, as their biological function is transferred to another woman. It is in this regard that Offred realizes:

> Serena Joy had changed for me, too. Once I'd merely hated her for her part in what was being done to me; and because she hated me too and resented my presence, and because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all (Atwood 154).

Serena Joy is perhaps a precise representation of the regime's uneven distribution of power among women. Once a public advocate for traditional values, she now finds herself confined within the domestic sphere she herself promoted. Her pre-Gilead identity as a televised speaker is reduced to household supervision. Denied the rights to read, write, and participate politically, she becomes a victim of the idealized femininity she once endorsed—the enactment of piety, dignity, and restraint:

> She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word (Atwood 44).

Serena thus becomes an embodiment of subjects who internalize and reproduce the norms of the regime.

From a biopolitical perspective, Wives represent the legitimization of reproductive governance in Gilead. Their blue attire symbolizes piety and purity, and they are obliged to protect the family structure of the state. Discipline here is internalized and hierarchical. While Wives exercise authority over Handmaids and Marthas, they themselves remain controlled by the Commanders. This dynamic is intensified in the television adaptation.

The series grants Serena a brief moment of political intervention—advocating for girls' literacy—only for her to be silenced and punished. These scenes clearly illustrate the limitations of derived authority. Although positioned as a privileged figure within the domestic sphere, she remains excluded from sovereign decision-making, regardless of her proximity to power.

Marthas, like Wives, are central to the social order of Gilead but are recognized only for their functionality. They cook, clean, and manage households without visibility or authority. Their labour consists of routine domestic duties and is preserved solely for its usefulness—a typical example of

normalized gendered labour. Presumed infertile, they are assigned to elite households and move within kitchens, pantries, and enclosed corridors.

Biopolitically, they function as regulated utilities, with their green garments symbolizing domestic functionality. Their predicament reflects what Michel Foucault observes in *Discipline and Punish*—power operating through routine regulation, normalization, and spatial organization (Foucault 1975). The lives of Marthas are shaped by repetitive domestic labour and confinement. They are deeply integrated into the household yet denied autonomy, functioning as a form of managed presence.

In the television adaptation, characters such as Rita are given emotional depth through scenes of quiet resistance and subtle negotiation within domestic spaces. Although an essential category, unlike Wives they remain expendable and may be reassigned to the Colonies if found disobedient. Their survival depends entirely upon compliance and caution.

In both the novel and the series, Marthas embody what may be described as managed invisibility. Although recognized for their domestic labour, they are not granted privileges in any substantive sense. They do not possess citizenship and are denied political voice, their existence suspended between stability and revocability.

Both Wives and Marthas remain suspended between visibility and disposability. Although included within the authoritative structure, they are not fully empowered by it. This condition becomes even more visible in the television adaptation, where they attempt to negotiate this state of conditional belonging. These women are neither expelled nor free but carefully positioned within a hierarchy that ensures managed recognition while denying actual citizenship.

Authority without Autonomy: Conditional Recognition of Aunts and Angels

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunts occupy a paradoxical position. Unlike Handmaids, Wives, and Marthas, they are unmarried women granted institutional authority. They train, discipline, and monitor the Handmaids in the Red Center, exercising a derivative authority conferred by the patriarchal regime. Their authority is neither autonomous nor liberal but conditional and delegated. Through Aunts, Atwood exposes how biopolitical governance operates through conditional recognition, whereby a selected group of women is vested with limited power to regulate other female bodies.

Aunts in Gilead may be understood as mediators between ideology and the body, responsible for instilling in Handmaids—and thus in readers—Gilead's reproductive theology. For instance, Aunt Lydia insists that the Handmaids' position is not "a prison but a privilege" (Atwood 6) and that what they do is an "honor" (Atwood 25). They repeatedly reframe sexual coercion as sacred duty, reserved only for the chosen. The ways in which they discipline Handmaids resemble what Michel Foucault describes as gentle power: not through overt torture but through ritual, surveillance, and shame.

The Red Center thus becomes a site of normalized disciplinary power. The Handmaids are stripped of their former identities, renamed, and trained to become ideal reproductive bodies for Gilead's future. Aunt Lydia's lessons emphasize modesty, gratitude, and silence, successfully shaping a subjectivity that Foucault conceptualizes as *docile bodies*:

> A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. The celebrated automata, on the other hand, were not only a way of illustrating an organism; they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power (Foucault 136).

Through repetition, humiliation, and the reiteration of scripture, Aunts function as minor yet effective agencies of power.

In the novel, there are several instances in which Aunts weaponize shame. They convert past trauma into disciplinary instruments, thereby internalizing blame and compliance. A notable example occurs when Aunt Helena forces Janine to recount her gang rape:

> But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. She did. She did. She did. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson . . . It was my fault, she says. It was my own fault. I led them on (Atwood 69–70).

However, the Aunts' authority remains conditional. They are permitted to read and allowed to carry cattle prods, yet beyond female spaces and reproductive contexts they lack command. They are denied political titles and military ranks and are not permitted to question the regime's norms. Their legitimacy persists only so long as they serve its reproductive regulation. Should they deviate, their privileges would be revoked. Thus, they occupy a position that bridges gendered exclusion and institutional authority.

They embody the modern state's investment in regulating the lives of its subjects, assigned the task of ensuring the smooth functioning of Gilead's reproductive machinery. Yet they occupy an ambiguous moral position. They are neither revered as Handmaids nor honored as Wives, and their legitimacy stems partly from their departure from conventional gender roles. Although they are not oppressed or silenced in the same manner as other female categories, they remain subject to the regime's command. Their existence occupies an intermediate zone—recognized but not equal, authoritative but not sovereign.

The television adaptation further deepens this paradox by presenting Aunt Lydia as a figure with personal history and emotional vulnerability. The series emphasizes that her authority is neither supreme nor secure and that her decisions remain subject to scrutiny by male superiors. Aunts thus demonstrate how biopolitical governance depends upon intermediaries through whom power is dispersed and administered.

While Aunts represent disciplinary authority, Angels represent militarized social bodies. They function as soldiers of the regime, stationed at checkpoints, deployed to battlefields, and positioned as guardians. Angels are both agents and products of power, their disciplined existence embodying strength, loyalty, and silence. Offred repeatedly encounters Angels outside Commanders' homes and at city checkpoints. Their roles are directly tied to safeguarding reproductive mechanisms, acting as protective barriers around Handmaids. They normalize the state's military vigilance, as checkpoints, patrols, and border controls are justified through the necessity of regulating reproductive bodies.

However, unlike Commanders, they do not possess elite status or absolute authority. Their power is functional rather than administrative. In both the novel and the series, Angels are rewarded with Wives for their loyalty to the regime. The mass weddings depicted in the television adaptation reinforce the regime's strategy of balancing coercion with celebration. In this way, the state fuses military duty with reproductive promise: masculine sacrifice on the battlefield is compensated with domestic authority at home. Angels thus function simultaneously as protectors and procreators.

Masculinity in this context is ritualized through uniforms, posture, and behaviour. Although Angels enforce the biopolitical hierarchy of Gilead, they themselves remain subject to its disciplinary mechanisms. Like Aunts, they are expendable once they deviate from the regime's expectations. By naming them "Angels," the regime symbolically merges religion and warfare, presenting soldiers as both divine messengers and militant defenders. The existence of Mayday, however, reveals the limits of this system and exposes the regime's underlying anxiety and instability. Ultimately, Angels represent a masculinity that is disciplined, conditional, and oriented toward national survival. Through Angels, Atwood demonstrates that biopolitics operates not only within households and Ceremonies but also across borders and battlefields.

Thus, both Aunts and Angels illuminate how Gilead sustains its biopolitical order through carefully regulated forms of conditional recognition. Neither group occupies the regime's sovereign core, yet neither is wholly marginalized. Both exist within a state of qualified belonging—recognized, instrumentalized, and authorized but never fully empowered. Through these figures, Atwood demonstrates that biopolitical governance depends not only on the subjugation of bodies but also on the strategic deployment of intermediaries. Power here operates not solely through fear but through the calibrated distribution of conditional belonging.

Preserved without Legitimacy: Jezebel's as Managed Spaces in Gilead

Within Gilead's moral order, Jezebel's occupies a clandestine position, even though it is structurally necessary. These women exist outside the canonical classifications of women in Gilead and are confined to secret brothels reserved for Commanders and foreign envoys.

Although Gilead proclaims sexual purity, modesty, and discipline, beneath these facades exists a world of illicit pleasure. Jezebel's is a clear example of how even the most rigorously organized moral regimes depend on controlled zones of violation. The women in Jezebel's exist in what may be described as a sexual exception. They are exempt from rigid norms that other women must follow—such as prohibitions against wearing makeup or drinking alcohol—while still lacking autonomy. They are, in effect, sexual bodies preserved not for reproduction but for the fulfilment of male desire.

Offred's visit to Jezebel's marks one of the most significant turning points in the novel, exposing the hypocrisy embedded in Gilead's moral codes. Encountering a space that sharply contrasts with the enforced modesty imposed on Handmaids, she experiences a disorienting return to a past from which she now feels estranged:

> All wear make-up, and I realize how unaccustomed I've become to seeing it, on women, because their eyes look too big to me, too dark and shimmering, their mouths too red, too wet, blood-dipped and glistening; or, on the other hand, too clownish (Atwood 234).

However, this apparent freedom is deceptive. The women in Jezebel's are in fact reclassified bodies, deemed unsuitable for other social categories yet considered too valuable or attractive to be sent to the Colonies. They therefore occupy an intermediary position between these two extremes, placed within a space that appears comparatively privileged but remains fundamentally coercive. Moira's reappearance at Jezebel's underscores this condition: once a figure of resistance at the Red Center, she is forced to choose between execution and relocation to Jezebel's. This episode demonstrates how, rather than eliminating deviant bodies, the regime redistributes them into controlled spaces. Here, the intellectual independence of these women is neutralized through their reduction to commodities serving male pleasure. This is evident when the Commander explains:

> Well, we have quite a collection. That one there, the one in green, she's a sociologist. Or was. That one was a lawyer, that one was in business, an executive position; some sort of fast-food chain or maybe it was hotels. I'm told you can have quite a good conversation with her if all you feel like is talking. They prefer it here, too. "Prefer it to what?" I say. "To the alternatives," he says. "You might even prefer it yourself, to what you've got" (Atwood 237).

This dynamic reflects what Michel Foucault observes in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*: modern power does not simply repress sexuality but reorganizes it for its utility (Foucault 33–34). The existence of Jezebel's demonstrates how sexuality is regulated and stratified—how the state determines which forms are recognized (as in the Ceremony), which are tolerated in illegitimate spaces (as in Jezebel's), and which are punishable (such as homosexuality or adultery). Although the regime publicly condemns the moral degradation of the pre-Gilead world, it privately reconstructs similar practices in order to accommodate male desire while preserving its reproductive dogma. Whether veiled in red or dressed in sequins, the female body remains an object structured for male consumption.

In the television adaptation, the portrayal of Jezebel's—with its neon lighting and loud music—visually contrasts the muted austerity of the external world. This imagery intensifies the paradox and exposes the hypocrisy embedded in Gilead's moral structure.

Women in Jezebel's, especially Moira, demonstrate how the regime succeeds in confining even those with exceptional emotional and intellectual resilience. Through her conversation with Offred, Moira expresses a sense of resignation and recognizes the futility of resistance within Gilead, suggesting that the authorities are indifferent to dissent and that escape from such spaces is nearly impossible (Atwood 243).

Thus, women in Jezebel's occupy a position of duality: they exist but do not belong. They inhabit what may be described as a suspended category—condemned yet preserved, hidden yet visible, disposable yet indulged. While official discourse denies them legitimacy, authoritarian practice sustains their presence. Through them, Margaret Atwood reveals how totalitarian control cannot fully eliminate contradiction and instead accommodates it within carefully regulated spaces.

Erased Lives and Disposable Bodies: Deferred Existence of Queers and Unwomen

Whilst all the above-mentioned groups are redistributed into regulated categories, Queers and Unwomen occupy the outermost margins of Gilead's social order. They are expendable bodies whose lives are deemed deviant, futile, and unproductive. Their existence opens up a much darker discourse in biopolitics—the calculated annihilation of populations the state considers unfit.

Constructed upon the singular goal of reproductive success, Gilead is organized around compulsory heterosexual reproduction. Within this framework, homosexuality becomes a perceived threat, as same-sex unions do not produce children. Termed "Gender Traitors," such individuals are executed, punished, and displayed as warnings—transforming identity itself into an act of treason. Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, observes how:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species . . . (Foucault 39–40).

From a Foucauldian perspective, the treatment of homosexuals in Gilead reflects the exclusionary dimension of biopolitics. Gilead's investment in fertility requires the devaluation of non-reproductive sexuality, and the elimination of queer bodies is framed not as an act of cruelty but as one of moral purification and public necessity.

This logic extends to Unwomen as well, who are those unable to fit into any recognized category within the regime's classificatory structure. They include feminists, lesbians, political dissidents, and infertile women considered incapable of contributing to the nation's reproductive future. They are typically sent to the Colonies to clean radioactive waste and await a slow death. Unlike the women of Jezebel's—who, although condemned, are still preserved in secret—Unwomen are openly discarded and exposed to death. Here, the biopolitical distinction becomes especially clear. While Handmaids are protected for their reproductive value, Marthas for their domestic labour, and Aunts for their regulatory function, Unwomen are pushed entirely beyond the sphere of usefulness. Their bodies—and thus their lives—become surplus to the regime and are ultimately eliminated through deferred exposure to death.

The description of the Colonies itself produces a terrifying image of their existence, reinforced further by the visual representation in the television adaptation. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's account portrays how modern regimes administer death indirectly through calculated neglect:

> The other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skinpulls away like rubber gloves. They don't bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to. Anyway they're mostly people they want to get rid of (Atwood, 249).

Thus, Queer bodies and Unwomen in Gilead exist as cautionary examples for others, neither visible, nor eliminated but living a life worse than death. These bodies are present only to reinforce the boundaries of Gilead's social order.

Beyond Liminality and Precarity: Conceptualizing Societal Limbo

Victor Turner, in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, conceptualizes the term *liminality* to refer to the transitional stage of individuals who are "betwixt and between" (Turner 95) social roles. Liminal subjects, according to him, are those temporarily removed from structured hierarchies before being reintegrated into mainstream society. They occupy an ambiguous position between social identities; however, their condition remains temporary and dynamic. A parallel yet distinctive

framework is proposed by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), where he develops the concept of *bare life*, through which the state of exception reduces individuals to mere biological existence devoid of political rights (Agamben 8). Here, subjects become killable—placed outside the protection of law. However, neither framework fully captures the suspended condition of Gilead's figures, whose positions are neither transitional nor entirely excluded. Instead, they remain structurally suspended within the same system that conditionally includes them.

Societal Limbo denotes this state of institutionalized suspension, whereby subjects are granted recognition and conditional inclusion yet denied sovereignty and permanent security. Unlike liminality, this condition is not transformational, and unlike precarity, it cannot be fully defined by generalized vulnerability. Rather, it describes a condition of managed preservation in which subjects are retained within the system primarily for their utility.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Handmaids are biologically indispensable but politically erased. Aunts are institutionally essential yet hierarchically subordinate. Angels are central to the military apparatus yet easily replaceable. Each category thus receives a measured form of recognition as a reward for service to the regime. Here, recognition functions as a tool of governance. Categories such as the Aunts are not economically precarious, as they possess institutional authority, literacy, and power over other women. However, beyond the sphere of reproductive enforcement, they remain politically powerless. Jezebels, similarly, are preserved and materially sustained while simultaneously hidden and disposable at the regime's discretion. These figures are not simply vulnerable; rather, they are instrumentalized and positioned in ways that systematically restrict their autonomy.

Thus, in Gilead, bodies are granted visibility and recognition only insofar as they reproduce, discipline, entertain, or defend the social and moral order. Such recognition remains conditional and revocable. Their existence is neither secure nor fully denied. Even the Wives occupy a position that is neither fully empowered nor fully excluded, nor transitional in a way that leads toward resolution. Their identities remain fixed within prescribed social roles, placing them in a condition of enduring suspension—a socially structured limbo.

In Gilead, *Societal Limbo* is not only social but also spatial, produced through controlled environments. The Red Centers, Jezebel's, and the Colonies function as sites of regulated containment, not as transitional zones but as regulatory margins. Here, *Societal Limbo* becomes architectural. It is embedded in disciplinary practices and sustained through repeated performance. Unlike liminality and precarity, this condition involves neither progression nor decline. Instead, it represents an enduring suspension—the suspension of life itself.

The concept of *Societal Limbo* enables us to examine how authoritarian regimes govern without constant visible violence. By granting selective recognition, the state consolidates authority through intermediaries—represented by Aunts and Angels—entrusted with managing the social and moral order of Gilead. Each category within Gilead thus occupies a distinct level of recognition without forming a collective political identity. *Societal Limbo* therefore describes a condition of structured suspension in which the state maximizes a subject's utility without granting full empowerment.

Although articulated through the dystopian structures of Gilead, *Societal Limbo* is not merely fictional. Contemporary political regimes continue to produce subjects whose inclusion remains conditional and suspended—migrant labourers without citizenship, queer communities without judicial protection, and institutionalized sex workers marginalized by society. Such groups remain neither fully expelled nor fully protected, occupying socially constructed spaces of liminality produced through the intersecting forces of religion, economy, and law.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale presents a dystopian regime that governs not through immediate terror but through sustained suspension. Subjects are sorted into groups based on their service and utility to the regime and are granted forms of recognition that are partial and conditional. Handmaids are utilized for their fertility; Wives function as the symbolic façade of Gilead's moral order; Marthas sustain domestic life; Aunts discipline and internalize reproductive subjectivity; Angels militarize reproductive protection; Jezebel's contains illicit desire; and Queers and Unwomen mark the margins of disposable bodies. Together, these categories expose a system that governs life not uniformly but differentially.

This article, by introducing the term *Societal Limbo*, demonstrates that in Gilead, rather than regulated suppression alone, there exists a systematic management of subjects in which individuals are not only utilized to their limits but are also conditioned to internalize their utility as recurring and necessary. Unlike liminality, this condition is not transitional; unlike precarity, it is not unstable. Instead, it operates as a sustained political arrangement.

The concept of *Societal Limbo* explains how Gilead sustains itself without relying solely on overt punishment. By granting selective recognition—literacy to Aunts, domestic authority to Wives, militarized legitimacy to Angels, and controlled visibility to Jezebels—the regime binds intermediaries to its survival. Inclusion here becomes conditional, replaceable, and functional. Although exclusion remains visible through the Wall and the Colonies, the system's durability depends primarily on those suspended within it.

The Handmaid's Tale, along with its television adaptation created by Bruce Miller, does not simply depict oppression but illustrates the subtle mechanisms of managed inclusion. By conceptualizing *Societal Limbo*, this paper offers a framework for understanding how authoritarian systems stabilize themselves—not only through violence or exclusion but through the calibrated distribution of recognition itself. In Gilead, power survives by keeping subjects alive, useful, and permanently suspended.

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