

The Handmaid's Tale – The Female Body as a Site of Resistance

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1. Introduction

“There is my country under glass,
 A white relief –
 Map with red dots for the cities,
 Reduced to the size of a wall”
 ? Margaret Atwood, “At the Tourist Centre in Boston”

In her note to the reader, which is enclosed at the end of the novel, Atwood arouses my attention by her claim that her fictional state is actually not an invention, but a theocracy society and a totalitarian that was there and is still there in the world (316). Set in a near future, the center of Gilead is located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where certain biologically and physically fit women were first deprived of all the rights they possess in the former world and then made handmaids that are to bear children for the elite but barren ruling class. The protagonist, Offred, strives to maintain her identity and explores her power through her body and reconstruction of her body through narration. Nonetheless, in the story, Offred often mingles the past with her present; what's more, she constructs a story, then she reverses what she has told and reconstructs another version. Thus, there are at least two Offreds that I see: the narrating Offred and the narrated Offred. It is not easy to distinguish, however, between the two because on the appearance, she appears to be a silent and introvert woman that is passive and pessimistic; but what goes on in her imagination and self-reflection is never as calm and dull as she appears. Namely, under her passivity and pessimistic attitude, Offred is not the quiet Offred under controlled at all; on the contrary, she manages to elaborate her power in her self-reflexive narration, and her

capability in revising the language shows more of the narrating Offred with a stronger sense of identity. Her narration helps her to move beyond bodily constraint and regain her power to construct a speaking and writing self eventually.

The body of the narrated Offred, however, is a vessel of production: Offred's body is expected to do nothing but work, and her work is to generate babies. With all the constraints on her body as the national property in the female dystopia, Offred secretly rediscovers her power through her body. And eating and preserving the body are the ways for her to discover the power of the female body and maintain her subjectivity. As I focus in Chapter One on women's self denial and assertion through eating and foods, in Chapter Two, I will discuss how Atwood uses the female body to demonstrate women's power. To be more specific, whereas *The Edible Woman* manifests a woman's reaction to patriarchal control through eating and metaphoric usage of food, *The Handmaid's Tale* thematizes women's resistance through the female body in association with not only eating and food, but also the act of narration. With the female body constrained as a national property, the protagonist Offred uses her body to determine her existence of being an individual with a history and self-awareness. Her eating behavior and perspective of food somehow voice out her resistance, and through the connection of food, eating and the image of the female body, she struggles to secretly maintain the way she was in the past. Although her name Offred suggests that Handmaids are in lack of self-identity, although written language and knowledge as the signs of power is generally withheld from women in Gilead, Offred uses first her body to retain her sense of identity and to rediscover her power. Even when she ironically can only use her voice (as a disembodied subject) to construct her subjectivity by narrating her story and reflecting on her past, even when her story gets reconstructed by some male historians, her identity in the book is still fully "embodied" in language.

That women's bodies such as Handmaids' are severely scrutinized has explained how a body can be docile, especially the female body. As Michel Foucault introduces how he sees the human bodies are those accustomed to being disciplined and regarded as docile ones in his *Discipline and Punish*, human bodies become docile so as to reach the controlling power's goal of order and regulation. For him, human body was directed and disciplined since birth; ideologies such as sexuality and gender are produced by discourses. This discipline not merely "produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (138) but also becomes an aptitude, a capacity that dissociates power from the body. That is, the energy of the body is controlled, disciplined and developed and later is reversed to be a restraint, a power of subjection. Additionally, this control takes place in body, in space and morality, which is an ideological control. Apparatus such as schools, military institutions, industrial organization, or a control

measure dealing with outbreak of certain epidemic diseases all demonstrate the impact of the power of the control over the body that is docile. In her “Introduction to the Female,” Jared Fox interprets how she perceives Foucault’s defining a docile body as one body that can be subjected, used, transformed and improved so as to achieve demands of disciplinary actions (1). She further endorses her reading of Sandra Lee Bartky who criticizes our society that has made the female body the particularly disciplined and docile one.

Hence, with Foucault’s concept of the docile body that is made to be both useful and intelligible, in this chapter, I will present my discussion in three sections: in the first section, I will examine Gilead’s control over all the women and especially the handmaids, focusing on the site of the female body. Gilead’s disciplinary technologies include: the way they categorize the female bodies, define women’s roles in a household as such that of the Commanders’ households, constrain and put under surveillance women’s movements, knowledge, language and even thinking. All of these are done to make the female body useful and intelligible. Then in the second section, I will move to analyze the bodily consciousness awakened by body and food imagery, which later awakens Offred to resist Gileadean control. I will argue how Offred, though seriously deprived and restricted, retains her bodily consciousness through an analysis of the body and food imagery used in her narration. And finally, I will examine Offred’s stronger and stronger resistance against the totalitarian and how she retains her individual consciousness and subjectivity through memory, bodily functions and acts, and, finally, self-narration.

2. The Docile Female Body – a Site of Construction

The female body in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is considered the national property. This could be seen through certain functions of different female bodies in a hierarchical society like Gilead. For women of different levels, the Gilead government appoints colored dresses for them. There are seven categories of women dressed in different colors: the Wives dressed in blue, and always seen in cars, but not on the sidewalks; the Aunts dressed in khaki with electronic cattle prod on their leather belts; the Handmaid in red, as Offred describes, “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us” (8); the Marthas in dull green, functioning as cooks; the Econowives in the striped dresses composed of the color red, blue and green, and among them, the Widows dressed in all black; the Unwoman, who are to be starved to death or catch unknown diseases in the Colonies, are in gray overall.

Besides being categorized by colors, women are treated as national property in terms of their function – as rewards and prize for men, the leading characters of Gilead. Fertile women, for instance, are made the Handmaids as prize objects sent to the Commanders' households. Once the Handmaids are done with giving birth to a household, she is to be redistributed to another household. As Offred recalls in her narration, "I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig. Sometime in the eighties they invented pig balls, for pigs who were being fattened in pens" (69). She thinks of herself as objectified as a prize pig when she is all alone in her room and can not do anything but what she is asked to do: to be bathed, to be fed and to wait for further demands from the head of the family or society. She is an example of how men in power, such as the Commanders and the Angels, are rewarded by fertile women. Likewise, the Virgins become brides to the Angels. The underground prostitutes are another example of women's being prizes, which are used to reward and entertain Commanders and their foreign customers.

When speaking about spatial constraint, in addition, only by taking turns in being sick and remaining in bed do the Wives get the chance of going out and visiting each other. However restrained the Wives are, Offred realizes the women from the lower status are even much more exploited and controlled. In the similar way, she notices that Marthas are confined in the household as well. She feels that Marthas are involved in their endless household chores in the kitchen and the compound. Offred knows that she is both the hope of them and the target of envy because she is allowed to get around running errands. Worst of all, the Unwoman exposed in the contaminated environment are silenced in the real life and in the documentary. Being segregated from society, the Unwoman only appear in documentary and in the Handmaids's nightmares. They are victimized in the Colonies, cleaning the waste and suffering from torment that later end them in the misery of mysterious illness.

As national property, women's bodies are expected to be useful and totally controllable by the men in power. To be more effective, Gilead authorizes some infertile women, the Aunts, as a deputy of the central controlling power so as to reaffirm that all women are under surveillance both ideologically and physically. Any rebellious female bodies are to be punished and re-educated until they have become bodies that follow the order. To achieve the total surveillance, first Handmaids are sieved out, disciplined and brainwashed with all the doctrines. Moira, the distinctly rebellious woman, is to be punished due to her uncooperative behavior; when the Aunts realizes that she may remain her position as a backlash against Gilead society, they send her to Jezebel's, the underground night club which offers Commanders and powerful figures of the country amusement such as sex service.

In addition to being identified in terms of the one role determined by the nation and

matched with one corresponding color, the women in Gilead, like the men there, are disciplined and organized spatially in Gilead. First of all, wherever they walk, they are under the surveillance of the Eyes. In the heart of Gilead, there are posts everywhere with Guardians and machines like the Compuchek to control and supervise everyone; no one is allowed to move freely in the city without passes. While closing schools, churches and libraries, the national machine provides the 'wall,' the dead bodies as "zeroes" on the wall, as well as the ceremony of public execution, as a means of education and a warning sign against any possible violation of rules and disloyalty. Under such strict surveillance of the Gileadeans' bodily actions, Offred is afraid of being caught at her secret rebellion such as her quiet communication with Ofglen. The spatial control in Gilead is an extreme form of what Foucault calls a "carceral texture of society [with its] capture of the body and its perpetual observation" (304). The existence of the wall, like the prison in Foucault's analysis, justifies society's disciplinary technologies and carceral forms. Situated in this carceral texture and having their bodies controlled both spatially and physically, the female bodies, whether they be those of the Wives, the Marthas' or Moira's and Offred's, are by all means docile. With a closer look on the life of the Marthas and the Wife in her Commander's compound, Offred notices that most conformed women devote their energy and bodies to domestic affairs. Even though they are given limited power, the Wives seem to be engaged in endless sewing, knitting and quilting for the frontier Angels. The quiet knitting image of a mother further brings Offred to retrospect on Serena Joy's eloquence in the old time and her silence at the present of Gilead. Offred recalls the old days when she used to see Serena Joy preaching the fundamental doctrines in a theatrical way on television:

She wasn't singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all. (45)

Here Offred demonstrates her resistance through her observation and critical thinking, and through her sarcasm over Serena's former life and current situation, she becomes powerful with her sharp awareness of control and her critical thinking and memory. Offred recalls the past when she watches Serena (whose real name, Offred believes, was Pam) make hysterical speeches with tears and heavy makeup wearing off with the tears, Offred feels frightened with Serena's earnest and enthusiasm. Then she considers Serena's silence to be a powerless protest compared to her eloquence in the pre-Gilead society: "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" (46).

If the Wives' and Marthas' bodies are framed within the household, Moira's is used secretly in a space beyond disciplinary boundaries and hidden in one corner of Gilead, Jezebel's, where women's sexuality is stressed and instrumentalized for sexual entertainment. In the second half of the novel, Offred discovers that the female body is manipulated and decorated with an emphasis on femininity under severe control. It is not until the night in Jezebel's does Offred realize that Gilead society not only manipulates the female body like the pre-Gilead society, but also further exploits the female body with extreme stress on female sexuality—even though the Aunts tell them that they are well protected from the crimes connected to sexual liberations. As a “rent-out” at the night in Jezebel's, Offred sees her friend Moira, dressed in the costume of a typical playmate: the bunny suit, which stresses on the figurative shape of the female body. Through Moira, Offred is told about her mother being exploited in the Colony and the life of the women in Jezebel's. It is what Moira has told her that makes her reflect on how much the female body is being exploited: the useless female body are treated as dirt and are exposed in a poisonous environment as a guinea pig, whereas the rebellious but still useful female bodies like Moira's have productive ovaries taken away from them so as to make their bodies become the source of pleasure and enjoyment for foreigners, guests of the state and the powerful figures in Gilead. In the Jezebel's, Moira tells Offred what she feels about her body: “Well, shit, nobody but a nun would pick the Colonies. I mean, I'm not a martyr. If I'd had my tubes tied years ago, I wouldn't even have needed the operation. Nobody in here with viable ovaries either, you can see what kind of problems it would cause” (249). Moira's nonchalant and cynical attitude toward where she is and how she is treated puzzles and makes Offred feel sad about the changed attitude of Moira, who used to give Offred a string of hope, the hope to get over all the plight. Offred recalls that she is frightened at hearing the indifference in Moira's voice, “a lack of volition:”

Have they really done it to her then, taken away something – what? – that used to be so central to her? And how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?

I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack. (249)

It is also this hope and courage of Moira that supports Offred to rebel one way or another against all sorts of confinement and restrictions secretly up to the point. Yet, Moira's indifferent attitude, suggesting her failure and self-resignation, makes Offred even more desperate at finding a way out. Ironically, Offred wants to be “off-red,” wants to reclaim her identity and subjectivity whereas Moira has transformed to be a conditioned Jezebel that cannot be off the label nor be herself any more.

Realizing her aloneness in the battlefield fight for her way out, Offred gradually finds herself chances to execute her resistance to actively break through her constraint. Another, and, of course, stronger, stimulus for Offred to resist, is Gilead's control over Handmaid's bodies, including her own. To begin with, the Handmaids in the Red Center are completely under the control of Aunts. They receive the doctrines defined by the Christian fundamentalism and are stocked with biblical teachings in their brains. Here I use two examples to explain how the Handmaids' bodies are docile and made useful in an extreme way. For one thing, the Handmaids' bodies are confined spatially and physically. As all Handmaids are the objects under surveillance, their movements and bodies are the target of the other spectators, including men and women. Not simply are they the target of the tourists, but they are the perfect aims of the Wives and all the others in the Prayvaganza. In face with the limited freedom, she also tries to adapt herself to it, for she knows that "A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (165). To sum up, there is no privacy for the handmaids, and the obligation that the doctors examine the Handmaids' bodies serves as another example. In public spaces or private spaces like the doctor's office, the Handmaids' red habits mark them differently from other female bodies. After being examined over as a thing, the Handmaids's bodies are materialized eventually. Under the Aunts' teachings, Offred reminds herself of treating her own body as various items and objects. Offred sees her body as a vessel, just as Aunt Lydia coaches the Handmaids to intake proper food and supplement for the sake of their bodies, which can be taken as a container, because "it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (96); or as a pearl, seeds or house chore that the Martha must tend to.

Apart from physical constraint and surveillance, Handmaids are under severe ideological control, and their bodies are strictly disciplined in order to be kept "useful." For instance, the concept of "the body" that is enjoyable in the past has become an object of instruction. In Testifying, Janine tells her gang-raped experience and is accused of being a seductive body:

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. (72)

This testifying experience exemplifies how Janine's bodily experience of rape is turned into a lesson for her as well as the collective body of the Handmaids: our contemporary idea of "blame it on the rape victims" here becomes a doctrine to

ensure that the Handmaids' bodies are deprived of all the signs of sexuality--which attract their own attention on their bodies as well as the rapists' --so as to be bodies "purely" for reproduction.

Another disciplinary technology used to stop the Handmaids from having sexual desire is, ironically, in the use of pornographic films. To start with, to prove that the female body is more privileged in Gilead society, the Aunts demonstrate how the female body is manipulated during the pre-Gilead time. Various female body parts are shown as a cruel proof of how women's bodies are abused and insulted. Nevertheless, the porno film that the Aunts use is just an extreme measure for them to brainwash the Handmaids and justify their overall control in the totalitarian. The Aunts argue that Gilead society makes the female body useful with their intelligible traits. The irony is, even though the Aunts put emphasis on the abuse of the female body in the old time, it is exactly the Aunts that carry out the punishment on the rebellious women through discipline and physical punishment on their bodies. And the tortures on the Handmaids' bodies are not at all less abusive than what is shown in the film. Offred recalls the time after Moira was snatched back to the Red Center from her first escape, her feet were beaten swollen by the steel cables: "It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. [] After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent" (92).

While the "discipline and punishment" used is partly for the Handmaids to be "useful" receptacle of sperms, it is also to turn their images to be easily intelligible and manipulable images of femininity. In many ways, the Handmaids are taught and conditioned ideologically to retain their femininity. At Gilead, femininity is constructed as the female image of self-restraint, purity and submissiveness. In the Red Center, Offred learns from Aunt Lydia who reminds all the Handmaids, "The Republic of Gilead knows no bound. Gilead is within you" (23). This powerful statement indicates how much Offred and other Handmaids internalize the teaching and behave in accordance with other's expectation, for they are forced to remember: "The posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive" (79).

Besides having decent and self-erasing physical movements, the Handmaids are also supposed to restrain themselves in eating. Apparently, all the Handmaids are on a regime of diet; they are not allowed to take coffee, cigarette and anything in excess. In other words, they exist because their bodies are usable and useful, and the Gilead society does not allow them to corrupt their bodies with anything. Although the Handmaids seem to have a bit more freedom in going around, they have literally no freedom in aspects ranging from diet to thinking. One obvious piece of evidence is that the Handmaids' diet is severely planned. Offred is accustomed to the Martha's

waiting on her when it comes to food and bath. As a “prize pig” or “a thing,” her body is also expected to remain slender so as to remain in their working position.

Moreover, one look on handmaids’ greetings, we see that the mind-and-body-control is externalized and practiced in their language to ensure that they focus on their function of procreation and conform to the image of feminine self-restraint-and-denial. Their awareness of being watched everywhere they go is reinforced in the farewell they bid each other: “Under His Eye.” All salutes and sayings are related to the sexual functions of the handmaids’ bodies, and this can also be seen in their greetings – “Blessed be the fruit;” “May the God open” (19); “Think of yourself as seeds.”

Likewise, images with reproduction are everywhere so as to do with their abstinence in both appearance, sex and foods – “Modesty is invisibility” (28), “Waste not, want not” (7). Besides lessons in the forms of praises and confirmation, warnings are also given to the Handmaids to warn them against men. The Handmaids are told that “All Flesh is weak,” that men could be tempted just as they themselves could be used as “sex machines.” After all, as the Aunts remind the Handmaids, none of the body parts is as essential as their wombs; and as the female body has somehow been instrumentalized and reduced as a reproductive machine, so does the sexual desire can be seen as redundant and unnecessary. These teachings and sayings, in a word, impose on the handmaids’ mind and body two ideas: to keep low-profiled, because “to be seen is to be penetrated” and they are expected to be “impenetrable” (28), and to keep focused on their bodies’ main function of procreation for the state.

Made, or forced to be, useful as well as completely intelligible, the Handmaid’s bodies, furthermore, is turned into one body. Since the re-education session in the Red Center, the Handmaids are taught to reverse views toward the female body as a body/product of “freedom to” to one body of “freedom from”; in other words, from liberated bodies back to restrained bodies. The Aunts lay stress on women’s bodies as one unison body that is the property of the nation and one body that is to be given freedom from, instead of a body that is free to do anything. This unison body appears here and there in the story: in the ceremony, Offred’s body only has a meaning when her reproductive system is considered as Serena’s; in other words, it is Offred’s lower body part that counts. Similarly, all Handmaids’ bodies are regarded as one body. Additionally, the chanting on the Birthday and the testifying in the Red Center also present this one body.

For Gileadean authority, the female body is treated as if there was only one body, a collective female body. Women are seen, not as individuals, but as different groups of social roles. No matter what social status one woman has, her body means nothing but its function, and she is replaceable by anyone with the same function. It is especially sarcastic when the Commander confuses his own wife, Serena, with Martha Cora. As

he reveals the death of the previous Handmaid, Offred reflects his words: “She hanged herself,” he says; thoughtfully, not sadly. “That’s why had the light fixture removed. In your room.” He pauses. “Serena found out,” he says, as if this explains it. And it does.

If your dog dies, get another. []

“I suppose it was Cora who found her,” I say. That’s why she screamed.

“Yes,” he says. “Poor girl.” He means Cora. (187 emphasis added)

Apparently, the Handmaid’s death is as meaningless and trivial as the woman that discovered it because all women can be taken as one body for the Commander, who insinuates that the female body in the old days is “the meat market” (219).

Enlightened by Roberta Rubenstein’s discussion of blurred distinction between human and non-human, Karen Stein also notices something that explains how the female body is objectified as one common thing, “The hanged bodies of Gilead’s victims are suspended from the walls of the former Harvard Yard like slabs of meat on meathook” (64-5).

In a way, all the strict control of Gileadian women’s, and in particular, Handmaids’ mind and body embodies to an extreme Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power. To make women’s bodies useful but not dangerous, Gilead’s discipline, to borrow Foucault’s words, “is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine” (164). In this carceral society in Gilead, as I have tried to show, women’s identities are simplified into different roles, with each serving only one role and all forming an “efficient machine” of household and procreation. No social machines, however, can exert their waterproof control on their subjects, and, in the case of Offred, resistance starts in her very body.

3. The Docile Female Body—Where Resistance Starts

Offred’s rebellious thinking develops as she receives more and more control on her body, and it manifests itself first in Offred’s observation of her own body and then through her relating her body to food. With her body being disciplined, she also has changed her attitude toward her own body. She reflects the big difference between her concept of body as concrete, substantial and multifunctional in the old time, and the void she feels within herself after her body becomes docile:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. [] There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. [] It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. (74)

Here the sense of emptiness is dubious to say the least. In one sense, Offred's body is a docile one, concerned with not having a fetus fill up her empty womb. The want of conceiving a baby drives Offred desperate: in a way, she needs the baby to survive in the Gilead since she has no chance left after the previous failures in the other two households. In another, Offred experiences the despair of loss and the dread of being left empty with nothing once more. To her, this baby is not merely a new life for the household, but a new life for her.

Atwood further illustrates how the female body, extraordinarily, can be torn apart in Gilead society. Through Offred's experience of her separated body and her sense of self, she reveals her shameful feeling of looking at her own body:

My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear ething suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely. (63)

Here, her body has become "something," an "it" that she does not feel like claiming hers. Likewise, she experiences the separation of her body from herself by composing her own body as "a thing" (66). Her identifying herself as a cloud that "congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than [she is] and glows red within its translucent wrapping" somehow may explain both her desire of conceiving a child and her complicated inner transition of separating her body and her self. That is why she sometimes fails to tell the reality from her dream, because she recollects the dream in which she was with her child, and then feels desperate and despair about her situation. Sometimes Offred reminisces and expresses her desolation: "Maybe the life I think I'm living is a paranoid delusion" (109). And sometimes, she hears something inside her body fall apart (146). All in all, she becomes devastated owing to the separation of her body and self.

With an attempt to keep her identity, this experience of the separation of the body and the self, however, further enables Offred to realize how her female body is the object of gaze, the object of desire, and is materialized as objects. Making the female body objectified, the Gilead authority penetrates their power throughout the nation. And that further drives Offred to the edge so as to cherish her scarce power that she

secretly maintains for retaining her identity and her name from the past. She remembers how she and all of the women in the pre-Gilead society lost their power to the Gilead authority. With her financial accounts frozen and her job taken away, Offred feels “white, flat, thin” and transparent; back then, she started to question: “Surely they will be able to see through me. Worse, how will I be able to hold onto Luke, to her []” (85). She feels as if she is made of smoke, and the sense of being penetrated and seen through further deprives her of the calm, confidence and power. Then she later experiences similar nakedness and transparent when she is in the Commander’s study room. Whatever she does, her body is always scrutinized and studied like an object by the Commander. Offred recollects her uneasiness under his gaze: “While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it, without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it” (184). The Commander’s demonstration of his power does not simply take place when he concentrates on Offred’s body and movement. The night at the Jezebel’s, Offred is completely conscious the Commander uses her to show off. That night when she dresses up to the Jezebel’s with the Commander, she is aware of her body as a body wearing a purple evening rental tag. Or, there are times Offred perceives how the Commander patronizes her as if she is “an almost extinct animal” when he looks at her. Nevertheless, there are times that Offred enjoys being watched, for the scarce power that she experiences. When her power is reduced to almost none, she uses her body as a source of power that further assists her to confirm her subjectivity. She uses her body as a seductive apparatus as she faces the checkpoint Guards:

They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It’s like thumbing your nose from behind a fence and teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I’m ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they’re too young.

Then I find I’m not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power, power of a dog bone, passive but there. (22)

And yet it is not merely Offred that is the target of gaze in Gilead. She is conscious that her body is taken as a freight of hope of others, for she acknowledges other’s expectation on her; she realizes that herself is like “a queen ant with eggs” and “the vehicle” of other’s hope (135). Through all the images of numerous objects and items, Offred understands very well how much her body and her womb have been objectified, and how much she is reduced to the basic level of biological function of a female body, and that makes her even more anxious to restore her subjectivity. With her five senses’ becoming keener than ever, Offred is also more critical in her observation of her body and the food. Here I would like to do a closer inspection on

Offred's resistance through the correlated imagery of the female body, food and eating in *The Handmaid's Tale*. As in *The Edible Woman*, patriarchal control of women and women's resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* find a powerful expression in the comparison of the female body to foods, and the issue of who gets to own or consume these foods. In the epigraph, Atwood quotes from Swift's *The Modest Proposal*. Critics like Karen Stein compares Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* with Jonathan Swift's *The Modest Proposal*; this comparison somehow explains that the images of food, eating and the body, particularly the female body in *The Handmaid's Tale* (as well as in *The Edible Woman*) is closely associated with food such as meat, as Stein points out,

The cannibal theme is carried out in several ways in *Tale*. On some level, the foods the handmaids eat, symbolic representations of wombs and fertility (pears, eggs, chickens, bread described as baking in the oven), are analogues for their bodies. Additionally, one of Offred's flashback memories recounts her childhood fear of cannibalism. [] By means of this digression, Offred makes explicit the analogies between Gilead and Nazi Germany, and between her tale and "A Modest Proposal" (66-7).

While trying to maintain her bodily consciousness, Offred uses smell to make associations with the past, and with the women around her. From Marthas's kitchen, for instance, she recollects the smell of her kitchen in the old times, of the days when she was still a mother, still had a mother, and of the food smell. Also, she sympathizes with Marthas owing to their constraint with endless chores in the kitchen and she is eager to communicate and connect with other women. The imagery of food is scattered in the text:

The table has been scrubbed off, cleared of flour; today's bread, freshly baked, is cooling on its rack. The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother. (47)

How does these imagery of foods arouse her self-awareness and provoke her the want of self-preservation? Offred regards this kitchen full of smell of food a past memory and a warning as "a treacherous smell" that she should keep away from. Nonetheless, she reveals her longing of her old identity as a mother and a daughter. Furthermore, her keen senses dwelling on the memory of being a mother and a daughter lead her to explore the smell that she notices in the sitting room and with Serena Joy. Offred has complicated feelings toward Serena Joy, who may be her surrogate mother, that ought to look after her in the household. Truth is, Serena does not actually care for Offred as a daughter. On the first day of Offred's arrival, Serena makes Offred understand her stance of the lady in the household, stressing on the unchangeable relationship with

her husband, and her principle of seeing Offred as least as possible. Her cold attitude and sexless smells along with the tasteless collections in the sitting room, in a way, have frustrated Offred and reminded her of the past when she was still a mother and still had a mother.

Offred's frustration in failing to connect with Serena, therefore, has hardened her loneliness in the spatial constraint, and yet made her determined to move beyond her spatial limit. Through Offred's narration, in Gilead society, women's bodies are very often compared to food. Hence, the food connected with the female body further reinforces the fact that the female body is materialized. Not only is the female body conditioned and kept in fixed positions in society, but women's diet is strictly controlled. Women's pregnant bodies collage with images of foods such as pears, eggs, oranges and lunch. Offred herself treats her body as food: she sways her body like a dog-bone to seduce the Guards and the Angels as if they are dogs longing for food. Similarly, she compares herself as "a ripe melon" when she uses her body to imagine manipulating man:

Did the sight of my ankle make him lightheaded, faint, at the checkpoint yesterday, when I dropped my pass and let him pick it up for me? No handkerchief, no fan, I use what's handy. Winter is not so dangerous. I need hardness, cold, rigidity; not this heaviness, as if I'm a melon on a stem, this liquid ripeness. (154)

On the Birthday, Ofwarren, whose real name is Janine, requests for extra sugar and is instructed that too much sugar is not good for her body. Likewise, from time to time, Offred feels tempted whenever she sees Nick and the Wife smoking. And when she is offered one cigarette from the Wife, she is warned not to have too much of it.

Furthermore, food in Gilead does not simply mean the food that people eat, it can also be an indication to social status. That is why when Offred brings home a bony chicken, Martha Rita complains about it, for she thinks the Commander's rank should make Offred be brave enough to speak up and get a better one (48). Later on the Birth day, Offred also notices that at the Ofwarren's household, there are oranges which may stand for the higher status of the whole household. In short, the abundant images of food in *The Handmaid's Tale* first indicate how the female body can be controlled by the regulation of diet and hence correlated with Atwood's concern of social cannibalism.

Like the food bearing something meaningful more than its substantial function, the body appears in a form of a collage of food. That is, the body is compared to food and collaborated with the image of food. Like *The Edible Woman*, Atwood connects the female body with the food in *The Handmaid's Tale* and strengthens her observation of the analogy between the two. Women's bodies of the past are compared to meat by the Aunts so as to stress on the inappropriate exterior decoration:

The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. [] Such things do not happen to nice women. And not good for the complexion, not at all, wrinkle you up like a dried apple. (55)

For the Aunts, dressing with exposure of the female body is improper and justifiable reason for rape to take place on women. In a way, remarks on the female body in the past for Aunt Lydia and Offred's Commander are like meat.

While the Commander and the Aunts comparing the female body to food, Offred feels that the female body in Gilead is food, or is treated as if it were food. Here and there, I see Offred relate the female body to food. At the doctor's office, she is aware of the doctor's calling her "honey," which is a generic term that Offred thinks it could represent all women. Among Marthas' talk, she feels uncomfortable when Rita is tenderizing the chicken and asks Cora to bathe Offred at the same time. The chicken reminds Offred of Handmaid's body and Aunts' teaching on the importance of healthy food and Handmaid's body: "The thigh of a chicken, overcooked. It's better than bloody, which is the other way she does it. [] You have to get your vitamins and minerals, said Aunt Lydia coyly. You must be a worthy vessel" (65). And later that night, though Offred feels repulsive, she does not dare throw up so she "chewed and swallowed, chewed and swallowed" until she feels the sweat come out (65-66). Yet she does save some butter and hide it secretly for herself to use later at night. The Aunts have been instructing the Handmaids that they are containers, only the interior body parts are important (96), in that case, Handmaids are not to tend to the appearance of the female body. As in other novels by Atwood, the image of egg and the female body is connected, so can this be proved in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Imaginative as Offred is, when eating, she imagines the egg being "what God must look like," and she remembers, "Women used to carry such eggs between their breasts, to incubate them" (110); old memory of the past like this makes her pleased and desire for one. Here, the egg becomes a metaphor and a pun in Offred's narration which reveals her crave and nostalgia. Food as it is, the egg later becomes a suggestion to Offred of how much a pregnant woman could be operated on like the food people eat with the knives and spoons. That is, the image of Janine's pregnant body as the food that is cut open by doctor's knife and brought up when she eats up her food and the teaching she receives:

Once they drugged women, induced labor, cut them open, sewed them up. No more. No anesthetics, even. Aunt Elizabeth said it was better for the baby, but also: I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. At lunch we got that, brown bread and lettuce sandwiches. (114)

For Offred, she uses butter to maintain her body. This gesture of connecting food with her body, which she compares to food from time to time, indicates how the female body is treated like edible in Gilead. As she recalls that her body is supposed to be a useful one that produces babies, she also remembers, when she was young she had mistaken her mother's story about the Jews in the old time: she thought the Jews were cooked in the oven like food. Furthermore, she later compares the conceivable female body to an oven with bun and a chalice with wine. Hence, words, the food she eats and the female body she sees have all become one in a very restricted circumstance under Gileadean surveillance, and that somehow has colluded to the Commander and the Aunt's remarks on the female body which is like meat. Once the female body is regarded useful and edible like food, it is hard for Offred to maintain her identity intact since her body becomes consumable in the cannibalistic Gilead society. After the Salvaging ceremony, death triggers Offred's appetite. This implication, in one way, consolidates Atwood's picture of a cannibalistic society, and in another way, empowers her protagonist to transform her bodily resistance to thinking and to the use of language.

4. The Writing Self in an Active Female Body – A Site of Resistance and Construction for Subjectivity

Besides keeping her bodily consciousness as a way of preserving her identity, Offred actively resists the overall control by criticizing the present and revising her past. In a way, beneath her apparent passivity, she has been reflecting, revising, criticizing and reconstructing her past as well as her present more and more actively. And in this aspect, she has been a story-teller in her mind, a composer of her body, even before she disappears from Gilead and tells her story into the tapes. The written body thus gets merged into the writing subject, and it all starts with Offred's sensitivity to and revision of Gilead's language's control.

To maintain her subjectivity and to rediscover her power, Offred tells the story, reconstructs her story, rephrases what she has learned and heard, and shows her power in narrating what has happened in Gilead. She rebuilds her subjectivity through her strong senses. Keen sensitivity helps her sharpen her imagination and observation that are important to narration, and also helps remind her of the past and preserve her real name. Only by sticking to refreshing her memory of her identity and life in pre-Gilead society can Offred reconstruct her subjectivity and reaffirm her existence as an individual. By investigating how Offred uses her narration as well as her body to resist Gilead's severe control, I intend to show the way she gradually discovers her power through language, imagination, memory and, most importantly, her bodily actions.

Control is everywhere in Gilead, just as Offred's subtle revision of its verbal control. Offred's hiding of her real name and revision of her given name, first of all, shows her resistance. "Offred," an indication of patronymic ownership—of Fred—is turned in her mind into "off red," or evading the Handmaid's sign of red color. Also, Offred's sensitivity of verbal constraint makes her notice that the stocks of biblical phrases and teachings that all the Handmaids are forced to bear in mind contain a great deal of ironies. For instance, the literal biblical dialogue of Leah connects giving birth with death. She uses puns to interpret the words she hears with different meanings such as the word "Mayday," as M'aidez, a French distress call, and "date rape" as a French dessert name. Mario Klarer regards Offred's narration and searching for different meanings of words as a process that "is not only the key to gaining access to the past, but also provides the possibility of anticipating the future, or that which does not yet exist" (134). That is to say, in the language-forbidden nation where words are reduced and simplified as wooden signs and biblical scrolls, language assists her to retain her subjectivity and struggle for a possible future.

Though her body is a docile one, her capability in using the language is a kind of power. As Stein indicates, with the red robe and white wimples, the Handmaids are all synchronized as one so that the central power of Gilead may deprive their individuality, and Marian does not feel comfortable with the color-coded dress. By revealing the discomfort in her red dress, Offred insinuates her capability in using the language to construct her identity and subjectivity: "and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood" (9). This paradox in a way shows that Offred tries to turn the traditional meaning of the fairy tales or the biblical teaching into a paradox, attempting to use language to mock Gilead society and vents her dissatisfaction of the restricted reality. Another revision of the Aunt's lesson is in the teaching of not to think, which is later proved to be impossible for Offred. At night and when left alone in her bed, she first consoles herself that if she wants to last, she has to listen to aunts' advice: not to think too much because "[t]here's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about" (8), since thinking can possibly ruin her chance and she intends to strive for living. Then, in allowing herself to think, she associates Aunt Lydia's instruction with that of a ballet class teacher in the past: "She said, Think of yourselves as seeds" (18)—that is, seeing the present self-preservation as a seed for future rebellion and changes. Offred learns to indulge herself to swerve from the reality and wander in the word-plays. Since Gilead is a confining realm that strictly controls the people's movement and language, Offred's secret word-plays becomes a monologue that also brings along moments in her past life. It is this severe confinement in body and language that forces her to

develop her individuality through imagination, reflection and rebellion. As Stein has mentioned, the Aunts act out as women surrogates of the patriarchal power, for “[they] transmit the words of the patriarchal government, and they silence unwanted speech” (271). The stock of biblical phrases stressed by the Fundamentalism is a measure of controlling, brainwashing and constraining. Teachings such as “Pen is Envy,” “Blessed be the meek,” and “Blessed are the silent” are short memorable and yet ironical to all Handmaids. The Handmaids are made to rehearse, memorize and thus internalize the sayings given in the Red Center. All of this emphasis on silence and meekness makes their bodies disciplined and without really suppressing their desire for a pen or penis. What is more ironical is the teachings like “Give me children, or else I die,” which emphasizes women’s own desire for bearing children, but actually suggests the consequence of failing to apparently perform this obligation. Ironically, then, giving birth becomes literally a life-and-death matter for women even without the risks of dystocia.

In addition to the birth-death irony, the Aunt’s teaching of “Pen is Envy” also explains that verbal constraint collaborates with bodily constraint. The rigorous regulations in Gilead forbid women to speak freely, to have access to anything concerned with language and words, for silence and meekness are considered virtues. Here, again Atwood plays with words through Offred’s narration. The phrase itself could be a pun. In the realm of Gilead, where words and any tools leading for knowledge are banned, as a writing tool, pen becomes the source of envy for Offred. During the secret meeting with the Commander, she is allowed to read magazines and even to write with a pen when she tries to ask a question to the Commander. As Offred recalls, the momentary gesture of writing and holding a pen in her hands becomes erotic and sensational so that she even feels like breaking the rule and stealing it as another act of rebellion.

The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Center motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It’s one more thing I would like to steal. (186)

Apparently, Offred breaks the ban on pen Gilead puts on women. However, one cannot help being reminded of Freud’s famous description of women’s “Penis Envy.” As Psychoanalysis would not be the theoretical reference for this thesis, I would like to simply say that Atwood’s witty word-play is a sarcastic comment on man power whose absoluteness has been supported by not only Gilead but also Freud.

As the word-play games show Offred’s imagination and sensitivity to language, the puns related to body also disclose her rebellion in a way. As Lawrence Davies

conceives the idea of puns and breaking language bars, he connects Offred's punning gesture to the behavior of someone that "both exhilarated and alarmed by language, by its power of making and of breaking bonds" (210). No matter what this word-playing or elaboration indicates, making/breaking the boundaries or denying connections between words, in any ways, Offred's power grows as she gets access to words. For instance, Offred ponders on "habit" that the Handmaids are wearing: "Habits are hard to break" (24-5). What she means may be ambiguous due to the meaning of the word "habit." It could indicate both a certain of religious ropes like the red ones that the Handmaids wear and the custom or practice that Offred she has. She could have referred to the prison-like durable clothing she wears, but she could also mean the word-playing games that go on and on within her mind or her other habitual secret practices in life. Also, when Ofglen circumambulates with the password of "Mayday," Offred's afterthought reveals her longing for her past.

Mayday used to be a distress signal, a long time ago in one of those wars we studied in high school. I kept getting them mixed up, but you could tell them apart by the airplanes if you paid attention. It was Luke who told me about mayday, though.

Mayday, mayday, for pilots whose planes had been hit, and ships. (41)

She then recalls the real meaning in French, "help me." This short passage speaks Offred's nostalgic feeling about the old days and her keen awareness how words can bear different meanings and serve different functions. Most of all, accesses to words and language have become a luxury and power in the forbidding status of an autocratic government.

As changing the language and the connection with the people surrounding her gives Offred a sense of power, likewise, through her body, food and eating, she discovers her power little by little. In terms of the act of seduction, she uses her body as food to perform her scarce power. She also feels the power when she plays the scrabble with the Commander. On the touch of the scrabble counters, Offred feels tempted by the wooden words and would like to swallow the scrabble counters so as to retain the power. The power that she has received from playing the scrabble game comes from her access of language and knowledge, and makes her want to eat up the wooden word counters. Also, the words on the scrabble board somehow remind her of the past, which reaffirms her identity secretly. And reading as fast as possible whenever she is given the chance of reading indicates her longing for knowing and for remembering. Gilead bans the language and words which are powerful keys to knowledge, and this restriction reminds Offred how much she is confined; more and more, she acknowledges what a passive role she is playing as a Handmaid. Both Klarer and Madonne Miner discuss this language ban on reading and writing: Klarer sees it as a measure of preventing "the 'privilege' of objectivity from getting into the hands of

women” (134) whereas Miner considers this ban of language an easy way for men to claim the authority and deprive women of their power. Without freedom in articulation and in knowledge, at times Offred feels distressed. In the Commander’s compound, she misses the old times and decides to take advantage of her imagination and her memory of the old days. Like a chipmunk trapped in her cage, the room she is not yet familiar with, she strives to explore the room gradually. And the more she observes her surroundings in her own space, the more she thinks of the past and is attacked by solitude:

I looked up at the blind paster eye in the ceiling. I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me. I have them, these attacks of the past, like faintness, a wave sweeping over my head. Sometimes it can hardly be borne. What is to be done, what is to be done, I thought. There is nothing to be done. They also serve who only stand and wait. Or lie down and wait. I know why the glass in the window is shatterproof, and why they took down the chandelier. I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me, but there wasn’t room. (52)

The “blind paster eye in the ceiling” is the result from a cruel past, a story and a legend of the dead Handmaid before Offred. In this passage, she describes her loneliness and emptiness caused by the limited, prison-like constraint; she uncovers her sense of helplessness when she thinks of her destiny which may be like the former Handmaid or be unknown as yet. She is not left with many choices and she is very much restricted in the space which is severely watched and controlled. She realizes her situation as being confined by the limited space and movement. Worst of all, she is always awaiting, for the demands, expectations and the time for rituals and routines. Not only is Offred like a waiting woman in the attic, awaiting for the Ceremony and calls from the Commander, but her body and mind is full of memory in terms of the consistent search of her past experience by sensational touch and creative imagination when she is with herself.

Indeed, Offred is very much framed in Gilead, just like certain fairy tale figures framed in the fixed spot. Her red habit makes her identify herself with the fairy-tale figures, possibly the Little Red Riding Hood or Repunzel. In a way, she is like Little Red Riding Hood, whose body runs for others’ demands. For instance, she is sent to run the chores by the Marthas. Later in the novel, she is also sent to Nick by Serena Joy. While the Marthas and Serena Joy serve as the role of the practical surrogate mothers for Offred, she is aware of her very restricted and scrutinized condition. Besides, Offred also resembles the fairy tale figure Rapunzel. She spends most of her time waiting in her room for the summons from the Commander, the Wife or the Marthas. Her long waiting posture in the attic and her long hair makes her a Rapunzel. Gilead requires the Handmaids to keep long hair. Offred’s long hair may not be as

beautiful as Rapunzel's, however, the hair does not offer any power at all, for all the Handmaids are required to put on the wimple which blocks their sight and forces them to look straight ahead. In other words, for Offred, Gilead becomes a forest where all the gestures and languages become dangerous as a Little Red Riding Hood, as well as for rebellion; where Offred is, like Rapunzel, given a mere window to look at the world. Only when she is alone in the room does she use her keen sensation to search for clues of the room in the past, to reflect on her identity, and memory in the past. Yet, strained as her body is, Offred knows she has to break the bond and struggles to move ahead beyond the spatial constraint. Therefore, in her own room, where she uses her imagination to move beyond the limited space and preserve her name, dreaming of one day that she could tell someone about her real name. Namely, her room gives her a sense of self-preservation through which she retains her identity and her name. Besides repeating her name secretly and reminding herself her real identity, Offred uses her sensitivity to preserve her identity. As she grows to be more sensitive to smell and taste, she also recalls more of her past life even when she is trapped in the sitting room or anywhere in Gilead. In her own room, Offred learns to preserve her body with the butter, which further indicates her instinct of maintaining her own body like the old time. Through these gestures of self-preservation, Offred reveals her strong intention of retaining her old identity, not as Offred, but as herself with a real name that identifies her as an individual.

More actively, she begins to rebel through various bodily actions and attempts. First, she attempts to steal something from the sitting room, as she reveals, "I would like to steal something from this room. I would like to take some small thing, [] secret it in my room" (80). Then she wishes further to "steal" Luke from the past into her present room because she feels like being sure of her identity and lusts for a body:

I want Luke here so badly. 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. (97)

It is the lack of identity that makes Offred a needy person that drives her to convince herself that Luke is somehow alive. She even believes that Luke will have a message "[s]lipped into [her] hand as [she] reach the tokens across the counter in All Flesh" (106). When her hope for Luke gradually fades away, she turns to Nick to satisfy her needs for self-assertion. Nick becomes someone that she tells her real name to, and someone she goes to secretly, even without the consent of Serena Joy. This, too, can be considered a proof of Offred's bodily action of rebellion against the powerful Gilead authority.

Finally, her turning everything unspeakable about Gilead, about her past and herself

into audible texts is by all means a form of resistance against the language-banned society. Her thoughts, views, memory and what happened to her have all been textualized as tapes, and that has somehow become a latent threat to and a possible obsolete of Gilead society. That is to say, through Offred's story-telling, she has turned her mouth a tool of resistance because narration can be taken as an act of reconstruction and imagination, which indeed occurs once in a while when she tells the story. As Celia Florin indicated: "the transmission of the story is frequently being questioned by the narrator" (258), at times, Offred distrusts her own story and revises her story from time to time. But the act of revising the story, in a way, reinforces her power of narration. She becomes an author who manipulates the audio texts. And by simply telling the story and revising the story, she has the power of demonstrating her resistance to Gilead. She shows the same resisting spirit when she tries to find out Ofglen's whereabouts. Later she realizes that Ofglen sacrifices herself to protect her; Offred becomes willing to identify with the rebellious organization at the end of her story. Though suspecting Nick's betrayal, she cooperates with Nick's instruction and get onto the Eye's van. To this extent, she is not as passive as before and takes a more active attitude in rebelling against the regime.

In addition to her bodily action against the totalitarian, there are two attempts of hers that show her active resistance against Gilead – one is her attempt to make connections with people around her and with the past, and the other is her attempt to change the language she has been forced to adapt to. Not merely with Ofglen does Offred try to connect herself with, but with other Handmaids, the Marthas, and Nick. By building connections with people around her, she gets to feel more strength and find out more about what's happening. Knowing is in itself a power, and by getting to know and to express through the connection with others, Offred gets more power and further acts out her alternative resistance. Moreover, by reflecting on the past, she gets to be more affirmative and determined to retain her identity. Through repetitively assuring herself of who she really is and what has happened in the past, she keeps her faith in living/surviving. Offred's other attempts of challenging the meaning of the language. In many biblical phrases and teachings that she has been forced to memorize, she criticizes and corrects Aunts' interpretations. When Nick speaks to her, she merely nods and recalls what she is told by the Aunts:

He isn't supposed to speak to me. Of course some of them will try, said Aunt Lydia. All flesh is weak. All flesh is grass, I corrected her in my head. They can't help it, she said, God made them that way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked. (45)

Her sensitivity to language makes her pay attention to even detail and little things in people's talk. She corrects and criticizes those she does not agree with and try to

rephrase what she has heard. For instance, she reflects how Aunt Lydia admonishes women in the past that have made spectacles by showing off their flesh. Aunt Lydia concludes that “things” happened to these women with a reason and lectures to Handmaids to be good because “[s]uch things do not happen to nice women. And not good for the complexion [].” Those “things” she mentions do hard to women’s complexion and made women like “dried apple” (55). Meanwhile, Offred recalls that it is Aunt Lydia herself that has told the Handmaids not to pay attention to their complexions. In other words, Offred mocks Aunt Lydia for her contradicting herself in the talk addressing to the Handmaids. Little rebellion like this brings Offred more strength of remaining her subjectivity and identity because she realizes that she has the power to change something, like language.

As she compares her reading with eating voraciously, her bodily resistance also becomes more active than before. In the mean time, that she reckons the Commander needs her empowers her. Gradually, Offred perceives her little power not merely from men, but from women superior to her status. As she thinks of the possible consequences of being caught of secretly meeting the Commander, she knows that the Commander would not risk saving her. However, somehow she feels the power over the Wife, for she reckons: “Also: I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn’t know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot” (162). Offred discovers “a circle of deceit” among the Commander’s household, and in the circle, “The handmaid deceives both the husband and the wife with Nick and the Commander, respectively” (255). This deception further accounts for Offred’s experience of power over both the Commander and the Wife. All in all, Offred discovers her power and realizes that she could derive the power from her body, food and the act of eating.

Although the ending of *The Handmaid’s Tale* does not reveal Offred’s where about or whether she is dead or alive, she has constructed a sense of subjectivity by telling the story as a record for the post-Gilead society. Through her narration, she uses her mouth as a weapon of rebellion, and resists the severe control and surveillance of the totalitarian Gilead regime. With very limited power that she has received from her rare chance of reading and performing seductively in the face of men, Offred smartly uses her body, the act of eating, food and the connection of food and her body to perform her power. In the search of herself, her past and her identity, the power helps her build a sense of subjectivity. As she calls her own room a “treacherous territory,” she rediscovers her strength and manages to move beyond the limited space where she is trapped. Against a powerful society like Gilead as she may have confronted, Offred struggles to find a way for her to withhold her identity and subjectivity under an absolute patriarchal sovereignty. It is hard to tell if Offred is rescued or betrayed at the

end of her story, which are tape records later transcribed and rearranged into the novel by two male professors in the post Gilead time. But with one glimpse on Atwood's ending in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is not hard to find how neither the society before, nor after Gilead, regime has been different that much from each other. Namely, patriarchal domineering power which is still active in the post-Gilead society. how the female body has always been treated as objects of male dominance. It is, finally, to such similar situations in Taiwan that I will turn to in my conclusion.