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The Scarlet Brand: Shame, Identity, and the Commodification of Women's Bodies in Hillary Jordan's *When She Woke*

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Abstract

The politics of autonomy and selfhood is a perennial concern in literature and society, with the dynamics of control and hierarchy perpetually shaping individual identity. Hillary Jordan's novel *When She Woke* offers a striking examination of individuality, as protagonist Hannah navigates a dystopian landscape where her very self is policed and redefined. Jordan's speculative fiction evolves from the likes of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The present study explores the intersection of shame, identity, and societal expectations regarding women's bodies in the context of both present and future dystopias in *When She Woke*. Jordan reveals the insidious mechanisms by which institutions seek to regulate and reclaim the self. Jordan envisions a dystopian future where women's bodies are controlled and commodified, which serves as a spectacle for scrutiny and punishment arising from the fundamentals of patriarchy and theocracy. The thwarting of abortion rights and bodily choices of women renders the novel as critically contemporaneous. Hawthorne's scarlet letter transforms into "red chrome" in *When She Woke*, highlighting the lack of reproductive autonomy, religious hypocrisy, and surveillance in a utilitarian society. Red chrome denotes the punishment for abortion and also the modern idea of the body as a visible marker of stigma and sin. Drawing on the philosophical insights of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, this analysis probes the mechanisms of micro-surveillance and biopower that underpin the novel's dystopian world.

Keywords: *When She Woke*, Dystopia, Abortion, Women's Bodies, Micro-surveillance

> "In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it... She stood apart from mortal interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits the familiar fireside, and can no longer make itself seen or felt."
>
> -Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

Introduction

Women are exposed to historical reductionism, oppression, and biopolitical control in different times, and the process permeates into the contemporary world. This pervasive oppression has manifested in various forms, from the objectification and commodification of women's bodies to the restriction of their agency and autonomy. The societal expectations placed upon women, perpetuated by patriarchal norms and institutions, have led to the erasure of their identities, desires, and experiences. Feminists include ARTs (Assisted Reproductive Technologies) in the milieu of reproductive control and ostracization of women. With the emphasis on fetal health and development rather than the bodies that are carrying them, ARTs reinforce a patriarchal paradigm that objectifies and marginalizes female bodies (Rudy 1997). Fiction acts as a general response towards the extremities of authoritarian and totalitarian control on women and helps society to realize and critique it. The dystopian feminist fiction mimicking and accentuating the eccentricities of the politics of reproduction is at a galore after the reversal of Roe v. Wade and other ongoing debacles. Alternative realities of these feminist dystopias transpire from the treatment of women by social, legal, and medical order in the existing system. Margaret Atwood, author of the iconic dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, explains how her futuristic fiction draws on historical precedents and the present, serving as ominous stepping stones toward a potential future.

Women writers try to account for the lack of feminine perspectives in the existing corpus of dystopias centred on male experiences, written by male writers with a masculine point of view in their feminist dystopian narratives. These narratives aim to highlight the struggles and marginalization faced by women in society, shedding light on the ways in which patriarchal systems limit their autonomy and agency. Writers like Marge Piercy were motivated to achieve gender equality by introducing processes such as ectogenesis in her reproductive utopia, *Woman on the Edge of Time,* a feminist equivalent of Huxley's *Brave New World* (Kendal, 2018). Ursula K. Le Guin also explores reproductive themes in her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and presents a world where individuals are ambisexual and asexual, offering a perspective on male pregnancy and reproductive dynamics. Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) contends that women's biology, particularly reproductive capacity, is the root of their oppression. Firestone criticized Engels for not fully recognizing the autonomy of women's oppression, instead

seeing it as secondary to class oppression. She argued that women's liberation required a more radical and independent approach than Engels' Marxist framework allowed. Unlike traditional utopias, which focus on governmental or economic reform, feminist utopian writers discuss biological differences because of their experiential disparities (Rudy, 1997). Infringed by their sexual roles and expectations in the community, some writers improvise the sexual and marital structures of society in their utopias. Feminist utopian writer Joanna Russ suggests that women can create a more equitable society by excluding men, and where children are raised without any patriarchal influence.

Feminist utopias or dystopias argue that men's control over women's reproductive capacity is the primary source of oppression in society. Instead of women-centric utopias without the involvement of men, some feminist writers expose the possibilities of radical social hierarchy, utilitarianism, and hegemonic control over women's bodies and autonomy. The exploration of themes such as forced reproduction, surveillance, and bodily autonomy in these narratives underscores the need for feminist resistance and collective action. With the erratic behaviour of many governments around the world attempting to control female reproduction and their bodily choices, dystopias become important to reflect on the complexities of reproductive oppression. In the oeuvre of feminist dystopias speculating on the reproductive anarchy and interdiction of abortion rights, Hillary Jordan's *When She Woke*, published in 2011, maintains its position of representing a chilling vision of a totalitarian regime. It gives a picture of a patriarchal society where women's bodies are controlled and commodified without their bodily rights, and people live in an all-time surveillance system. Hillary Jordan's dystopian America is ruled by the fundamentalist Christian Trinity Party, which has abolished abortion rights and considers the procedure tantamount to murder (See, 2011). The erosion of reproductive rights and bodily autonomy in fiction inexplicably echoes the precarious position of women in contemporary America, especially after the repeal of Roe V. Wade, where ongoing debates and restrictions on abortion access threaten to undermine their autonomy and freedom.

As the boundaries between fiction and reality continue to blur, Jordan's novel remains a powerful indictment of systemic oppression and a testament to the enduring power of feminist resistance. The novel opens with the protagonist, Hanna Payne, waking up as a "red" and her new identity being broadcast live to the world. In this church-led America, felons undergo the process of "melachroming" by a virus, which colors their skin, signifying the nature of their crime. Once these criminals are released back into society, they are up for societal ridicule and discrimination because of their color, they are made to wear their guilt on their skin, and the right to grant punishment belongs to all. In this speculative fiction, melachroming is the advanced version of racism and marginalization wherein individuals are judged and discriminated against based on the color of their skin. By literalizing the codification of criminality onto the body through chromatic markers, melachroming reinforces pernicious notions of guilt and shame as inherent to specific

groups, thereby perpetuating a paradigm of racialized oppression. In such systems people are reduced to their corporeal appearance, thereby effacing their complex identities and agency. Concomitantly, the notion of a just and equitable legal and social order is also compromised.

Hannah was designated "red," which meant murder, and her crime was aborting her unborn child. The "stop sign red" of Hannah's body was an emblem of shame and humiliation in Jordan's futuristic and dystopian America. Hannah herself undergoes an arc from doubting her religious faith and the teachings of her church to ultimate redemption and a sense of freedom. Her complex understanding and relationship with religion and its followers provide subjectivity to her character. It reveals the moral and social expectations of being a woman in a theocentric society and their eventual discarding if they fail to adhere to them. The dialectical tensions between Hannah's past and future selves present the complexities of human agency, ethical decision-making, and the negotiations of moral identity. Hannah's internalized shame and self-loathing were the result of her ostracization from society and the church, compounded by her own family's rejection and silence.

The state control in *When She Woke* is supplemented by micro-surveillance, with nanotransmitters implanted in convicts to monitor their positions and actions at all times via geostats. This serves as a reminder of the capability of technological oppression in the future, restricting the individuality of a person and also imposing their own conformity on them. This resonates with Michel Foucault's conception of disciplinary power, wherein institutions and apparatuses of control regulate and normalize individual behavior (Foucault, 1976). Foucault discusses the evolution of sovereign power, particularly the right of life and death. He argues that sovereign power's effect on life is exercised only when the sovereign can kill: " The very essence of the right of life is exercised only when the sovereign can kill " (Foucault, 1976, p. 240). Initially, sovereign power was characterized by the right to "take life or let live," whereas Foucault argues that a new right emerged: the power to "make live and let die." This transformation marks a shift from a sovereign power focused on punishment and death to a power concerned with managing and regulating life. The corporeal control in the novel reflects the sovereign power that uses technology to exert control over individuals' lives and bodies. This control extends beyond punishment, illustrating a power that regulates and manages life itself.

Another biopolitical strategy is the state's ability to monitor and control individuals' reproductive choices, suggestive of the power dynamic between the sovereign and its subjects. The reduction of convicts to a state of constant surveillance and monitoring accentuates Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life" (nuda vita), wherein individuals are stripped of their autonomy, agency, and political existence, and are instead rendered as mere biological entities subject to the whims of state power (Calarco and DeCaroli, 2007). The imposition of conformity through such technological means evokes Agamben's concept of the "state of exception," in which individuals are suspended in a zone of

indistinction between law and lawlessness and thereby rendered vulnerable to the capricious exercise of state power (Agamben, 2004). The marginal life still prepares itself for resistance and for reclaiming agency and autonomy over its bodies, as evinced by the characters in *When She Woke.*

The cautionary tale, warning readers about the difficulties ahead, also highlights the characters' importance and desire for individuality. Though impeachable by the state, it validates individual freedom as necessary for sustenance in society. Through a critical examination of Hillary Jordan's *When She Woke*, this analysis will explore the intersections of biopolitics, power, and resistance, shedding light on the implications of a society in which the boundaries between punishment, surveillance, and control are increasingly blurred. It draws a picture of sovereign power repudiating marginal life and convoluting freedom, indicating the dire consequences of unchecked state control.

Literary Lineage of *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

The stark and deliberate resemblance to the literary canons of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is impossible to miss for the readers of this science fiction dystopia. The dystopian narrative of Hillary Jordan's, "*When She Woke "* inherits a provocative literary legacy, one that echoes the oppressive patriarchal societies and also offers a distinctively contemporary critique of biopolitical control and resistance. Each writer draws heavily on the contemporary problems of their time, which transcend all ages, and their texts advocate for the rights to bodily autonomy and privacy. Özyönemploys Gérard Genette's theory of "hypertextuality" to explain the influence of Hawthorne's classic on the themes and setting of *When She Woke* (Özyön, 2015). *The Scarlet Letter* serves as a hypotext or pre-text for *When She Woke,* where character names and plot elements pay homage to the original. The puritanic roots of public shaming and punishment were a part of colonial America, and Hawthorne's novel was enthused by elements of the same, where Hester Prynne was made to wear the scarlet letter "A" at all times as punishment for adultery (Ajunwa, 2015). Public shaming as punishment, as depicted in *The Scarlet Letter*, remains a persistent practice in contemporary American society, where Hawthorne's Hester was turned into a spectacle for the public on a scaffold, and Jordan's Hannah was shown live on TV. Hillary Jordan herself admits to considering Reality TV as an equivalent of the scaffold in the future dystopia (Jordan, 2011).

Jordan's Aidan Dale is the modern counterpart to Arthur Dimmesdale of *The Scarlet Letter*, the two-faced preacher who struggles with his own desires, ultimately forsaking the woman he had an affair with, exhibiting the hypocrisy that religion often withholds. Both societies have their separate concerns, but there is a submergence into one, invasion of privacy, and erasure of individuality when it comes to bodily autonomy. While Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* delves into the intersections of society and nature, the

complexities of sin, and the oppressive aspects of the Puritan culture, Jordan alleges her goal was to explore the government surveillance, abortion rights, and the thin line between faith and politics in *When She Woke* (Jordan, 2011). Another fervent connection between Hawthorne's and Jordan's novels is "Pearl", the illegitimate child and embodiment of the protagonists' sin. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl's inexplicable identity was central to the plot, and it even confounded her mother at times, who wondered about her true origin (Grossman, 1993, p. 15). Pearl's treatment in the novel probes into the historical and cultural context of that time. Unlike the living child in *The Scarlet Letter*, the Pearl of *When She Woke* is merely a phantasm.The Straight Path Center shamed the chromed women there to make dolls in their child's image to make them realize their sin of abortion, adding to their psychological torment of being a chrome and a social pariah. Hannah sewed her doll to the utmost perfection and named it Pearl.

With the congruence in characters and themes of both novels, the speculation of what the scarlet 'A' in *The Scarlet Letter* denotes also varies. Scholars analyze it for adultery primarily, which the novel also insists on, but some of the allusions also point to alternative themes like abolition and abortion (Grossman, 1993; Medoro, 2017). Dana Medoro compares Pearl's birth to the birth of a new America and suggests that Hawthorne chose abortion as a symbol to end the reign of Anglo-America (Medoro, 2017). She taps into the abortion debate of Hawthorne's time and the popularity of abortifacient drugs in the media for traces of abortion in the novel. She finds the meaning of the scarlet letter 'A' not subtle and also calls it unfixed. Medoro posits that the absence of abortion in the novel implies its presence, particularly in Hester's decision to carry Pearl to term (Weingarten, 2023). This choice represents Hester's defiance against societal norms and the novel's rejection of the US narrative of fate and racist foundations.

Another revered text that warns readers about the ill effects of a dogmatic, patriarchal society in a dystopian future is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* published in 1985. There are striking parallels between Atwood's novel and Jordan's *When She Woke* in their exploration of themes of reproductive rights, resistance, and female autonomy. Both novels depict patriarchal societies in the future where women's bodies are controlled and commodified, but at the same time serve as reflections on the past and present in some places. Atwood herself proclaims that the Puritan roots are still discernible in modern-day America, thus making her text relentlessly contemporary. The protagonists of both novels were living a life of public scrutiny with no reproductive choices, trying to break the cycle of oppression they were exposed to in the intolerant powers of their time. The totalitarian regimes in both novels exercise total control over citizens, monitoring their actions and punishing dissent, using public shaming and humiliation as tools of control. The women in both novels were forced into rigid roles and stripped of their agency, while theocratic men were central to the power dynamics in both worlds.

Scarlet red is a central leitmotif in both texts, though it represents different facets

of female oppression. Its meaning shifts from fertility and social order in the handmaids' attire to a mark of criminal punishment in the “red chromes”. This control extends beyond symbolism into physical surveillance. Just as Gilead’s Handmaids are monitored by 'The Eye,' Hannah is trapped by hidden cameras and mirrors (Özyön, 2015). Omnipresent surveillance is key to instilling fear and exerting power over the female protagonists. At the heart of these religious-political regimes are patriarchal figures like Commander Fred Waterford and Aidan Dale. Despite publicly enforcing a rigid moral code, both men are deeply hypocritical, exploiting the very women their systems oppress to satisfy their private desires, betraying the values they publicly espoused.

The last and most important common thread in both works is Canada; it is the recurrent escape that emerges for women in the works of feminist dystopias. Both women try to flee their oppressive environment and see Canada as the land of freedom and expression. This trope is kind of overused now, where Canada is portrayed as a haven for American characters seeking refuge or escape. The storyline has been explored in novels such as The *Handmaid’s Tale, When She Woke,* and *Red Clocks.* It's interesting to consider how this trope reflects and shapes cultural attitudes towards Canada and its relationship with the United States, Sarah Marian Seltzer describes it as a half-solution to an America gone fascist (Seltzer, 2023). After the reversal of Roe v. Wade, the trope of feminist dystopias is escalating as a reminder of the struggle for reproductive rights and a threat to existing gender dynamics.

Hypocrisy of Church in *When She Woke*

Insinuating on the foreseeable future with the merger of religion and politics, Jordan weaves a society intolerant of gender equity. *When She Woke* critiques the theocratic society that masquerades as a moral and righteous community. At the heart of this society is the Church, which claims to uphold the values of compassion, forgiveness, and love. However, there are several peepholes in the text that expose the Church as a bastion of hypocrisy, using its power and influence to control and oppress women. One of the most striking aspects of the Church's hypocrisy is its treatment of women who have committed "crimes" against its moral code, where they are chromed, ostracized, and made to wear their shame as a reminder. Some reviewers are already discontented by the villainization of religion in most science fiction and deem it as a much too simplistic treatment of plot and characters (Elisabeth, 2012). Nevertheless, one can argue that illustrations of such societies in the present already exist and become a model for the narratives woven by the likes of Jordan, Atwood, and Zumas. The Church's justification for this cruel punishment is rooted in its supposed commitment to upholding the sanctity of life. As Kathy Rudy (1997) asserts, some technologies treat fetuses as the ‘primary patients,’ and mothers are just condensed ‘fetal environments’ for them.

The church’s issues with women stem from its historical roots, like in the views of

St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. St. Augustine believed women were created to be subordinate to men and that their guilt for humanity's fall into sin necessitated their submission to male authority (Ruether, 2008). Such patriarchal views perpetuate women's subjugation and exclude them from positions of power within the church. In Jordan's dystopia, too, the women in superior social positions were only acting as associates to their male counterparts, like Alyssa and Mrs. Henley. The two women, despite enjoying the status quo of reverends' wives, helped establish the preachings of the church by incriminating the convicted women, which seemed like a silent nod to Serena Joy's character in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The constant shaming of those women by the clergy groups like The Straight Path Center was in the pattern of psychological abuse designed to maintain specific power relations, and nowhere does it signal the benevolence and compassion that the church preaches. The clergywomen tried to impose rudimentary control on those women to assume some prominence in their otherwise insignificant patriarchal roles. Another way of revealing the dichotomy of Christian values was the sham marriage of Aidan and Alyssa. A true and noble Christian household disrupts the mental condition of women like Alyssa who have infidel husbands. Subtle hints throughout the text suggest Alyssa's awareness of her husband's philandry, which she chose to remain silent about, and she took out her anger on Hannah in a stern, supercilious tone.

The church's hypocrisy is also evident in its treatment of men who were often impunitive by the state despite their behaviour. Hannah idolized Aidan and her love for him, and refused to name the father of her unborn child, adding six years to her sentence. For Hannah, abortion represented an act of selfless love and protection, a deliberate choice she made to safeguard herself and Aidan, subverting the societal narrative that would have her believe otherwise. Ironically, the father (Aidan) was present at the time of her persecution and even urged Hannah to reveal his identity on account of religious and moral codes, successfully demystifying his own spiritual facade. He propelled his hypocrisy by his callous remarks, "you've been granted an open shame, so that you may one day have an open triumph over the wickedness within you…. Would you deny it to the father of this child, who lacked the courage to come forward?" (Jordan, 10).

Hannah romanticized Aidan's relationship with Alyssa, while condemning her own indulgence with him as sinful, revealing the deeply ingrained guilt and shame that governed her perceptions of love, sex, and morality. She took sole responsibility for the adulterous relationship, ignoring Aidan's equal culpability, and blamed herself for disrupting his marriage and his connection with the divine, "By wanting him, Hannah wronged Aidan's wife" (Jordan, 20). Her perception of Aidan as a paragon of holiness and his inability to sin exemplify how women are entrenched in self-blame and guilt for their perceived moral transgressions. This phenomenon is a direct consequence of societal conditioning, wherein women are disproportionately held accountable for their actions, while men are frequently absolved of responsibility. The Church has always perpetuated a complex and often

contradictory view of sex, sin, and women (James, 1978). Sex and procreation are not separate for Christian forces, complicating the notions of sexuality in modern times and women's bodies framed as tempestuous. The idea not only controls their bodies and sexuality but also stigmatizes female desire. In the novel, the enlighteners also condemn sexual desire in women and exclaim it as satanic, "Every time a woman's weakness leads her to defy God's commandments, Satan laughs" (Jordan, 113). The oppressive and misogynistic views of The Straight Path Center were a fundamentalist interpretation of God's wrath and how women should be condemned for defying God, "When you defiled your body with fornication and then abortion, you defiled God" (113).

The plot of men abandoning women has been a recurring theme in literature, especially in abortion narratives, reflecting on the weight of societal and emotional expectations of women. In Brit Bennett's *The Mothers* (2016), Luke's treatment of Nadia was similar to Aidan's abandonment of Hannah, where Luke knew about the pregnancy and abortion, but Aidan didn't know early on. But Aidan must have understood his involvement after Hannah's arrest and didn't come forward for fear of harming his perfect image of a renowned reverend and secretary of faith. Aidan's failure to acknowledge his role in Hannah's pregnancy, even after her arrest, accentuates his complicity in her suffering. The male protagonists in both texts were associated with the church; Aidan was a reverend himself, and Luke was a pastor's son, and both exhibit the church's double standards in its preaching and subsequent actions. They both end up hurting and abandoning the women they loved and cared for, ramifying the patriarchal ideology and the role of men in cases of unplanned pregnancy and abortion. Still, Hannah disillusioned herself with Aidan's love despite her fallen stature in society, "Hannah knew he thought of her, missed her, grieved as she did for their lost child. Blamed himself and tormented himself with what-ifs. Probably hated himself for not coming forward" (Jordan, 52).

Jordan's *When She Woke* is full of multifaceted people using religion as the reason for their admonitory actions against humanity; Hannah's brother-in-law, Cole, was one of them. Cole was a deranged patriarch who veiled his actions with Christian myths and treated his wife, Becca, with condescension, "Cole says a woman's place is with her family. Cole says the only jewelry a woman should wear besides a cross is a wedding ring" (Jordan, 46-47). In Jordan's dystopia, women did not have the choice to raise their voice against their husbands but to stay silent and be good Christian wives. Cole separated the two sisters to save Becca from Hannah's bad influence, so that he could continue to have a meek and submissive wife. Certain ancient religious texts have historically perpetuated harmful attitudes towards women, condoning coercion and reinforcing patriarchal norms that deem women inferior to men, texts like the Old Testament also contributed to the propagation of rape myths within Christianity (Franiuk and Shain, 2011). *When She Woke* provides surplus accounts of hypocrisy and oppression of a totalitarian Christian regime. Through its treatment of women, its use of language and symbolism, and its blatant double standards,

the Church reveals itself to be an institution that prioritizes maintaining its own power and influence over genuinely promoting the values of compassion, forgiveness, and love. Women in the novel are relegated to subservient roles, stripped of agency, and forced into silence by the authoritarian forces.

Guilt and Memory of Abortion

In Hillary Jordan's, *When She Woke*, guilt and memory of abortion interplay between Hannah's individuality and the vexing treatment she gets from her surroundings. Hannah's guilt was palpable, stemming from her decision to abort her unborn child. Hannah navigates a journey from societal shame to acceptance of her own individualism after her experience, and also confronts the consequences of internalized guilt. The memory of abortion is often persistent in abortion narratives, but in *When She Woke,* it was fuelled more by Hannah's fear of God, her unconditional love for Aidan, and her willingness to sacrifice herself for him, "Because I loved him, more even than our child. And still do" (Jordan, 25).

The Straight Path Center was a madhouse of sadism and discipline for the fallen women who were wracked in shame. The pejorative Christian forces took pleasure in reprimanding women and reminding them of their sins; they proclaimed themselves as enlighteners, and the women they sheltered for redemption were called walkers at the center. It was a visceral representation of the 19th-century 'madwoman in the attic' concept, as explored by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, thus the futuristic world of Jordan takes a turn back in time. Just like the women who were suppressed in terms of creativity as well as autonomy and were driven to madness, women at the Straight Path Center met with the same fate of loss of voice and agency, and only an endless cycle of shame. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) compare the pen to a metaphorical penis representing masculine power of creation, expression, and dominance over women's stories and experiences. The parallels between the past and present serve as a stark reminder of the ongoing struggle for women's autonomy and creativity.

Women at the Straight Path Center were shamed and humiliated by being made to act crazy and redemptive; they were made to create dolls in the image of their unborn children. The practice, although sadistic, was meant to be corrective for Reds, to bestow enlightenment on them. It was a continuous reminder for the 'Reds' of their deeds and imposition of supremacy on their sins. Their pain was further exacerbated by the compulsion of naming the dolls just like how they would have named their children. Hannah soon realized the futility of their actions and the destructive impact of shame and guilt on her life. She acknowledged the need to let go of those emotions to regain confidence and strength and made a conscious decision to reject shame and move out of the Straight Path Center.

> At some point, Hannah stopped listening to his ranting. She was thinking about shame, her constant companion since the abortion. What had carrying all that guilt and self-loathing accomplished? Nothing, except to sap her confidence and enfeeble her. And she couldn't afford to be weak, not if she wanted to survive. No more, she resolved. She was done with shame. (Jordan, 139)

Feminist Resistance in *When She Woke*

Tulay Akkoyun writes that the dystopian worlds writers envision are often shaped by real-life experiences. Popular examples include Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Burdekin's work reflected the fascist ideologies of Hitler, while Atwood predicted a world without bodily and abortion rights for women; both authors drew from their contemporary experiences, and their predictions have been proven right to an extent. (Akkoyun, 2020). The repeal of Roe v. Wade has led critics to draw unsettling parallels between America and the Republic of Gilead in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale.* The rise of authoritarian regimes worldwide is alarmingly reminiscent of the totalitarian futures depicted in these dystopian novels, raising concerns about the blurred lines between fiction and reality. Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949), highlights the historical relegation of women to a secondary social status, reducing them to their reproductive roles, as she succinctly phrases it, "Woman is a womb." In Hillary Jordan's, *When She Woke*, Hannah lived in a world where women were defined by their reproductive capacity and were condemned and incarcerated if they deviated from their path.

In addition to being a story of feminist dystopia and dejection, Hillary Jordan's *When She Woke* chronicles Hannah's transformative journey and feminist resistance. Initially, Hannah also internalized the patriarchal society's oppressive norms, conforming to its expectations. But soon, she finds herself opposing the banishments of her body and working towards a path of empowerment and self-liberation. Hannah's first act of defiance was her decision to keep her pregnancy a secret and her subsequent refusal to name the father of her unborn child. Her refusal to name the father of her unborn child and her abortionist incurs a harsh penalty, adding six extra years to her sentence. By trying to reclaim her agency and autonomy, Hannah challenges the oppressive institutions that seek to regulate her body and dictate her choices. This resistance is not without consequences, as Hannah faces severe punishment and social ostracism.

Hannah's epitomization of Aidan's godliness and virtues [Aidan Dale was known and admired as a true man of God" (Jordan, 19)] led her to contribute to her downfall to the point where she viewed her maltreatment as retribution. Hannah's actions reinforce the notion that women's bodies and lives are defined by their relationships with others, particularly men. Her idea of love was self-sacrifice and non-betrayal, "Hannah had

aborted their child to protect him. She would not betray him now" (25). Adrienne Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980) illustrates that women are socialized to prioritize heterosexual relationships and male approval. Hannah's actions, although motivated by a desire to protect someone she cares about, underline the societal expectation that women will put men's needs before their own. Hannah's body and reproductive choices were being controlled and policed by societal expectations, and she was confined to her bodily experiences only.

Patriarchy and religion are the metanarratives that are controlling the choices of marginalized women beyond fiction and extend to the major totalitarian regimes of the world. The stigma of abortion perpetuates the inferiority of women in society and checks the revolt of body autonomy and agency. Shulamith Firestone argues that women are intimidated into not expressing personal and political opinions, fearing they will be deemed selfish and unfeminine. She points to the detail that society considers abortion and reproduction to be objectively women's problems and women are forced to bear the burden of their relationships with men, taking on all the risks and consequences (Firestone, 1968). And yet they are excluded from the decision-making processes that affect their lives. In her demand for an equal society, Firestone rejects the notion of "becoming impregnated for the greater good of society" and of being forced into childbearing (Firestone, 1968).

Hannah, with the help of the other characters in the novel, realizes and creates a space for resistance and transformation. Hannah metamorphoses into a confident, self-reliant woman, even if it includes becoming a recluse from the authoritarian society and her familial bonds. Escaping the gendered bias of her society was crucial to Hannah's survival and empowerment, and it also led her down the path of forgiveness and new beginnings. As Adrienne Rich notes in her essay *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* (1971), "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (18). By re-visioning her own life and experiences, Hannah was able to transform into her future confident self with the help of the people she encountered along the way and her own doubts.

The act of resistance in Jordan's narrative becomes important for her individuation and self-acceptance, and the people she meets along her journey have a profound impact on her. Her first influence was her abortionist Raphael, whose name literally translates to "archangel of healing." Because of her conversation with Raphael, Hannah also questions the moral indictment of abortion, "Legally, he was bound to notify the police if he found evidence that a patient had had a recent abortion; morally, he felt bound not to. Morality won" (36). Hannah observed Raphael's radicalism and his belief in healing women, and how his ways were much gentler and more compassionate than the police doctors who manhandled her. Raphael's courageous stance, prioritizing morality over legality, led Hannah to reflect on the complexities surrounding abortion; she began to contest her own

perceptions of abortion shaped by society (Herrero Valero, 2024). In the course of time, Hannah realizes her fear of raising a child alone and societal pressures may have influenced her decision, "And the thought of bearing and raising a child alone had terrified her. The truth, buried for months, hit Hannah hard: she'd acted as much out of selfishness as out of love" (113).

Hannah's interactions with other characters like Kayla and the "Novembrists" (a resilient feminist group facilitating chromes' escape to Canada and reversal of the melachroming process) propelled her toward a transformative journey of self-discovery and understanding the complexity of her own identity. As she navigated this new path, Hannah began to interrogate the moral frameworks and religious convictions that had long underpinned her sense of identity. She introspects on shame and guilt as enforced and doubts the church's ways at The Straight Path Center, "Her conversations with God began to take on a doubtful, then an accusatory note. How could He approve of what the Henleys were doing here? Could this really be the path to Him?" (134). Hannah regains her hope in herself and people, with her friends, Kayla and Simone, countering the doubt and disillusionment she had felt earlier. Novembrists' motto, "Abortion is personal" (201), emphasized the importance of choice in abortion, free from external judgment or coercion, which was something Hannah herself did not believe in earlier but later understood. In a theocentric America, the Novembrists' exercise of free will and vocal opposition to oppressive norms earned them the label of 'terrorists', revealing the government's fear of dissent and independent thought.

Hannah's bond with Simone develops in time, and she understands the true meaning of "it's personal" after hearing Simone's story, how she was raped and drugged, followed by a brutal abortion. While it generates empathy for Simone, the encounter also profoundly shapes her views on reproductive autonomy, showing that the choice to decide for your own body provides self-worth and personal dignity (279). Astounded by Simone's generosity and her own desire, Hannah made love with her, which she sought as different from what she had with Aidan. She felt seen; she termed the experience as emotional, intense, erotic, and also healing, something that made her feel human again after becoming a "red" (285). The intensity of their connection prompts Hannah to reevaluate her sexuality, introducing doubts and, ultimately, a newfound awareness of her bisexuality. She acknowledges that one's sexuality is also personal, a notion that would have been unimaginable to her before; she begins to subvert her earlier gender identity and conditioning. As Judith Butler (1990) argues, gender results from intersections of "racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" and one cannot separate gender from "political and cultural intersections" (6), Hannah's heterosexual performance was also a mark of her preconditioning in the theocratic society. Hannah's bisexuality was not isolated from her other identities and experiences; rather, it intersects with and informs her sense of self, relationships, and place within the world.

Hannah's burgeoning self-awareness culminates in a profound declaration of independence, as she rejects being defined by external expectations or relationships. Asserting her autonomy, Hannah proclaims, "no more boxes.... She wasn't anyone's but her own" (287-288). The statement signifies her liberation from the restrictive roles and how she reclaims her agency and establishes herself as a self-sufficient individual. Leaving behind her identity and fate as a chrome, Hannah eventually embraces her selfhood and freedom in Quebec, "She woke and she was herself" (341). The "waking" alludes to the activist notion of "waking up" to the injustices and inequalities surrounding her, Hannah's transformation serves as a metaphor for the awakening of feminist consciousness, as she sheds her conditioned identity and embraces her autonomy. Jordan in *When She Woke* presents a compelling portrayal of feminist resistance, highlighting the ways in which women can challenge, subvert, and transform oppressive systems to create a more just and equitable society. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of collective action, solidarity, and resistance in the face of patriarchal oppression.

Women Bodies in a Panopticon

In Hillary Jordan's dystopian novel *When She Woke*, near-future America is characterized by a rigid, fundamentalist regime that polices women's bodies, regulating their reproductive rights, sexuality, and appearance. The melachroming process was a mechanism for publicly shaming them for perceived transgressions, serving as a visual manifestation of control. At first, Hannah found herself in an empty room, surrounded by cameras for a live broadcast of her breakage to the public. Jordan herself revealed in an interview that she imagined reality TV as "a futuristic equivalent of the scaffold" in *The Scarlet Letter*, so that convicts could be victims of common, mindless ridicule from the public. By showcasing people's vulnerabilities, reality TV reduces them to commodities for mass entertainment (Jordan, 2012). Attractive women, especially 'reds', were in high demand for viewing; thus, Hannah was determined to act calm and unflinched in her confinement. The constant surveillance and public shaming induced a sense of perpetual self-monitoring, and women internalized the patriarchal gaze on them. Even the feminine aspects of her body seemed distant to her because of melachroming, "She was a Red. Her femininity was irrelevant" (7).

The dehumanizing, distant perspective on one's own body can be understood through Foucault's concept of the panopticon. The Panopticon is an architectural design for control and surveillance in prisons, implemented without prisoners' knowledge (Bentham, 1791). The gaze does not work both ways, as prisoners have no way of knowing they are seen. David Lyon (1993) describes the phenomenon as "watched by unseen eyes" (656). This uncertainty leads to a state of self-regulation in which obedience becomes the prisoners' most rational choice. Foucault studied the panopticon as the metaphorical representation of disciplinary institutions and asymmetrical societal structures. According

to him, “The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201-202). In the age of digital surveillance, the unstable dynamics of governments and their subjects exhibit panoptic features; the society itself is an extension of the prison panopticon. Today, authorities utilize digital technologies to monitor citizens' online activities, creating a profound power imbalance that reinforces existing social controls.

In *When She Woke,* the Panopticon is exemplified through the pervasive gaze that monitors and regulates chromes. Due to prison overcrowding, chromes were released back into society, extending their punishment to include public shame, judgment, and stigma. The surveillance extends beyond prison walls and becomes a social phenomenon, where individuals police themselves to conform to norms, marking it as an act of “performance of surveillance” in society (McGrath, 2015). With the continuous gaze through the installation of nanotransmitters in their bodies, “chromes” were subjected to infinite visibility, whereas their observers were entirely invisible. Chromes were at the lowest position in the chain of socioeconomic hierarchy in *When She Woke.* Anyone could search their name, and chromes’ location would be revealed to them, compromising the privacy of chromes without their knowledge (158). They were at the mercy of the general public and onlookers, vigilante gangs like “The Fist”. The rate of killing and abusing chromes was high, people rebuked them without fearing consequences, “all those who victimized Chromes, taking advantage of their vulnerability, secure in the knowledge that they could do so with relative impunity” (310).

The state was reminiscent of Mark Poster's concept of the “Superpanopticon,” which represents a hyper-intensified surveillance state in which individuals are subjected to ubiquitous monitoring and data collection, focused on capitalist profit and exaggerating social hierarchy (Lyon, 1993, p. 665). A simple search of keywords on the internet was also part of surveillance, where online searches were closely monitored. Authorities tried to control information access to the general public, and certain subjects, like abortion were prioritized for censorship (32). The surveillance state scraped Hannah’s personhood as well as instilled fear in her, she mentions the low “survival rate of female reds” (202) in the narrative, further marginalizing women for their reproductive choices and controlling their autonomy. As Foucault states, “the panopticon is a laboratory of power,” exerting power by observation and formulating knowledge (1977, p. 207). The distinctive colored bodies of chromes served as virtual markers of information about their crimes to the public. The virtual representation of punishment was accompanied by constant threats and messages like “BURN IN HELL, MURDERER! “or “I hope you hear the cries of the baby you killed every night for the rest of your life” (165). Therefore, the Superpanopticon has significant implications for the understanding of contemporary surveillance societies, with the emphasis on the importance of individual autonomy and agency.

Hannah's experiences with the medical system also reflect the power dynamics within the state and among people, especially the relationship between patient and doctor. The use of technology to control bodies resonates with Foucault's concept of "medical gaze." The process of "melachroming" in itself exemplified the medical and social gaze on the chromes. Medical professionals, as well as their tools, supplemented the control and surveillance of chromes and treated their bodies as mere objects for experimentation. Chromes were detached from the majority of social orders, legitimizing their subjugation and the social gaze directed at them. Their loss of autonomy and treatment at the Chrome Center also indicates the dissonance of doctor-patient confidentiality. Revolutionary doctors like Raphael were among the few lefts beseeching the bond between doctor and patient, "Even more abhorrent to him than the lack of exceptions for rape, incest or the mother's health was the abrogation of doctor-patient privilege" (36). Through Hannah's journey, Jordan critiques the medicalization of women's bodies and the internalized gaze of societal expectations. The novel highlights the intersection of medicine, technology, and power in the usurpation of individuality and reproductive autonomy.

Conclusion

Hillary Jordan's *When She Woke* serves as a prescient warning, elucidating the distressing intersections of gender, power, and technology in contemporary America and beyond. The feminist dystopian literature gives insight into the ways in which patriarchal societies seek to control and exploit women's bodies. In the United States, the ongoing erosion of reproductive rights, the persistence of systemic racism, and the rise of misogynistic rhetoric all underscore the enduring relevance of Jordan's narrative. Globally, the resurgence of authoritarian regimes, the proliferation of digital surveillance, and the escalating violence against women and marginalized communities all attest to Jordan's portrayal of Hannah in *When She Woke*. Through Hannah's harrowing journey, Jordan lays bare the fundamentals of utilitarian society and the stereotypical, precarious position of women within it.

The text highlights the contemporary dilemma in which the boundaries between freedom and oppression, self and society, are perpetually shifting. Jordan's dystopian world is benignly inspired by the power dynamics in gender roles and the debilitating stigma around women's bodies. Feminist groups around the world are encouraging women to share their abortion stories and overcome the stigma around them. Novels like *When She Woke* may help in eradicating the taboo and shame around abortion and the female body in society by stressing on its importance as well as complexities. It provides insight into the social, emotional, and psychological experiences of women who undergo abortions while also underlining the involvement and, oftentimes, abandonment by their partners. This study demonstrates how feminist dystopian fiction serves as a cautionary tale about patriarchal oppression and how, across cultures, women are marginalized, and their bodies

are treated as tools for social control. The unsettling parallels between the novel's dystopian world and the contemporary reality mandate the confrontation of religious, medical, and legal organizations that seek to usurp the bodily rights of women.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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