

The (Bio) Political Violence in Atwood's *Alias Grace*

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Abstract

This research explores the (bio)political violence that sets the subject position and subjugation of the women characters including Grace Marks in Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace. Grace is acquitted as murderess and sent to jail, and to the lunatic asylum to make her docile and succumb to sovereign power. It is biopolitics, the sovereign power over populations that is deployed via social institutions to make her manageable and go docile. Through the state apparatuses the biopolitical governmentality constitutes and disseminates knowledge that helps Grace formulate her subjectivity and subjects to the law. Being a woman, she is discarded, sexually abused, and retained in bare life in the jail. In particular, her resignation to the power marks the inclusive exclusion and political violence over her. This reflect her perennial exclusion from social life. Finally, her servitude, amnesty and wedding epitomizes her oikos and docility under the (bio)political violence.

Keywords: biopolitics, governmentality, subjectivity, oikos, exclusion, quilting

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) revolves around man and woman relation in particular how men retain the sovereign power. They exercise it in order to govern and make the woman's body docile while holding sovereign power. Most importantly, woman's body is the site of exercising political power viz. physical build, choice of sexual partner, clothing and other domesticating process to name a few. For the women, there are social requirements to be followed yet they differ by social class as well. To sustain the social requirements the regime, led by men, deploys power through the state apparatuses and constitutes the knowledge and disciplinary techniques that are disseminated through universities, prisons, schools, hospitals, factories and barracks, to safeguard the regime which Foucault names as governmentality, a strategy to govern as a part of biopolitics (Foucault, 1995, p. 228) . In addition, this research

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aims to delve into the process of subjectivation and subjugation that features ‘bare life’ of Grace and other female characters who are deprived from citizenry rights. Indeed, to fall in the situation of ‘bare life’ is to be abandoned from social, cultural and legal life that Grace suffer from. Exploring the events and activities related with Grace, this paper inquires into Grace’s bare life and the narratives against her so called involvement in the murder case as the (bio)political violence which the sovereign led by male performs.

This article embarks on the pertinent issue of exploring truth in case of the murder case of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. In so doing, it inquires upon the process usurped and the role played by state agencies to constitute ‘the truth of the regime, veridiction.’ This stately versioned truth is purposefully reiterated to debilitate the narrative of Grace, a convicted criminal. Further, the tag of murderess and stigma Grace carries before she gets amnesty indicates the political violence over her. Awhile, it further probes into how biopolitics governs and manages the subjectivity of Grace, her mother, and other character. Further, how she comes under docility. Upon exploring on such issues, this paper contends that it is the sovereign power be it classical or modern liberal, that is repressive to mould the citizens as per its design which is the biopolitics. To boost it, the indictment of crime in her early age, jail life, stay at lunatic asylum, use of medico-technology upon her, and finally her amnesty for the alleged crime are the epitomes of power over her life. Largely, it indicates that how power subjects her to the law. Largely, her subjugated life at Ireland, in Canada as housemaid, and sexual abuses from home to jail significantly highlight the dovetailing of politics with her life. Therefore, her experiences thoroughly mirror the biopolitical control over her life that compels her go through subjugation and subjects her to face gender based political violence; (bio)political violence.

Methodology

In line with Grace Marks’ subjugation this research employs (post) Foucauldian biopolitical theory in order for the text to explicate and analyze from this perspective. The events and characters of *Alias Grace* inculcates biopolitical lens expounded by Giorgio Agamben for textual interpretavism. It is Mitchel Foucault who reads life in relation with politics and he introduces biopolitics as the power hold over life to manage it (Foucault, 2003, p.51). Since the end of sovereign power (power of the sword) in Europe in 17/ 18th century, there is the inclusion of life in politics which traits as liberal form of government. He further elaborates biopolitics as the use of power that

“exerts a positive influence on life that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (Foucault, 1976, p. 137). This Foucauldian explanation of biopolitics is ambivalent; on the one hand he claims that biopolitics is productive and acts as life enhancing force, on other hand it is repressive that uses comprehensive laws that control life to make it docile.

Allegedly, in the Foucauldian biopolitical discourse there is anomaly of two polarities. Corresponding to it, Esposito points out “the two polarities of biopolitics- *bios* and politics- as originally separate and only afterwards reassembled them together in such a fashion that one always attempts to subdue and absorb the other” (Esposito, 2011, p. 211). What Esposito explains is the genealogical mapping of western political system in which the intersection of life (commoners) with politics was only after the fall of monarchy in Europe which Foucault marks as the advent of biopolitics. However, there are two contrasting lines of biopolitics in which “life either appears to be seized and trapped by power destined to reduce to a mere biopolitical stratum, to “bare life,” or politics appears to be subsumed and dissolved into the productive rhythm of a constantly expanding life” (ibid). This internal rupture of biopolitics is visible in Foucault when he imbricates biopower and biopolitics and uses them interchangeably. He explains biopower as, “the numerous and diverse techniques, for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault, 1976, p.140). Here is echo of the spillover effect of biopolitics to reduce life and subject it to ‘bare life.’ It seems that to him the ultimate trait of biopolitics is to subjugate the body via exercising the numerous techniques of governmentality. He adds “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (Foucault, 2007, p.16). Finally, Foucault’s ambivalent analysis of biopolitics leads Agamben to go with socially excluded figure in his worthy tomes, *Homo Sacer*.

Building idea on the Foucauldian biopolitics, Agamben reiterates biopolitics as, “the growing inclusion of natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power” (Agamben, 1998, p. 119). What Agamben agrees with Foucault is how power calculates and manages life of the denizens under political paradigm which Foucault sums up as the political inclusion of people, “modern man is an animal whose politics (*bios*) places his existence as a living being (*zoé*) in question” (Foucault, 1976, p.143). In question, it is the politicization of life (Agamben, 1998, p. 119) writ large. In this inclusive politics he finds the exclusion of people from their social status. He notably

forwards his thesis inferring through the discussion of *zoé* (zoological life, or the most elemental biological dimension) that encapsulates *oikos* (private realm that ensures only sleeping, eating laboring and reproducing which is similar to animals), and kept away from the sphere of *polis* (city life, or the public sphere) is solely destined to *bios* (speaking life equipped with civil rights). He contends that the inclusion of *zoé* in the domain of *bios* or *polis* is in order for homo sacer to exclude it with the motif of subjugating it to the ‘bare life,’ (Walter Benjamin) a life without legal status. He deduces, “The bare life that expresses our (homo sacers’) subjection to political power” (Agamben, 1998, p.181). To gear up his contention, he cites Pompeius Festus, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Promo Levy for homo sacer, sovereign exception, sovereign ban and *Muselmann*, the *suprestes* reduced to unsayable status by the torture in the camp respectively. It is the homo sacer who undergoes sovereign ban or sovereign exception to witness the *muselmann* trap being outlawed from the socio-political status

Obviously, the sovereign includes *zoé* in the realm of *bios* to exclude it from human rights. In a nutshell, Agamben’s biopolitical thesis interrogates upon the “Western political practice that first constitutes itself through the exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life” (Agamben, 1998, p.7). The blurring zone between *zoé* and *bios* (inside/outside, man/ animal) marks “*the production of biopolitical body as the origin of sovereign power*” (italics in origins, Agamben, 1998, p. 6). By mapping *zoe* and *bios*, Agamben manifests the bare life (*zoé*) assigned to homo sacer to project its entire subjected life to sovereign power. His thesis is that the sovereign creates camp unlike Grecian *polis* to exclude its people from their social rights. Under it, the serf and socially excluded denizens had no access in Greeko Roman period.

After being excluded from lawful life the homo sacer is liable to face political violence and be imposed any kind of abusive atrocity, or be killed with impunity. His killing is not homicide either. This is the improper or precarious life, a sort of exile, he lives (Agamben, 1995, p. 72). The great dismaying fact of the western liberalism is this exclusion of people from legal status to maintain Leviathan regime, who withdraws citizenry rights and intends to exclude its people by exercising sovereign ban and forming state of exception. It projects the total domination over life and assigns the people the life of an animal attributing no legal position, which Agamben calls animalizing the human (Agamben, 2004, p. 37). Finally, this research entails the theoretical frame of Foucault and Agamben because I hypothesize that Atwood’s

Alias Grace contains the sovereign (*bios*) and excluded (*zoé*) characters whereby the sovereign exercises sovereign ban to exclude the other, mainly the women, maids, farmers from political domain. Thus, the female characters undergo the repressive use of politics or power and constitute their 'self' accordingly whereas the males entertain the sovereign power.

In case of male and female folks, it is sexuality, sexual orientation and behavior of an individual, to be curbed or managed to retain the social norm run smoothly. Indeed, it is the sexuality that determines one's position in the society because there are codes related to it, eg. hetrosexual is okay, homo sexual is a taboo etc. in this regard, especially the cult of domesticity is so strongly constituted and delegated to working class and bourgeois women that demands their labor and reproduce labor power (Ripo, 2015, p.14). Coupling with Foucault's repressive hypothesis on sexuality Repo contends that it is the sexuality that is the modern apparatus to be managed for reproducing labor and mitigating the number of populations.

Outlawry of Grace: A Manifestation of (Bio) Political Violence

Margaret Atwood's worthy tome, *Alias Grace* does not succinctly unpack the murder case of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery which is the case that leads Grace Marks's incarceration. However, it decries the imbrication of political government (led by men) and life government (Lazzarato, 2002) of Grace Marks. The novel mainly projects the political violence over Grace, Mary, Nancy and Grace's mother who has no name. Grace's mother's identity is 'under erasure,' because she has no other options save bearing her abusive husband. Her burial in the sea without any ritual indicates (bio)political violence. Awhile the state (sovereign) not only lets the females be under deprivation (of legal rights and basic needs of life), but also indicts and imprisons Grace for more than two decades. By and large, she is retained in the lunatic asylum, and medicinal technology is exercised upon her, and finally, she receives pardon, grace. These events arguably epitomize the imbrication of governmentality and personal life of Grace, or in another words it is biopolitical conditioning of Grace. More precisely her life witnesses the political and cultural violence and is always vulnerable.

The retrospective narrative of Grace, Dr. Simon copies in his diary highlights her pretty miserable life, let alone her mother's misery. Her father is an alcoholic abusive who does not care and support his family. Grace along with her mother involves in quilting for the livelihood of the family from her early age. This is indeed

the process of taming and domesticating the women in Victorian Era. Murray interprets Grace's quilting and her attachment with the quilt as the metaphor loaded with multiple meanings. Linking it with woman folks she argues, "Quilting, as a domestic activity generally carried out by women, may easily be associated with sewing, knitting, or embroidery, to name but a few examples. The representation of handcrafting of this sorts relatively frequent in Atwood's fiction" (Murray, 2001, p. 67). The interesting fact is that by means of this quilting metaphor, Atwood unpacks the historical conditioning of women and their docility which is the reduced life in the hostile environment "Out of the gravel there are peonies growing" (Atwood, 1996, p.2), equal to animal involving in eating laboring, sleeping and breeding. In a way this life is the bare life excluded from other form of life. In tandem with domesticating and disciplining the jail inmates, patchwork was in vogue in Newgate jail (Margaret, 1998, p.6). She further elaborates the objective of tapestry:

The construction of patchworks in alias Grace is more than a voicing of the central character's history; it also acts as calming therapy in the afternoon session that she has with Simon. In the 19th century the act of piecing together tiny scraps of fabric to make aesthetically harmonious and useful products were recognized in the areas of medical and social rehabilitation. (Margaret, 1998, p.6)

Her contention is to show the medical and social as well as economic benefit of tapestry among the jail inmates which Victorian era brought into exercise.

Atwood further enumerates the events of making female body docile. To Foucault, docile body is that which is involved in economic/ productive activity and go in pursuant to the law which is also the subjectivity of the person. When the body does not enact as per the design of the state, finally, there is its end like of the extermination of Mary Whitney who dies during her blotched abortion. It is Mary who teaches Grace the dos and don'ts while working as housemaid. It instills obedience in Grace to the law. The paradox of her life is that she likes to be an independent lady but died during her abortion. It undeniably proves the fact of that the death of underdogs like her, during the malpractice of medicinal technology is equal to the death of a socially exiled figure, *homo sacer*, who can be killed with impunity, nor it is deemed as homicide (Duranty, 2009, p.206). Duranty further extends Agambenian contention on women as *homines sacre* in the world of men (p.211) Grace's mother bears the patriarchal subjugation and hence she is the *homo sacer*. She mothers twelve children from her reckless and abusive husband. Grace picture of her mother as "a

timid creature, hesitating and weak and delicate who has round blue eyes like a doll” (Atwood, 1996, p. 125) attributes her total stripped off like Greek *homo sacer* figure whose death is not stained by sacrilege (Agamben, 1998, p.72) because she also died in the ship and thrown into the sea without any sacred cremation en route to Canada. Her life symbolically projects the total outcast and outlawed one which has no legal and social position but outside the rim of the society. This figure is the werewolf in Agambenian discourse.

The murder indictment and jail life of Grace further unpins her outlawry. Grace talks of the physical punishment exercised over the jail inmates, “6 lashes; cat-o'-nine-tails, 6 lashes; rawhide, 24 lashes; cat-o'-nine-tails, 6 lashes; cat-o'-nine-tails 6 lashes; rawhide, and bread and water Bread and water 36 hours in dark cell, and bread and water (Atwood, 1996,p. 3), reminds the Nazi concentration camps and the horrible subjugation where the inmates used to be turned into *Muselmann* whose consciousness is taken away (Agamben,1998, p.184) and who shares the animal life lacking language to say their trauma. Grace also falls under this subjectivity, however, she narrates the story of the day of Kinnear and Montgomery murder which the people in power reject and formulate another story against her which is truth of regime (veridiction) after that she is entrenched in the Provincial Lunatic Asylum, Toronto. Grace’s reduction to minimal life and subjection to insanity corresponds to Agamben’s thesis borrowed from Heidegger “The stone is worldless; the animal is poor in world; man is world forming” (Agamben, 2003,p.51), to decry how the man in power (world) formulate truth so that they can outcast the poor animal (here Grace) who is marked as poor after she is ripped off from social life; bare life.

In tandem with it, Vatter’s reading of Agamben’s *zoé* and *bios* seems apt to mention here. He mentions the interlacing of *zoé* with *bios* by chance with plan, in order to exclude it from the domain of polis whereby the excluded figure naturally go under bare life. He states that:

In *The Open* Agamben sees this "anthropological machine" at work in the ancient life-world of the polis, where animal *zoé* is "included" into human *bios* only in order to "exclude" it from the political life of citizens in the form of "slaves," "barbarians," and "women" whose exploitation makes possible that political life. Conversely, in the age of totalitarian biopolitics, entire human ways of life, or *bios* (for instance, those of "Jews," "Gypsies," "homosexuals," "handicapped persons," "stateless peoples," and "savages") are "excluded" from political and civil life only in order to be "included" in it as bestial *zoé*:

"pests," "vermin," "life not worthy of being lived," which is to be selected from the rest of humanity and eventually exterminated or let to die. (as cited in Vatter, 2008, p. 48)

Vetter also talks of the threshold life between mere living of zoe and rich living of bios subscribing Foucault's thesis on sovereign's ancient right of taking life or letting live (Foucault, 1976, p. 136) that holds the power of life and death.

Given that Grace further narrates the fact how her subjectivity is formulated by other so that she would succumb to the power. She complains that:

I think of all the things that have been written about me - that I am inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?" (Atwood, 1996, p. 23).

Grace resents at the charges made against her, however, she endorses it succumbing to the power and turns out to be the object of power that gives her different identity, a convict, lunatic, murderer, maid, and wife.

Once being fed up with the dehumanizing and abusive treatment in the jail and lunatic asylum she retorts Dr. Simon who wants to know what had happened in the aforementioned murder she tells him: "You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself" (Atwood, 1996, p. 46). This indicates the fact that Grace's subjectivity or the positioning is at the hand of other who holds power. Unlike classical power structure, in biopolitical power structure power circulates not only from top to down but from every direction. Media coverage and the decision of the court primarily help people to know who Grace is. These agencies ostracize her. Instilling this sense, Lopez also underscores the power dynamics hold by knowledge and power to subjugate, stigmatize, and look down the 'werewolf' a socially discarded figure in Agamben. He remarks that:

The interrelation between power and knowledge, in a Foucauldian sense, is made clear here. Practices of power, as carried out in penal institutions, and by

the legal and scientific communities, intend to turn Grace, who finds herself in a position of marginality, and hence, of lack of power, into a knowable individual to be supervised and controlled (Lopez, 2012, p.159).

Lopez's analysis centers on the surveillance, a power technology of biopolitical governmentality employed to supervise and monitor an individual which subjects him/her to the given position. It is to manage and keep record of the population. Here grace is under the sovereign's panopticon to make her confess the crime and subject to the given law in terms of man and woman hierarchy.

Notably, the Governor's wife's scrapbook also keeps the record of the horrendous crime. It talks of the hierarchy of the criminal and the reaction of the people whose legal status has been withdrawn. On their behalf, she makes the penitential prayer as the execution of pastoral power. Of course, she is a grown up woman and not a young girl, so she is just as fond of remembering, what she wants to remember is not violets or a picnic. No Dearest and Love and Beauty, no Eternal Friends, none of those things for her; what it has instead is all the famous criminals in it – the ones that have been hanged, or else brought here to be penitent, because this is a Penitentiary and you are supposed to repent while in it,(Atwood, 1996, p.). Lopez further elaborate the underlying motif as the scrapbook owned by the penitentiary governor's wife, a collection of newspaper cuttings on famous crimes and criminals, can be seen as a microcosm of the novel as a whole. The scrapbook of underlines, then, where Grace stands in relation to social class divisions: as a marginal figure on which the upper- and middle-class desire for sensationalism and feminine stereotypes comes to be projected. The scrapbook also presents Grace as spectacle, an object everyone can look at and examine. (Lopez, 2012, p.158). Lopez notably critiques the stereotyping social reception of Grace after her indictment through the scrapbook of Governor's wife. Moreover, his concern is about how the power and the state sponsored knowledge befits with it constructs the position of an individual which Murray also reiterates, "Based on the life of Grace Marks, the construction of Grace also benefits from twentieth century awareness through her focalizing of certain social problems such as the roles that society accords to women" (Murray, 2001, p.71). Her prime stand is to underpin upon the startling fact of the position one needs to accord especially Grace.

On the other hand Grace also conspicuously attunes with the coercive conditioning power of the regime that subtly spreads unto social institutions. She remarks "...Murderess is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes at night I whisper

it over to myself: *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor” (Atwood, 1996, pp. 22-23); to titillate with the infamy awarded by the regime because there is no other way save endorsing it for her. It indicates the fact that the power is so pervasive that there is no escape except going docile. If one is under coercion tries to constitute his/ her ‘self’ accorded by other. Tuning with it, Szalay expounds:

In exploring how narratives of all types shape our lives and our view of the world. My discussion of *Alias Grace* will show how the novel presents identity as constructed through discourse primarily, that is, how the individual exists for others and herself in the form of narratives only. (Szalay, 2003, p 173)

Szalay’s recounts the power given identity of Grace that she appropriates despite she has the next version of the murder that nobody endorses.

Dr. Biswanger, Dr. Simon, and Dr. Jerome, and DuPont who hold the ‘community of power’ try their best to reveal the mystery of the murder from Grace. They stand for the power who during the investigation try to control her sexuality and defy her narrative with regard to the murder case, “Grace’s right to claim authenticity for her own version of the events is habitually undermined by (male) figures of authority” (Szalay, 2003, p 174). Even the corrupt sovereign system enacts through the lawyer, Kenneth MacKenzie who coerces her to narrate the compelling story of the murder. Lopez reads their process to discipline and makes Grace docile from Foucauldian lens:

This process takes place because Grace resists being comprehended by the knowledge and discourse of what I would like to call communities of power, namely, the scientific, religious, and legal communities and by the Foucauldian disciplinary system created by them. She belongs, on the contrary, to the marginal communities of immigrants, servants, and mad people, who share strong bonds of solidarity based upon vulnerability and secrecy and who challenge the rigidity of social categories, together with official middle- and upper-class constructions of national identity (Lopez, 2012, p.157).

He focuses on how power is deployed upon the vulnerable life of the Grace and other socially pushed to margin group so that the power/ regime can formulate its knowledge which the outcast must attune with.

On the other hand Reverend Enoch Verringer who works for the amnesty of Grace deploys Dr. Simon an expert of amnesia also does not go against the current. However his attempts succeed in releasing Grace from the gaol who then she migrates to America and runs her marital life with Jamie Walsh despite her disinterest in

pregnancy that compels the female to succumb to the power. There she completes her 'Tree of Paradise' tapestry to bond with her mother, Mary, and Nancy who had had their docile life.

Conclusion

To sum up, Grace Marks's life marks the bestial life which ensures her labour as quilting, weaving, patching the tapestry, and serving as maid before her arrest and as a maid at jail governor's quarter. All these infer to her subjectivity as female oriented to servitude. Awhile, she undergoes with social exclusion like the *homo sacer*, an individual ripped from legal status whom anybody may harm with impunity in Greek time. The sexual abuses from home, to jail and during investigation on Grace exemplifies her *nuda vita* i.e. outlawry from legal position. When people disbelieve her illness and narrative, they enjoy to stigmatize and stereotype her as cunning murderess. The lawyer and the doctors attempt to make her docile and impose their episteme as designed by the power. Finally, her marriage evidences her subjugation of heterosexual normativity which the regime sustains through power.

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