



POWER AND POLITICS OF HEALTHCARE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the representation of power and politics within contemporary healthcare systems as depicted in literature. It argues that healthcare, under neoliberal and capitalist paradigms, has shifted from a system of healing to one of control and exploitation, commodifying human bodies and dehumanizing individuals. Drawing on theories from Marx, Foucault, Agamben, and Gramsci, the article examines how this transformation erodes individual subjectivity and reinforces social inequalities. Through close readings of novels such as Kazuo Ishiguro's **Never Let Me Go** and Margaret Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale**, the analysis explores themes of medical gaze, profit-driven healthcare, neoliberal exclusion, institutional dehumanization, surveillance, hyper reality, organ trafficking, and the reduction of individuals to "bare life." The article concludes that these literary narratives offer a powerful critique of contemporary healthcare systems, exposing ethical failures and systemic inequalities, and prompting a reconsideration of healthcare's fundamental purpose: whether it serves humanity or has become a tool for economic exploitation and political control.

Key Words: Healthcare, humanization, Self, commodification, Neo-liberalism, Exclusion, Surveillance, Penoptican

Introduction:

The commodification of human bodies and the dehumanization of individuals within healthcare systems have become critical areas of exploration in contemporary literature. Through the lens of these narratives, we are invited to reflect on how power, politics, and profit collide, often at the expense of the most vulnerable in society. Healthcare has developed from a healing system preserving a human life to becoming a control, exploitative tool for economic advantage under the neoliberal and capitalist paradigm. The theories from the writings of Marx, Foucault, Agamben and Gramsci provide insight into how what used to be the most comfort-giving, dignity- endowing institution - health care - erodes the self's subjectivity, becomes an institutional foundation of dehumanisation and reinforces social inequality. In novels such as *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, we find a richness of narrative that illuminates the complex, often troubling, relationship between healthcare and humanity. These texts are both deeply personal and political, urging us to think about how healthcare does not only shape but distorts the bodies it would like to heal.

Lived Experiences and the Erasure of Subjectivity:

In the walls of modern healthcare, the patient is often reduced to little more than a body in need of repair, stripped of individuality and lived experience. Michel Foucault's medical gaze encapsulates this dehumanising process, where the patient is viewed not as a person but as collection of symptoms diseases, medical data. Tolstoy writes incredibly powerful novella in his *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. He brings forth the phenomenon through Ivan Ilyich's experiences, which are viewed with a cold, clinical approach of medical professionals who seem not to see him but an object of study. This medical gaze, uncaring of the pain of the individual, is a recurring theme in the text, pointing to the way healthcare systems alienate us from our experiences of illness and death.

This dehumanisation stretches beyond the clinic. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro explores the lives of clones, bred solely to donate their organs. Their existence amounts to nothing more than biological function, their memories, desires, and emotions dismissed as irrelevant. The clones are taught to accept this without question, their identities erased by a system that commodifies their bodies for the benefit of others. Ishiguro's tale makes us face the not-so-glamorous face of a healthcare system which reduces the very core of what means to be human to something disposable.

Marxist Critique: Profit driven Healthcare and Exploitation:

Commodification of healthcare goes beyond reducing people to a mere body; it runs deep into the very basis of the system. Health care under capitalism has been turned into a market, where services are sold as products, and patients are treated more or less as consumers or even raw material. The theory of alienation, as proposed by Marx, is vividly illustrated in the way healthcare, under a profit-driven system, estranges individuals from their own bodies and their right to care. Instead of being considered people in need, the patients are turned into consumers, with care decided according to the level of pay.

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro bluntly depicts the process of commodification in how the lives of the clones are totally ruled by the economic forces. The treatment of their bodies as a resource shows that they hardly mattered in terms of human existence or personal wishes. Such as the ominous vision of healthcare as a commodity bespeaks the deeper issue of inequality and exploitation created by capitalism. Likewise, in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, these women are subjugated not just at the hand of reproductive control but see their bodies bought and sold, and its value marked only by reproductive capacity. The commodification of human life in both these works reveals the disastrous consequences of a system where profit and not care drives medical practices.

Neoliberalism and the Excluded Body:

Neoliberalist ideologies, where emphasis is placed on privatisation and deregulation, have exacerbated the commodification of healthcare. That is, healthcare is reduced from a human right into a privilege for only the few who can afford to enjoy it. In effect, the most vulnerable population in society, namely the ones without financial muscle, is excluded from healthcare delivery. This in that sense is not healthcare as an equalising factor, but a tool through which inequality is perpetuated so that the rich fare far better than the rest. In Atwood's work, *The Handmaid's Tale*, this gives a dystopian approach that sees the healthcare systems of privatised sorts which are selectively dispensed. In the theocratic regime of Gilead, healthcare is a tool of control and domination wielded selectively to empower those in power while stripping away the autonomy of women. The character of Offred, whose identity is subsumed by the state's desire for her reproductive capacity, encapsulates the marginalisation that results from a neoliberal healthcare system. Atwood's portrayal of Gilead forces us to question the ethical implications of healthcare that is structured to serve the privileged, leaving the powerless to suffer in silence.

Medical the Gaze and Institutional Dehumanisation:

Foucault's concept of the medical gaze reveals how institutional frameworks within healthcare reduce the patient to an object under scrutiny. This look, dominating both the physical examinations and bureaucratic procedures, further develops the perception of a passive patient-to-be acted upon rather than an active agent in care. This institutional dehumanisation is perhaps best demonstrated in the case of Ivan Ilyich in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. As he lies dying, the professionals around him are concerned solely with his condition in abstract, detached terms, treating him as one case among the many, without empathy and human connection. The medical detachment displayed by his doctors is reflective of the broader bureaucratic and institutional process of reduction, which reduces them to cases rather than making them human beings with more complex emotional and psychological life.

This dehumanisation is also institutionalised in *Never Let Me Go*, where the clones undergo a strict, dehumanising system that controls every detail of their lives. The educational system they undergo is designed not to nurture their individuality but to prepare them for their inevitable fate as organ donors. The institutional control, which silences their voices and limits their agency, is a stark reflection of bureaucratic systems that shape and ultimately govern their lives.

Surveillance and Panopticon:

Surveillance, both medical and bureaucratic, is another manner in which power is exercised within healthcare. Foucault's Panopticon has clear echoes in the medical field, where patients are monitored not just physically, but also through digital records and continuous observation. Constant surveillance becomes internalised in that patients regulate their behaviour out of fear of being judged or punished.

In *Never Let Me Go*, it is such a bleak place of surveillance, as clones are both watched and are conditioned into not fighting against that role that they have in society. Their very existence is lived within the context of this surveillance. Everything that one does becomes an action subjected to inspection, and the decisions themselves are made. The internalization of that surveillance made them mere passengers in the exploitation process itself. In the real world, we increasingly see such dynamics in healthcare, where patients are reduced to data points, every move monitored and recorded for institutional purposes.

Hyperreality and the Crisis of Representation:

The commodification of healthcare is often masked by representation of care that obscures the darker truths of exploitation and inequality. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, in which the image of something is more important than reality, allows for an understanding of how healthcare is often presented in ways that are unconnected to the lived experience of patients. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the healthcare system of Gilead presents an illusion of care and benevolence but in reality, serves to control and manipulate women. The regime, through such an act, projects the issue of reproductive health as a common good to veil its true intention of using women for their reproductive capacity.

Organ Trafficking and Marginalisation:

The darker side of the commodification of the body is reflected in organ trafficking. Here, marginalised bodies are treated as waste products whose organs are taken out for money. This brutal exploitation of human lives is vividly depicted in *Never Let Me Go*, where the clones, whose bodies are literally made for the purpose of organ donation, are commodified to an extreme degree. The novel challenges us to confront the moral and

ethical implications of such practices, which mirror the inequalities inherent in real - world capitalist health care systems.

Homo Sacer: Bare Life and Political Power:

The most chilling aspect of Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer concept - the reduction of certain lives to "bare life," which refers to lives that exist and can lived but which lack legal or political recognition-finds its perfect manifestation in health systems which take away personhood. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women such as offered are reduced to bare life, their very existence defined solely by the potential reproduction. They are not recognised as people, but as biological vessels, their lives subordinated to the needs of the state.

Conclusion:

Summed through literature we receive an intense criticism of a commodity - producing healthcare system that not only detaches man from all he has left of human mankind but dehumanises patients into simple resources and reservoirs of resources, something depicted in such works as *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *Never Let Me Go* and *Handmaid's Tale*. These narratives expose ethical failures and systematic inequalities that permeate medical system, urging us to rethink the very purpose of healthcare. It is a system designed to serve humanity, or it has become the tool for economic exploitation and political control? These questions raised through literature, invite us to imagine a healthcare system that honours human dignity and prioritizes care, compassion and equality over profit and power.

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