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THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY AND FEMININITY
IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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Ročník: 3.

I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

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Anotace

Hlavní náplní této práce bude zkoumání konceptu identity a ženskosti v knize Příběh služebnice od Margaret Atwoodové. Identita a ženskost coby elementy silně podléhající interpretaci budou předmětem analýzy a komparace z různých úhlů pohledu. Tohoto záměru bude dosaženo pomocí podrobného čtení a rozboru autorčina románu v kombinaci s poznatky z per autorů sekundární literatury. Témata, která budou v práci obsažena, jsou následující: Druhá vlna feminismu a její vliv na literaturu, hegemonická struktura státního aparátu Gileadu, genderové role a jejich vyobrazení v románu, jazyk jakožto prostředek manipulace a oprese jedinců, symbolika barev, názvů a tradic, gradující psychická destrukce hlavní postavy. Práce se zaměří na relevanci těchto témat v literatuře v kontextu doznívající druhé vlny feminismu. Práce bude napsána v anglickém jazyce.

Klíčová slova:

Identita, feminita, role jazyka, genderové role, teokracie, totalita

Abstract

The focus of this thesis will be to explore the concept of identity and femininity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Identity and femininity as elements strongly subject to interpretation will be analysed and compared from different perspectives. This aim will be achieved through close reading and analysis of the author's novel combined with insights from secondary literature. The themes that will be covered in the thesis are as follows: second-wave feminism and its impact on literature, the hegemonic structure of the state of Gilead, gender roles and their depiction in the novel, language as a means of manipulation and oppression of individuals, the symbolism of colours, names, and traditions, and the gradual psychological destruction of the main character. The thesis will focus on the relevance of these themes in literature in the context of the reverberating second wave of feminism. The thesis will be written in English.

Keywords:

Identity, femininity, the role of language, gender roles, theocracy, totalitarianism

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Introduction

The problems of gender inequality, environmental issues, and the infertility crisis have only been brought into the spotlight in recent decades. However striking they might have seemed in the years before, with a few exceptions, it was not a topic of literary discourse. Margaret Atwood is the author who gave rise to a subgenre of feminist dystopian novels that discuss and explore these issues. The anti utopian novel depicting ritualised rape, identity loss, and life in a theocratical state was first published by the end of the second wave of feminism. Since then, *the Handmaid's Tale* has become a symbol, symbol of resistance and women's rights movements. Women dressing up as handmaids, wearing famous scarlet cloaks and white bonnets during protests against abortion restrictions and discriminatory policies are even in these days categorically depicted in newspaper articles. Tracing back to the origins of this phenomenon, it started in 1985 when the first edition was published by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, as her sixth novel book.

The book has immediately gained immense success, with over 8 million copies sold worldwide and translations made into more than 40 languages. For instance, the phrase "Nolite te bastarades carborundorum," quoted from the book and invented by the author in her scholarly years, became a reason for some people to inscribe it permanently on their bodies in a form of a tattoo. *The Handmaid's Tale* was also adapted into a film version directed by Volker Schlöndorff, opera by Poul Ruders, and most recently a TV series directed by Bruce Miller. The book was complemented by a sequel, *The Testaments*, published in 2019.

This bachelor's thesis focuses on two prominent concepts that are depicted in the book by means of words and symbolism. The concept of identity, its significance in the lives of those who live under oppressive regimes, and the concept of femininity in relation to the patriarchal ideology. The disputation point about women's rights and intersectionality will be related to what is called a dystopian novel. I will reference this to the author's claim about inspiration in situations that have already happened.

The main feature of this work will therefore be linking literary theory with cultural and sociological phenomena. The first part will connect the topic to its wider cultural context by discussing the impact of second-wave feminism on the perception of the role of women in society. The next part will be dealing with the hegemonic structure of the fictional state Gilead. It will examine the theory of state formation, relating to the work of John Locke.

Concerning the structure of Gileadean society, the work will analyse the hierarchy and therefore social stratification, social mobility, and the role of patriarchy in a theocratic state. The hypocrisy of those who claim to be profoundly religious but work differently will be highlighted.

To continue in the exploration of this topic, I would elaborate on the concept of identity loss presented in the novel, emphasising the fact handmaids lose their former names and are given a patronymic depending on their posting. I would stress what identity means to the leading protagonist Offred and what are her coping mechanisms.

The subchapter will be dedicated to the linguistic interpretation of names in Gilead and its possible implications, the means of language manipulation, and the speculation about linguistic choices the main character makes.

Femininity is a socially constructed term that is dependent upon interpretation. Drawing from different ideas of what being feminine meant throughout history, I would take a comparative approach and I will try to compare the simulacrum of a woman in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is seemingly taking place in the near future, to the closest description of the femininity in the past. By doing this, I would like to speculate whether gender stereotypes traditionally enforced by radical right parties may lead to a regression.

Adducing from the main pillars of my work, that is the hegemonic structure of the society portrayed, the identity, the language aspect, and femininity, I will draw a conclusion of whether *The Handmaid's Tale* surpasses other dystopian works and therefore if it indeed is worth its fame.

1. The circumstances behind the birth of the novel

“When I wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing went into it that had not happened in real life somewhere at some time“(Atwood, “Creative Writing”).

Margaret Atwood, an acclaimed Canadian novelist, poet, essayist, literary critic, and university lecturer published many writings over the course of the last 40 years, but one of her works in particular, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has brought to the Western World the question of *What?* What might happen under different, perhaps not so affluent, and liberal circumstances?

Her opus magnum was published in 1985, in an era called Second Wave Feminism. The term was first coined by journalist Martha Lear in 1968. “Proponents call it the Second Feminist Wave, the first having ebbed after the glorious victory of suffrage and disappeared, finally, into the great sandbar of Togetherness “(Lear 24). Women started opposing an oppressive patriarchal society that was not going to give them equal rights unless they made themselves heard. Inspired by civil rights movements, they were organizing loud strikes, writing critical pieces of literature, and speaking up against sexualization in mainstream media. In 1961, the contraceptive pill was made available, the Women’s Liberation Movement was established in the late 1960s, the Equal Pay Act was announced in 1963, Pregnancy Discrimination Act became effective in 1978. Women gained the right to join the military, women’s studies were pronounced a legitimate field of study, and women achieved changing social attitudes toward gender stereotypes. As Simone De Beauvoir famously wrote in her book, *The second sex*; “All oppression creates a state of war” (849). The focus shifted to public and private injustices, such as reproductive rights, gender stereotypes, domestic

violence, and workplace harassment. Great granddaughters of suffragettes, who sought the right to vote, refused to have their value dependent upon their reproduction possibilities and family status. Margaret Atwood was one of those who contributed to their efforts. Her profound feminist commitment was effectuated through language (Reesman 6).

1.1 The genre discussion

The Handmaid's Tale has been defined as a science fiction novel numerous times. David Ketterer labeled it as the most successful science fiction novel written by a Canadian. He argues that science fiction is only worth serious attention if it concerns something real. And according to him, in this case, underlying the muted feminist polemic is that of human survival. The big question of the future, of how humankind will survive, is portrayed (209).

Margaret Atwood, on the other hand, has spoken against labelling her novel as science fiction. She characterizes science fiction as a piece of writing in which things that are not possible today happen. She adds that there are events depending on advanced space and time travel, discoveries of aliens on other planets and galaxies, or containing many different technologies not yet developed (Atwood, "Writing with intent"). She suggests that her novel is rather speculative fiction, which she defines as a way of dealing with the potentiality that is inherent in society now but which has not yet been fully enacted (Atwood, "Speculative Fiction."). Another argument that may be used against science fiction labelling of the novel could be its approach towards technical advancement, in other words, the world of Gilead represents a very conservative and disapproving attitude that is against revolutions in any field of human studies.

The novel is set in a near future America and there is a specific reason for this. Ironically, the narrative takes place in a state where the concept of the American Dream was created. To be more precise, it is set in Cambridge, Mass which is a home of a leading liberal educational institution, Harvard University which however used to be a Puritan theological seminary. (Atwood, “Age of Trump”). Danita Dodson suggests there is a notion in the novel that global progress toward human rights will never be possible unless the “nations of freedom” face their own dystopian realities (66). Margaret Atwood works with what has already been executed in the past. Her source of inspiration was among others also seventeenth-century Puritan New England with its strict theocracy and marked bias against women. She noted it would only need the opportunity of social chaos to re-declare itself (Atwood, “to write the Handmaid’s Tale”).

The novel comes from a long tradition of writing utopias, especially dystopias and anti-utopias which are prominent features of the political and literary landscape ever since eighteenth-century early novels. It can also be categorised into a subgenre of feminist dystopias which became visible during second-wave feminism, in the 1970s alongside women’s rights movements, and which includes works of authors such as Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, or Ursula Le Guin (Stillman and Johnson 70). The last mentioned author, Ursula Le Guin, has written a critical review of Atwood’s work where she speculates that Atwood’s novels *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* alongside *The Handmaid’s Tale* all epitomise one concept of science fiction, which is extrapolating vividly from contemporary trends and events to a near-future, making it half satire, half prediction. She claims that Atwood’s “arbitrarily restrictive definition” is devised to protect her from literary bigots shoving her into the literary ghetto (Le Guin 2018).

According to Stillman and Johnson, Margaret Atwood does not only continue in a long tradition of dystopia writing, but she also follows a common plot. Her main character lives under a human rights oppressive regime and at first, she follows the rules before she involves herself in a love affair, and when the possibility of resistance arises, she becomes a part of an anti-government movement (71). The main protagonist, a relatable character, reminds readers that there are still some people that are willing to face death rather than renounce the rights that make us human beings (Ingersoll 64). *The Handmaid's Tale* has many formal and thematic characteristics typical of traditional satire, as it is defined by contemporary literary theory, despite its necessarily subversive status as a female invasion of male literary territory (Hammer 39). That brings out polemics about what makes this particular piece of literature successful and influential to the extent that it has become a symbol of the fight for women's rights.

1.2 The hegemonic structure of Gileadean society

The novel is set in a non-specified near future in North America in a strictly patriarchal society. Sylvia Walby in her essay *Theorising patriarchy* defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (214). According to Offred, the main protagonist and the narrator of the story, after a successful coup d'état, the new Government was formed, and the Constitution was adjourned until the order was to be restored. John Locke in his *Two Treatises of Government* defines political power as “a right of making laws with penalties of death, and consequently all less penalties for the regulating and preserving of property, and of employing the force of the community, in the execution of such laws, and in the defence of the commonwealth from foreign injury; and all this only for the public good” (92).

As the new government claimed power in a state weakened by the infertility crisis caused by pollution and chemicals, gradually, the new system is introduced, and it is presented as a greater good. “The chances are one in four, we learned that at the Centre. The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 104). Gileadean policy presents the implementation of discriminatory laws as an aid that is aimed at the salvation of society. One of the strategies in geopolitical discourse is the language of justification by an appeal to women’s good. The battle for public support for the wars is played out through a combination of the liberal discourse and the premise that only bombing the oppressive enemy can solve the problem (Power 11).

Gilead thus uses the suggestive discourse to invoke the idea that this way women will be more valued than before.

It’s a risk you’re taking, said Aunt Lydia, but you are the shock troops, you will march out in advance, into dangerous territory. The greater the risk the greater the glory,..... A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 105-106)

Strategically, the new government uses religious discourse to promote its ideas and establish a theocracy. Theocracy means a government composed of a self-appointed group who claim to speak and act on God’s behalf (Ferrero 724). “What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies,....” Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled...” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 180).

Secularist thought tends to envision man's multiple spheres of operation as separate forms, one is a member of a family, a society, and a political organization in addition to addressing themselves to their Lord; thus, they act on two entirely different levels of experience, and the mode of expressing their personality is split into social terms and religious terms (Khalid 187). This is opposed to what Gilead wants to achieve, as they construct a world where deity is omnipresent in all aspects of one's life.

“We turn in at a more modern building, a huge banner draped above its door — WOMEN'S PRAYVAGANZA TODAY. The banner covers the building's former name, some dead President they shot. Below the red writing there's a line of smaller print, in black, with the outline of a winged eye on either side of it: GOD IS A NATIONAL RESOURCE. On either side of the doorway stand the inevitable Guardians, two pairs, four in all, arms at their sides, eyes front.” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 196)

Another strategy Gilead tries to enact is the use of the words God and Gilead interchangeably. According to Filipczak, the author emphasizes the term for certain reasons. One of them is connected to Offred's training in the Red Center during the indoctrination of handmaids. “The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you“ (Atwood 26). The statement is remarkably powerful in terms of rhetoric. It has a binary structure as the semantics of the second sentence enhances the effect the first one has. The idea that the total ideology is not only present in the state's affairs but also inside individuals' minds embedded in the unconscious, forces its citizens to think there is no escape from Gilead as it becomes an integral part of the self (Filipczak 173).

„This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want. I am not

being wasted. Why do I want?" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 10). The return to traditions and old practices, as is often enforced by radically right-wing doctrine, is also adopted by Gilead. The everyday life of its citizens is based on principles of the interpretation of biblical teachings. Offred with a hint of sarcasm narrates the story of a society that fosters male domination and female object status, sanctioned by the patriarchal history of Jacob/Israel and by Paul's First Letter to Timothy (Filipczak 171).

I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (NIV Bible 1 Timothy 2:13-15)

Gilead becomes the state that strictly orders following this dogma. Furthermore, they vindicate terrorist attacks, ritualized rape, or working camps in the interest of one interpretation. Historians have to interpret data by making exclusion of certain facts from their accounts marked as irrelevant for the purpose of their narrative (White 281). Gilead thus changes the reality about war according to the most suitable story.

They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news?“Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule,” says the reassuring pink face, back on the screen. “Three thousand have arrived this week in National Homeland One, with another two thousand in transit.” How are they transporting that many people at once? Trains, buses? We are not shown any pictures of this. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 79-80)

However pure and virtuous those who hold power in Gilead claim to be, they find their own loopholes as their morality is only illusional. The commander fraternizes with Offred in his office, offers her banned materials, and takes her to the Club where the powerful can enjoy illicit sex. His wife on the other hand, seemingly deeply pious and a great Gilead supporter, then suggests that infertility could be man's fault. She accompanies Offred to the driver's room to attempt to impregnate her by someone whose child can be passed off as the Commander's (Ingersoll 68). In this way, it is the theocracy where not one person is devout and where such concepts as faith and morality simply have no meaning; it is a society that claims to be profoundly Christian, but ironically transforms every citizen into a sinner insofar as each person must become a liar and a hypocrite in order to exist within the system (Hammer 40).

Every community that dwells on the planet exists within a certain social organisation. Anywhere where a group of people living together is to be found therefore exist interpersonal and intergroup relations of dominance and submission, the range of hierarchy within social stratification (Cancian 227). The society in the land where Gilead lies makes no exception. In fact, it is strictly socially stratified and highly hierarchical. Within this hierarchy, there is a strong misogynist presupposition. As Stillman and Johnson put it, "Gilead is devoted to white, Christian, misogynist, stratified reproduction" (71). Only men can achieve high positions as commanders. Their privilege is based on multiple factors, including gender, race, and social status. The theory of intersectionality, coined during the second wave of feminism can be applied to this model. Intersectionality is the idea that judgment is composed of mutually reinforcing factors of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Nash 2). This is strongly implied by the fact that only married white heterosexual men can be appointed highest-ranking commanders. Those who do not hold such strong status are made Angels, who are soldiers, Eyes, which is secret police, or

Guardians who are labourers. While men's role in this society is tied to performing work tasks and serving the public, women's roles are only connected to motherhood and chores around the house. This could be linked to Gilead's interpretation of cultural sexual dimorphism and encouraging demonstrations of behaviour only of the traits considered appropriate to a person's gender. In that case, women are only expected to be ruled by the Eros principle, regarded as a love principle, whereas men by Logos, the principle of thought (Meadow 190).

In fact, the only women who can pursue a career in public service are aunts. They are allowed various prerogatives that no other women in a country have access to. The most distinctive ones are reading and writing. „Blessed be the fruit, Janine, Aunt Lydia would have said, without looking up from her desk, where she was writing something. For every rule there is always an exception: this too can be depended upon. The Aunts are allowed to read and write“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 120). Education could be considered a basic presupposition for freedom and independence, as people come to understand that they are masters of their own destinies and strive to become captains of their own souls (Roucek 483). Infringement of one of the most fundamental human rights, the right to education is typical for dictatorship regimes. To some extent, literacy means wisdom, and depriving someone of this possibility means restricting chances for change. Through this strict control, Gilead makes guarantees to eliminate any possibility of the overthrow.

Women who are still in a privileged position compared to others are Wives. Their status is dependent solely upon their marriage and following stereotypical archetypes, they are to be obedient and respect their husbands. The submission of wives is a phenomenon on the religious scene (Meadow 191). The main Wife that is visible in the story is Serena Joy. Offred, the main protagonist, observes her throughout the story and notes her gradual state of deprivation. “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 work” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 46). No matter how much was Serena advocating for Gilead, she has, too, become trapped in its obsession (Callaway 35). Women who are less fortunate than Wives but still hold a status higher than mere object are called Econowives. They can be categorised as the wives of poorer men. Unlike Wives, who have their own domestic staff and who “only need to worry about knitting and gardening”, Econowives perform these tasks on their own. “Their striped dresses are worn-looking, as are their faces. Some day, when times improve, says Aunt Lydia, no one will have to be an Econowife“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 44). It is implied they are replaceable, they do not make any particular contribution to society. One would perhaps suppose ascending the social ladder is possible in such a social structure. However, social mobility is in fact not an option in Gilead. Individuals either comply with their social role, or they are about to face consequences which can vary from mutilations, and removals of body parts, to public executions. One of the harshest punishments is sentence to colonies which is also a certain ticket to long and painful death after months of cleaning up the toxic waste.

2. Identity

As mentioned before, the theocracy in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a modern continuation of a Puritan tradition. Margaret Atwood in her essay on how she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* stated that nations never establish ostensibly radical forms of government on non-existent foundations. She refers to China replacing a state bureaucracy with a similar state bureaucracy but using a different name or the former USSR restoring dreaded secret police from imperial times. As she decided to set the story in the United States, she was looking for the deep foundation of the theocratical regime anchored in the Puritan times (Atwood 2019). It is widely known Puritans lived according to strict rules and standards and they required obedience from individual members of their society. Their idea of the woman was a pious, humble, patient, meek, submissive, and often silent lady who is obeying her husband. In essence, the language they used encouraged the suppression of individual identity (Willen 564). Identity is a central concept in contemporary cultural and literary criticism. Interestingly, the Cambridge Dictionary provides multiple definitions of the term identity, some of which directly contradict themselves. The first of them is “the qualities that make a person, organization, etc. different from others“, whereas the second one is “the fact of being or feeling the same“ (identity). It carries a paradoxical connotation meaning both sameness and distinctiveness (Gardiner 347). Generally, there is little agreement on how identity may be defined (Bosma 1995) therefore it may be approached by many fields of study. Erik Erikson was one of the first to coin the term in social psychology. He noted that “individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically related in continual change” (114). Thus, identity is something that is connected to the deepest notion of oneself, a

feeling of having to find oneself and decide who they are but also the urge to anchor one's place in the community.

The theory of identity has been explored by various scientists but those mostly focused on human identity in general and especially the one of males without considering the gender factor. "Psychoanalysts in particular define man as a human being and woman as a female: every time she acts like a human being, the woman is said to be imitating the male" (De Beauvoir 85). Nancy Chodorow suggested an interesting proposal, that is for every aspect of identity as men define it, women's experience varies (Gardiner 349). Thus, this idea offers an elementary presupposition that making decisions for someone else without taking into account the gender aspect may be entirely fallacious. This is ostensibly depicted in various discussions Offred leads with Fred Waterford on their late-night meetings. "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, is what he says. We thought we could do better. Better? I say, in a small voice. How can he think this is better? Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 194).

Texts written by women frequently deal with issues of female identity, those of learning how to react to social norms for what being a woman in such culture entails (Gardiner 359). In Offred's case, her identity is entirely disrupted by the sudden change of the regime and her consequent position in society. She has to adapt to the new concept of what she is according to societal norms. She manages to keep critical thinking through reflections on her past. "Now and again we vary the route; there's nothing against it, as long as we stay within the barriers. A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 152).

2.1 Identity as a prescribed quality

The boundaries of individual choice are set by societal norms and the historical context; they make some identity choices simple and others nearly impossible (Phinney 30). Offred is marked as a fallen woman in Gilead because she married a divorced man. Divorces are not recognised in the newly established country, therefore Offred's husband, Luke, is still considered to be legally married to his previous wife and Offred is labelled as an adulteress. The archetypical dogma which in this case Gilead follows is that marriage symbolises the union of heaven and earth, therefore every partnership united in marriage recreates the structure of the cosmos, and breaking this bond would be an act of tearing the earth apart from heaven, separating the Christ from the Church, producing cosmic chaos (Meadow 190). To avoid life where such ideology is enforced, Offred and Luke attempt an escape before they are caught and separated.

Offred is recognised as a fertile woman and subsequently given a choice between becoming a Handmaid or being sent to colonies. "Nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 90). Hence this choice may perhaps be regarded as an easy one, especially in a society where abandoning one's doll house as Nora did is penalised with death. This makes it the primary choice and taking into account the self-preservation instinct most species are equipped with, Offred's choice to live even as a Handmaid is understandable. She acknowledges that she has been given a choice, and in fact, she takes a pragmatic approach when commenting on the situation. "That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 12).

Although Offred acknowledges her identity as a Handmaid, this does not mean she identifies and agrees to her her role to the full extent. She, in many ways, is a relatable and sympathetic narrator who leads a usual life of a working woman with a husband, a daughter, a university degree, and an office job (Stimpson 764). Stillman and Johnson note there is a transition in her attitude towards herself. At first, she refuses to call the room she is assigned as hers, “The door of the room — not my room, I refuse to say my — is not locked“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 12). After a while, however, she proceeds with labeling it as hers „My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 50), precisely because her private life is being compromised (Stillman and Johnson 73). The room she is assigned is rather basic, she assimilates it to the room of a university student. It has an ordinary disposition, there are no ways for her to make it personalised. “If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values. You must cultivate poverty of spirit. “Blessed are the meek“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 64). One’s possessions are conceptualised as major contributors to and reflections of one’s identity (Belk 139). By tearing away all aspects of Offred’s previous life, including her family, work, freedom, but also material things such as her possessions, they cannot expect her to immediately comply with the new identity she is given. Furthermore, she notes her newly assigned room was someone else’s before. Someone who was in the same place, in the same position. This notion of fluidity and replaceability of Handmaids is another factor that makes it difficult for her to relate to her role.

She discovers evidence of a previous Handmaid in the Waterford household on her third day in the house while exploring the room in order to occupy herself. “I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a

fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: Nolite te bastardes carborundorum“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 52). She is thrilled by this discovery because she believes it to be something personal, meant for her eyes only. “It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 52). She is forced to lead an isolated life and when she wonders about other people in her immediate proximity, she finds little satisfaction in interaction that could develop a sense of self (Stillman and Johnson 74). Thus an idea of a potential woman who was in the same place and whom she can relate to fills her with excitement. Ironically, although Handmaids' only role in society is producing children, they are in fact in many aspects of their life treated like problematic children themselves. They are not trusted with knives, Marthas have to run them baths and prepare healthy meals for them, and Wives behave like their evil stepmothers. “They're talking about me as though I can't hear. To them I'm a household chore, one among many“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 48). Marthas mostly treat Offred as another household chore, with only one exception among them, Cora, who tolerates her and treats her with respect precisely because of the child she might ultimately bear. Offred acknowledges these acts of kindness even though this “merely reinforces her identity as a two-legged womb of Gilead” (Callaway 59).

2.2 Defence mechanisms

Offred feels like a burden in the house and therefore when she realises somebody already has been in her place, she wants to find out more about her, she is looking for someone to identify with. “Identification is an ego defense or mental mechanism through which an individual, in varying degree, makes himself or herself like someone else; they identify with another person. Identification is an emotional alliance“ (Laughlin 135). Offred thus, in her efforts

of re-establishing her identity identifies herself with the first person who is seemingly in her immediate surrounding, and who according to her would understand her. When she freshly arrives at this posting, she has a similar hope she could establish this bond with Serena Waterford. "I was disappointed. I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 18). Offred's wish for Serena to be a motherly figure to her, a guardian, demonstrates another example of Gilead's effort for making handmaids to feel like children.

Every member of society suffers both psychologically and spiritually from being forced into modes of behaviour that are not in natural accordance with their psychological and spiritual needs (Meadow 191). Hence it is not only the Handmaids who suffer from sudden identity loss but also the Wives. However privileged they may appear in contrast to lower-class women that are the main concern of the book, it is implied that neither they are satisfied with the social change and apply their own defence mechanisms.

"The Wife in my posting before this had spent most of her time in her bedroom; the Marthas said she drank. I wanted this one to be different. I wanted to think I would have liked her, in another time and place, another life. But I could see already that I wouldn't have liked her, nor she me" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 18).

Being defined solely by marital status and having every aspect of one's personality suppressed in the interest of representation of a meek and submissive wife is also highly painful. Wives are ordered to control their appearance, speech, and behaviour to be socially acceptable images of themselves, but this does not apply to their counterparts, at least not to this degree. The foundation of this distinction lies in the fact that women are given their identities by virtue of

their relationship with men, but not vice versa. (Lakoff 68). Offred, with some satisfaction, observes Serena's disappointment with the regime, which in Offred's eyes, she helped to create. She used to participate in evangelist programmes for children, singing gospels. Later she started making speeches about women's place in the household. She was an instrumental figure in the regime change, she advocated for the culture that would bring women back home (Callaway 55).

“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“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 46). When describing Serena, Offred tends to depict her negatively with a sense of resentment. She uses the defense mechanism of projection. “Projection is an unconscious device through which disapproved wishes, motives, or feelings are disowned and ascribed to someone else“ (Laughlin 234). Offred projects her frustration with the regime in Serena as she is the woman in her closest proximity who advocated for the creation of Gilead and although she is not responsible for Offred eventually becoming a handmaid, she receives many more hateful comments from Offred than Commander Waterford. “Serena Joy, what a stupid name. It's like something you'd put on your hair, in the other time, the time before, to straighten it“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 46).

However understandable this is given her situation, it is her attitude that unconsciously complies with Gilead's patriarchal policy. All women regardless of their wealth, status, or beauty are deeply marked by living in a world that, although claims to be benefiting women, is in fact poisoned at the root by millennia of male domination. (Ferrante 28). By creating a misogynist society where not only men oppress women but even women are enemies of other women, Gilead ensures continuation in such a regime and blocks potential resistance. Not only is Offred

constantly avoided by Marthas and the Wife, but she as a Handmaid is also ordered to monitor her fellow Handmaids and report on them on their mandatory daily walks. Her isolation is scarcely interrupted by ritual greetings where she is prescribed to use special lexis (Hansot 58).

The marginality and the discrimination aimed at women are present in both ways women are expected to speak, and in the way in which they are spoken of (Lakoff 45). Atwood adopts the dichotomy of literacy and orality in a gendered way. Apart from writing about an extensive power structure, she also writes about how it confines women to an oral cultural tradition in order to oppress them (Klarer 130). All women except Aunts are prohibited from reading and are threatened with having their fingers cut off in case they are caught doing so. Gilead uses religious discourse to support their arguments. “That language is a major problem has become apparent to many people trying to understand why religion lags far behind other social institutions in eliminating unhealthy sexist practices“ (Meadow 187).

2.3 The language aspect

So far, Offred's identity has been analysed from the sociological point of view, that is through her relationships with people in her society, and also through a psychological approach by identifying her defence mechanisms and labeling them, drawing from her inner monologues. Identity, however, can also be defined by means of linguistics, as a linguistic construction of membership in a certain social group. Literary critics and linguists have previously expressed interest in the linguistic innovations found in speculative feminist fiction (Cavalcanti 153). Among others, linguistic choices provide a notion of crucial criteria that serve members of groups to identify themselves within them. This may be realised through the use of particular

linguistic forms and the use of communicative practices that are indexed by the normative application of its members in the context of their group (Kroskrity 111).

The use of particular linguistic forms that are prescribed by Gilead is an apparent and distinctive element in the book. The term verbal hygiene, coined by feminist linguist Deborah Cameron, is defined in relation to practices and is theorized as a fundamental cultural trace. It is an urge to clean up or improve language, as well as a general impulse to regulate language, control it, and make it better (9). Gilead uses language as a strategic tool, as a language change is often gradual and seemingly natural, it is a witty way of creating an atmosphere of a cage harboured not only by means of state borders but also by all layers of one's lifestyle, including language use. Gilead has coined many terms to use for its citizens precisely to achieve the effect of complete isolation from their previous lives and from the world around them. The processes by which words enter a language are called word-formation processes and are the field of research of morphology.

2.3.1 The meaning behind labeling social groups

One of the most essential word-formation processes is lexical borrowing from other languages. The vocabulary has been proliferating by borrowing and adapting words from Greek and Latin and later on, the formation of words in English-speaking countries was according to Greek and Latin patterns (Quirk 1522-1523). Gilead uses loanwords from Bible and assigns them new meanings according to their current propaganda. This helps to reinforce its theocratic nature, assign gender stereotypes, and assemble individuals into greater groups in society. "Power is exercised by virtue of things being known and people being seen" (Foucault 154). In the Bible, Martha is portrayed as a woman known for her hospitality and domestic duties. "They made him

a supper there: and Martha served“ (John 12.2). Therefore, in Gilead a Martha with a capital M became a word coined for domestic workers who are obliged to serve in the households without a claim for financial compensation.

Gilead, although claiming to be profoundly religious and to follow strict moral standards, allows higher ranking commanders to visit brothels that are under the control of the state and deliberately violate the marital promise which is otherwise enforced by law. Women who work in those institutions are called Jezebels. Another name is borrowed from Bible, which is supposed to hint at what their occupation is; in the Bible, in the same verse where Jezebel is called a mother, she is also called a whore. Finally, there is a description of her wearing makeup (Schneider 124). Drawing from her descriptions in the Bible, the bearers of her name are also ordered to wear makeup, dress in vulgar costumes, and work as sex workers. “In the room beyond, a woman in a catsuit with a tail made of orange fake fur is re-doing her makeup. This is like backstage: greasepaint, smoke, the materials of illusion“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 225). This is clearly contrasted with what Wives and other women visible in society are ordered to do, they do not wear makeup anymore, they are prohibited from doing so. Jezebels, to highlight their dishonorable position and contrast them to seemingly “pure“ Wives are ordered to act as complete opposites of them. It is another way of discrimination starting with as simple as a name. The name Jezebel carries a negative connotation and due to its historical allusion; it reinforces the regime's way of controlling and discriminating women by degrading them to objects of male pleasure.

The title of the book comprises the name *The Handmaid's Tale*. Handmaid can be considered a compound; a word created by combining the roots of two or more different words to generate a new meaning (Carstairs-McCarthy 59). The first part of a compound is a free morpheme *hand*, which signifies labor and carries the functional aspect of their role in society. The second part of the compound, a free morpheme *maid* denotes a notion of subservience and their inferior position in society. By combining these two morphemes together to create a compound Handmaid, Gilead succeeds in labelling a group of people, assigning them a role in the society that involves fertile women bearing children for privileged families. This would have been unimaginable in the years before Gilead which Offred recalls in her memories, but precisely by giving a category a name and social role, the unimaginable becomes a reality.

Another compound word used to describe a group of women and distinguish them from Handmaids and Marthas is Econowives. It comprises of blended morphemes Econo, probably coming from economic, referring to their practical position within society. These women are not to enjoy luxurious lifestyle reserved for members of higher society. The second part of the blend is wife, referring to their gender role within society. Econowife is an endocentric compound, meaning that Econowife is a type of wife, and they cannot be referred to as Wives only, as this is a distinct category in the Gileadean society. The reason for using the blend is to refer to their similarities, eg. they are not maids or servants as they are wed, but also to emphasise the distinction between them and Wives, that is to appoint them the demeaning role in society as their name purposely carries a certain connotation of practicality and simplicity.

The last category of women in the Gileadean society which bears a morphologically interesting name is Unwomen. By adding a negative derivational prefix Un, the goal is to create a meaning of the opposite of the stem. Gilead strategically aims to dehumanize bearers of the

title by means of one single morpheme. Any difference in meaning must necessarily involve semantics, and one way to address the semantic issue is to consider the difference in part of speech (Andrews 227). When applying its semantic meaning, this denomination leads to social seclusion and creates an unfavorable category that serves as a constant reminder that even humanity is not to be taken for granted. Gilead, utilizing its theocratic and political nature can, among other things, take this away from individuals. Unwomen are all the previous categories of women, e.g., Wives, Econoviwes, Handmaids, Marthas or Aunts, that have not complied with the regime and their prescribed function in society, and consequently, they are sent to colonies to clean up toxic waste. This is a one-way ticket to death, with Gilead reminding its citizens that first, they will lose what it means to be human in all its aspects before they are encountered with capital punishment.

The last two categories of women are labeled as Aunts and Wives. It is interesting to notice that the naming of their positions comes from the names of family members. This again emphasizes the regime's effort to exclude women from public affairs by simple means of language. Not coincidentally, names used for roles of men in society are usually connotated in a way that suggests some degree of superiority if compared to their gender counterparts. To be associated with male means to be associated with certain qualities which are positive, whereas not to be linked with it means the absence of those qualities (Spender 23). The partners of Wives are not called Husbands, their names are Commanders, and they are the highest-ranking men in the society. As their name suggests, they are in charge of commanding, ordering, controlling, and holding power. "I wait, for the household to assemble. Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till

death do us part“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 77). By being referred to as commanders, they are given predetermined authority.

Another group of men who hold status are called Angels. As Still and Johnson have pointed out in their study, *Handmaid's Tale* shows similarities to Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with its limited natural resources, constant wars with enemies, and the prosecution of those who do not comply with the regime (71). There is also certain language similarity and the functionality of its suggested use. An example of that would be The Ministry of Love in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is responsible for the practice of fear, torture, and suffering, although its name indicates otherwise. Similarly, Angels in *The Handmaid's Tale* serve the function of soldiers and are members of military force, and although the violent nature of their jobs suggests they are ordered to lead wars and execute people, their name implies something different. Angels symbolize purity and God's protection; they are messengers of God. Coming back to the earlier hypothesis, this would again comply with the idea Gilead is trying to reinforce; that according to their propaganda, the terms Gilead and God are interchangeable. Angels work as protectors of people and serve Gilead just as biblical angels protect humanity and serve God.

Guardians are lower-ranking officers who maintain order within Gilead. Unlike police, their predecessors in times before Gilead, whose name derives from the Latin “*politia*” meaning civil administration (Police | Etymology, Origin and Meaning of Police by Etymonline) the name Guardians suggests guarding the place, protecting it. It aims to propose a narrative of guardians as protectors of people, not those who restrain, control, and execute people on the streets.

Eyes are members of the secret police of Gilead; however, nobody knows who are they or how do they look. Their name is metonymical, is it a synecdoche, as Eyes represent humans

whose job is to stay on guard. “The Eyes of God run over all the earth ” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 73). This could be substituted as the Eyes of Gilead run all over the earth.

By assigning new names to the positions, Gilead tries to manipulate people into thinking their role is straightforward, prescribed and they should think about it in one way. According to Spender, categories have a significant impact on human behavior that goes beyond their initial application (140). It could be argued they draw from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativism. According to this theory, language influences thought by shaping one’s perception of specific categories, thereby shaping their overall worldview (Luck 21). Language plays a natural role in shaping cognition and by changing the way people talk, it changes the way they think (Boroditsky 65). Gilead uses its language weapons to achieve the transition in perception of peoples’ social roles to the ones designed by the state.

“Blessed be the fruit,” she says to me, the accepted greeting among us” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 22). These agreed-upon forms of greetings are clearly social constructions; they would have had no meaning in times before, but at the time the novel takes place everyone in society understands them and is taught into using them. They convey a clear message; the citizens of Gilead are not to keep critical thinking, they should follow the doctrine of Gilead and if they will not, they can easily be eliminated. Offred is quite obedient when it comes to agreed-upon greetings, however, she remains careful in her internal monologues. “The war is going well, I hear,” she says. “Praise be,” I reply. “We’ve been sent good weather.” “Which I receive with joy.” “They’ve defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday.” “Praise be,” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 23). These agreed-upon greetings are used repeatedly throughout the book. The sense of repetition underlines the intensity of the narrative. Another fixed phrase that is used

repeatedly in the book is “Under his eye”. This constant reminder of surveillance is an effective linguistic device of manipulation. The manipulation carried out by means of language is in fact a very inventive strategy. As language is adaptive and flexible, it is easily spread if supported by political power. Power is a commodity, something held or possessed, something embodied in a person, institution, or structure, and something to be used for organizational or personal purposes; it is not acquired, taken forcefully, or distributed; rather, it is something that is maintained or relinquished consciously (Foucault 94). The aspect that can be perceived as somewhat worrying is that power dynamics is often unconsciously supported by language users when coined ideological phrases become a natural part of their lexis.

Language production can serve as a manifestation and affirmation of oppressive ideologies, which provide justifications for discrimination. Additionally, language can directly contribute to or perpetuate unequal power dynamics and privileges within a society. Viewing language as a form of social action, both reflective of and influential in shaping social relationships, allows for a closer examination of the ideological implications present in spoken and written words. It also enables an investigation into the effects and consequences of such linguistic expressions on the individuals and groups involved (Marcoccio 149). Although the depicted vision in the book is unsettling, the protagonist's voice serves as a powerful affirmation of the profound impact language can have in altering one's reality. Language becomes a means to defy and transcend oppressive systems that subjugate individuals, emphasizing the transformative capacity of storytelling to shape and reshape the world we inhabit (Reesman 6).

Offred, although surrounded by ideologically focused language, manages to maintain her personal freedom through internal monologue. Atwood here uses a stream of consciousness to

describe Offred's feelings, her struggles, memories, and the psychological effects it left on her mental health.

I consider this: maybe they're drugging me. Maybe the life I think I'm living is a paranoid delusion. Not a hope. I know where I am, and who, and what day it is. These are the tests, and I am sane. Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 102)

As a response to the totalitarian erasure of collective history and individual recollection, the main characters in dystopian novels strive to establish their own personal archives. There is an ostensive similarity between Offred's and Winston Smith's attempts to preserve fragments of the shattered past. Through their diaries and journals, which they envision as records for a future history beyond the regime's influence, they focus on safeguarding the remnants that endure in memory, language, and physical artifacts, recognizing their significance as enduring traces of what once was (Finigan 435).

When women are predominantly perceived and treated as sexual beings, it inherently diminishes their status to that of objects. By regarding women solely as objects of male pleasure and satisfaction, their humanity is disregarded, and they are denied recognition as autonomous individuals (Lakoff 62). Offred often takes a pragmatic approach to dealing with the situation. "Last night he had a drink, Scotch and water. He's taken to drinking in my presence, to unwind after the day, he says. I'm to gather he is under pressure. He never offers me one, though, and I don't ask: we both know what my body is for" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 193). Although she acknowledges the fact she has been denied her fundamental human rights, Offred still does

not fully identify with her role as a mere object of reproduction. „I hunger to commit the act of touch“ (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 14).

Lakoff notes that individuals use their linguistic behaviour as a diagnostic for their hidden feelings about things. (46). Thus, also the utterances humans decide to produce or not, have a strong base in their state of mind. As quoted above, Offred longs for touching something that is not cloth or wood. What she wants to touch is a bread dough that Rita is kneading with her hands and that reminds Offred of flesh. She, however, decides not to ask this seemingly banal question. “But even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid. The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 15). The decision not to ask, not to perform a simple request through an interrogative question demonstrates her inner insecurity and uncertainty about everything around her which leads to her gradual loss of freedom of mind. This concept is fundamental for the American literary tradition that values maintaining the freedom of imagination. This engagement with the tradition is enriched by the novel's feminist discourse, which extends beyond the confines of nationality or culture (Reesman 6).

Therefore, Atwood attempts to describe dystopia where one is gradually deprived of personal freedom in all its layers extends beyond the fears of an American citizen, as their country is built on the idea of a City upon a hill where democracy and liberty are fundamental concepts of human rights. Her setting is therefore not random, it emphasizes that oppressive and totalitarian regimes can emerge even in a society that is traditionally associated with opposing qualities such as freedom and democracy. Atwood draws attention to the presence of authority and power dynamics within the New World. By highlighting the historical context of violence in a colonial society driven by empire-building, she challenges readers to reexamine American

history and literature through an intertextual lens while engaging with Offred's narrative. Similar to the Puritans of the 17th century, the Protestant reformers in Gilead forcefully remove, execute, enslave, and ultimately silence those who dissent against their religious and racial ideologies. Therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* challenges any previous interpretation of the Puritan narrative as a utopian mission centered on divine justice. (Dodson 70).

3. Femininity

3.1 Puritans and the traditional gender roles

The most notable link of this story to American novels lies in its distinct post-Puritan perspective, which entails a deliberate rejection of epistemologies that promote object-centered methods of understanding, especially when it comes to defining what is the essence of a human being (Reesman 7). In trying to elaborate on topics in previous chapters, I often collected data from biblical texts in trying to interpret various concepts in this book as the work challenges theocratic regimes. As mentioned before, *The Handmaid's Tale* questions the depiction of the Puritan mission as a pursuit of religious and moral purity. This very initial part of American history was for many reasons problematic and the creation of Gilead draws inspiration from the Puritan era. The first settlement of the “promised land” was accompanied by a number of existential issues. First of all, the first settlers were often people unskilled in agriculture, and as the land transpired to be more barren than expected, this meant a much larger obstacle for the expedition that has been poorly equipped for the tasks of settlement and thus colonists faced impending starvation. Individuals who sailed over the ocean with a desire for moral regeneration which would follow on a change in their environment beset with the loss of ideals and harsh reality encounter (Frost 255). The new represented a threat. The notion of not having things under control, muchly feared by humans is opposed to the idea of the American Dream. This concept was coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic of America*. A number of eminent American writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Henry James, Francis Scott

Fitzgerald, and many others have continued in a tradition and engaged in the dream, which became a prominent concept in American writing (Bloom 15). American Dream is the idea that through determination, hard work, and individual merit anyone can achieve success, autonomy, and pursuit of happiness. This is vigorously opposed to the new state and lifestyle created by Gilead with its focal focus on the denial of fundamental human rights hidden behind religious narrative. As indicated before, this has been applied to the vast majority of society, but the special narrative was used for the dichotomy between men and women.

The primary reasons behind women's disadvantages are largely attributed to the perpetuation of stereotypical societal expectations. These expectations, held by both women and men, hinder women's progress in their careers and contribute to prejudice and discrimination against them (Connel 262). The idea that men are from Mars, and women are from Venus, a popular pop-cultural reference was in fact embodied within power structures in our society since the ancient period, and this slightly rephrased idea was used as an explanation for the military and political coup by Gilead which lead to consequent oppression of women. The appropriation of the sexuality of Handmaids represents an extreme instance of the well-known societal measures aimed at exerting control over women's bodies. In the novel, the use of familiar floral language underscores this exploitation, implying that women suffered a loss of sexual and social autonomy (Hooker 285).

Coming back to its connection with the Puritan era, *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates the transformation of a male utopia characterized by promiscuity into a female dystopia dominated by Puritanism. This evolution mirrors the way Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* serves as both a romantic narrative and a detailed examination of Puritan society (Kaler 45). Puritans lead a strict lifestyle of control and self-denial. Their reasons for leaving England due to religious dissension

with the Church of England along with the combination of factors mentioned before, such as harsh and barren land, lead to them setting up strict moral standards that were to be obeyed. Just as in Puritan period, the notion of femininity and masculinity in Gilead was extremely differentiated, and thus they recreated gender duties that were to be obeyed. Femininity, according to De Beauvoir, is defined primarily as the lack of something, as man defines a woman in relation to himself, that consequently leading to women not being considered autonomous beings (26). Connel points out that social structure relates to the formation of personality through means of role learning and internalization, women thus become feminine by learning the attributed role, the female role (Connel 262).

3.2 Madonna-whore dichotomy

The ideal of a woman as presented by Gilead is the loyal pious wife, who suppresses her personality as a sign of dignity, and dresses in blue, the color of the Virgin Mary. Blue is used in contrast with red, the colour of Handmaids. "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 12). Red, on the other hand, symbolizes passion but also danger and warning. Handmaids are dressed in red in order to be marked. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, it is precisely the red letter A that is ostentatiously visible on Hester's chest which distinguishes her from the rest of the villagers and accounts for her condemnation. This clear parallel highlights the suggested femininity that Handmaids ought to have: sinners, adulterers, who are there to satisfy the needs of their commanders. Even the imposition of the name Offred indicates the Handmaid is offered as a sacrifice to society, of red because of her obligatory red attire and Of red as she is the scarlet woman of Revelations 17 (Kaler 47).

Gilead is forcing Handmaids into performing their prescribed role theory. Role theory is commonly perceived as a type of social determinism that emphasizes how individuals are confined within stereotypes and societal expectations. However, upon closer examination, this perception starts to fade away. Role theory posits that these “expectations” become influential by promoting the notion that conforming to stereotypes will result in rewards from others, while deviating from them will lead to punishment (Connell 263). The process of erasing one's individuality and embracing selflessness, the stripping away of personal identity through changes in name, attire, and way of life, the commitment to vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the physical practices aimed at suppressing bodily desires—all these elements, originally intended as essential means of development for women in religious orders, are transformed into “distortions” used to enforce the “conversions” of the Handmaids (Kaler 44).

“At the end of the hallway, above the front door, is a fanlight of coloured glass: flowers, red and blue” (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 12). Red and blue, Handmaids and Wives, there is a constant reminder of the contrast between pure wives and fallen handmaids, and thus these two colours represent the fundamental perspective of femininity as Gilead views it; the Madonna-whore dichotomy. This term was first coined by Sigmund Freud as a part of his work in psychoanalysis. It describes complex involving men's perception of women as either saintly Madonnas (Wives) or sinful whores (Handmaids) (Hartmann 2335). This binary way of perceiving women's sexuality and assigning them these alleged feminine qualities is a calculation well thought out by Gilead. Not only can Handmaids and Wives be allotted into these two categories, but also a few remaining categories of women — Marthas, Aunts, and Econowiives would all fall into Madonna class, whereas Jezebels and Unowmen would fall into the whore class, although the distinction is not as clear as with Handmaids and Wives.

3.3 Imposed gender patterns and their influence on children

The formation of identity in children begins by observing and identifying influential and appealing role models who provide them with a vision of their potential future selves (Phinney 28). This is particularly harmful to little girls growing up in Gilead, who are presented with very little means of how a woman can realise herself, also taking into account the fact that women are portrayed in two ways of femininity as implied by Gilead. Girls in Gilead are separated from boys in the schooling system, and they are taught special skills such as sewing and embroidery. They are educated to become future wives, on the condition they learn their lesson well. This is further elaborated on in the sequel, *The testaments*. However, women do not receive unconditional acceptance from society as a reward. Instead, their mastery of this unique way of speaking becomes a justification that others exploit to belittle them and deny them the recognition and respect they deserve as human beings (Lakoff 46).

Masculinity, on the contrary, is presented as a primary substance, the right one, with the category of a commander seen as a perfect embodiment of masculinity, as a white, Christian man who is a head of a family. Gilead could be seen as an example of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity signifies a position of dominance of men obtained through the influence of culture, institutions, and persuasive methods (Connell, Messerschmidt 832). By presenting children with very limited role models of what they can become, Gilead ensures they grow up to be obedient and compliant people who will fit into predestined categories society has prepared for them.

3.4 Nolite te bastardes carborundorum

The famous slogan *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* has become a symbol of resistance and the message written on numerous banners during anti-discrimination protests. It is a sentence

that was made up by Atwood during her school years intended as a joke, and it is not in correct Latin, yet it conveys an important message. In the book, the sentence was first discovered by Offred scratched in the corner of a cupboard, and since then, it has become her mean of escape. It was her connection to the woman who was there before her, to the woman who according to Rita's words "didn't work out" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 54). Yet Offred is still interested in her personality and one day she confronts the commander about it and he translates the meaning for her. She pretends to have known the girl before her and never tells the commander she did not. It is important to her, as she has a feeling she has control of something and that precisely is her secret which she can keep.

When the commander tells her the inscription means "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 174), Offred is fascinated; she feels an immediate connection with the woman who was there before her. Perhaps it is for the strong message the words convey: it is certainly not considered feminine to speak that way in a state which dictates the vocabulary. A society which suppresses an individual's personal identity prevents women from expressing themselves strongly while promoting expressions that imply triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about them (Lakoff 47). Offred repeats the sentence again in the book, in the last chapter. She wonders if it has no meaning but conversely, it helps her remain calm, brings her tranquillity and it reminds her to be herself. "But I feel serene, at peace, pervaded with indifference. Don't let the bastards grind you down" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 266). This message symbolises the exact opposite of what Offred, throughout the book, was supposed to do, say, and believe. It fights traditional gender stereotypes and femininity as established by Gilead; it uses vulgar language as opposed to how women ought to speak. It provides hope, not in God's salvation but hope it will end one day. It addresses her and it assails patriarchy in Gilead and its

hegemonic structure. It symbolises the connection between Offred and the woman before her when Gilead aims at keeping Handmaids separated. And finally, it serves as her escape from the regime, as she mutters those words minutes before she is taken away from the house of Waterfords, her allegorical imprisonment.

4. Conclusion

Living in society means existing within a community where certain rules are set. These rules are taken as an essence of the symbiosis of humans and are enforced by the holders of power. *The Handmaid's Tale* exemplifies a society in which the theocratic regime arises and breaks the wings of democracy and liberty. It is a dystopian novel that has roots in real-life events. From the Old Testament story of Rachel and Leah, which stood as an inspiration for the ceremony and the conception of Handmaids, past witch trials in Salem during the seventeenth century to Ronald Reagan's presidency, all of these events in history have something in common; the use of religious discourse to justify the actions. Atwood identified perils that pose a threat to life in freedom and has managed to assemble the pieces of history hidden under the allegorical cloak into a book with the famous red cover. The cover that has a picture of a woman wearing red cloak and white bonnet on it, the presumed *sister dipped in blood*. The publication of the book has risen a number of questions, controversies, and critiques, but more importantly, it has redirected attention to contemporary issues and concepts, that are often unheeded. In this bachelor thesis, I tried to identify some of the most significant concepts and analyse them.

In the introductory chapter, this thesis dealt with a general overview of the novel, the circumstances behind the publication, and the importance of second-wave feminism in the women's rights movement. The novel is often labelled as science fiction because of its dystopian setting. The better categorisation for the story would be, as Margaret Atwood implied, the *speculative fiction*. While the novel meets certain criteria for science fiction novels, such as an alternative societal structure and a dystopian setting, it certainly does not concern prevailing

elements of science fiction such as time and space travel, extraterrestrial life forms, and technological advancement. On the contrary, Gilead is depicted as a society that strongly opposes technological progress and believes in returning to old traditional ways of living. This is supported by the use of a manipulative religious discourse, to which the chapter of this thesis was devoted.

The choice of language provides a notion of human consciousness. It divulges one's intentions and may serve as a powerful tool for totalitarian regimes. Drawing from common morphological concepts, I tried to analyse word-formation processes that Gilead has announced for new categories in society. The compounds Handmaid or Econowife clearly define the purpose of the name holders and have in a sense a negative connotation. Moreover, Handmaids are given new names according to their posting; the novel never reveals Offred's former name, instead, readers are given a very intimate narrative of a main character whose name they never ascertain. The biblical interpretation of the names Martha and Jezebel implemented as categories for maidservant and prostitute demonstrate how Gilead attempts at hiding the reality behind the biblical discourse. The significance of the names Wife and Aunt is clear when looking at the nature of the Gileadean patriarchal attitude: their names are those of family members as women are in a traditional conservative view associated with a family. This prevents them from pursuing careers outside the family sphere. The linguistic choice behind male categories is also elaborated. Angels and Guardians sound like protection providers, in reality, they are those who often violently enforce civil obedience and compliance with the rules. Commanders are the heads of the small units and families and they are Gilead's envisionment of the masculine role.

The importance of internal monologue is emphasized in regard to forming identity. Identity is a very subjective and fragile notion that however plays a crucial role in the formation

of self. The novel deals with identity loss on multiple levels; from Offred's detachment from time and space in her monologues to her uses of defence mechanisms such as identification with the previous Handmaid in her posting and projection of her negative feelings towards Serena Joy. The thesis points out that Wives are privileged compared to other women in Gileadean society, however, they are still denied fundamental human rights such as reading or the right to work. Their only role in society is to complement their husbands and while Offred's resentment towards Serena Joy is understandable, she fails to realise she unconsciously complies with the patriarchal structure that aims at separating individuals and making them rivals.

Gilead is a society with a hegemonic structure founded upon theocratical premises. Throughout the novel, in order to enforce civil obedience from its citizens, Gilead's authorities use formulations that imply that Gilead is everywhere, the eyes of Gilead are everywhere, and that Gilead is the highest form of authority. There is a resemblance between the discourse of cult leaders referring to God and the individuals in the novel referring to Gilead.

While sex is innate and dependent upon biological attributes, gender refers to socially constructed roles. Masculinity and femininity are socially created categories intended for attributing stereotypical gender roles to men and women. In this patriarchal society, women's principles are categorised into dichotomic madonna/whore distinction. By assigning femininity the two aforementioned categories, women are perceived as inferior members of society which is precisely the narrative Gilead is aiming for. Furthermore, this creates an unhealthy environment for little girls growing up in such a society. This is in fact the main theme in the sequel of *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*, which is set in the last years of Gilead and among others, provides an insight into the diaries of a young woman growing up which turns out to be Offred's daughter.

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum is a seemingly unimportant sentence that became a motto to be heard and seen on many protests for women's rights. Its importance lies in its message: it fights the stereotypes and prejudice towards women in the book. It also serves as a tool of hope and connection not only for the heroines in the book but also for all those who are fighting oppressive systems and those who support them.

I consider this thesis to be relevant for its scope of topics touching upon different areas of humanities. The exploration of hegemony and power structures which are linked to sociology and politology, the linguistic approach when analysing different strategies Gilead implemented in assigning names to categories, and finally the psychological and gender studies outlook into concepts of identity and femininity. This knowledge has been combined with the insights from different literary critics who already wrote on this topic.

The Handmaid's Tale has become a phenomenon and its various iconic symbols of the book, such as famous red cloaks and *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* have become familiar even to those who have not read the book. Its immense commercial success lies behind a combination of many factors, one of which is its cross-over with different aspects of life, which I tried to present in this thesis. Its appeal lies for the reasons I presented in the introductory chapter. As Margaret Atwood said on multiple occasions, this book does not write about anything that has not happened before and it poses the new question "Could this happen again?"

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