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Is there Feminism in Gilead?: Feminist Analysis of  
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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## ABSTRACT

Literature can be understood and analyzed using many different approaches. In this study, the focus is feminist literary criticism. This thesis argues that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is, in fact, a feminist dystopia. Analyzing the novel from this perspective allows the reader to understand aspects such as religious references, Gilead's society, and its government under a different light providing new and relevant information that, in a first reading, may go unnoticed. Religious references in the book are numerous and they highlight the importance of the Bible in Gilead and the consequences it has for women. One of these consequences is the division of society into separate categories according to their use, being a division significantly harsher for women. From these two elements, the type of government is derived, one whose aim is to oppress women.

*The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood, feminism, religion, society, government

La literatura se puede entender y analizar desde distintos enfoques. En este estudio, el centro de atención es la crítica literaria feminista. Esta tesis va a argumentar que El cuento de la criada de Margaret Atwood (1985) es, en realidad, una distopía feminista. Analizarlo desde este punto de vista permite al lector entender aspectos como las referencias religiosas, la sociedad de Gilead y su gobierno bajo una perspectiva diferente que proporciona nueva información y que, al leerlo por primera vez, puede pasar desapercibida. Las referencias religiosas en el libro son muy numerosas y resaltan la importancia de la Biblia en Gilead y las consecuencias que esto tiene para las mujeres. Una de estas consecuencias es la división de la sociedad en categorías teniendo en cuenta su uso, siendo esta división significativamente más dura para las mujeres. De estos dos elementos deriva el tipo de gobierno, un gobierno cuyo objetivo es oprimir a las mujeres.

El cuento de la criada, Margaret Atwood, feminismo, religión, sociedad, gobierno



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## I. INTRODUCTION

“Feminism has transformed the academic study of literature, fundamentally altering the canon of what is taught and setting new agendas for literary analysis.” (Plain and Sellers NP). This is why feminist approaches to literature are so necessary. Developing this type of analysis provides new information about texts already written and analyzed under different theories and approaches. It is important to have a broader view about literature and about the world in general; looking at the same work with a different vision and mentality, changes everything. This is what feminist literary criticism aims to do. The feminist approach to literature is something that has a long history. The origin can be seen in what is known as the *first wave feminism*. Nowadays, in these times of change and female empowerment, it can be considered to be even more important.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is one of the most popular novels written by Canadian author Margaret Atwood. She was born in Ottawa in the year 1939. She wrote “more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays” (Margaret Atwood 2018). She received several awards and prizes for her work including the Prince of Asturias Award for Letters in 2008. For *The Handmaid's Tale*, she received The Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987 which is given to the best science fiction novel of the year. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Atwood presents a dystopian near-future North America. The novel focuses on the figure of Offred which is a Handmaid in this new society. She is also the narrator of the story although she is not writing it as it is forbidden; she is recording her words in tapes hidden and buried underground. The tapes were found and analyzed in the period after Gilead as it can be seen in the epilogue of the novel. This epilogue is called Historical Notes and it is a lecture given by Professor Pieixoto in the year 2195. The society in Gilead is a Christian theocracy where all the power rests in the hands of a specific group of white men while women are divided into different categories according to their “use” to the community: Handmaids, Aunts, Marthas, Wives, Econowives and Unwomen.

According to Ketterer (2009), *The Handmaid's Tale* is “the best and most successful SF novel written by a Canadian”. There has been some disagreement as to whether this is actually a science fiction novel. For Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* is speculative fiction which she differentiates from science fiction in the fact that a speculative novel “employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth” (2004; 513). Anyway, she accepts that some scholars follow different distinctions. She provides the arguments for this idea in her essay “*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context” where she describes the background and places each novel within its own genre. Another proposal regarding its literary genre is Hammer's. She believes that the novel is, in fact, a satire. In her essay “The world as it will be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*” she argues about this. She believes the novel is a satire which is a “genre dominated by men” (39). She sees it as the female appropriation of a generally male genre, going on to argue that it should be considered and analyzed from a specific point of view that considers women, not only from the tradition of male-written texts (46).

In any case this study refers to *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dystopia as it has been accepted by most scholars and, in some way, also by the author herself. Furthermore, *The Handmaid's Tale* includes some of the main characteristics of the dystopian novel: a powerful and dictatorial political regime where the main character is committing little acts of rebellion (visits to the Commander's room, or sleeping with Nick, among others) that will lead to a negative end (Stillman and Johnson 70-71). Another typical characteristic is technology which, in this case is not present as such, insomuch as there are no robots or inventions. The technology that can be found is what Hammer refers to as the technology of power (45). She defines the technology of power as “the constant monitoring of everyone by everyone [...] coupled with the ever-present threat of clearly defined punishments” (46).

Gerhard refers to this novel as a feminist dystopia and she believes that Atwood wrote it to “satirize the contemporary feminist movements as well as misogynistic inclinations” as she was concerned about the world's future if things do not change (13).



This is not the only scholar who supports the idea of a feminist dystopia. Stillman and Johnson see it as a subgenre that can be compared to other novels such as *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ or *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (70). For them, a feminist novel is one that shows power as gendered (70). From this point of view, *The Handmaid's Tale* falls perfectly into that category as everything in Gilead's society is decided and established by patriarchy. However, although Atwood accepts that the novel can be considered a dystopia, she does not see it adequately placed under the label *feminist*. She has said that it is not feminist considering what she understands as feminism. She decided to use a female voice and perspective because everything she had read before of science fiction (Orwell, Huxley, Zamyatin...) had been written from a male perspective. She also argues that when women appear in these stories "they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime" (Atwood 2004; 516). So, although she decides to voice the female experience in a dystopian world, she does not believe her novel is a feminist dystopia: "this does not make *The Handmaid's Tale* a 'feminist dystopia', except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered 'feminism' by those who think women ought not to have these things" (Atwood 2004; 516). For her, providing women with a voice is not something exceptional that has to be considered a rebellious act, but something natural that should be seen that way. If not a feminist dystopia, at least it is, as Bergmann puts it, "a political statement and a 'female text'" (853). Anyway, whether you consider it a feminist dystopia or not, it is clear that "the book concerns itself successfully with complex feminist issues" (Hammer 40).

The present junior thesis aims to develop a feminist analysis of the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* so as to show how female characters are portrayed and what their relations with other (male and female) characters and their environment are. Although not every scholar sees *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist novel, this study tries to show how, in fact, the novel contains several of the ideas that have been developed by feminist literary criticism. It also shows how the novel is suitable for this type of analysis and how it provides new information that, in a first reading, could have passed unnoticed. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been chosen for this specific purpose because of its wide array of

female characters and because Atwood is able to create a society where everything focuses on women and even if they are the most important aspect of society, they have been stripped of all freedom and rights.

## II. FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

The fact that “Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal” (Dobie 97) creates a significant imbalance that affects everyone even if sometimes we do not see it or do not want to see it. This invisibility is one of patriarchy’s main means of control and oppression. Everyday activities, from going to work or to school, to watching television are fraught with instances of inequality. The patriarchal establishment of our culture influences Western decisions and actions for both, male and female citizens. The role of the feminist critic is to expose the patriarchal system and to try and change the vision. Although the word “feminism” firstly appeared in 1895 (Callaway 13), it is still, and specially in these moments of female movement, a word very much in use and in need. In fact, “feminism” was the word of the year in 2017 for the online dictionary Merriam-Webster which means that it was the definition that people were most interested in (2017). The main reasons for this were: the Women’s March on Washington DC in January, the release of the film *Wonder Woman* and the series *The Handmaid’s Tale* (based on Atwood’s novel and created by HBO) and the “many accounts of sexual assault and harassment in the news” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Undoubtedly, feminism is a word and a movement that concerned women in the past, but that is highly relevant in 21st century society. Thus, a feminist view on literature is as important.

Despite its pervasive presence, feminism and feminist criticism are difficult to define as there are different schools and critics that refer to it in diverse ways. The feminist movement can be considered to have started in the 19th century, but the modern approach can be traced back to the early 1960s (Dobie 97-98). The feminist critical tradition is organized in four main schools of thought according to Fry in his lecture *The Classical Feminist Tradition* (00:25:00). The first wave deals with the analysis of men’s representations of women in literature, both as authors and as characters. This relation is one of isolation and inferiority. *Sexual Politics* (1970) by Kate Millet is considered a first wave feminist book; in fact, according to Gallop (76), it is considered the “first book of

academic feminist literary criticism.” As Dobie clearly explains, Millet basically defends the relation of the sexes as a political element to be considered. She also differentiates between biological and cultural identities: biological identity refers to the sexual organs, while cultural identity indicates gender (100).

The second wave is also known as *gynocriticism*, if we follow Elaine Showalter and, unlike first wave feminism that focused on “officially mandated *de jure* inequalities”, second wave feminism saw “unofficial *de facto* inequalities [...] as equally important” (Callaway 14). This movement was highly criticized because it was thought to have excluded “working-class and minority women” (Callaway 16). There were different subgroups that derived from second wave feminism: cultural feminism, separatism, materialist feminism and radical feminism. Regarding literary analysis, in this case, there is an examination of female characters by both female and male authors, but in general, what they try to do is to establish a female literary canon. Gynocriticism was firstly mentioned in *A Literature of their Own* (1977) by Showalter. In it, she focuses on American gynocriticism to claim that it “has moved away from the romantic feminism [...] to a more complex engagement with the symbolic, linguistic and professional aspects of American women’s literature” (1993; 115) and “that it is more productive to look at what work contributes, and what it leaves open, than to pounce triumphantly on where it has ‘failed’” (1993; 126). Showalter also establishes some phases in woman’s writing. The first one is the feminist phase where she talks about women trying to write like men, sometimes even using pseudonyms. The use of pseudonyms in literature by women has been something very widespread. An example of this is Mary Ann Evans author of *Middlemarch* who wrote under the name of George Eliot as she wanted her work to be considered seriously. In fact, there is no need to look so far back. J. K. Rowling herself decided to use a male pseudonym when she published *The Cuckoo’s Calling* (2013) as she wanted “to work without hype or expectation and to receive totally unvarnished feedback.” (Flood 2015). Even when she wrote the worldwide known and very successful *Harry Potter* series, she decided to just use her initials. It was also common to find women publishing anonymously. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) believes that most anonymous authors in the past were

women: “I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.” (50-51). The second phase, according to Showalter, is the feminist phase. In this phase, female authors do not try to copy male writers anymore, instead they start criticizing the oppression their gender has suffered and continues to suffer aiming to achieve some kind of change in their situation. Finally, the third phase is known as the female phase. In this stage, they argue that the work developed by women is as valid as that of men and should not be undervalued or ignored; on the contrary, it should be part of the literary canon in the same way male writing is.

After the second wave, Gilbert and Gubar started the “Mad Woman Thesis” by means of their celebrated work *The Madwoman in the Attic* of 1979. In their examination, they analyzed different female authors from the nineteenth century like Charlotte Brontë (in fact, the title is taken from *Jane Eyre*) or Jane Austen among others, regarding gender. As stated in its preface, they realized that “literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art and society” (Gilbert and Gubar xii). They wanted to criticize how male authors always tried to categorize female characters between two groups: the angel and the monster. This distinction was so strict that it would probably have worked as a limitation for female authors at that time trying to express themselves: they had to decide whether they identified as angel-women or as monster-women (Gilbert and Gubar 44).

Finally, a different version of feminism, French Feminism, mainly focuses on the search and defense for a female language. Irigaray, for example, says that women have a specificity that distinguishes them from men (85). Warhol and Herndl analyze her words in depth in their book *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Thus, Irigaray believes that this particularity is what would enable woman to abandon male ways and to discover their own discourse (74). However, the differences between male and female writings are not something restricted to French feminism. Showalter relates her coined term gynocritics to deal with this issue as well. Her interest resides in stating those

differences and for it, she analyses four “models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural” (1981; 186). First of all, regarding the biological aspect, she mentions the importance of imagery derived from the body, but she wants to highlight at the same time, the necessity of not simply focusing on anatomy (1981; 189). When dealing with linguistics, she concentrates on questioning whether there are differences between male and female discourse. As stated previously, this was a central topic in French feminist criticism. As Showalter declares, the attention now focuses on the “oppressive aspects for women of a male-constructed language system.” (1981; 190). And, for her, the basic problem is not the insufficiency of language, but the fact that women have been silenced (1981; 193). The third aspect she mentions is the psychoanalytic area. Here, the focus has usually remained in Freudian theories (French feminism) and, although there are new studies such as Chodorov’s focus on the pre-Oedipal phase, they have proved to be insufficient to give a general explanation and other aspects would be needed. One of these aspects is culture, which is the last of Showalter’s topics in the essay *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*. Culture, for her, is the most complete analysis (1981; 197) as it incorporates all the previous ideas placing them in a specific context. For this, she mainly focuses on Ardener’s idea of a dominant and a muted culture; women writing has to be understood as located between two traditions and two voices (1981; 200-202).

### III. *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*: FEMINIST ANALYSIS

A society in which women are divided according to their use to the community, where they have to dress in a specific color and where their freedom has been completely coerced seems like a nightmare. This is the reality of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* for which its author, Margaret Atwood, looked for inspiration in the real world: past, present and what she believes is going to be the future if nothing changes. This chapter explores *The Handmaid's Tale* under a feminist approach focusing on three main aspects: religious references, society and politics. The novel is full of Biblical allusions as Atwood used them to create this dystopian society. The analysis of these elements provides information about the situation of women in Gilead as well as it reflects the discourse of misogyny that is usually derived from the use of the Bible as a means of control. This, at the same time, helps with the analysis of the society present in Atwood's work. The focus remains mainly on the female characters, but the analysis interprets male positions too. In order to make easier and more visual the understanding of female figures, these characters are divided in the same groups of the novel: Handmaids, Aunts, Marthas, Wives, Econowives and Unwomen. Finally, the politics and government of Gilead are studied under this light as well, to show how its establishment affected women and continued to control them.

As Ketterer clearly states in his article "Atwood's Contextual Dystopia", the female imagery present in the novel is very representative and visual. As seen in the previous chapter, imagery is an important aspect developed by Showalter when she analyses the biological models of difference between men and women. She focuses on imagery derived from the female body and this is what can be seen in Atwood's novel. There are several key objects that are represented as ovals. Ketterer says that "as the book develops, it is the female imagery of circles and curves which predominates". In fact, even the Wall that is usually related to male features, has a circular shape (Ketterer 211). The main elements that can be related to this female imagery are the oval mirrors, the oval rug, the oval face of Offred's mother, among others.

The last chapter of Historical Notes that is supposed to be a conference given on some tapes found in Canada which comprehend the fictional *The Handmaid's Tale*, provides a lot of information about how Gilead was established, about Offred herself and her Commander's possible identity, and also about how things are in that time when Gilead does no longer exist and what they think about what happened in North America. By analyzing the words used by the lecturer, ideas about his vision of society can also be inferred. Furthermore, it is made clear that Pieixoto and the rest of scholars of the time, could not completely understand Offred as they decided to leave emotions outside the reading (Bergmann 853). There are some jokes delivered by the scholar giving the lecture, that suggest an existing sexism and also an inaction against the injustices of the past. At some point it even seems as if Professor Pieixoto is "justifying" what happened in Gilead due to the fact that it was "under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise" (Atwood 2016; 302). Although Gilead is now over and the situation is much better, women are still not in the position they should. This is probably a message Atwood wanted to highlight. In most dystopian novels, the authors want to leave the reader with the idea that if society does not change, everything they imagined could become a reality. Atwood does the same thing, but in a more indirect and subtle way. She uses these notes to show that, although the horrific Gilead has passed, a lot has to change for history not to repeat itself: "Atwood is pointing, with disguised horror, to the smug blindness of a society that refuses to recognize [...] the seeds of sexism that could lead to another Gilead" (Ketterer 214). This is one of the aspects which makes *The Handmaid's Tale* a less common dystopia.

*The Handmaid's Tale* can also be seen as a response to second wave feminism as Callaway explains in "Women Disunited: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Critique of Feminism". For her, Atwood falls better in the category of Liberal Feminism which is closely related to first wave feminism (12). In fact, in the novel, she criticizes some of the ideas spread by the different subgroups of second wave feminism. Callaway shows the examples very clearly regarding each specific subgroup. Cultural feminism states that women are gentler and kinder than men. Atwood uses the figure of the Aunts to criticize this idea as the Aunts are the essential pillars on the oppression of women in



Gilead. She also argues that separatism, seen as encouraging “resentment between the sexes”, is perfectly portrayed in the figure of Offred’s mother as she talks about men in a very negative way accepting that they are useless: “what use are they except for ten seconds’ worth of half babies. A man is just a woman’s strategy of making other women.” (Atwood 2016; 187). Finally, radical feminism was also criticized by Atwood (Callaway 17-19). For her, second wave feminism had three main problems: women lack of solidarity, the changing definition of the word “woman” (nowadays also seen with the word “feminism”) and “the antagonistic view toward men adopted by some groups” (Callaway 21-24). Atwood tries to analyze and illustrate these problems in her novel.

Atwood used other elements in her novel to criticize different aspects and not just feminism. She wanted to warn population, especially women, about the dangers of a patriarchal society and the dangers of having the Bible as the law. Developing a thorough analysis of how religion affects society and government, shows its consequences on women.

### **1. Religious references**

What are the dangers of using the Bible as main and almost only source in the establishment of a new society? Atwood decides to illustrate this topic with *The Handmaid’s Tale*. As Filipczak states in her article “Is there no Balm in Gilead?”, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is full of cultural references and among those, there is a great amount of “biblical images” (171). The religion that Gilead’s rulers decide to take as reference to establish the new society is the Judaic-Christian tradition. What this society does is “a right-wing fundamentalist reading of the Bible” to graft it “onto patriarchal attitudes” and impose it in society (Stillman and Johnson 71). Atwood shows the dangers of using the sacred text as source to establish a whole nation: “pointing to the dangers of lurking in the process of institutionalization of the sacred text” (Filipczak 171). Once again, Atwood exemplifies the dangers of a hypothetical situation. This is also seen if we consider that her

intention with the novel is to show the dangers of a patriarchal society; the dangers of continuing in this direction without changes. The question arises: why did this new society choose to use biblical elements to establish itself? The answer can be seen in the Historical Notes chapter. Professor Pieixoto himself says that “no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the previous elements” (Atwood 2016; 468).

The name of the new country, Gilead, has its own meaning in the Bible. Gilead, as Filipczak mentions, is present in the Old Testament “as a backdrop for quite a few important events from patriarchal history” (172). Once again, everything is male-focused. Even the name of the new society has been chosen to perpetuate the idea of female inferiority.

In the Ceremony celebrated once every month, the Commander reads the Bible. This Bible is kept and guarded by men highlighting its importance in society and in the home. Recalling the past, only the man of the household is allowed to read it and he reads it mainly to his Wife and the Handmaid of the house although the Marthas and the Guardian are also present. The Bible is also relevant in Gilead because it has become a “lethal instrument”: most of the oppressive laws and prohibitions are taken from this text, or at least, it is said so by the Commanders in order to justify themselves (Filipczak 171). Violence against Handmaids is justified too as “there’s Scriptural precedent” although they cannot use any weapon, just their bare hands (Atwood 2016; 25). They used passages from the Bible to defend this ceremony as well. For example, they had the Genesis 30:1-3 as a reference to create the proceeding of the Ceremony. The Bible says: “Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees that I may also have children by her”. What is happening is that the Handmaid is lying between the Wife’s legs during the whole celebration while the Commander is raping the Handmaid so that it seems that the wife is the one in that position. According to Ketterer (210) the whole Ceremony is “modeled directly on the Genesis passage”. In the Bible, Rachel is Jacob’s wife, but she is suffering from infertility. In order to provide him with children, Bilhah, the servant, is “used”. This is an exact reflection of what happens in Atwood’s invented society. The quote is found at the

beginning of the novel which makes clear Atwood's source of information. From that same excerpt, there is another sentence that repeats itself a lot through the book and that is relevant in the understanding of the Handmaid's position: "Rachel [...] said to Jacob, Give me children, or else I die". This quote is used several times by the Aunts in the Red Centre to justify the Handmaid's duty. In another episode having Rachel as the protagonist, she is linked with Eve. Since ancient times, Eve has been a representation of the original sin and the cause of men's fall from paradise. In this case, Rachel is portrayed as inheritor of that sin making the Handmaids inheritors as well. This, too, shows women as weak and having "to look up to the patriarch for care and decision" (Filipczak 175). Also related to the figure of Rachel, the Red Centre, where the Handmaids are trained, is actually called the Rachel and Leah center. There, fertile women are taken and confined in order to become Handmaids. They are trained by the Aunts who give them lectures, show them videos, punish them harshly and repeat how lucky they are for being "seeds" (Atwood 2016; 29).

The Bible is not only read during the Ceremony, however. Another special moment in which Handmaids are allowed to hear the holy scripture is during what is called the Prayvaganza (pray + extravaganza). These are praying reunions; in this case, the one described in the novel was used as a multiple wedding too. The excerpt of the Commander's reading that is transcribed in the book talks about how women should be subjected to men and silent: "not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." (Atwood 2016; 341). Furthermore, it also deals with the ever-present sinful inheritance of women: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression." (341). Finally, the message ends saying that women are only saved due to childbearing which highlights the importance of the Handmaids' role in Gilead.

Religious expressions taken from the Bible are used by the people in Gilead as courtesy formulas. It is mainly seen when Handmaid's greet each other and when they say good-bye, but not only. Their conversations are full of expressions like "Blessed be the fruit"; "May the Lord open"; "The war is going well"; "Praise be"; "We've sent god

weather”; “Which I receive with joy” (Atwood 2016; 30). Clearly, they are not able to talk, just to repeat formulas that they have learnt by heart.

Another example of biblical references is the figure of the Eyes which are what could be considered the policemen of Gilead although they work mainly as spies. This can be seen as trying to follow the biblical idea of God being able to see everything and everyone. Thus, being able to punish people the same way Gilead’s Eyes work. A reference to Orwell’s *1984* can be seen as well in the figures; like the Big Brother, they know everything and they punish bad behavior.

Although there are a lot of references to the Bible and its use in society is very clear, the outcome for the reader is not as clear. Hammer argues that Atwood decided to use satire when dealing with the biblical references as well. She wanted to show Gilead’s hypocrisy: “a regime which preaches biblical virtue but where vice reigns everywhere” (Hammer 40). Hammer goes even further to claim that all the characters, even the Handmaids, end up being hypocrites: “each person must become a liar and a hypocrite in order to exist within the system” (40).

That the Bible is source for the establishment of Gilead’s society is not something scholars have deduced or interpreted. In the epilogue (Historical Notes), Professor Pieixoto who is giving the lecture, talks about this saying that the people in charge decided to establish a system with “biblical precedents” where polygamy is established as present in “early Old Testament times and in the former state of Utah” (Atwood 2016; 468). In conclusion, it can be said, that women are positioned in a situation of inferiority which is highlighted by using the Bible as primary source in Gilead. As Filipczak puts it, the Bible becomes “an accomplice in the patriarchal strategy of marginalizing and victimizing women” (182).

## 2. Society

Society in Gilead is divided first between men and women and, among each group, there are further divisions depending on their “use” to the common good. Although the main focus of analysis is women, men are organized as well: “some men are second-class citizens and all women are third-class citizens” (Callaway 48). The highest rank is the Commander, these are the men in the positions of power and the ones with the right to have a Wife and a Handmaid. From this, we already get the superiority of men. The next position is the Eyes. It is a secret organization whose main duty is to spy and report any violation of the rules of Gilead. Closely related to a military force are the Angels. They are the soldiers who have to protect Gilead’s borders. Finally, there are also Guardians which usually work for the Commanders. Guardians can ascend in position which means that at some point, they can receive a Wife and even a Handmaid. In fact, men in Gilead are considered of a low rank if they have not received, at least, one woman. Once again, women are used as objects to celebrate and give men as presents.

The conclusion that can be reached from the analysis of male divisions in Gilead is that men are the ones that hold the important roles: they are in charge politically as well as militarily. Furthermore, they can even promote themselves, something that is not possible for women. The only change in position that they could suffer is moving to a lower one: the Unwoman. Also, men do not only control women, but they see them as inferior; the Commander especially, talks in an arrogant and patronizing way to Offred. This is basically derived from the type of government established which sees women as complements of men. Furthermore, the patriarchy seen in Gilead is what creates and establishes “the matriarchal network responsible for regulating women” (Callaway 49) as we will explore in the analysis of the figures of the Aunts.

Female characters are organized in different groups, each one with its own color, dress-code, “rights” and obligations and with its own name. As Bergmann explains, Atwood wanted to “explore the implications of a patriarchal language involved in creating a especially misogynist world” (847). The division is as follows: Handmaids, Aunts,

Marthas, Wives, Econowives and Unwomen. The word "rights" is written between quotation marks because what women have in Gilead are not actually rights. They have been stripped of everything, even their names, so the little they let them keep is considered a privilege, especially for the rest of the women who do not enjoy that specific permit. For example, the fact that Aunts could read or write is seen as a privilege as the rest of the women are not allowed to, in fact, they are punished for it. This prohibition is exaggerated (something common in dystopias) as even the signs of the shops are eliminated and substituted with pictures so as to avoid temptation (Atwood 2016; 33). Banning reading is something quite common in dystopian novels, however, in this case only women are the ones affected. Atwood adapted this banning for the situation in the 80s regarding feminism (Klarer 131). The division is done taking into account women's use to society which means that they are valued for their bodies: if they can or cannot produce children. Gerhard explains it very clearly: "the woman is literally perceived as a body, a 'womb' that can produce offspring to be distributed and utilized in society" (34). Offred herself talks about this when she remembers what the Aunts told them in the Red Centre: "think of yourselves as seeds" (Atwood 2016; 29). Offred is very aware of her situation and she accepts the vision of their bodies as a "national resource" (85). Men want to control reproduction and, in order to do so, they have to control women (Bergmann 847).

There is another category, but it is not an official one. As in all societies, black market exists and it does not only focus on selling products that have become illegal like magazines or make up (objects that the Commander has in his possession and that gives to Offred in their nightly meetings). This black market is also concerned with women, like everything else in Gilead. Some women work as prostitutes in brothels restricted for the Commanders like the Jezebel. Although this is not official, everybody knows about it, or at least all men. These women among which Moira can be found, usually end up in that situation in order to avoid a death sentence by becoming Unwomen and working in the Colonies (women in the Colonies are forced to collect chemical waste). They are controlled by the Aunts too. When Offred is taken there, there is a clear example of how men see these women: as objects belonging to them. She says that "he slips around my wrist a tag [...]"

like the tags for airport luggage” and he tells her that “if anyone asks you, say you’re an evening rental” (Atwood 2016; 361); that if she shows them her tag, “they’ll know you’re taken” (2016; 372). These quotes show how men see women as their own property; they also mark property through the tattoos in their ankles: “a cattle brand. It means ownership” (Atwood 2016; 395). The Commander justifies this illegal action by talking about nature. For him, men need variety and it is not their fault. He even refers to the past pre-Gilean times and says that women bought so many clothes because they wanted to please men (Atwood 2016; 367). This argument is not something Atwood came up with, it is an argument which can be heard nowadays: women doing everything to please men. Furthermore, the Commander also says that women dressed in different ways to trick men, which can be linked to the ancient idea that women are evil beings, inheritors of Eve’s sin. Thus, it is seen, once again, as a direct consequence of having the Bible as primary source.

The narrator of the novel is the Handmaid Offred who can even be considered a heroin. The reader does not know her name for two main reasons. First of all, in this society, Handmaids are known by the name of their Commander. In this case, the Commander’s name is Fred so, in order to show possession, it is transformed into the compound Offred (Of-Fred). Other examples are Ofglen or Ofwarren. In Spanish, the names have been translated as Defred or Deglen to continue with that idea of possession. Raschke developed the theory that by saying “Of-Fred” instead of “I-am-of-Fred”, “the subject is effaced” diminishing even more women’s relevance (259). The other main reason why the name becomes unknown is her desire of keeping it a secret: “this name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that’s survived an unimaginably distant past” (Atwood 2016; 130). As she is the narrator and she is telling the story to an imagined future, she could have said her name without it becoming a problem for her. Anyway, she decides not to do so because she associates it to her past and her family; to what she was before everything changed. For her, it is the only element that they cannot take away. There are scholars like Ketterer (210) who believe that the name *Offred* can be understood as well as a misspelling of *offered* which also supports the idea of Handmaids being objects of

society offered to men to accomplish their desires. However, this explanation is not fit for the rest of the Handmaids' names.

One of the main characteristics of Offred as a narrator is the power she transmits through her words. As Reesman states in her article "Dark Knowledge in *The Handmaid's Tale*", the importance of language reveals "a profound feminist commitment." (6), but also, as Offred's present is our near-future, "her discoveries about the relationship between her language and her reality uncover versions of our reality to us" (Bergmann 848). Offred uses language to change her reality and as a means of surviving against the oppressive and patriarchal society she has to live under. She is even able to change the way her Commander sees her because of their dialogues (Reesman 18). As in most dystopian novels, resistance is found in writing or, more precisely, in language. A very clear example is Winston Smith in *1984*. In this case, Offred is not really writing but telling her story and recording it. Anyway, language is used to oppose the ruling authority in Gilead. Furthermore, Gerhard in her work "Control and Resistance in the Dystopian Novel", defends the idea that Offred uses language to "reclaim control over one's body" (22). The theocratic government has been able to control women's bodies stripping them from all power of decision. The way Offred tries to regain that control is through her words and remembering her previous self; a self that was completely hers. Through her own words and the metaphors she develops, the reader can see how she feels her body does not belong to her: "I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does" (Atwood 2016; 160). Thus, she uses her story and her words as a means to "reconnect with her body [...] and regard herself [...] as a piece of humanity" (Gerhard 65). This is a common idea seen in feminist literary criticism: women writing to take control of their own selves, bodies and to place themselves in society. Writing provides them with authorship and authority. What feminist tradition has been trying and continues trying to do is to give voice to the oppressed and that is exactly what Offred represents (Gerhard 70). This novel shows female oppression in the context of an imagined near-future, but, at the same time, it represents the fears of many feminists that are, not expecting a change, but provoking it. Gerhard even associates it to Virginia Woolf's idea of *A Room of One's Own*. Her telling the story



provides Offred with a space for her to express her feelings and have some kind of power (Gerhard 95-97). Anyway, when comparing Offred with other characters such as her best friend Moira or her mother, a great difference in terms of social consciousness and feminist ideas can be seen. As Stillman and Johnson ponder, Offred, before Gilead did not have a strong political or social opinion: “she lacks a consciousness of the constraints imposed upon her by society” and she mocked Moira and her mother for it (78). Despite the fact that throughout the whole novel Offred is trying to show resistance, in the end, when she is being taken away she surrenders: “I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped” (Atwood 2016; 453). She even surrenders to God itself: “Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. [...] I’ll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. [...] I’ll sacrifice. I’ll repent. I’ll abdicate. I’ll renounce.” (Atwood 2016; 440). Furthermore, according to Stillman and Johnson, those acts of rebellion regarding the Commander or Nick, reduce her to a body which is what Gilead wants; there is no real rebellion in the end (75-76). She focuses on herself and on making her time the less horrible she can. This is why it cannot be said that Offred is a feminist character; she accepted most of the things that started happening and the misogyny present in the United States. On the other hand, Moira and Offred’s mother are feminist activists that want to change the situation and that act. Offred remains still watching how everything changes and concerned only with herself and her family (Stillman and Johnson 78-79). The little action she takes is telling her story. It is argued by some scholars such as Hammer that her inaction is due to a “dangerous amalgamation of gender assumptions which have governed women’s behavior for centuries and which have guaranteed their oppression” (44). With the epilogue of Historical Notes, some kind of hope can be perceived as it is seen that Gilead is not going to last forever. The lecturer is talking about it in the past showing that they are in a different society and situation. Atwood used Orwell’s *1984*’s epilogue as inspiration. This epilogue is an essay on Newspeak, the language implanted in *1984*’s imagined society. As she remarks, the essay is written in the past and in third person hinting that it is in a different and better future where Newspeak has finally disappeared. Another clue is that it is written in standard English and not in Newspeak (516).

The epilogue Historical Notes provides the most reliable source of information about Gilead as it is an academic lecture delivered in a university. However, a lot of material is obtained as well from Offred's narration. Her recollection can be divided into two main groups: the chapters concerning her present where she gives all the information about Gilead's society, although most of the times in an indirect way. And the chapters about her past life where she remembers her family. She pays special attention to those actions and opportunities she had that seemed of little importance and compares them to her actual life (Ketterer 210). A highly interesting process she describes is how everything started and how women were stripped of all their rights and possessions. The first time she noticed something had changed was when she and every other woman in her job were suddenly fired and she saw the soldiers and their new and unknown uniforms in her work. The justification was that it was "law". The next law she learned about was that women could not hold property which meant also, no money and no bank account. Everything they owned was transferred to the "husband or male next of kin" (Atwood 2016; 276). Offred also talks about people going to the streets to complain, but at the same time, she accepts that these marches were less numerous than it could be expected. However, she did not participate, she decided to think about her family and "started doing more housework, more baking" (278). This supports the idea stated previously: Offred is not a feminist character, rather, she is a victim of the patriarchy that existed even previous to Gilead. The only concern or unease she felt was regarding her husband Luke. She believed that the balance had shifted as they "were not each other's, anymore", she was his (2016: 282).

In Gilead's society, the Aunts are the ones in charge of the Handmaids mainly, but not only. They represent the matriarchy that helped in the establishment and maintenance of "the new social order" (Callaway 49). Aunts main role is in the re-educating centers where they are in charge of creating good and useful Handmaids. Through physical and psychological violence, they achieve, in some cases, their intention of altering women's view of their roles. A very clear example of this manipulation of the minds of Handmaids is what happens with Janine. Before Gilead was established, Janine was gang raped leaving her physical and psychological scars. In the Rachel and Leah center, Aunts convince Janine

that what happened to her was only her fault. The process is simple: Aunts ask the Handmaids whose fault it was and “who lead them on” and they have to repeat over and over again: “her fault” and “she did” (Atwood 2016; 111-112). Furthermore, it is justified as God allowed it to teach her a lesson. This all happens with Janine in the middle of all the Handmaids creating a stressful atmosphere. Finally, she accepts everything they tell her. It is possible that during this process, Aunts are not only re-educating Handmaids, but also themselves. They try to convince their inner woman that what they are doing is the correct thing that is why they refer to Handmaids with religious expressions such as: “sacred vessels” or “ambulatory chalices” (Atwood, 2016 55). Deep down, they must know that what they are doing is completely inhumane.

Aunts are in such a power position that they even have control over other female characters like the women prostitutes in the Commanders’ club. Furthermore, in some cases they are in an elevated position over the wives as it can be clearly seen in specific parts of the novel like for example during the birth of Janine’s baby. It could also be argued that, in fact, they have more power than the Commanders themselves especially regarding the control over the Handmaids. Anyway, they still have to obey men. A question that arises when dealing with the figures of the Aunts is: why did Atwood choose women to be the ones in control of the Handmaids instead of using men? Atwood’s answer is clear: the history of imperialism. And it is not the first time that she uses this technique of “female-oppression of women” (Johnson 69). Another example is her novel *Cat’s Eye* from 1988. Through the history of colonization, it has become clear that the best way of oppressing a group is by placing people from that same group as the oppressors. This was seen with the British Empire in India and it is the technique chosen by Gilead’s government as well (Atwood and Beaulieu 78). Continuing with the figures of the Aunts, Hammer believes that they act in such ways due to jealousy and fear (40). It is true that they could feel that way as they believed the Handmaids to be in a privileged position or, at least, that is the opinion they had to deliver publicly. The lack of an Aunt’s point of view as narrator makes it impossible to know for certain. But this idea continues to support the sense of women against women that is present nowadays and has always been. Through feminism, women

try to *sororize* and support each other. Offred herself talks about this term criticizing the fact that a word exists meaning to behave like a brother while there is no word meaning to behave like a sister. She decides that *sorority* will be the equivalent to *fraternize* (Atwood 2016; 16). Once again, words and writing are proved to be of great importance to affect the reality of the world around us.

Wives, at first sight, can be seen as the most privileged ones: they are the lawful partners of the Commanders and, theoretically, they have a relationship of love and companionship. Furthermore, they also support the patriarchy that oppresses women, in this case, in the household (Callaway 50). As Miner puts it, “for some women to enjoy the freedom of playing with red flowers, other women must wear the red of handmaids” (152). In this case, she is referring to the Wives enjoying gardening while Handmaids have to wear the red costumes and all they imply. However, like everything else in Atwood’s novel, this is not the case; nothing is as it seems. It is true that they are in a better position than the rest of the women in the novel, but, like them, they are also subjected to the new order. In the novel, Serena Joy is the Wife that can be seen as representing the rest of the social group. She is the partner of Offred’s Commander so Offred also belongs to her. Serena is an infertile woman (the possibility of men being the infertile ones is not even contemplated) who has received a Handmaid in her home to provide her with children. Serena is even more interesting because she was one of the women supporting the establishment of Gilead before it even existed. She supported her husband as she believed women had to return to their roles in the household supporting the theory of the separate spheres. However, what reality ended up being was not what she had imagined. Wives are described as focusing on “ladylike” activities such as needlework and gardening; they are imprisoned as well. Offred believes they are allowed this little entertainment in order to keep them busy (Atwood 2016; 19). The Aunts teach Handmaids that the dangerous ones are not the Commanders, but in fact the Wives as they will resent them. However, “they should forgive them for they do not know what they do” (Atwood 2016; 73). From this quote, it is understood that Wives are treated in an infantile way. This infantilization only

provides men with even more power as it supports the ancient belief that women need male guidance and control.

The new order was established and exists not only thanks to men, but also due to women participation: Aunts and Wives. However, it is unfair and unrealistic to limit them to the role of oppressors. Like every other female figure in Gilead, they are oppressed as well. They cannot choose their role nor their actions. Like Handmaids, they are limited and defined within social constraints that they did not choose. Men in Gilead use women to be oppressors, but it is just that: men choosing women to do as they wish. I believe this is something relevant to consider when reading and analyzing the novel.

Something has to be said as well about the Econowives although they are not very relevant to the story as Offred does not interact with them, she just sees them when she goes shopping. These are the Wives of the poor men and, thus, they are in the lower ranks of society. As always, being a woman is not the only factor that determines the way they live and are seen, but also economy and social classes. Nowadays, many feminists claim that feminism has to be for every woman and poverty should not affect the fight for their rights too. In their households, there are no Handmaids nor Marthas so they take the role of all female categories in Gilead. Like them, they have no authority and are subjected to their husbands who go to work while they take care of the children and house. Nothing new here.

Marthas are the women in charge of the house activities: cooking, cleaning, etc. It is not new nor surprising to have women in this position and not men. The male equivalent could be the Guardians who are in charge of the car. The differences and inequalities between both sexes are clearly seen. Cora and Rita are the ones in Offred's house and the three of them have a difficult and uneasy relationship. Most of the times, instead of treating each other as sisters or, at least, as friends, they are suspicious and envious of Offred. However, the two Marthas in Offred's household portray opposite opinions regarding the figure of the Handmaids. On the one hand, Rita criticizes Offred as she believes she could have chosen something different. In fact, the only possibility would have been to become

and Unwoman in the Colonies. On the other hand, Cora tries to be sympathetic to Offred and is very happy thinking about the idea of having a child in the house. This, nonetheless, is not as positive as it seems. As Callaway argues, her taking care of Offred due to the fact that she may bring a child “merely reinforce her identity as a two-legged womb of Gilead” (59).

Finally, Unwomen are the ones working in the Colonies collecting chemical waste. This is seen as a death sentence because, due to the radiation, they are likely to die there rather quickly. Women are sent to the Colonies for various reasons, mainly because they are criminals under Gilead’s perspective (being homosexual or practicing abortions, for example) and also because of being Handmaids that finally are not able to conceive.

What can be concluded from this section is that the categorization of society relates women, but also men, closer to objects than to people. Emotions and feelings like love are completely ignored focusing simply on productivity. At one point, the Commander asks Offred what they overlooked with the establishment of Gilead and her answer is “love”, “falling in love” (Atwood 2016; 347). Obviously, this is all male-centered as they are the ones making all the decisions. It is true that capitalism cannot be forgotten and economy highly affects the quality of life in Gilead.

### **3. Government**

In most dystopian novels, the key aspect that defines the new society the author is creating, is the type of government present. In this case, it is a theocracy. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, a theocracy is a “government of a state by immediate divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided” (2018). Atwood chose this type of government because she decided to look back to the beginning of America which was a “country governed by religion” (2016; NP): America as we know it nowadays was established by Puritanism. Atwood herself talks about how she looked into history and

other cultures to create this government. Because she visited Iran or Afghanistan and lived in Berlin when the Wall was still up, she said that the “West did not have to look very far back in its own past” to see women without some of the most basic human rights. She wanted to send the message that what she describes in the novel “are possibilities in every society, including ours” while at the same time hopes “that it will not become a reality. Anymore than it already is” (2016; NP).

Gilead was established by men although in some cases, it needed women support. Examples of this female aid are the Aunts and their role of oppressors. Gilead’s main and probably only purpose is reproduction, a “white, Christian, misogynist, stratified reproduction” (Stillman and Johnson 71). If we consider its repression of women from a feminist point of view, the main consequence was their perception: now they are not human beings anymore. They are a common good that has to be used in the most effective way; the same way we use water or petrol in the present day. According to Gerhard, in order to succeed in the oppression of a whole society, the first step to be taken is the control over the body which will then lead to an indoctrination of the mind: “ideology plays an enormous role” (37). But Aunts are not the only female figures helping in the implementation and continuity of Gilead. As mentioned above, Wives like Serena Joy supported men as they shared the belief that women should return to the household; they highlighted the importance of the separate spheres which, had almost disappeared in the pre-Gilead period.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Everything in the book, Atwood says, has a correspondence in reality “either in contemporary conditions or historical fact” (Greene 205). This sounds improbable and inconceivable when you first think about it, but, after a detailed analysis of the novel always having in mind history and reality, it becomes more plausible and, at the same time, more threatening. The feminist approach to *The Handmaid’s Tale* highlights the role of women in this society which, sometimes, is not that different from what has happened or continues to happen in reality. Like everything, history repeats itself and what Atwood describes in her novel presents troubling similarities in our own world.

The analysis has shown how women are portrayed in the novel and what their role in Gilead is. *The Handmaid’s Tale* includes some very interesting ideas from the perspective of feminism and it portrays central aspects analyzed by feminist literary critics. For example, the fact that Atwood is giving voice to a woman in a dystopia is something to highlight as the tradition has been mainly male. The figures of Moira or Offred’s mother analyzed in contrast with Offred show the main positions occupied by women in society which is a reflection of reality. In the end, feminist literary criticism not only aims to provide an alternative reading to novels, but also to mirror reality so as to provoke a reaction. This is successfully done by Atwood because anyone reading the novel will have an opinion. She was able to create a world that does not leave anyone indifferent; it makes people think. This is not only an objective of feminism, but of literature in general which makes *The Handmaid’s Tale* a masterpiece.

The final message Atwood delivers to the audience is one of caution. We should be aware of how control is exercised over us. We believe we are free because society does not see the ways in which it is been dominated, but it is. And, as Hammer states in the conclusion to her essay, we are also scrutinizing everybody else (47). Through this novel, Atwood is trying to show that society does not have to stay put and quiet; action is needed.



This is why *The Handmaid's Tale* can be considered feminist; feminism aims to make people, especially women, aware of their situation and actions and it tries to change everything that is wrong in this patriarchal society which, in some ways, is not as different as Offred's world, Gilead.

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