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The Dystopic Body in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis analyzes the dystopic body in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It aims at examining the ways with which the masculinist power subjugates Handmaids through the objectification and erasure of their bodies, then analyzing the female body as a disruptive force, a site where constant powerplay occurs throughout the novel. The introduction provides a brief discussion of my reasons for choosing *The Handmaid's Tale* as a case study, which includes a desire to develop the concept of the dystopic body from a feminist standpoint. It also delineates my argument on the dystopic body and power. In the first chapter entitled "Critical Perspectives", I present a critical review of literature, introduce my contribution to the study of the novel, and expose my arguments on feminist utopia, dystopia, the dystopic body and power play. The second chapter entitled "The Dystopic Body" demonstrates that dystopia is already deep-rooted in the present. It focuses on the different aspects of dystopia mainly reproduction, sexuality, surveillance and the dress code, and studies their impact on the Handmaid's body. These aspects are discussed in detail in separate subchapters. The final chapter entitled "Power Subversion" examines at one level the mode of power exchange between the Commander and his wife Serena Joy. It investigates the ways with which each of the characters positions themselves to power in order to take ownership of Offred's body. At another level, it studies the irony that lies behind the constant power play in the novel, uncovering the perpetuation of bodily dystopia since the female body never ceases to be the object of struggle. This thesis examines the bodily experience of women under such totalitarian regimes and the ways in which the female body becomes dystopic. It

presents the female body as the prey of both men and women, and dystopia as closely dependent on and generated by the conception of that body in the society of Gilead.

***Keywords*:** Dystopia, Body, Power, Feminism, Irony, Margaret Atwood

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse analyse le corps dystopique dans *La Servante Ecarlate*. Elle vise à examiner les façons dont le pouvoir masculiniste subjugue les servantes à travers l'objectivation et l'effacement de leur corps, puis à analyser le corps féminin comme un élément perturbateur, un site où se produit une constante subversion du pouvoir tout au long du roman. L'introduction offre une brève discussion sur la raison derrière le choix de La Servante Ecarlate comme une étude de cas, qui est dans le but de développer le concept du corps dystopique à partir d'un point de vue féministe. Elle délimite aussi mon argument sur le corps dystopique et le pouvoir. Le premier chapitre intitulé "Perspectives Critiques" présente une revue critique de la littérature, introduit ma contribution à l'étude du roman, et expose mes arguments sur l'utopie féministe, la dystopie, le corps dystopique et la circulation du pouvoir. Dans le deuxième chapitre intitulé "Le Corps Dystopique" je démontre que la dystopie dans une certaine mesure est déjà profondément enracinée dans le présent. Cette section se concentre sur les différents aspects de la dystopie principalement la reproduction, la sexualité, la surveillance et le code vestimentaire tout en étudiant leur impact sur le corps de la servante. Ces aspects sont abordés en détail dans des sous-chapitres séparés. Le dernier chapitre intitulé "La Subversion du Pouvoir" examine dans un premier lieu le mode d'échange de pouvoir entre le commandant et son épouse Serena Joy. Il étudie les façons dont chacun des personnages se positionne par rapport au pouvoir afin d'exploiter le corps d'Offred. Puis, il examine l'ironie qui se cache derrière le jeu de pouvoir constant dans le roman, dévoilant ainsi la perpétuation de la dystopie corporelle étant donné que le corps de la

femme ne cesse d'être l'objet de la lutte. Ce travail étudie l'expérience corporelle de la femme dans un régime totalitaire et les façons dont le corps féminin devient dystopique. Il présente le corps féminin comme la proie des hommes et des femmes, et la dystopie comme étroitement dépendante et générée par la conception de ce corps dans la société de Gilead.

Mots clés: Dystopie, Corps, Pouvoir, Féminisme, Ironie, Margaret Atwood

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Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale is a feminist protest made into a novel, a work of speculative fiction written and first published in 1985. Just as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* depict the oppressive atmosphere of particular societies in a time set in the future, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a terrifying scenario of what has become of the United States of America after its "speculative" overthrow. Drawing an elaborate portrait of a misogynist society, Margaret Atwood has succeeded in steering much critical attention. The book has won considerable prizes and ultimately has been projected into a film directed by Volker Schlondorff. The novel depicts the author's deep social concerns and questions the situation of women in the North American society. As a futuristic story that incorporates elements of science fiction, Atwood's fiction is subject to various interpretations and readings. Her novel cannot be summed in its feminist message for it critiques as well the political and the environmental conditions of a given society that would be called the Republic of Gilead. Atwood develops a structure of a monolithic state and a patriarchal society founded on the Compulsory-Christian regime of the Old Testament. In a country pervaded by ecological and physical degradation causing widespread sterility, dictatorship and religious orthodoxy become means by which the Republic of Gilead subjugates women and uses the fertile ones as concubines for reproductive purposes. *The Handmaid's Tale* tells the story of Offred, a woman who used to lead a normal life in a country once called America, then was victim of the abrupt political change. The new patriarchal regime strips women of their rights to work, read, and have economic independence. Caught in the oppressive patriarchal system, Offred loses her husband and daughter. She is then transferred to Rachel and Leah

Center where she is indoctrinated in order to become a Handmaid. The book recounts Offred's journey from the Red Center to the house of the Commander.

Scholars consider dystopia as a rich field for examining the sexist and extremist aspects of Atwood's fiction. Some critics have used *The Handmaid's Tale* as case study for their research on dystopia. Others have drawn an analogy between the book and Orwell's *1984*. There are also those who have linked it to other novels written by Atwood like *Oryx and Crake* and *Life Before Men*. Much critical attention is paid to the different aspects of dislocations of dystopia in the novel. The intertexts of the novel have presented a major field of study and inquiry for many critics. Some are related to the mythical (the Persephone and the Triple-Goddess), biblical (the story of Bilhah, Jacob and Rachel) and the fairy-tale (Red Riding Hood) for parodic purposes or a critique of sexual politics in the novel. Others pinpoint the postmodern techniques that Atwood's "postmodern historiographic metafiction" employs in order to "deconstruct national and cultural master narratives and critique not only the dystopian society as a colonizing power but all colonizers in history" (Dvorak 68). Feminists consider the novel as a means of addressing certain problematic factors of the American society namely the antifeminist backlash of the 1980s. The study of the body is often connected to the notion of power display, misogyny and patriarchy. Scholarship on the female body is sometimes paralleled to the structure of Offred's narrative. Hélène Cixous' essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" provided a framework to investigate woman's language and body, as well as the possibility to challenge historical and political constructions, and subvert the hegemonic linguistic order. Critiques also tend to stress the impact of Gilead's political and religious strategies on the Handmaids' bodies, manifested in body

mutilation, fragmentation and objectification. Dehumanized sexual acts, disembodied handmaids, anatomy as destiny and enforced maternity were aspects investigated in some feminist critiques in order to unveil the dogmas of the patriarchal sexist male gaze and demonstrate how the body as representation and performance is obliterated by culture.

The Handmaid's Tale provides a helpful ground in which to explore the aspects of dystopia from a feminist standpoint. In fashioning a theocracy that includes extremist religious indoctrination, environmental degradation, increasing surveillance of individuals, and widespread infertility problems, the novel presents a source text in order to investigate the impacts of these elements on the female body. Woman's body is the focal point of the study because it is the target of all the features that constitute Atwood's dystopia. Margaret Atwood seems to demonstrate that it is of little importance that the book was written decades ago or that the monolithic society of Gilead is projected in the future, because the themes of the novel transcend their anchor in time and become concerns of the present. In some ways, the issues that the book deals with are real threats that endanger societies in general and women in particular. Therefore, the analysis of the female body is not specific only to the novel for it is also relevant to the situation of women across the world today who experience a dystopia very similar to that imagined by Atwood. The novel helps to examine the bodily experience of women under such totalitarian regimes and to understand the ways in which the female body becomes dystopic.

The reason why *The Handmaid's Tale* has been chosen in the present thesis is that in writing a dystopia from a woman's point of view, Atwood puts an accent on

significant issues from the perspective of feminism. Unlike George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who presents a dystopia that lacks a narrative led by characters themselves, *The Handmaid's Tale* initiates its protagonist Offred into telling the story by her own free will. Atwood's novel enables the female character to articulate her experience, give life to a personal story and allow this story to be retold. Even though Orwell's protagonist strives to conserve his story in a diary, the narrative is still deprived of the active voice and is more focused on a male experience. The fact that Atwood's novel is told from a woman's perspective sheds light on the circumstances in which women live and the oppression exerted on them. Offred delivers a clipped narration in conditions where women are prohibited from reading and writing. The story emanates from not only a female voice but also a female body. The narrative transcends the performance of language and involves the protagonist's corporeal representation and experience. Often Offred speaks out of her body and for her body. Her body is a subject that hunts the novel and the protagonist as a female victim of a patriarchal social order cannot sever her body from her story because her body is already the story. Thus, the analysis of the body does not undertake the study of dystopia as a genre. It is rather a feminist analysis of the body in the context of a novel which has been read as dystopian.

In the first chapter entitled "Critical Perspectives", I present the various arguments elaborated by scholars on the issues of dystopia, the Handmaid's body, and power in the novel. I engage in a critical response to these readings. Then I introduce my interpretation of dystopia in Atwood's fiction. I will demonstrate that dystopia cannot be derived from or contrasted to feminist utopia since the latter lacks a unified conception. My perception of dystopia rather challenges the existence of utopia that Atwood's

fiction might imply. I present dystopia as already deep-rooted in the present. In this chapter I also expose my interpretation of power in the novel and demonstrate that patriarchy does not necessarily imply that power is held only by men. Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin's perceptions of power are helpful to examine power play and subversion in the novel. Foucault's concept of power relations allows me to study power circulation between male and female characters, whereas Bakhtin's carnivalesque provides a theoretical support to analyze the irony behind the overturning of power.

The Handmaid's Tale in some ways triggers these questions "What is Atwood's implied utopia? Does it, even partially, exist in the present society?" However, since utopia cannot be defined or delimited from a feminist perspective, I take these interrogations to another level by addressing the question "If Atwood's fiction presents a dystopia that targets mainly the Handmaid's body in order to criticize the condition of women in the society of the present, then in what ways does this representation of the dystopic body differ from the situation of the female body in the society in which we live now?" In the second chapter entitled "The Dystopic Body", I demonstrate that dystopia already exists in reality and that the difference between Atwood's fiction and the present is based on certain temporal regression. The analysis of the dystopic body will be approached in different sections. I study the impact of patriarchy on the Handmaid's body at various levels, mainly reproduction, sexuality, surveillance and the dress code. In *Forms and Functions of Dystopia in Margaret Atwood's Novels "The Handmaid's Tale"* and *"Oryx and Crake",* Manuel Benjamin Becker examines the different aspects of dystopia in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* such as social organization, communication, dress code, surveillance, science and technology as well

as the spatial and temporal aspects. However, as the title of his book indicates, Becker's approach is based on the forms and functions of dystopia in Atwood's novel. My thesis focalizes on Gilead's means to suppress the female body. The Handmaid's body is the primary target of patriarchy and social violence. It is essential to bring to a focus in order to delineate male sexist discourse and the different forms of oppressive practices in Gilead.

The third chapter entitled "Power Subversion" examines the constant powerplay in the novel, a novel in which the Handmaid's body is perceived as a terrain where exterior forces are engaged in a continual struggle. In this section, I will analyze the strategies that the Commander and his wife Serena Joy use in order to possess and exploit Offred's body. Foucault's concept of power relations helps to investigate the exchange of power between male and female characters. Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque is preoccupied with the perversion of power. It allows me to trace the power subversion within the social hierarchy of Gilead and the irony that this subversion creates. This chapter aims as well at presenting the female body as the element that constantly perpetuates dystopia since the Handmaid's body remains the object of struggle between characters, and also as the weapon that drives the preachers of the Gileadian regime to disregard the laws upon which this regime is founded.

The present thesis addresses the situation of women in a totalitarian regime. It takes the body as the locus of women's oppression and looks at the different sexist practices of Gilead. It examines the ways in which gender inequality and male domination affect the corporeal experience of women. The term "dystopic body" illustrates how the different aspects of dystopia; ecological which results in biological

handicap, religious extremism, and dictatorship, allow for the subjugation of women. *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes this oppression since the main theme of the novel is centered on the use of fertile Handmaids as concubines and reproductive objects. This study also examines the distribution of power in order to demonstrate that power circulation itself is dystopic. It seeks to reveal the strategies and mechanisms of power relations and how these are at the heart of the objectification of the Handmaid's body. Finally, this thesis presents the female body as the prey of both men and women. It also demonstrates that dystopia is closely dependent on and generated by the conception of that body in the Gileadian society.

Chapter One

Critical Perspectives

The Handmaid's Tale is Atwood's most well-known novel. It plunges the reader into a disturbing futuristic society, the Republic of Gilead, where dictatorship and patriarchy reign. The story is compelling enough to trigger intellectual as well as affective responses to the novel. Laying bare a dystopia that strips women of their most natural rights, the narrative offers a plausible portrait of a misogynist society that cannot escape the reader's critical attention. Described as both feminist dystopia and science fiction, the novel provokes various readings and interpretations. Scholars disagree not only on the matter of its genre but also about the meanings and the themes it explores. This chapter offers an overview of the scholarship on dystopia, the body and power, all issues relating to my own reading of the Handmaid. Scholars have devoted considerable energy analyzing the misogynistic and sexist aspects of Atwood's dystopia. This chapter delineates the various functions and modes of expression of feminist dystopia and engages in a critical response to these readings. The body as a concept has always been a concern of Atwood's. She is intensely aware of the significance of the female body in her novel. Critics tend to analyze power in connection with storytelling. Offred's narrative, for instance, is interpreted as an act of subversion. My thesis focuses on the female body and Gilead's sexist discourse as the locus of women's oppression. I present Offred's body as the site through which power is exchanged and articulated. I ask, what is the impact of this exchange and this articulation?

Attempting to situate the novel "historically" and "politically," most critics argue that as a feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* was written as a response to the antifeminist backlash of the 1980s. They claim that the New Right movement targeted feminists who aimed to liberate women from a patriarchal regime that confined them to

the domestic sphere. Feminists were considered to be the 'villains' of the system as they stood in opposition to what the spokesman of the New Right Jerry Falwell called the "home," and traditional notions of family. Coral Ann Howells writes that "Gilead is a totalitarian regime run on patriarchal lines derived from the Old Testament and seventeenth-century American Puritanism plus a strong infusion of the American New Right ideology of the 1980s" (qtd. in Bouson 93). Feminists tried to free the wife from the supremacy of her husband. They demanded legal equality in a wide range of issues; sexuality, family and the improvement of workplace conditions. They attacked the so-called "natural" right and responsibility of a man to lead and impose his rules in the family. Feminist activists called for women's autonomy and economic independence, asserting that the latter have the right to decide over their own lives without the hegemonic interference of men. Attacking the "pro-family" advocates; they struggled to deconstruct the patriarchal privilege. Through their revolutionary demands, feminists constituted a threat to male culture. In "The Misogyny of Patriarchal culture in The Handmaid's Tale," set in her book *Brutal choreographies : oppositional strategies and narrative design in the novels of Margaret Atwood*, J. Brooks Bouson provides a historical context for the novel. She employs Susan Faludi's observation of Jerry Falwell's attitude towards feminists and traces its impact on U.S government policy. Falwell's claim that feminists were undertaking a "satanic attack on the home" (Bouson 135) illustrates the New Right's fervent desire to restrict women's roles and to maintain such restrictions.

Bouson affirms that Atwood's novel offers an overview of what the United States would be like in the future. She reinforces her point of view by bringing up

Atwood's discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a novel that plays on the hypothetical consequences of reality. Atwood argues that the book imagines what would follow if women continue to be reduced to the domestic sphere. Her book depicts a "logical extension of where we are now" (Atwood qtd. in Bouson 136). Offred's story describes what life could be like for women following the enforcement of the New Right's ideology. Consequently, Bouson believes that dystopia in the novel is not based on a far away, isolated and impossible land as that of Utopia. It is, rather, set in a real land with an accurate historical background. Eleonora Rao writes in *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* that "History, literature, and the present are in fact the intertexts of this feminist version of dystopia" (18). Atwood constructs a speculative American society taken to the extreme of Evangelical fundamentalism. She fashions the possible outcome of this movement on gender relations and its repercussions on women. Bouson further supports Rao's idea using Frances Bartkowki, Arnold Davidson and Howell's observations of the novel. All believe that, in Howell's words, "history repeats itself with minimal variations and the major source of fear for the reader is that nothing in this futurist society is new" (Bouson 136). In other words, Atwood's dystopia is somewhat more realistic than speculative. It is already lived *before* and arises again *after* a certain liberty acquired by women.

Thus, the novel emerges as a warning against the yet-to-come if women do not keep struggling for their rights. Coral Ann Howells writes in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, "Perhaps the primary function of a dystopia is to send out danger signals to its readers" (161). The novel expresses feminists' fears that their political activism will be overthrown. Immersed in reality, dystopia speaks for the past and the

present only to evade a near future. Critics like Bouson who link the novel to the antifeminist backlash fail to trace back the present dystopia to what wouldn't be a dystopia. The movement from reality to a plausible dystopia requires as well a study of the present situation of women in order to assess the extent to which the future can be 'pessimistic'. If dystopia in the novel has its origins already in reality as critics like Bouson argue, then, I ask, in what ways does *The Handmaid's Tale* differ from the context of its publication? Without the examination of the here and now, dystopia loses all sense of relativity for dystopia is demarcated only in contrast to what the present society offers as non-dystopic. If the difference between reality and that of the novel is a matter of degree, then what are the specific features of women's position in society that are further threatened in the novel? Therefore, the aspect of temporality is inherent to the definition of dystopia. Dystopia needs the evaluation and the comparison to reality so that its elements can be established as dystopic. With the absence of this examination, dystopia is then taken for granted as a 'negative' existence of society in the absolute meaning of the term.

The collection, *Atwood, Feminism and Fiction* offers a different perspective on the novel's genre. In "The Handmaid's Tale: Second-Wave Feminism as Anti-Utopia," Fiona Tolan explores the novel in relation to the concepts of utopia and anti-utopia. Tolan affirms that Offred's story parallels the history of the feminist movement. However she emphasizes that Atwood's dystopia emerges rather from a feminism that has gone wrong. In her criticism of the feminist movement, the critic draws a close link between dystopia in the novel and the malfunction of feminism arguing that the latter is at the heart of women's subjection in Gilead. Tolan claims,

> Against a backdrop of postmodernist debate, the mid-1980s became a point of evaluation and reinvention for feminism, as a second generation of feminists inherited the second wave. *The Handmaid's Tale* looks back at this transition, examining the changing concerns and evolving vocabulary of an increasingly theorized feminism. Through her dystopian vision, Atwood exposes something of the limiting and prescriptive nature of the utopianism that had underpinned much of the feminists of the early second wave. By juxtaposing flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism with contemporary descriptions of Gileadian practices, each informs the other, so that *The Handmaid's Tale* comes to satirically depict a dystopian society that has unconsciously and paradoxically met certain feminist aims. (145)

Thus for Tolan, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is not strictly about the oppression of feminists by religious fundamentalists. It is the transition within the feminist movement and its changing objectives that are dystopian. The feminists are partly to blame here for the situation in which women find themselves in the metafictional story of Gilead. Tolan argues that second wave feminism had swerved away from its main goals and was unintentionally leading women to an anti-feminist future. Shannon Eileen Hengen argues in *Margaret Atwood's Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* that "the novel can also be addressed as a critique, more specifically, of regressive narcissism as it has affected American feminists" (99). Tolan moves to analyze "the proximity of utopia and anti-utopia" in the novel asserting that according to Atwood, the difference between both is a question of perspective. Engaged in an approach of comparison between utopia, anti-utopia, and dystopia, the critic tries to fit the novel in its appropriate genre. Arguing that the novel is postmodern and that postmodernism goes hand in hand with anti-utopianism, Tolan suggests that *The Handmaid's Tale* excludes the utopian belief in a perfect model of society. The critic maintains that reality or "pre-Gilead past" becomes the utopia which provides a certain sense of normality and that the strain existing between utopian and anti-utopian writing

parallels that of the postmodern feminism that unceasingly condemns and aspires for human perfection at once.

Tolan, following Tom Moylan's understanding of anti-utopia, concludes that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel rather than an anti-utopian one even though Atwood's writing falls within the tradition of the twentieth-century anti-utopia. Following Frye's perception of utopia, Tolan claims in *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* that dystopia and anti-utopia emerge from the same starting point as both expose what would happen if certain important elements in society were not virtuously accomplished. The novel, according to Tolan, does not present the "pessimism of human nature" but can be considered as "the product of the terrors of the twentieth century" (148). It is concerned with the fears of the century and is rooted in the current anxieties of a modern society. Another point of distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia lies in the function of hope in the novel. She writes,

> Crucially, "in some form, a utopian horizon, or at the very least a scrap of hope, appears within the militant dystopia". Where the utopia (the good place that is no place) and the anti-utopia (the absolute denial and negation of utopia) are in direct political opposition, the dystopia "negotiates the continuum" between the two extremes. (148)

Howells links hope to the "didactic" message of the story, assuming that the warning behind dystopia carries within itself a consciousness of that danger and therefore presents hope to avoid dystopia. She relies on Moylan's statement that "Many dystopias are self-consciously warnings. A warning implies that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible" (161). Tolan looks to the narrative for hope. The optimistic end of Offred's story presents a sense of hope that cannot be found in anti-utopian writing.

Thus dystopia joins together certain elements of utopia and anti-utopia and creates between these opposites a space of negotiation.

This classification of *The Handmaid's Tale* as dystopian has met with a certain degree of resistance. In "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia," David Ketterer claims that despite including important elements of the dystopian writing, like physical degradation, surveillance and absence of freedom, the novel upsets the dystopian genre by including the historical notes. The "Historical Notes" consist of "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies...which took place at the University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195" (212). According to Ketterer, the "Historical Notes" create a certain temporal fraction between the past and the future which disables dystopia in the novel and makes of it only a momentary transition between tolerable past and future. Offred's story emerges as a dystopian parenthesis that is finite and sealed off from the past and the present. Ketterer questions the efficiency of the embedded warning in the novel if the dystopian story is only transitory:

> At the same time the "Notes" strongly imply that Atwood cannot have intended *The Handmaid's Tale* only as the typical dire dystopian warning or call to rebellion if she envisages Gilead either passing away naturally in the fullness of time or being dramatically overthrown. Gilead does not correspond to an Orwellian "boot stamping on a human face-forever" (1984, p. 390). It might, then, be asked: Is there any point in penning a dystopia if that dystopia is explicitly presented as only transitory? (212-213)

Ketterer presents the "yes" to this question by describing the novel as a contextual dystopia arguing that Atwood is interested not only in the 'pre-context' or the "historical establishment that led to the establishment of dystopia" but also in the 'post-context' or "the historical development that led, over time or abruptly, away from dystopia" (213).

It is this concern in mapping dystopia with its temporal shifts that makes of Atwood's writing a discontinuous dystopia. Ketterer argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* does not fit into the traditional genre of dystopia claiming that "the traditional dystopia (and eutopia) generally assumes, and to some extent depends upon, a linear conception of time" (213). The discontinuity generated by the shifts in historical contexts adheres to a cyclical conception that "swings" from normality to dystopia to reach normality again. Ketterer notes that this cyclical process mirrors the day-night shifts in the chapters. However Ketterer's analysis suggests that the "Historical Notes" present the end of dystopia in the novel. The post-Gileadian society is more civilized than Gilead. However Pieixoto's speech reflects persisting gender discrimination. The question would be, is Atwood's dystopia cyclical if sexism is still existent or is it linear and, if linear, is the line of the Gileadian era slightly bolder than post-Gilead? Jacques Leclaire in "*The Handmaid's Tale*: A Feminist Dystopia?" sees the "Historical Notes" as an extension of Offred's narrative. He argues that the "Historical Notes" serve to sharpen Atwood's warning. It is a tool with which feminist dystopia becomes more notorious. In depicting a society that fought against sexism but still preserves traces of prejudice and gender inequality in the future, the signal of danger becomes stronger. Through the "Historical Notes" Atwood seems, according to Leclaire, to demand not a change but a *radical* change that protects women from future discrimination. He writes, "By depicting only terrible things that have happened or are still happening, Atwood brings her warning of such dangers much closer to the bone" (Lacroix, Leclaire, et al. 86). Arnold E. Davidson remarks that The "Historical Notes" "provide comic relief from the grotesque text of Gilead. Yet in crucial ways the epilogue is the most pessimistic part of the book" (VanSpanckeren and Castro 120). Héliane Ventura in *Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale* considers the

"Historical Notes" to be a continuity of Gileadian practices. Post-Gilead society is as dystopic as Gilead and it exerts the same oppressive methods on women. She writes,

> Au delà de ses plaisanteries de mauvais goût, il se livre à des manipulations du conte d'Offred qui s'inscrivent dans la continuité de Galaad dans la mesure où elles font violence au texte. Peixoto a pris possession du texte d'Offred comme les commandeurs ont pris possession de son corps. Comme les commandeurs qui donnaient leur nom à leur servante, Pieixoto et Wade donnent au nom au récit d'Offred, dont l'origine patriarcale a été remarquée par de nombreux critiques (Coral Ann Howells, Brian Johnson). …C'est le même phénomène de sujétion, de colonisation, d'aliénation qui nous est donné à Harvard et à Nunavit. (45- 46)

Critics generally tend to analyze *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially the dystopic element, on a social and political level. They examine the situation of Handmaids and the manner in which they are oppressed. They investigate gender discrimination and the forms and functions of patriarchy. Lucy M. Freibert in "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" claims that "Atwood demonstrates the absurdity of Western patriarchal teleology that view woman's biology as destiny and exposes the complicity of women in perpetuating that view" (Mc-Combs 280). The enforced motherhood is described as the ultimate act of subjection. Rao writes "motherhood in this novel retains both the oppressive aspects of a "patriarchal institution," as well as the pleasurable facets of the experience" (19). Bouson adds "The sexual object for male consumption and the marginalized woman who is shunned and despised by other women, the handmaid is the good/bad woman, the saintly prostitute" (140). They are defined as "two-legged" wombs that can perish if they fail to procreate. Critics analyze the brutal objectification of women who are reduced to reproductive machines as a form of dehumanization. Feminists examine this objectification as the most oppressive practice of patriarchy. Denied freedom, the right to read and write, and

to choose her sexual partner, the Handmaid is subjected to the sexist discourse taken to its extreme degree. Other critics investigate the religious discourse embedded in the novel and the way it serves the dystopian vision. They analyze the concept of the surrogate mother present in the story of Rachel and Leah. Lucy M. Freibert argues that "the biblical epigraph not only suggests the violation of individual autonomy […] It also foreshadows the female envy and male/female enmity that form the inner tension of the novel" (Mc-Combs 283). Memory becomes a double edged weapon. It is a survival tool and a source of relief from a despicable present. And yet it also prevents the Handmaid from adapting herself to the current situation. Thus, it further alienates her and intensifies her trauma.

The study of the body in scholarship on *The Handmaid's Tale* often has to do with Offred's narrative. Critics observe that the fragmentation of the Handmaid's narrative reflects the dismemberment of her body. Critics examine the extent to which the narrative encodes the corporeal subjection of the Handmaids. Offred's narrative is disjointed, filled as it is with memories, flashbacks and other women's stories. Likewise, her body is divided, as Gilead is obsessed only with its reproductive system. Roberta Rubenstein argues in "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia" that "the imagery of mutilation and dismemberment permeates the narrator's own language" (VanSpanckeren and Castro 105). Offred's "fragmented selfhood" mirrors her "amputated speech" (105). Examining the way in which patriarchy metaphorically splits the female body Rao suggests, "The connection existing between self/text/body is indicated by the fact that the story itself is described in anthropomorphic terms" (83). Charlotte Sturgess claims in "The Female Body as Representation and Performance in Margaret Atwood's *The*

Handmaid's Tale" that "The way the female body is focused in distinct detached parts … and the way sexuality is underscored in the arching backs and damp cavities, figures the body in its purely objectile dimension" (qtd. In Dvorak 74). The sexualized body becomes effaced by biology. In Jacques Leclaire's words, "Offred's body has been fragmented and reduced to a womb on legs" (Atwood, Lacroix, Leclaire and Warwick 87). However other critics like Howells believe that the body can be a source of resistance and subversion. Relying on Helene Cixous's essay "Laugh of the Medusa" Howells writes in *Margaret Atwood*,

> According to Cixous's prescription, 'By writing herself (or in Offred's case "speaking herself") woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display. (137)

Thus the story becomes a tool reconstructing and reclaiming one's body. It is a means of survival and rebellion against male domination. Howells further mentions in "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions" that "Offred's real hope centers on her own body, whose femaleness has been reinscribed by Gilead's biological discourse and its oppressively Old Testament sexual practices" (167). She argues that memories in which Offred talks about her body and desires become a space where she recovers her selfhood as well as her body and deconstructs patriarchy. My reading of the Handmaid's body shares with the aforementioned critics the idea that the body is fragmented, since recognition and value are attributed only to the reproductive organs. This argument presents one of the elements that make the Handmaid's body a dystopic one. However, the present thesis does not analyze the female body as capable of rehabilitation and resistance as Howell claims. On the contrary, the Handmaid's body is the object that perpetuates dystopia in

the novel. It is pictured as a commodity trapped in struggle between exterior forces. Offred's body is subject to resistance by other women like Serena. However, this resistance emanates only from another female oppressor. The Handmaid's body does not voice its own resistance for it is disciplined and silenced by those who "own" it.

Studies of the novel do not include much investigation of power relations or the way power is distributed in the society of Gilead. They focus, rather, on absolute patriarchy and extreme domination. Much attention is paid to social organization, the control of communication and surveillance. Power relations are not examined as power is assumed to be attributed solely to male characters, since women are pictured as abused and docile. Therefore, feminist dystopia is understood according to patriarchy or the absolute authority of men. Power in these studies is conceived as static and possessed only by male characters. Rao affirms that power politics in the novel "is explored through the tyranny of the Gilead Republic, a futuristic Christian, totalitarian state, where a puritanical religion functions primarily as a means of social control" (16). When the narrative or Offred's story are not concerned, the analysis of female power and resistance is scarce. Shannon Hengen is one of the rare critics who talks about power attributed to women. In "Power Revisited: The 1980s' Texts," she writes,

> In this novel Atwood's contemptible minor female characters have been given power of the violent kind and appear as tyrannical aunts … Thus the gender of characters begins to matter less to Atwood in this text than their ability or inability to interrogate and undermine the governing order. Men can be "women", or leftist feminists; women can be "men," or sexist conservatives. (99)

Although the issue of power distribution is not elaborated enough in her article, Hengen acknowledges the fact that power is not static in the novel, it is not solely in the hands of

commanders, and that, at times, women can claim authority. Marie Pascale Buschini argues in "Idéologie et Fonctionnement du Pouvoir dans *The Handmaid's Tale*" that power oppresses those who wield, it like the aunts. Sadism prevails in these relationships between aunts and their captors. She further explains that the fall of Serena Joy's image from star to mere housewife makes power illusive in the novel.

For many critics power is attributed to Offred's narrative. They view the storytelling as an important tool that attacks the hegemony of male discourse and dismantles gender discrimination. On the one hand, the narrative resists unity. On the other hand, the story Offred is telling resists the silencing and oppression of women. Howells writes,

> A critical reading which focuses attention on the female narrator's position, on her language, and on the structural features of her narrative might allow us to see how *The Handmaid's Tale* eludes classification, just as Offred's storytelling allows her to escape the prescriptive definitions of Gilead. (Bouson 92)

The novel itself highlights, in Freibert's words, "the absurdity of Western patriarchal teleology" (qtd. In Mc-Combs 280). She adds that throughout the novel "the dual effect of the double-entendre in the pun of the word tale, as literary creation and anatomic part, combines humor and denigration" (Mc Combs 281). Sharon R. Wilson in "Beyond Colonization: *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Postmodern and Postcolonial Metafiction" believes that the novel criticizes various genres. She claims that Atwood "critiques storytelling itself, including dystopian, other literary, biblical, folkloric, critical historical, national and cultural texts" (qtd. In Dvorak 125). She further explains that the novel "illustrates the deconstruction of national and cultural master narratives through postmodern genres and, especially, the techniques of intertextuality, parody, and irony"

(Dvorak 127). At times the text becomes slippery as it offers many versions and keeps secret other elements. Hence, it resists the possession of the text and challenges the ability of the reader to reach certainty. Liliane Louvel argues in "Les Secrets de la Servants," "Le texte de la servante balbutie ses versions et garde secret la nuit de l'amour" (qtd. In Dvorak 141). Rao takes Louvel's argument further and suggests that the novel questions the reliability of history. She writes,

> The breakdown of mutually exclusive oppositions acquires a further significance in *The Handmaid's Tale* in that it refutes the conventional logic of true and false, and highlights the fact that Offred's contradictory versions of events put into question the trust in history's ability to tell the truth and challenge the common sense distinction that sees history as referring to the actual real world while fiction refers to a fictive universe. (123)

The narrative becomes a means of resistance and subversion. This argument is helpful to understand the ways with which the narrative challenges authority. The uncertainty and slipperiness of the storytelling acquire a certain performativity that contests the dystopic position of women in the novel. The aforementioned critics analyze power in relation to Offred's narrative, whereas the present thesis is preoccupied with the circulation of power between characters and the ironic aspect of power subversion. My examination of power is centered on the Handmaid's body rather than her story.

The analysis of dystopia in the present thesis does not rely on a historical account of the novel. In other words, it does not analyze dystopia in relation to the New Right ideology that condemns feminist activism in 1980. Neither is this thesis interested in the

idea of comparing and contrasting utopia and dystopia, for the definition of feminist utopia is slippery and cannot be established in a unified concept. The next chapter entitled "The Dystopic Body" examines the common elements between dystopia and reality. The approach to dystopia is different from that of the critics mentioned above since the present study questions the existence of Atwood's implied utopia. It demonstrates that freedom, control over one's body and justice are absent in dystopia just as they cannot be achieved in real life. "The Dystopic Body" does not involve an investigation of what utopia is according to Atwood since a feminist utopia is still an ambiguous concept. The interpretation of utopia might vary from one feminist theorist to another. Thus the examination of utopia in *The Handmaid's Tale* might not concord with Atwood's intended utopia. As Tineke Willemsen argues,

> Feminism can take many forms, has many theories and ideologies and therefore probably no two feminists will agree as to what an ideal feminist society would look like. It is hardly even possible to give a definition of feminism that every feminist will agree with. The easiest way to describe a feminist utopia is to paraphrase a line coined by the first modern outspoken feminist in The Netherlands, Joke Smit. She wrote a song with a first line that has become almost proverbial in the Netherlands: There is a land where women would like to live. A feminist utopia would therefore be the description of a place where at least women would like to live. (Schönpflug 11)

The absence of a "*feminist* utopia" makes it difficult to present a consolidated vision of what utopia would consist of. Shulamith Firestone remarks as well that feminist thought and theory are short of "visionary thinking" (Schönpflug 16). She believes that "We haven't even a literary image of this future society; there is not even a utopian feminist literature yet in existence" (Schönpflug 16). Thus many interrogations arise. It is possible that man and woman do not have the same conception of utopia. Man's utopia is already presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* where Commanders are

given control over the state. Gilead is their ideal place. They enjoy the power and superiority that patriarchy gives them. Firestone suggests that "men's utopias might actually be women's dystopias and men's dystopias might actually bear some good for women" (Schönpflug 16). Angelika Bammer writes, "If women's utopias were different from men's, the question was: how? What was a feminist utopia?" (qtd. In Schönpflug 12). One basic element that most feminists would agree on is already introduced by Willemsen: a land where women would like to live. But what of other aspects of women's lives, such as gender roles, working conditions, and reproduction? A feminist utopia can imply gender equality or demand gender inequality. On the one hand, gender equality means the erasure of binary oppositions that privilege man over woman. It asks, for instance, for a better integration of women in society and the eradication of gender discrimination in the workplace. Shulamith Firestone believes that woman can reach equality between sexes if she abandons her "biological privilege" and would no longer be chained to the "tyranny of reproduction" (qtd. In Schönpflug 17). Others advocate for gender inequality or matriarchy, the inversion of patriarchy. Accordingly, "traditionally feminine qualities are valued more highly than traditionally masculine qualities" (Schönpflug 19).

Another common point beside the feminist ideal land that would unite all feminist conceptions of utopia is the issue of the body. A woman has to have total control over her own body. She should be freed from the enforced biological discourse of reproduction. In utopia, woman should not be subjected to sexual violence or be *assigned* to a single sexual partner. Her body is not valued according to her fertility or

given primacy because of its reproduction system. Adrienne Rich voices her conception of a "utopic body":

> We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth… the visions, and the thinking necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence…Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meaning; thinking itself will be transformed (Schönpflug 16).

Man's attempts to possess or dominate a woman's body would certainly lead to dystopia. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, all the "negative" elements mentioned above are present in the republic of Gilead. Women are covered by a red dress against their will and are reduced to "two-legged wombs" or reproductive machines. Thus they come to bear dystopic bodies; which is the concern of the following chapter.

My perception of dystopia challenges the existence of a utopian reality and investigates the boundaries of utopia. It also seeks to present reality as already dystopic. The difference between both is a matter of degree. If the non-dystopic real society involves the establishment of freedom and justice, then a dystopic future would negate these elements. However, with reference mainly to Barbara Goodwin, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, I will demonstrate that the society of the present does not include any of these utopian elements. In fact, the implied utopia with its basic aspects: freedom, control over one's body, and justice can never be implemented in real life because of the inherent social control in society. Consequently, the future of dystopia in a certain extent is already deep-rooted in the present. It does not bring forth any new conception that does not exist in the here and now. Goodwin argues that methods of social control limit man's freedom. Foucault exposes how the body is always mediated by power relations.

It is constantly disciplined by social control projected into the rhythms of daily life. Derrida denies the possibility of justice dependent as it is upon "the economic and political interests of the dominant forces of society" (Griffin and Moylan 47). "The Dystopic Body" seeks to demonstrate that dystopia in the present thesis relies on the temporal aspect, since the past is reenacted in the future.

Being the object of analysis, the body is the key element that reflects the immediate impact of dystopia on the female corporeal experience. In the second chapter, I will explore the Handmaid's relationship with her own body, a topic which critics have not yet analyzed in depth. The notion of communication, whether with one's body or with the public sphere is important to depict the degree to which dystopia is different from reality. The body is not only objectified or fragmented; it is also a stranger that the Handmaid inhabits. It becomes, in some ways, an enemy that oppresses its inhabitant. Thus, there is no longer communication between the self and the body. Luce Irigaray's *The Sex Which Is Not One* exposes the Gilead's misconceptions of female sexuality. Irigaray' writings on female sexuality and the multiplicity of woman's pleasure highlight Gilead's perverted and violent notions of sexuality. The handmaids, after all, are forced to copulate with Commanders and are not allowed to take pleasure. Throughout the examination of the dress code and with reference to Rosi Braidotti's notion of sexual difference, I will demonstrate how the female body is seen as corrupt and a threat that needs to be erased. Consequently the Handmaid's body needs to be concealed.

Through his concept of normalization, Foucault allows me to investigate the ways in which the Handmaid's body is disciplined and engaged in many forms of social control. Her body is made to comply with the rules. It must be docile. In *The*

Handmaid's Tale women are divided into categories according to the demands of Gilead. Those who are infertile are sent to death. Foucault's writings allow us to see how Gilead mechanizes Handmaids and makes them conform to its patriarchal regime. Ovaries become the only valuable parts in the Handmaid's body. Foucault's panopticon metaphor affords insight into the intensive surveillance of the Handmaids. The Eyes and guards are the novel's agents of social surveillance. The Handmaids not only circulate in restricted spaces but are also watched wherever they move. Their bodies are constantly tested and observed in order to make sure that they obey the laws.

My approach to the analysis of power in the novel is different from preceding studies in the sense that it relies neither on Offred's conscious resistance, in other words her deliberately subversive behavior, nor on the dissident aspects of her narrative. It picks up on Hengen's point that power is not attributed solely to men or commanders. The idea that women in the novel might as well get fragments of power even in minor matters or situations allows to understand how power functions in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Hengen's point decentralizes patriarchy as the single possessor of authority and introduces the female subject as an agent in the circle of power. It even presents her as an oppressor. However, her perspective focuses rather on the idea of possession of power and not the circulation of the latter between different individuals. Her point fails to underline the mechanisms with which power moves from one subject to another in the novel and the way it operates within the society of Gilead. Whereas Hengen is more interested in whether or not characters, regardless of their gender, are capable of overthrowing their monolithic government with the power they employ, my perception rather centers on the ways in which power is channeled and how it constantly witnesses

transformation in the established hierarchy. The Foucauldian concept of "power relations" provides a theoretical support here, reminding us that power is a constantly moving outcome of never-ending collisions within a social network. The notion of power being exchanged between male and female subjects suggests that it is not static or possessed by a single person or group. What makes power circulate from one character to another is the fundamental question I seek to address.

My interpretation of power challenges other, previous interpretations of power in the novel and therefore challenges the definition of dystopia in relation to power. On the one hand, feminist dystopia does not entail that power is allocated only to men. On the other hand, the concept of power relations, or the idea that power circulates between male and female characters, does not abolish the dystopic aspect of the novel. The present thesis establishes dystopia in relation to the body. It is the oppression exerted on the female body that makes of the novel a dystopia. Reviews often tend to examine Offred's storytelling as an act of resistance and subversion. This thesis undertakes the handmaid's body as a site where constant shifts of power take place. It is not approaching this concept from the standpoint of "resistance"; rather from the notion of irony. Irony and resistance are two facets that constitute subversion. However, since characters other than the Handmaid are subverting power through her body (each for their own purposes), irony is more relevant to my perspective. By this I imply that resistance would be applied if Offred is the agent of subversion. The chapter entitled "Power Subversion" investigates the function of power only to demonstrate the way in which the Handmaid's body is conquered and subdued according to the different interests of other characters. In the novel, both male and female characters obtain power.

However, the power they use aims only at further subjugating and exploiting the Handmaid's body. Aunts and the Wives in *The Handmaid's Tale* are authoritarian figures. Yet, the movement of power between men and women is in itself dystopic, for it circulates to achieve the same goal which is the possession of the female body.

The Foucauldian concept of power relations and Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque are helpful in order to trace the movement of power and the way it affects social relations in the novel. The carnivalesque is an anti-hegemonic "discourse" that breaks away from all modes of power that are limiting and oppressive. Bakhtin's approach to power is different than Foucault's since the carnivalesque is preoccupied with reversing and overturning power. However Foucault perceives power more as a network of power relations. He is interested in analyzing how power functions and circulates within society. His study is centered on the constant movement of power and how this movement defines and affects social hierarchies. His concept helps to investigate the situation of women within the porous hierarchies of Gilead. It provides a theoretical support to examine the positioning of women to power and the extent to which their use of power transforms their position in the hierarchy. It also enables a new understanding of power as not a static entity that is attributed solely to male characters such as Commanders, but rather as a force that can be mobilized by women such as the Wives. This understanding helps to analyze the ways with which women channel power and therefore are capable of resisting patriarchy. Foucauld's understanding of power fits well with my own examination of both male and female characters in the novel and the various ways in which they employ power to control the Handmaid's body. In other words, the Handmaid's body can be pictured as a terrain where exterior forces are

colliding in order to colonize it. Therefore, Foucault's vision of power allows me to study the movement and the function of these forces.

The carnivalesque presents a different conception of power. It is a literary tradition where the social fuses within the literary. It celebrates the creation of new meaning of the world and an unfamiliar vision of the bodily experience. The grotesque is a literary instrument that avoids closed meanings and limited modes of expression. The parodic elements in the prose are a means of perverting and subverting absolute power. The role of laughter acquires a significant role as it contributes to the degradation of power. Satire becomes a mode of rehabilitation and purification from the tyrannical authority of established institutions and regimes such as church, dictatorship, capitalism, etc. The subversion of hierarchies and the suspension of these institutions are a redeeming force that grants the common people the ability to rebuild a world free of oppression. The carnivalesque can be represented as a resistance theory that undermines power and dominion. From this perspective, Bakhtin's approach to power helps me to trace women's subversion of the oppressive regime of Gilead. It allows me to uncover the irony behind the subversion of power by satirizing the mutual debasement of both the Commander and his wife. The utopian aspect of the carnivalesque also helps me to accentuate dystopia in the novel, bringing to light the Handmaid's failure to take ownership of her body. At another level, the carnivalesque powerplay in the novel brings to surface the lack that pervades in all the characters of the Gileadian society, which makes the Handmaid's body the object that perpetuates the patriarchal rules and the weapon that presents them as inherently dysfunctional.

First, my thesis focuses on the female body as the locus of women's oppression and Gilead's sexist discourse. It analyzes the ways with which masculine power subjugates Handmaids through the objectification and erasure of their bodies. Second, my thesis perceives Offred's body as a disruptive force, a site where constant powerplay occurs throughout the novel. Since the novel revolves around Gilead's obsession with the exploitation and oppression of the female body, then it is helpful to take the Handmaid's body as the main concern of a scholarship in order to be able to dig deep in the different themes of the novel. The present study takes the body of the Handmaid as the central object of analysis. Such a point of departure allows me to examine the aspects of dystopia in relation to the oppression exerted on the Handmaid's body; which explains the conjunction established between dystopia and the body into the concept dystopic body. The Handmaid's body also enables the investigation of the power subversion in the novel and constitutes an interesting angle from which the movement of power can be analyzed.

Chapter Two

The Dystopic Body

> *The reproductive body, then isn't one that fits easily into the model of the body as possession. If women aren't in possession of their bodies, they can't be full subjects; if women aren't in possession of their bodies, they by definition lack self-control, independence, autonomy, and integrity*.
>
> - (Scarth 4).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the dramatic pervasion of sterility in the United States of America has led the political figures to build a social structure founded upon religious extremism and severe political hierarchy, the goal of which is to have total control on women's bodies. Women are prohibited from reading, writing and working, for these rights might render them rebellious and independent of men. Gilead's aim is to strip women of their freedom in order to make of them docile vessels and reproductive instruments that would ensure the breeding of next generation. This chapter focuses on the sexist and misogynistic strategies Gilead employs to oppress women. First, it questions the implied meaning and the boundaries of utopia in relation to Atwood's work. Second, it seeks to analyze the extent to which the different aspects of dystopia affect the corporeal experience of Handmaids. It examines the ways in which compulsory procreation objectify women and confine them to the status of "two-legged wombs." It also looks at the classification of women as a dystopic element that defines women according to their reproductive capacity. Then, it moves to analyze the role of the ceremony in coercing and silencing the Handmaid's sexuality. It further examines the impact of rape on the Handmaid's relation to her body. Surveillance is another aspect that is interpreted as an oppressive strategy which imprisons Handmaids and limits their bodily conduct. Finally, this chapter analyzes the dress code as a means

adopted by Gilead in order oppress the handmaid's body and to present it as a sinful object.

Dystopia/Utopia

Dystopia, "utopia's twentieth-century doppelganger" has attracted considerable academic attention especially in the fields of science fiction and political fiction. Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash in *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* argue that the concept of utopianism is a term which incorporates both utopia and dystopia explaining that

> Despite the name, dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia. A true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful. Dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society. (1)

Thus, already inherent in utopia, dystopia is a corrupted practice of it. Since utopia is slippery as it is always restricted by personal criteria, it is likely to stray off the course of the "perfect". Barbara Goodwin claims that a "transmutation of 'good' into 'perfect' has certain structural and problematic consequences" because "it highlights the question 'Perfect according to which criteria?'" (qtd. In Becker 6). Dystopia can be considered more closely connected to reality than utopia for it is based on aspects of lived experience. As More's book title indicates, *Utopia* is compounded from the Greek words for "no" (ou) and "place" (topos) which means "nowhere". Thus, Utopia is a non-place, an impossibility that exists only in the human imagination. Dystopia however often refers to real societies, which is the case in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and makes people reconsider their lives and environment. Atwood explains in *Writing with Intent*

that in her novel "nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or that it is not doing now" (92). The story plunges the present in a corrupted vision of the time to come and draws a hypothetical prospect of how things can evolve. Dystopia provides the symptoms that might result in a nightmarish future and attempts to raise consciousness about certain vile social or political conditions.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau believe that an ideal society had already existed in the primitive days of Europe, before it was stained by the development of civilization. Such is the definition of dystopia: a society corrupted by civilization. Dystopias are marked by environmental degradation which may result from the overuse of machinery and the use of bombs. Order and human goodness are replaced by violence and hegemonic power within a community. Dystopia often signals the absence of democracy and the unequal distribution of power. It also witnesses a concept of citizenship that lacks hospitality. Political chaos and injustice are frequent aspects of dystopian societies. Increasing political and economic deterioration as well as constant effacement of freedom are major features. The futuristic vision presents groups of people massacred and oppressed by those who have power. Through Atwood's dystopian novel emerges a category of women exploited through the commodification and subjection of their bodies. They are subject to the unfair sexist and patriarchal regime of Gilead which denies them the freedom and the right to have control over their bodies. *The Handmaid's Tale* to some extent questions the existence of utopia as well as the possibility of freedom and justice especially in terms of female bodily experience. In fact, Atwood argues in *Writing with Intent* that "the Utopia-Dystopia as a form challenges us to reexamine what we understand by the word *human*, and above all what

we intend by the word *freedom*" (95). This reflection urges one to seek the true definition and limits of freedom outside the idealistic sense of the term. It calls for a reconstruction of our understanding of freedom in present-day society.

The question is, does freedom exist in utopia if it is absent in dystopia? The need for social control is central to any society's mechanism. It governs according to norms and laws that contribute to the maintainance of order. Goodwin provides illuminating materials to resolve this problematic. In *Social Science and Utopia,* she presents a eight forms of social control: Coercion, Terror, Legal Punishment, Education or Rational Instruction, Morality, Inducements, Indoctrination and psychological Conditioning. She writes,

> All efficient methods of social control are dependent on the successful harnessing of man's faculties: physical control makes use of his vulnerability to pain, while other controls manipulate the intellect, and psychological control aims to dominate man through his psyche. (84)

Thus, freedom is always already contaminated and restricted by social control that tries to reach utopia. Michel Foucault's concept of power also helps to define the boundaries of utopia. For him, power is everywhere, dispersed throughout society. Since it is a pervasive human dynamic that establishes laws and regulates human relationships, it is as productive as it is repressive and prohibitive. People exercise power over one other. Consequently, everyone is subject to the little power everyone has. Therefore, freedom is chained by communal and interactive power. At another level, for Foucault the body "is moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws" (qtd. in Grosz 148). It is always immersed in power and cannot be freed from the

field of politics. He believes that "Power relations have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks" (qtd. in Besley and Peters 59). Thus, the body cannot escape the grip of social control and culture and its subject can never have total control over it. According to Susan Bordo,

> The body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature… [Bodies] are disciplined directly through 'the practice and bodily habits of everyday life.' (35)

Therefore, the female body cannot be severed from the social values and cultural constructs in which it is immersed. The body is trained and shaped by the conventions of sex and gender roles. It is restrained by social meanings and concepts that allocate domination to men and passivity to women.

Does justice exist in utopia? According to Jacques Derrida, justice is yet to come. It is a demand or a promise. It is a desire that cannot be fulfilled because law is affected by economic and political forces and therefore depends on violence. On the one hand, society cannot be based on homogeneity since difference is inherent to it. Thus, laws which aim at treating everyone equally cannot be fairly applied to each individual in the community. On the other hand, laws reflect in Derrida's words "the economic and political interests of the dominant forces of society" (Griffin and Moylan 47). Laws, like discourses, are designed and appropriated by those who have power and cannot speak to everyone. The utopian possibility of true recognition of the other does not exist given that 'fusion' of the same with the other is far-fetched. The law needs constant alteration and reinvention. It cannot fulfill its promise when it's applied blindly in each case. The absence of a stabilized and anchored reference makes the existence of justice further improbable. Derrida says "If [a judge] wants to be just, he cannot content himself with

applying the law. He has to reinvent the law each time" (Griffin and Moylan 54). Justice cannot escape corruption and distortion in its path from the ideal to the real. Eugene O'Brien argues "This is the crux of the utopian imperative: how can an ideal become integrated into the real without becoming reified into another dogma, another doxa, another dystopia" (Griffin and Moylan 53).

Atwood employs dystopia as a means of addressing certain problematic factors of American society that happened historically before or are still happening now. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a fertile ground for feminist criticism because it projects a terrifying vision of female experience in a religious patriarchal society. Atwood asserts in *Writing With Intent*, that "A novel is always the story of an individual, or several individuals; never the story of a generalized mass" (111). Her dystopian fiction is concerned with the female struggle against cultural catastrophe and an enforced biological destiny. In the monolithic regime of Gilead, woman is bound to her anatomy. She is depicted as a slave whose task is to bring babies into a sterile world. Central to Atwood's dystopia as well lies an explicit preoccupation with power. Atwood elaborates,

> By 'political' I mean having to do with power: who's got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how. (qtd. in VanSpanckeren and Castro 102)

The dystopic aspect in *The Handmaid's Tale* lies not only in the unequal distribution of power but also in a certain temporal regression. Both reflect the oppression of women at the hands of men. Atwood projects the American society in the future where dictatorship strips women of their rights to work, to have economic independence and to have control over their lives. The aspect of time in the novel

creates confusion since the past is reenacted in the future. Decades ago women fought against patriarchal and sexist rules of society. They struggled to free themselves from their biological destiny. Feminist movements succeeded in offering the female subjects a certain freedom to exist as autonomous citizens and have a certain control over their lives. Then, women no longer 'needed' men to live. This conclusion is adopted and defended by Offred's mother in the novel. The regression resides in the backward temporal movement of the book vis-à-vis the history of the female experience. Women are supposed to gain more rights and equality with men in the future. This is called progress and the recognition of human rights. However, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are denied all the rights they have earned through feminist endeavors. They are brought back to the dark ages where they are oppressed and exploited. The total erasure of these endeavors creates a certain superimposition of the past (dark ages) with the future (the time of dystopia). The futurity of women's experience is a powerful element that frames dystopia in the novel. Atwood argues in *Writing With Intent*, "Why bother to try to improve society, or even visualize it improved, when you know it's all going to go around again, like clothes in the wash?" (93).

Production

Corol Ann Howells affirms that "Atwood has always been intensely aware of the significance of the female body" (43). In the novel, Gilead's phallocentric civilization takes ownership of the Handmaids' bodies. By denying women economic independence and the right to exist as intellectual and autonomous citizens, it makes their anatomy their destiny. They can no longer read, write, work and travel. Toxic wastes and nuclear fallout causing widespread sterility and infertility have made human reproduction the

major preoccupation and goal of Gilead. As fertile women, the Handmaids become a collectively owned property whose unique task is to deliver babies. After intense religious indoctrination by the Aunts at the Rachel and Leah Center, Handmaids are compelled to fulfill their duty as reproductive wombs in the houses of high ranked government officers. They are seen and treated as "two-legged wombs" constantly watched and expected to be filled. Gilead constructs the Handmaid's reproductive service not only as an obligation but also as "a marvelous privilege," a sacred contribution to the rescue of Gilead's demographical future.

The process of classification is a technique Gilead employs to subjugate women and regulate their bodies. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault summarizes five operations that the normalizing gaze brings into play: comparison, differentiation, hierarchization, homogenization, and exclusion. He unveils the disciplinary mechanisms that implement norms and decide what is accepted and what is forbidden in society. Differentiation divides people according to their ability to obey the norms laid down by those who hold power. It creates mechanization since everyone is compelled to fit into a model. In the words of Foucault, normalizing reason

> refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed. It differentiated individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected or an optimum towards which one must move. It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the 'nature' of individuals. It introduces, through this 'value-giving' measure, the constraint of conformity that must be achieved. Lastly, it traces the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal. (183)

In the novel, the body, more specifically ovaries, become the parameter that sets a female hierarchy and organizes the different layers of society. After passing laws denying women jobs, property and money, women were sorted into groups. The first includes women with fertile ovaries known as Handmaids and dressed in red uniforms and white-winged hoods. After a period of religious indoctrination, they are assigned to Commanders and their sterile Wives. The second contains post-menopausal or unfertile sterile women called Aunts, whose job is to indoctrinate the handmaids. The third group contains a green-dressed servant-class known as Marthas. Apart from the Wives, lower class Econowives and widows, there exists a fourth group which comprises Unwomen, who are sent to the colonies and whose job is to clear toxic wastes which can be considered as a death sentence. There are also Jezebels, prostitutes whose existence is illegal but secretly allowed among Commanders. Fertility is the powerful tool that attributes worthiness to the female subject. The womb becomes a double-edged sword that acknowledges the power of the female body and yet it oppresses that same body. Sterility strips the woman of her femininity and denies her the natural essence of womanhood. The obsession with fertility mechanizes Handmaids, diminishes their humanity and objectifies them. They are subdued by a normalizing male gaze that assesses their value according to a sexist standard.

Since woman's identity is confined to her biological functions, she becomes entrapped and imprisoned by her body. Handmaids are procreators and nurturers. The patriarchal society considers the whole female organism to be a vessel adapted for, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, "the servitude for maternity" (Scarth 141). The handmaid's individuality is sacrificed. Total attention is given to the task and process of

bringing babies into the world. Their selfhood is conceptualized on the basis of Gilead's male gaze and its sexist parameters. "As Foucault has argued, though in quite different terms, the discourse of sex is the locus of the (male) subject's subjection" (Whitford 150). By using Handmaids as reproductive machines, Gilead marginalizes them through the objectification and appropriation of their bodies. Their destiny cannot be self-determined because they are doomed to the mere task of reproducing life. Butler argues that the woman is othered through her body. As the male disengages his identity from his body, he frees his selfhood from its restraints while chaining the female to her anatomy. She writes,

> Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities… By defining women as 'Other,' men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies-a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally- and to make their bodies other than themselves. From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others *are* their bodies, while the masculine 'I' is the noncorporeal soul. The body rendered as Other- the body repressed or denied and, then, projected—re-emerges for this 'I' as the view of others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence. (Culley 80)

The Handmaid's body becomes the object with which she is identified. She cannot achieve anything outside of it. It is the only thing that defines her. All she does has to serve it. From Offred's perspective:

> I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen (91). […] I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely. (78)

Husserl explains “I do not have the possibility of distancing myself from my body nor it from me” since “the same body that serves me as a means of all perception stands in the way in the perception of itself and is a remarkably incompletely constituted thing” (Husserl and Welton 184). The Handmaid’s body fills the whole space of her identity and locates her selfhood in her womb. What Offred experiences is fractured communication with body parts the value of which variy from an organ to another. “Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (114). Offred feels that her body, in Grosz’ words, “is never quite reducible to being merely a thing; nor does it manage to rise above the status of thing. Thus, it is both a thing and a non-thing.” This confusion is what makes her care about her skin and loathe her body at the same time. She is caught in the prison of her own body which does not belong to her.

Gilead’s perception of the body as solely a means of production disrupts the coherence between woman and her body. Offred is dispossessed of her body. She is reduced to a womb that has to carry the seeds of the next generation. She no longer knows where to place herself or her mind within her body. She exists outside of it, exiled from it. She says “My nakedness is strange to me already” (78). She is unable to imbue it with feelings, fill it with emotions. The unification of the subject and the body does not occur. She is detached and alienated from it, for each occupies a different space. The body comes to exist in the real and the self in the virtual, the denied world of freedom and desire. Gilead seeks to disrupt the “concrete unity” (Carman 6) of body and soul. Descartes claims that “I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it,

so that I and the body form a unit" (qtd. in Skirry 98). The Gileadian society abolishes the unity between the subject and its body by taking ownership of it. Sidonie Smith argues in *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*,

> If "being home," as Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggest, " refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries," the autobiographical subject may find the body to be the home of a stranger who is not at home in the body, who is in fact homeless. This sense of "'not being home,' "Martin and Mohanty continue, "is a matter of realizing that home was illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of differences even within oneself." This experience of homelessness inside the body derives from the relationship of specific bodies to the cultural meanings assigned bodies in the body politic. (128)

For Deleuze and Guattari, a body exists to communicate with other components as fields of multiplicities engaged in unceasing connection. The body does not exist as "origin, prior to or outside the field of encounters that articulate it within any specific assemblage" (Flanagan and Booth 531). In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz contends that Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the body

> as a discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speed and durations, maybe of great value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind\body, nature\culture, subject\object, and interior\exterior. (164)

Offred's body is a restricted space, a limit not open to "assemblages," a term coined by Deleuze. This concept refuses the ordering logic of stability as well as unity and suggests a focus on the notion of linkage and connection. The meeting of assemblages allows the body to articulate identity through their functioning and composition in a

specific field. According to Grosz, the Deleuzian concept of the body as assemblage presents

> an altogether different way of understanding the body in its connections with other bodies, both human and non-human, animate and inanimate, linking organs and biological processes to material objects and social practices while refusing to subordinate the body to a unit of homogeneity of the kind provided by the bodies' subordination to consciousnesses or to biological organizations. (165)

Gilead understands the female body only as an isolated reproductive organ. Offred is not allowed to experiment with new and different bodily habits, or make connection with objects or persons to whom she is not allowed to talk. She has to forget what a body can do as well as the fact that it can disturb the boundaries established by the guardians of social normality. "I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. I want to steal something" (120). The rebellious thought of theft is a will to awaken the memories of what the body is able to do, and to recover the desire for quest. It bursts to remind the body of the possibility of possession.

Offred's body is steadily deprived of memory. It is denied the privileges of remembrance. It is a numbed organ cut off from the past, the present and the future. It functions outside the here and now. It becomes a simulacrum or an image, a copy that has to reproduce another copy. However, this simulacrum, to adopt the Deleuzian concept of Simulacra, is real. It is a representation or construction of the body 'from the time before' which is lost and unavailable in the present. Thus, the copy comes to live in nostalgia. "I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch" (13). The hunger is desire that is intrinsic to the body, the need to make a connection with the other. For Michel de Certeau, "Desire is [also] expressive of

embodiment in which an unstable and incomplete 'self' is continually being constructed in a movement outwards and in encounters with what is other than itself" (qtd. in Sheldrake 114). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Gileadian regime prohibits the communication of the body with other objects, other bodies – other than that of the Commander during "the Ceremony" ─ and with itself.

Gilead offers a type of contract that trades child delivery for survival. Being pregnant and ultimately giving birth is a means of survival in the novel. Carole Pateman, in her book *The Sexual Contract*, affirms that "Contract theory is primarily about a way of creating social relationships constituted by subordination, not about exchange" (58). Feeling anxiety about having her menstruation, Offred says "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own (91). Menstruation becomes the signal of failure and deceit. On one hand it "links women into a (presumedly natural) maternity without acknowledging women's sexual specificity" (Schweitzer 76). On the other hand, it excludes them from the definition of womanhood which Gilead has established. Emily Martin argues in *The Woman in the Body*,

> Menstruation not only carries with it the connotation of a productive system that has failed to produce, it also carries the idea of production gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsaleable, wasted, scrap. (46)

The notion of productive body recalls Timothy Murphy's reading of the body in *Naked Lunch* "The disciplined body, like thought, is domesticated and subordinated to the process of production as an instrument, […] the body's very organization abets capitalist control" (97). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the expectations of those in power, is

to have a child so as to have balanced life, whereas Offred's hope is to deliver a baby in order to survive without having to be sent to the colonies and die from toxicity. Offred's greatest desire and only true fulfillment does not lie in maternity but in its reward. Motherhood becomes the means, not the end. The Handmaid is allowed to stay only a few months after the birth. She is then transferred to a new house, where she has to do the same procedure again and be spared from the colonies as a prize. Unsuccessful insemination becomes a symbol of the end, of death. The handmaid's body would fail not only those she serves but also herself.

The handmaid's body becomes her threat. She comes to carry within her the weapon that can destroy her after a certain number of trials. The body becomes a time bomb that endangers the life of its own subject. It comes to incarnate the enemy within her. The Eyes inhabit the flesh and make sure that the mind does not do anything to jeopardize the safety of the body. The subject lives in a body allied with the oppressor. It is a limited space that speaks for her. Gayatri Spivak argues that "there is no such a thing as an uncoded body" (qtd. in Howells, The Cambridge 60). Offred's body is marked by the codes of Gilead's biological discourse. It is the site that welcomes male invasion and entraps the self in the perpetual treacherous sexual practices inscribed by the bible. Offred's womb colonizes her and neutralizes her female voice. It becomes the "pearl" that determines her worth. As Offred is prevented from caring about the aesthetics of the other body parts, she feels diminished in front of the control of her own womb, the domination of which is demonstrated by the pear metaphor.

In Gilead, pregnancy is the Handmaid's responsibility. Chemicals and nuclear fallout that cause widespread sterility have supposedly affected all humans. However,

the Republic of Gilead does not require fertility tests for men. The woman's body is a scapegoat, the object that is made to bare the blame for the possible, sometimes certain sterility of men. The patriarchal ideology refuses to bring the male figure into an equal or lower position than that of the woman by admitting the infertility of men. The accusation of women is based on the sexist thought that women are solely responsible for the success or failure of conception. Infertility renders her a useless slave unable to accomplish the duties laid down for her. The indoctrination of the Handmaids to accept their roles as child bearers relies on the misreading of the Bible. "Religion has had a particularly important role in advancing and perpetuating sexist notions. The great religions of the world have mostly been pervaded to the core by sexism" (Singh 32). Napoleon Bonaparte's voices Gilead's patriarchal system "Nature intended women to be our slaves, …they are our property, we are not theirs. They belong to us just as a tree that bears fruit belongs to a gardener […] women are nothing but machines for producing children" (Singh 32).

Sexuality

Gilead oppresses the handmaids' bodies also through dystopic sexual relationships. The Handmaid's sexuality is not only silenced but also violated. "The Ceremony" is a non-marital sexual act performed for the unique purpose of reproduction. It reenacts a biblical passage in which Rachel offers to her husband Jacob her maid Bilhah to bear him the children that Rachel cannot. The wife holds the hands of the Handmaid who lies between her legs as if they are one person. As a surrogate womb, the Handmaid remains clothed except her legs and sex. The husband penetrates her as though he attempts to impregnate his own wife. Offred describes the ceremony:

> My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. (116)

Offred lies passively during the mechanical process of impregnation. Beauvoir describes heterosexual intercourse as an invasion that alienates the female from her own body. Yet, the ceremony is an act of rape in disguise. It amplifies the rupture between the woman's self and her body. The vagina becomes, as Winifred Woodhull puts it in "Sexuality, Power, and the Question of Rape", "coded- and experienced - as a place of emptiness and vulnerability, the penis as a weapon." Rape is a way by which Gileadian society implements male power and subjugate women. Woodhull further argues,

> many American feminists insist on the importance of desexualizing rape by defining it as a crime of power, not of sex. According to this view, rape should be seen as a logical outcome of political, economic, and social processes that generate and foster men's domination over women in every cultural domain. (Diamond and Quinby 170)

A particular conception or interpretation of the relationship between male and female bodies is linked to certain notions of sexual desire and pleasure. The difference between male and female sexuality has been much debated. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray explores the misconceptions around female sexual pleasure. She argues that a woman derives pleasure from touch rather than the visual. She asserts that the female has multiple erogenous zones and libidinal energies in her body: "woman has at least two [sex organs], but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is plural" (28). She further elaborates,

> Woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She finds pleasure almost everywhere … the geography of pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its difference, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined- in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness. (28)

Human sexuality in Gilead is devoid of pleasure because desire is seen as sinful and corrupt. Gilead's strategy for "desexualizing" women is to construct eroticism as a threat and insult to the religious foundations of the society. The absence of emotions and pleasure creates a sense of disembodiment in the Handmaid. With the absence of desire and sexual satisfaction, the body becomes an unreal shell, invalid flesh. In fact, Offred says "Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied" (128). She does not experience pleasure during the ceremony because the sexual intercourse ignores love and does not require affection. The handmaid's sexuality is omitted as her body is touched in a particular zone to accomplish a "national" duty. The vagina is the only part with which the commander has contact because it is the central location that leads to the womb. Offred's other body parts remain clothed because they are considered as futile. The husband must not be aroused by her nudity for the only preoccupation is sending the semen unto the surrogate womb.

Offred experiences a sense of corporeal fragmentation. Since all the worthiness is attributed to her fertile ovaries, her other organs become complementary phantoms emptied of merit and value. During the medical inspection, the doctor "deals with a torso only" (74). The body is considered as a site of biological relief. It is not treated, in Susan Bordo's words, "as invested with personal meaning, history and value" as "suffused with subjectivity" (Bordo 74). In the time before, Offred believed her body to

be an "instrument" over which she had control. It was limited "but nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with [her]" (91). In Gilead's patriarchal regime, her body as a whole shrinks to her reproductive organ. It is described in terms of parts rather than an organic whole. This becomes more obvious when Offred compares her narrative to herself, "a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force… this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story." Mutilation is symbolic, like the ceiling ornament in Offred's room like "the place in the face where the eye has been taken out." But it can also become real. Moira's mutilated hands are the ultimate example of fractured body.

The space in which the body exists forbids acts that might involve pleasure or lust. The tactile becomes bearer of sin and a threat. According to Merleau-Ponty, "the moment of perception excludes the perceiving organ itself from the domain of objects perceived." He agrees saying "As for my body, I do not observe it itself: to be able to do so, I would need the use of a second body" (qtd. in Hubert and Wrathall 207). Communication with another body is needed for identification. However, the contact with the perceived object is absent in the novel. Thus, the subject fails to recognize her own body. The latter becomes tensed. It is passive not only in relation to the outside world, the public, but also to itself. Husserl argues "when I touch something with my hand, not only do I feel the qualities of the object, I also feel, and can turn my attention to, tactile sensations localized in the hand itself" (qtd. in Taylor 128). Since the touch is forbidden, the handmaid loses the sensational quality within her body. The connection between the body parts is interrupted as they no longer respond to each other. It becomes obvious when Offred tries to touch herself but feels no pleasure. She says,

> But I too am dry and white, hard, granular; it's like running my hand over a plateful of dried rice; it's like snow. There's something dead about it, something deserted. I am like a room when things once happened and now nothing does. (128)

Offred's relation to her own body is fractured. It becomes an empty space where communication with other bodies and objects cannot take place. She loses connection with it as she cannot identify with it.

Surveillance

The control over the Handmaids' bodies yields to Foucault's Panopticon metaphor. Jeremy Bentham's design of the prison allows constant observation of prisoners, each separated from the other and denied interaction. Unseen, the guards are able to continually see inside each cell from their vantage point in a high central tower. The constant observation acts as a control mechanism whereby the observed party internalizes that surveillance. Its goal is to force the acceptance of regulations. The process of normalization censors, represses and eliminates those who do not respect regulations. The Panopticon was a metaphor that allowed Foucault to explore the impacts of surveillance on people in a disciplinary situation and their relationship with the observing system. It also sheds light on the power-knowledge concept for power and knowledge stem from observing others.

> [Foucault] argued that the body is a field or surface on which the play of power, knowledge and resistance is worked out. Through social norms, self-surveillance and disciplinary practices, the body's materiality, and its desires and pleasures are produced and restricted to a narrow range of acceptable attitude. (McDowell and Sharp 203)

The desired outcome of surveillance is docility. The menace of discipline laid by society makes sure that people exhibit compliant behavior. Submission is achieved not through total surveillance, but by the internalization of that surveillance.

Likewise, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Handmaids are not allowed to communicate with each other, safe saying ritualized greetings. In the novel, the Eyes are constantly flashing their inspecting lights over the houses and in the streets to make sure no handmaid is out of her place. The monolithic society keeps the bodies of the Handmaids under ceaseless surveillance. The circular mirror the hallway – in the Commander's house - becomes the symbol of the dystopian watching eye "I see the two of us as…in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend" and the hostile male gaze that objectifies the female body. The invisible omniscience roams constantly in the Republic of Gilead. Offred is not allowed to touch sharp objects like knives and blades. She is prevented from the possibility of damaging her body since it is not hers but a "national resource". The coercion of surveillance is applied on the body and its mobility. She describes her tattoo as "four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important….I am a national resource" (80). The eye on her ankle is an ever present reminder that her body is a coded object under surveillance. It is a tool over which an outside force has power.

Handmaids have regular appointments with doctors to evaluate the conditions of their ovaries and estimate the chances of pregnancy. The medical investigative tests reduce the Handmaids into machines of reproduction, reinforce their objectification and obliterate their individuality. The hospital becomes a system of surveillance that extends

even into a woman's body and severs it from her selfhood. Ovaries become the "central object" that is "more real" than the Handmaid herself. Without their proper functioning, she has no existence; she becomes an unwoman, an invalid human being. The Handmaid is excluded from her womb and confined to it at once since all the attention is concentrated on it and her destiny revolves around its fertility. This act of division creates ambivalent feelings in the female subject towards her own body. She loathes it because it dooms her to mere reproduction of life but is attached to it for it is her only source of hope. The monitoring of the handmaids' bodies annihilates a sense of corporeal individuality as they become a collectively owned property. "We are containers; it's only the insides of our bodies that are important". Offred mentions throughout her story that she is a piece of a collectively owned resource, especially when she refers to herself in the plural, indicating that her individual identity has been subsumed by a collective identity. She tells the Commander that "our skin gets dry" when speaking of her own skin, and describes during the birth scene that "we are one smile" (126).

The Handmaids are virtual prisoners in the houses of their 'masters.' Offred describes that she is not allowed to be out of her room after a certain hour at night. When she sneaks out of her room in the middle of the night to steal a flower in the sitting room, she says "I am out of place. This is entirely illegal" (121). She has no alternative rooms to explore besides her own and other limited spaces in which she is accompanied. Solitude is allowed only in her room. The space in which she can be alone might offer her the utopian possibility of escape or suicide. The goal behind company is not the relief of that solitude but the surveillance of the handmaid's

movements. Offred has to walk doubled by another handmaid on their way to the food stores:

> We aren't allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable. (23)

The internalization of surveillance annihilates any possible feelings of sympathy and solidarity between the Handmaids. Sharon Wilson, in her book *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, compares Offred to the naïve "Little Red Cap" who meets the wolf on her way to her grandmother's house and gets dismembered and devoured by it. However, the handmaid, in her journey from the house to the stores and vice versa, must not go "off the path". Identified by her clothing, she cannot go astray from the path she is intended to take. Changing it would arouse suspicions and threaten her life.

Dress code

> Utopias and dystopias both take a lot of pleasure in describing costume. What is worn and what is forbidden? What cannot be worn, who can wear what and under what circumstances? This is of course just an exaggerated variant on what goes on in society anyway. (Kuhn 13)

Margaret Atwood is intensely aware of the significance of dress in her dystopic fiction. As it articulates the body and frames gender within a cultural context, dress acquires a meaningful function since it links the body to "its social habitus" (Kuhn 4). In her book *Self-Fashioning in Margaret Atwood's Fiction Dress, Culture, and Identity*, Cynthia G. Kuhn explores the role of the dress code in the novels of Atwood in relation

to feminism and femininity and discusses the interrelation of the dress, body and story in the construction of identity. She argues,

> Because clothing has a close relationship to the body, attention to dress and appearance has been associated with the erotic, particularly the sin of the body. […] Whether it is categorized as artistic representation or as a semiotic system, dress clearly locates a site of performance. "Performance" is a term used widely in a variety of fields, and an important element of performance is its space as "a border, a margin, a site of negotiation." (2-4)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the red uniform worn by the Handmaids dress limits the body to the extreme. It conceals all body parts except the face and becomes a tool with which Gilead performs its patriarchal discourse. Dress is a disciplinary act that imposes conformity and submission. It destroys the individual choice of clothing in order to construct a multitude of indistinguishable bodies. Offred experiences a corporeal disintegration in her uniform because it obscures her shape and neutralizes her particularity. The red-coded dress renders her body a common object among cattle of similar objects. The censorship to communicate oneself through fashion is a technique Gilead's society uses to enforce docility. Since dress is "a kind of visual metaphor for identity" (Kuhn 30), it can act as a means of subversion and negotiation of a cultural domination. Gilead controls what women wear in order to prevent any act of self-presentation.

The Handmaid's body is constructed as corrupt and phantasmagorical though it can be aesthetically beautiful. It provokes mixed feelings of desire and fear. The mythological representation of the female body mirrors that of Gilead's perception. Both view the reproductive body as monstrous and a source of moral impurity. Handmaids are treated as incarnations of danger and power. Their flesh and vaginas are

polluted and threatening sites. In this context, Rosi Braidotti argues in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*,

> woman as a sign of difference is monstrous. If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a blend of fascination and horror. (226)

Woman's sexuality, framed through the topography of her body is seen as a source of sin for it triggers man's sexual vulnerability. Her shapes are associated with wicked lust. Her sexuality is silenced through not only objectification and rape but also the effacement of her body. Trying to erase the body's sexual language, Gilead has made Handmaids wear long dresses that conceal their curves. All body parts that may render man weak by visual accessibility have to be rendered invisible. The handmaid's body is not born to be looked at or admired; it is rather a composed object that has to be penetrated in order to save Gilead's future. Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro in *Fashoning the Frame* describe dress as a "frame" that provides both boundary and margin, arguing that "the limitation of physical visibility via clothing, for example, parallels metaphorically an intended limitation of psychological accessibility" (qtd. in Kuhn 28). The dress aims as well at weakening the Handmaid's sense of corporeal worthiness and deconstructing the beauty-power binary. The internalization of corporeal invisibility in the Handmaid's consciousness results in Offred's being repelled by the sight of Japanese tourists wearing short skirts, with their hair exposed "in all its darkness and sexuality." She then recognizes that "it has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this" (36).

One of the particularities of the red uniform is its intent to provide a limited view of the handmaid's surroundings. Offred describes the dress as such:

> Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue, they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (42)

The white wings recall the image of a racehorse's blinkers which are designed to restrict the horse's peripheral and rear vision. The handmaid's dress serves to reduce distractions and to make her focus only on what is ahead of her. Gilead prevents the handmaid from "straying" just like the trainer attempts to keep his horse from veering out in a certain direction. Offred says that she "learned to see the world in gasps" (38). Handmaids are denied full view of what is around them so as not to get distracted from their only reproductive function. Behind the red uniform lies a process of "dressage" based on which the Handmaids are "trained" to be docile. The wings eradicate as well the female gaze. Vision endangers her isolation and submission. The concept of blinding suggests an enforced ignorance on the Handmaid coupled with the interdiction to read and write. The less she knows the less she threatens Gilead's patriarchy and dictatorship. The monolithic regime seems to acknowledge that observation means knowledge which means power. Kept as blind objects, Handmaids lose tactile as well as visual contact with the space outside their selves. The dress becomes a frontier that separates their biological entities from the world. In Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro's words "a boundary, it frames the body and separates from the rest of the social world, thus functioning as a kind of container or wrapper" (17).

The novel embodies Grosz's opinion that woman provides space for man but occupies none herself. Atwood seems to say that the female body can be the element that oppresses woman and makes of her something composed and made rather than born; an object a sexist and patriarchal society would use and subjugate. The different aspects of dystopia, ecological, social, and political have immediate impacts on woman's body and allow for her subjugation. Foucault argues that the body is the product of social forces and cultural constructs. It is mediated and shaped by the social interactions in which it is engaged. Likewise, the Handmaid's body is marked by power relations in the house of the Commander. Dystopia is further reinforced by the different demands on the Handmaid's body. These demands are engaged in a constant struggle in order to further exploit the productive body. The following chapter analyzes the ways in which the female body becomes a site where constant shift of power, power subversion and irony operate in the novel. It seeks to present power circulation as dystopic since it is preoccupied with the subordination of the female body.

Chapter Three

Power Subversion

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Handmaid's body is the central object upon which the rules of Gilead are founded. It is the lack of human reproduction that impels men to establish a severe regime of hierarchy where the female body needs to be controlled and subdued in order to fulfill that lack. Systems of surveillance, mechanized sexual intercourses and other forms of bodily oppression are implemented as mechanisms of power so as to tame and take possession of the Handmaid's body. However, these mechanisms are not performed only by men in the novel. Women as well take part in the subjugation of the female body. This chapter examines power exchange between the Commander and his wife Serena Joy. It investigates the ways in which each of the characters positions themselves to power in order to take ownership of Offred's body. The present study analyzes the Handmaid's body as a field where exterior forces are engaged in a constant struggle. It relies on Foucault's concept of power relations in order to investigate the movement as well as the function of power in relation to the exploitation of Offred's body. At one level, it studies the strategies used by the Commander and Serena which aim at satisfying their own interests. At another level, it examines the irony that lies behind the constant power play in the novel. Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque helps to trace power reversal and the subversion of social hierarchy. It also uncovers the perpetuation of bodily dystopia in the novel since the female body never ceases to be the object of struggle. The carnivalesque allows me study of the Handmaid's body as the means that ironically brings to surface the sense of lack in the characters and the defective regime of Gilead.

The concept of power is one of the most important notions Foucault investigates in his works. His definition does not limit power in framework of law and sovereignty.

His genealogical examination breaks free from the restraints of juridico-discursive structure as well as the scientific discourse. He rather presents it in terms of networks of relations that obey a certain hierarchy and organization. Besides, these relations manifest themselves everywhere. They interact with other types of relations such as economic relations, sexuality, family, and so on. Foucault's study emancipates power from the traditional definition long associated with it. According to him, power is not merely a source of repression and coercion. He rather presents it in terms of relations that can be not only prohibitive but also productive. Power relations work on a model of negation. They also to engender knowledge, create discourses, and procure pleasures. These relations allow for new forms of resistance to emerge and counter-discourses to operate. The mechanisms of power relations in their turn modify the definition of knowledge and truth.

Reinscribing "power" into a network of power relations suggests that power is not static or stable. It is not possessed by a single subject. It rather moves through a web of relations and discourses. It is in constant play between persons who employ different strategies and techniques to mobilize it. Power feeds on connections that individuals exhibit in order to dominate or counter-react. According to Foucault, power is not an object or substance that is held by a person or a group. It is dispersed everywhere. It engenders and is generated by social struggle. Power circulates within a complex of relations and "is exercised in decentralized ways throughout the social body" (Alfonso and Bizzini 191). This does not imply that power is random or that it is possessed by everyone. It shifts according to the interplay of relations and fluctuates according to the way people position themselves within it. It imposes normalization and disciplines

bodies within hierarchical relations. Foucault suggests that one should not consider power relations in terms of binary oppositions, or investigate who holds power and who is deprived of it. One should rather look at the interplay of power relations and how these generate transformations in the social body. It is also interesting to examine how power creates new forms of discourses. Foucault argues, "we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one" (qtd. in Bammer 44). One should look at power relations "as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (Bammer 191).

Foucault maintains that the body is the central target of power. It is the site of struggle for domination. The body is constantly modified and redefined according to the movement of multiple discourses operating on it. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the body as the locus or reservoir where the disciplinary forces of society and culture are articulated and reinforced. The subject is always "subjected" to the mechanism of social control through his body. When power is prohibitive and repressive, it oppresses pleasures and desires which are articulated through and closely linked to corporeal subjectivity. Foucault claims that power has always its immediate marks on the body. Laws, social hierarchy and other forms of control and authority continually shape bodies. He writes "It is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals" (qtd. in Mills 19). Power trains bodies into conformity and discipline, and engages them in processes of normalization by limiting and controlling their pleasures and desires. Through disciplinary

mechanisms, bodies become “docile”. Thus, the body is not only the destination of power but also the point that triggers and boards warring forces and discourses.

Foucault’s work on power has provided a fruitful ground for feminist interpretations. It presents a framework that helps them define and understand the female body within political and social contexts. Foucauldian study allows them to explain the subjection of women under repressive patriarchy. It reveals the dynamics of power that marginalize women and oppress their bodies. Culture and sexist dogmas have imprisoned women into restricted experiences of marriage and motherhood. However, Foucault’s ungendered concept of the body was at the heart of feminists’ criticism of his writings. They argued that his analysis of power “is not a theory developed for women” (Hekman 162). Rosi Braidotti argues,

> The “body” in question is the threshold of subjectivity; it is to be thought of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social; that is to say between the socio-political of the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension. (Braidotti 182)

Thus, feminists are interested in the sexualization of the body. They consider it as a crucial element that helps them understand the position of women in society. Patriarchal discourse produces knowledge of gender inequality, inserts the body in a certain regime of power, and creates the truth of the phallus as the visible privilege and the female body as weak and nominal. Gender is important in the way in which it ascribes power to men and sexual as well as social submission to women. Feminists explain that only with the gendered, “libidinal” body does one come to see the formation of power relations. The female body was not only seen as perverse and pathological but also as a weak object that needs to be disciplined into a docile “thing”. Consequently, in order to

examine how women are socialized and oppressed, it is imperative to explore not their position within the social order, but to study the role of sexual division and the repercussions of mechanisms of gender practiced on the body.

In "Notes on Power Politics" Atwood articulates her opinion regarding power. Her ideas reflect those of Foucault since both conceive power as something that intermingles with other types of relations. Atwood believes that power is not a substance that can be isolated from culture or the daily life of people. She sees culture as imbued with power relations. She writes,

> Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air…We would all like to have a private life that is sealed off from the public life and different from it, where there are no rulers and no ruled, no hierarchies, no politicians, only equals, free people. But because any culture is a closed system and our culture is one based and fed on power this is impossible or at least very difficult…So many of the things we do in what we sadly think of as our personal lives are simply duplications of the external world of power games, power struggles. (qtd. in Howells 43)

Like Foucault, she argues that power circulates. Like an electron; it never ceases to move, diffusing energy around it and altering hierarchies. Power becomes an "environment" that shelters all kinds of political and personal activities. For Atwood, power is closely linked to politics. Atwood explains, "Politics for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom […] Politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed" (Atwood, Ingersoll 149). Once more, power joins the political and the personal altogether. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, power ascription acquires a new meaning. The novel is associated with the negative facet of power, the patriarchal power or male violence. Who exercises violence on whom can be

investigated not only within the political boundaries but also in the bodily and sexual sense.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, power is predominantly exercised over women. Yet, it is not only men that target the female body. Women also exert their power over it. The Handmaid's body becomes the site where forces culminate and magnify. The commander appropriates the Handmaid's body for reproduction. Aunts discipline the Handmaids and punish them when they break the rules, and the Wives not only snatch babies from their fertile mothers but can also hold the latter's destiny. They can send them to colonies when they are dissatisfied. They can also be the cause of their public execution. Therefore, power is not totally attributed to men. It is true that mainly men who impose the rules, which makes of it a patriarchal regime. However, women at the top of the social scale like the Wives enjoy power to a certain extent. The hierarchy in Gilead might also deprive some men of authority. Hence, power can circulate in a totalitarian dystopic system. It is not equally shared by males and females but both employ their authority and tactics for the unique purpose of controlling and using the Handmaid's body. Atwood asserts,

> Some people mistakenly think that the society in *The Handmaid's Tale* is one in which all men have power, and all women don't. That is not true, because it is a true totalitarianism: therefore a true hierarchy. Those at the top have power, those at the bottom don't. And those at the bottom include men, and those at the top include women. The women at the top have different kinds of power from the men at the top, but they have power nonetheless, and some of the power they have is power over other women. Like Serena Joy, like the Aunts. (qtd. in Howells, The Cambridge 53)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's body is the centre of the struggle for domination between the Commander and his wife Serena Joy. Each uses their authority for their own purposes. Offred's body becomes a disruptive force, a site where constant

powerplay occurs throughout the novel. The key elements that enable the shift of power between female and male characters to take place are invisibility and secrecy. However, these elements are not based on conspiracy, for a conspiratorial comportment involves a reciprocal agreement upon an action. Yet, in the novel, Offred is made to consent. What she receives are orders that she cannot ignore or disobey. She is not offered the choice to disapprove or negotiate. She must do what she is told to do because she is a slave, a docile woman. Offred says "This is conspiracy" (175). Offred fears that what she is doing with the Commander can be interpreted as conspiracy. She not only obeys the instructions of the Commander as Serena Joy but also has to keep what she does to each of them secret. "'We just won't tell him, will we?' This idea hangs between us, almost visible, almost palpable" (257). She becomes the secret battlefield of warring forces and the ground that witnesses the constant subversion of power between the authoritarian characters. She is "a blank, here, between parentheses. Between other people" (285). If the secret events in which she is implicated are divulged, she and her accomplice would be severely punished. If she refuses to comply with her superior, she runs the risk of being taken to the colonies where she would perish. Secrecy requires that the wife or the husband must not be informed about what the other is doing with Offred. When Offred goes secretly to the Commander's office at night, she is aware that she is taking a risk. She confesses,

> If she were to find out, for instance. He wouldn't be able to intervene, to save me; the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone. She was a malicious and vengeful woman. (202)

Thus, the authority exercised over this Handmaid is one that trespasses the boundaries of its legitimacy. Power that is legal and absolute is ascribed to none. Even the Commander's authority is limited. Secrecy implies that he is using his power outside the rules dictated by the regime of Gilead, which might not only cause a social conflict but also bring down the totalitarian system. Consequently, Offred is constantly kept hidden during the illegal actions in which she is compelled to take part. Her invisibility uncovers the powerplay and illegal excess that take place under the strict rules of Gilead.

When Offred is forced to obey the secret 'missions' of the Commander or his wife, she is caught in a certain system of economy of exchange or blackmail. The hand lotion and magazines that the Commander offers her are not gifts. They are objects that the Handmaid trades on. Offred says, "It's a bargaining session, things are about to be exchanged" (173). The commander manipulates her with tempting presents in order to invite her to his office without resistance whenever he wishes. In his text entitled "Given Time" the French philosopher Jacques Derrida questions the possibility of giving. He explains that a true gift cannot be based on self-interest or a reciprocal preoccupation with giving and taking. Discussing the notion of the gift, he suggests,

> For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or difference. (Derrida and Kamuf 12)

The Commander's "gifts" are not genuine because they hide behind them demands. They are also offered as rewards for Offred's compliant behavior. Thus, their essence is destroyed from the moment he asks Offred to join him in his office or kiss him. These

"gifts" depend on the Handmaid's response, which has to be resignation and obedience. Derrida claims that "the logic of a genuine gift actually requires that self and other be radically disparate, and have no obligations or claims upon each other of any kind" (qtd. in Singh 401). However, the Commander's expectations are a form of restitution of his gift. This economy of exchange is at the heart of power subversion. The objects of this implicit exchange are the means through which the Commander violates the limits of his authority and uses the docility of the Handmaid for his personal interest.

The Commander and Serena Joy are positioned differently within power. What the former has is mainly political authority. His power inside the house is limited by the presence of his wife. His ascendency outside the house is restricted by the Eyes and the guards. Yet, his political rank grants him enough power to transport Offred unseen outside the house to a night club filled with illegal Jezebels. The Commander's demands on the Handmaid's body go beyond the cold and mechanic ceremony that takes place under the surveillance of his wife. What he wants are moments of intimacy and affection. He asks Offred to kiss him as if she means it. He asks for "some approach to true love" (175). He seeks not only friendship but also a genuine sexual intercourse. He tempts her with the scrabble game, the ability to read magazines, the privilege of writing and having direct contact with words. He allows her to hydrate her skin with the hand lotion. He wants to recover the familiar and warm atmosphere of the old days, so that the Handmaid would forget the risk she is taking, the rules she is breaking and would release her body more freely to him. As a political chief he no longer cares about the chief aim of Gilead, reproduction. He seeks to fill the emotional lack he suffers from. He offers her one of his wife's old fancy dresses. The dress reveals the curves and the

skin of Offred. The Commander wishes to recover the femininity of Offred's body and the warmth of love. Offred confesses that she is not the first woman with whom the Commander does this. He has done it before with another Handmaid. He is indifferent to the oppression of the woman's body. His actions uncover his hypocritical attitude towards the female body. On the one hand, he supports the ideologies behind the red uniform. On the other hand, he fails to conform to these ideologies because he wants to satisfy his sexual hunger and fantasies. The Commander takes Offred to a hotel room in order to perpetuate the objectification of her body. He tells her "If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental" (293).

Serena Joy's power occupies solely the domestic space. She, too, uses her authority to manipulate the Handmaid's body to serve her ends. She shares with the Commander the ability to mobilize Offred wherever she wants as long as it remains inside the house. Serena's authority outside the house is merely restricted to her connection with other Wives. Yet, this female bond is not insignificant for it circulates and channels a secret subversive system. Serena Joy subverts the binary opposition which Gilead sets between man and woman. She implicitly upsets the patriarchal regime that neglects male sterility and humiliates the woman for being infertile. She uses her authority over the Handmaid in order to deconstruct the power of the Commander. Arranging secretly a meeting for the Handmaid's with Nick the Commander's driver after the failure of pregnancy, she revolts against the limitation of her authority:

> "I won't go outside with you," she whispers. Odd, to hear her whispering, as if she is one of us. Usually Wives do not lower their voices. "You go out through the door and turn right. There's another door, it's open. Go up the stairs and

> knock, he's expecting you. No one will see you. I'll sit right here." She'll wait for me then, in case there's trouble. (326)

Dialogue is Serena's strategy to establish communication with Offred. She relies on the power of language so as to gain the trust of her Handmaid. Offred says "This could be a kitchen table, it could be a date we're discussing, some girlish stratagem of ploys and flirtation" (257). Serena creates a certain continuum. She attempts to undermine the sharpness of the hierarchy existing between the two. She seeks to build a harmonious sphere where both are united and equal by their womanhood. The word becomes the carrier of this correspondence. Bakhtin argues that "every word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant" (qtd. in Morson and Emerson 129). The Wife counts on the gendered reciprocity she shares with Offred. Serena would not lead the same conversation if her listener or addressee were not a woman. She also would not find the easiness to discuss the matter with Offred if the latter hadn't been a victim of the patriarchal regime. Irigaray establishes a connection between dialogue and knowledge, especially the knowledge of identity, of the other. In front of an audience in Marseille, she recognized the blank, a certain emptiness that hangs between her and her listeners. She notes "I don't know anything because I don't know whom I have before me" (qtd. in Bauer 69). Knowledge becomes a carrier of dialogue. Serena Joy does not experience this emptiness because she knows the other and can control her relation to this other. Language is an instrument that allows her to engage in a conversation at the personal level, to exteriorize her desire while keeping her authority. In this regard, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist argue in *Mikhail Bakhtin*,

> Language invokes the political concept of freedom because language is struggle against the necessity of certain forms. Language is a unitizing noun developed for the action of what is a scattered and powerful array of social forces. Whether or not social interaction is conceived as class struggle, social forces are never conceived otherwise than as being a conflict…Bakhtin argues that language is where those struggles are engaged most comprehensively and at the same time most intimately and personally. It is in language, not in the nation-state, that social force finds its most realized expression. (220)

Serena Joy uses dialogue to implement her authority and bring the Handmaid to her side. Her discourse not only constructs power but also channels it. It plays an important role in the positioning of women within the society of Gilead. It also brings certain ascendency over the silent Handmaid. Serena imposes truth through discourse which in its turn influences Offred. It enables her to resist the Gileadian regime. Thus the Handmaid's behavior becomes an embodied outcome of the wife's discourse. Foucault emancipates discourse from the restricted concept of speech-writing. Drawing on the words of Foucault, Stuart Hall defines discourse:

> A group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment… Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But…since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect. (44)

Discourse cannot be summed up merely in its linguistic aspect for it involves as well the practice which language induces in subjects. Discourse constructs both knowledge and truth. It operates as the vehicle through which these concepts are practiced within the social body. It allows the transition of language from ideas to performance. Discourse decides what is admissible and what is prohibited. It limits one's behavior and governs the social practices in society. It generates the world in which we live. Foucault argues that discourse operates on the meaning of the topic talked about and at another level

"influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others" (Wetherell and Yates 72). In the novel, Offred's actions would not have taken place without her conversation with Serena. Therefore, the Handmaid's subversive comportment acquires meaning in relation to Serena's discourse. In other words, it is discourse that produces meaning and assigns it to the action. Serena Joy's discourse also unfolds her identity. It reveals much about women's subordination and the ability to overcome it. It includes as well the implied relationship between both women, one that hangs between agreement and fear. Furthermore, it suggests that resistance cannot be confined in words and that it needs a doer to take it to the level of action. The Handmaid is the only one that can perform resistance. The limited authority allocated to Serena makes of her an individual who is likely to be believed when speaking to inferior individuals such as Handmaids. In its turn, the wife's discourse gives her more power when she speaks about certain subjects that the Handmaids might ignore. Serena knows that her husband is sterile whereas Offred's limited encounter with the Commander cannot provide her with this information.

Foucault's concept of power/knowledge helps to understand Serena Joy's strategy to convince Offred of having sex with Nick. Foucault integrates power and knowledge in an indestructible entity where neither element exists independent of the other. On the one hand, the production of knowledge perpetually needs power. On the other hand, it is inconceivable for knowledge not to generate power and not for the latter to be exercised without the former. Possessing knowledge is having the ability to pass a statement to the "other" the receiver as "the truth", regardless of whether it conforms to the ideal notion of knowledge. The agents of power may alter that statement or

appropriate it to serve their disciplinary aims. They often have to turn to this knowledge in order to exercise power. The agents of discipline also contribute to the establishment of a certain "truth" as long as it serves their ends. Thus, the production of knowledge and the exertion of power mutually nourish each other. Power not only brings forward or distorts knowledge but also "grows through its circulation" (Racevskis 71). Power and knowledge are constantly aligned together. They entertain an inevitable reciprocal relation. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues,

> Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations. (94)

Serena Joy breaks the Gileadian rules of reproduction for the Handmaid does not have the right to have sexual intercourse with anyone other than the Wife's husband. Serena knows that her husband is sterile. She communicates this knowledge to Offred ""May be he can't," she says" (256). She is aware that men too can be infertile in Gilead. Serena passes this statement to Offred as "the truth" in a form of recurrence ""Maybe,"[…] "Maybe you should try it another way.""(256). She appropriates this knowledge to subvert the existence of the "other," her husband. Offred is not the only Handmaid who is about to try with another man. Serena confesses that many other Wives help their Handmaids getting impregnated by other men. The confession of this knowledge acquires power as it allows for a female bond to emerge. The wife contributes with the ideology and the Handmaid with the performance in order to subvert the patriarchal regime. By confessing that her husband "may" be sterile, Serena

voices her rebellion against the sexist rules of Gilead. By the use of this knowledge, she articulates her vengeance.

Serena Joy uses her power over the Handmaid through the economy of exchange as well. Her husband seeks another approach to love, whereas she pursues a tangible outcome. She wants a compensation for her empty ovaries, a fulfillment of her motherhood. First, she employs an emotional bargain, the temporal reminder to scare Offred "Your time is running out" (256). She knows that the Handmaids are accorded a specific period of time to be pregnant. If they fail to make it in this period they would be sent to the colonies. She also knows that Handmaids prefer keeping their status as Handmaids than be sent to the colonies. The reminder serves as a weapon that attempts to weaken Offred and abate her resistance. It alludes to the choice between obedience and the colonies, risk for safety. Then, Serena introduces the material bargain. She tells Offred ""Maybe I could get something for you" […] "Something you want"" (258). She trades Offred's compliant behavior for a picture of her daughter, using the vulnerability of a mother. She knows how eager Offred would be to know that her daughter is still alive and see how she has become. Serena wants desperately to have a baby. Offred's body becomes the object of her desire because it alone can deliver what she needs. She breaks the religious rules of Gilead in order to control that body and discipline it anew according to her lack and that of her husband.

The excess and subversion of power creates a sense of irony in the novel. The Commander and his wife have different demands on the body of their Handmaid. They express them differently and secretly. The struggle over the Handmaid's body ironically undermines the power of those who are highly ranked and turn them into fools. Power-

play takes the form of a certain game or a tragic comedy in which everyone is dissatisfied and wants to be a winner. Irony resides not only in the anarchic powerplay but also in the debasement of those who are in power. Bakhtin's theory of the carnival and the carnivalesque explains the mockery that lies in the "decrowning" of the mighty and the powerful. Bakhtin traces the carnival culture that characterized much of the literary works during the Renaissance which constitutes a time of revival and metamorphosis. In *Rabelais and His World*, the Russian Formalist explores the prose of the French writer François Rabelais. He discards the vulgarity long associated with the works of the latter. He maintains that these works constitute a rich terrain for the study of folk culture. For Bakhtin, the writing of Rabelais, mainly *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, allow for the examination of the Renaisssance carnival. Bakhtin exposes how literature portrays and embodies features of the medieval festival that used to be celebrated in popular culture. The carnivalesque is exhibited through various modes of representation. Bakhtin argues that it is embedded in abusive language or a comic structuring or arrangement of narration. It also takes the form of imagery and spectacle. He insists that a deep distinction has to be established between the carnival in its original past form and the modern one. He argues that Rabelais' works successfully document and enact the genuine and old carnival in its excess and ardent demands. The carnival celebrates festival laughter and allows change and renewal to all that is absolute and eternal. It is a "temporary transfer to the utopian world" (Bakhtin 276). Bakhtin writes,

> As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of the time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. (qtd. in Hohne and Wussow 106)

Bakthin links this liberation to the aspect of time. Carnival offers an escape from the restraints of history and opens a space where the restricted ideologies of the time can be negotiated and subverted. It seeks to denigrate dogmas, reverse hierarchies and de-privileges authoritarian figures through satire. The world "flips upside down" as kings are turned into beggars. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque is an attempt to "invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (Makaryk 88). Kings are debased and the lower bodily strata enjoy a symbolic "refertalization" (Morson and Emerson 443). The latter are allowed to reconstruct the ideologies that exclude them. Yet, carnival aims not only at bringing the mighty down to earth, but also at uniting "everyone on the same earthy, bodily, social plane" (Bell 159).

The ways with which the Commander's use of power affects the status of his wife and vice-versa, correspond with some of the aspects of the carnivalesque. In *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, Clair Willis draws an analogy between Bakhtin's carnival, hysteria, and women's texts "in their capacity to disrupt and remake official public norms" (Hirschkop and Shepherd 85). She argues that "women may have a different relationship to carnival, since, as Clément argues, they are both placed together in the zone of the anomalous" (Hirschkop and Shepherd 93). Wills also describes the bourgeois woman as an hysteric whose body is closed. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Serena's anomaly lies in her sterility. Her ovaries are barren. Her body is not subject to penetration. It is sexually as well as emotionally closed since it is not engaged in a sexual or emotional reciprocity. The Wife remains only watchful while the Commander has a sexual intercourse with the Handmaid. The Commander's secret relationship with

Offred is also similar to the male Bourgeois fantasies about the servant girl. Willis writes,

> There is also an equation between the servant girl and the bourgeois woman. All these women are 'on the market' and any one can be substituted for any other. […] Hélène Cixous notes the importance of realising kinship with the other in the circuit of exchange where the 'servant girl is the repressed of the boss's wife' (p.150). It maybe that in order for public protest to be made, the bourgeois woman must realize that she is the same as the maid, for in the masculine economy the hysteric and the prostitute were always the same. (qtd. in Hirschkop and Shepherd 95)

The Commander desires the body of the Handmaid, not that of his wife. For him, the servant girl embodied in Offred joins together "the family" and "the world outside" or the "extra-familial" (Hirschkop and Shepherd 94). The desire to seduce the Handmaid is illustrated by the various visits. It is also reflected in their evening out at the hotel. The Commander casts down the "prestige" of his wife. He casts down her pride by offering Offred a sexual ascendancy over her. The Handmaid becomes a sexual as well as a kind of romantic substitution of Serena Joy. The Commander subverts the binary opposition existing between the Wife and the Handmaid. The lower bodily strata become as powerful as the authoritarian figure. Offred says "I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it" (202).

Serena Joy in her turn "decrowns" the Commander. He becomes the sterile man that needs to be substituted with another. The privilege of man as being a flawless superior human being accorded by the regime of Gilead is deconstructed by Serena's pact with Offred. The master's imperfection and frailty are exposed. Serena's accusation not only suppresses the unblemished status of the man but also dismisses the patriarchal regime that nourishes his supremacy. There is no need to test her husband's

fertility for she *knows* that like her, he is sterile. She brings down man to the same stratum of woman, thus establishing certain equality between both sexes. By having Offred try with Nick deconstructs the power that marginalizes and excludes her otherness. In her conversation with Offred, the Commander is no longer the mighty political figure. He is rendered a weak and barren man who is no longer capable of achieving the values he preaches. He becomes a defective object that has to be put aside.

Bakhtin draws a close connection between the carnival and the body. He introduces the notion of the grotesque body in opposition to the classical body. The grotesque dismisses all that is harmonious and cultured. It emphasizes the comic and repellent aspects of the human body such as spitting, farting, and drinking. Arguing that the body has to be engaged into new experiences, he explains that corporeality has to go beyond the traits of nobility and elegance. Disembodiment and discord become a means of rebellion against the canons of the humanist and hierarchal systems. The carnivalesque body is constantly recreated and pictured through its indecency and excess. Bakhtin celebrates this transition and idealizes the parodistic version of the medieval representation. The clownish and obscene body is a form of triumph over the static humanist body, which engenders repression through its closed boundaries. The grotesque is expressed in its

> heterogeneity, masking, protuberant distension, disproportion, exorbitancy,… a focus upon gaps, orifices and symbolic filth… physical needs and pleasures of the lower bodily stratum, materiality and parody. (Hohne and Wussow 99)

Offred depicts the bodily functions of Serena Joy as grotesque. The wife's hands are described as both failing and ugly. "Definitely her hands are getting worse" (256).

The subversive description aims at debasing the noble body of the Wife. The body of Serena fits into the satirical aspect of the carnivalesque rather than Bakhtin's idealization of the grotesque body that is "free, unconfined and constantly overcoming limits" (Clark and Holquist 303). Serena is no longer the prestigious figure of an authoritarian woman. She is not the eternal star of television. She is a body that comes soon to its expiration. Throughout her conversation with Offred, Serena is depicted as weak and monstrous. "Maybe," she says, holding the cigarette, which she has failed to light" (256). Her body is "damaged, defective". Her voice is repulsive and her look is hideous. "Well," she says, with firmness; no, more than that, a clenched look, like a purse snapping shut" (257). Satirizing the body becomes the Handmaid's means to subvert Serena's power and emphasize the ambivalence of her caracter, a body that hangs between life and death. Offred unveils the deficiency that lies behind the idealized and beautiful face of the singer. The destructive satire aims at removing the body from the certainty of canons and immersing it into uncertainty. This uncertainty in its turn shakes the authority of Serena and predicts its end.

Bakhtin argues that the goal of the carnival "is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better" (qtd. in Hohne and Wussow 36). By debasing the mighty and celebrating the folks, it seeks to create a society or a word where everyone is equal. It pursues as well the ideal of fertilization. The repressive canons are deconstructed in order to build ideologies that defy the absolute and the finalized. The carnival celebrates the death of closed and absolute systems and idealizes the openness and rebirth of unbound representation. The carnivalesque signals a rupture with the past and the birth of a present where common

people recover their rights of freedom. It enables them to dismiss the overbearing political regime and live without social hierarchy. Bakhtin sees the carnivalesque as a "temporary transfer to the utopian world" (Bakhtin 276), which entails that the past represents a portrait of a dystopian society since all the elements that come to represent utopia are reversed. It is in the satirical perversion of power that the lower bodily strata break free from their dystopian past and construct the world in which they would like to live. The carnival delivers them from the severe social division.

Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque reveals much about the dystopic aspect of the novel. The question is whether or not the elements of the carnivalesque featured by the constant powerplay in *The Handmaid's Tale* enable the passage from dystopia to utopia. For utopia to be reached, the body of the Handmaid needs to cease being the object of struggle. Utopia also demands liberation from the patriarchal. The carnivalesque powerplay in the novel does not reflect the ideal of Bakhtin, for power subversion only enhances the objectification of the Handmaid's body. The deconstruction of the authority of both the Commander and his wife is merely exercised to achieve personal ends. The "conspiratorial" actions in which Offred takes part do not liberate her from the patriarchal rules of Gilead. She becomes a means that perpetuates this oppressive system. The Handmaid is not engaged actively in the overthrow of the Gileadian religious dogmas. She is made to accept choices that allow her to survive or live better. Thus, she cannot launch the rebirth of a world that would free the enslaved Handmaids nor improve the demonic world in which she lives. Her body is further exploited and manipulated. Offred is essentially the object of the game, the battlefield where exterior warring forces erupt. She is the "servant" girl of the Commander and the

vessel of Serena Joy. The carnivalesque powerplay sows anarchy, the goal of which denies the eradication of the monolithic male rule. The hierarchy is further amplified and women are still confined in the duty of reproduction. The disorder that this powerplay engenders does not reverse the political or the ideological structure of Gilead.

The excess and subversive interplay of power in the novel is ironic in the sense that it does not only bring the authoritarian characters down to earth but also recognizes the oppressive patriarchal regime of Gilead as futile and discordant. The carnivalesque powerplay suggests that the Gileadian system exists only to be constantly violated and resisted by the figures that defend its establishment. Through the treacherous actions in which these figures take part, the system reveals itself to be invalid. None of the characters in the novel derives satisfaction from the monolithic and sexist ideology. The Commander seeks to fill the emotional lack that his wife's frigidity creates. He is aware that having Offred in his office and taking her out during one evening is illegal. He wants to experience an "approach to true love", one that Gilead banishes. Thus, he realizes that his country does not offer him emotional wellbeing. Since Serena Joy is contaminated by the rigid religious rules, she cannot entertain a genuine relationship with her husband. Express one's love is against Gilead's sole aim which is reproduction. Thus, affection is rendered futile. The Commander finds in the subversive character of Offred the warm companion that can bring him what Gilead annihilates. Serena Joy occupies a liminal position, that of a wife at the threshold, oscillating between her loyalty to indoctrination and resistance to the patriarchal rule. Offred feels the hatred emanating from Serena. She knows that the latter loathes the presence of the Handmaid.

The wife feels that her space is being invaded by a stranger woman with which her husband is having sex under her eyes. "[...] She hated me too and resented my presence" (201). The Handmaid reinforces the feeling of lack and emptiness in the Wife. She creates a feeling of envy. Serena has to accept Offred because of Gilead's laws and also because she wants desperately a baby. However, these reasons cannot subsume her unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The Handmaid, in her turn, is the central victim of Gilead's tyranny. She refuses to be the sexual object of man and the object of envy and despise of the Wife. The patriarchal regime strips her of her humanity and enslaves her. According to the frustration that the religious regime breeds in this triad, the very laws that constitute Gilead lead the characters of all social ranks to subvert them.

Foucault argues that resistance is inherent to power. He writes "wherever there is power there is resistance" (Hekman 161). Resistance is a discourse that takes place within the site of power. It alters the organization of power relations, where the peripheral subject voices a discourse in response to the hegemonic discourse he/she are subject to. Power is produced at the very moment of resistance which is itself induced by power:

> There are no relations of power without resistances, and these resistances are formed precisely where power is being exercised…it emerges from the site power is applied, the body, sexuality and so on. Resistance occupies the same geography as power and emerges at multiple local and individual levels that can be integrated with global strategies. (Barker 78)

Therefore, the body is not only the target of power but also the surface at which these mechanisms can be undermined and rejected. Rules and norms are inscribed on the body. It is also through the latter that resistance emanates. Although Foucault does not elaborate much on the notion of resistance, his works lead one to think that the body is

not neutral or passive. It does not exist merely to internalize power. It can also be a source of power or a means to produce it. It is not only the repository of all forms of normalization but also a weapon, a platform upon which counter-discourses operate.

The Handmaid plays an important role in revealing the irony that lies in the discordant regime of Gilead. Her indoctrination is exercised to provide a cure to the excessive sterility of the former United States of America. However this indoctrination is the catalyst of Gilead's system disorder. Handmaids are supposed to be docile objects that would accomplish their functions and save the future of the nation. Yet, Gilead is oblivious to the repercussions which its repressive rules would generate. The red servants might be passive. But, their position within society and the mode according to which they are integrated are problematic. The social forces that arise from Offred's 'implantation' in the house of the Commander are constantly engaged in struggle to use the Handmaid according to intentions that often exceed those of Gilead. Thus, the Handmaid is no longer the symbol of alleviation but rather a source of anarchy and subversion. Since Offred is assigned to serve the Commander and his wife, the social rules within the family are upset and corrupted. The Handmaid's body becomes an object that has to be possessed and manipulated regardless of its original duty. The chaos that it brings reinforces the idea that the Handmaid's body cannot be a neutral element. It interacts within the environment in which it exists and reciprocally gets trained by the forces in which it is plunged. Therefore Offred's body cannot be isolated from these warring forces in order to achieve the sole goal programmed for her. It also generates desire and envy, which in their turn attempt to swerve her from the severe trajectory she has to follow. Her body gets mediated by the other bodies that surround

her. The Eyes cannot exercise their surveillance inside the house. However, it is in such a bounded space that resistance sparks.

Power is allocated to certain women in order to maintain the social hierarchy. They become accomplices in the degradation of their situation. Thus power is not held only by male characters. Serena Joy uses her status in order to have enough control over Offred's body. The Commander as well, as a high political figure employs his authority to take advantage of his handmaid. Thus power is not static for it circulates between male and female characters throughout the novel. Offred's body becomes a shared territory over which the Commander and Serena permanently subvert each other's power. Each of them wants this body for his own interests. The constant power play in the novel does not emancipate the Handmaid from the subjugation exerted on her, for she does not take part in the overturning of power. She remains exterior to her own body and obedient to what is asked from her. The utopian resistance inherent in the carnivalesque cannot be applied to power reversal in the novel since Offred is not the agent of resistance. Her body remains dystopic as long as it is perceived as the object that needs to be conquered. However the Gileadian regime, in its fervent obsession with the female body, is not conscious that it is constructing a weapon which deconstructs the very rules it builds. The Handmaid's body being the object of perpetual power subversion becomes ironically the object for which other characters violate the strict canons of Gilead.

Afterthoughts

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the dystopic body in the novel. I explored the possibility and the limits of utopia. This study demonstrates that the concept of a utopian body can never be implemented in real life because the body is always mediated by cultural constructions that hinder the existence of freedom and justice. Dystopia is rather based on temporal regression, in other words, a sudden return to a traumatizing condition lived by women in the past which was once improved after long years of activism. “The Dystopic Body” examined the ways in which the patriarchal and sexist society of Gilead subjugates women through their bodies and how these bodies come to bear dystopia. Dystopia affects the Handmaid’s body at different levels. The second chapter analyzed the impacts of the monolithic and misogynist regime on female sexuality. I studied the ways in which compulsory production to which Handmaids are subjects creates certain division and classification among women themselves and how this hierarchy undermines their worthiness. I also examined the strategies used by Gilead such as constant surveillance the goal of which is to discipline the Handmaids’ bodies. Foucault’s Panopticon metaphor was chosen for the theoretical framework because his perception can be adapted successfully to the study of the oppression exerted on women in a totalitarian society. I analyzed dress code as a sexist strategy that Gilead uses in order to efface and the female body and to present it as a sinful object.

The final chapter demonstrates that patriarchy does not imply that power is possessed only by men in the novel. In fact, power circulates constantly between male and female characters. This movement is best represented through the exchange of power between the Commander and his wife Serena. However, the function of power does not undermine the dystopic aspect of the novel since the Handmaid’s body is the

object that needs to be subdued and exploited. Therefore, power circulation is ironic because the Handmaid is excluded from it. Foucault's concept of power relations and Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque provided a theoretical support that allowed me to examine the ways in which Offred is subject to this power exchange and to unveil the irony that lies behind power subversion. The concept of the carnivalesque helped me to interpret the Handmaid's body as an element that reinforces dystopia in the novel since it remains silent and does not resist the oppressive practices of the Commander and his wife. Through Bakhtin's theory, I could depict the Gileadian regime as dysfunctional, for the fertile female body which is perceived as the solution for Gilead's widespread sterility becomes the element that creates chaos within society.

The dystopic body is a concept that investigates the traumatizing corporeal experience of women in a given society. When sterility is used as a reason for the rejection and oppression of women, the worthiness of these subjects becomes restricted to their reproductive capacity. The dystopian aspect in *The Handmaid's Tale* lies mainly in the obsession with the female body and the need to control it. A utopian vision of the body requires the obliteration of the demands made on woman's body. However, before elaborating the elements that would constitute a female utopian body, it is necessary to determine the real causes of women's subordination in the present-day society in order to come up with the appropriate solutions. When Firestone claims that a feminist utopia lacks "visionary thinking", she might imply that the step that is concerned with delimiting the reasons for the subjugation of women has not yet been successfully accomplished. Gayle Rubin's article entitled "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" presents a rich field for understanding the dystopic body

and the discrimination exerted on women from a different angle. Based on perspectives of anthropology and psychoanalysis, she analyzes why women are unable to have control of their bodies and determines how this subjugation is culturally rooted in every society. The definition of "sex/gender system" is at the core of Rubin's study. She attempts to explain this term by looking at the structures and social mechanisms that allow for the oppression of women. She argues, "sex/gender system is a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity" (qtd. in Nicholson 28). First, she argues that Marxism, to a certain extent, addresses women's exploitation but fails to provide the reasons for and the locus of women's subordination. The concepts of reproduction of labor and capitalism do not represent the issue of sex even though capitalism is dominated by men and women are means that reinforce this institution.

Subsequently, Rubin looks at Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structure of Kinship* which offers a detailed explanation of how women are discriminated. His work examines the role of kinship in producing culturally 'canonized' sexuality. The gift and incest taboo are the major concepts that best represent social inequality between men and women. According to Lévi-Strauss, marriage is a means that insures the domestication of women. It is based on the notion of exchange. Women are perceived as gifts, traded between families. Thus, they do not have the chance to control their destiny. He argues that the taboo of incest allows men to use women as a "commodity" in order to establish social relations outside of the family and to benefit from the alliances they create. However, Rubin declines this argument because it fails to explain the biological oppression of women. She claims that kinship is not concerned with the exchange of

only women for it also encompasses the 'trade' of children, the exchange of power within families and generations, rights, etc. She further explains that the subjugation of women is rather the product of social organization, not the origin that generates it. Rubin perceives kinship relations as the factor that renders gender an outcome of social distinctions between sexes. Marriage implements sexual conventions and enforces heterosexuality. It creates certain division between men and women and an opposition between male and female sexes that can be redeemed only by marriage. Rubin draws an analogy between imposed heterosexuality and the oppression of women since marriage is at the heart of gender coercion and the inequality between sexes. Compulsory heterosexuality and the circulation of women under the status of 'gifts' are culturally inscribed into the genitals since infancy. The phallus is seen as active and dominant, and the vagina as passive and subordinated. This is where Rubin turns to the psychoanalytic theories of Freud in order to examine the ways in which gender inequality is internalized by individuals. She considers the oedipal complex with its implied ideas of anatomical distinction as a key factor that leads to biological hierarchy. The understanding of these theories generally tend to attribute superiority to boys because of the visibility of the phallus, whereas girls are made to feel inferior because they recognize their anatomical lack and their inability to satisfy the mother. Thus, the girl internalizes envy and a passivity that her castration engenders. The oppression exerted on her is a reaction to the cultural conventions that are built on biological determinism.

Rubin argues that the identity formation of individuals should not be founded on anatomical distinctions or the cultural understanding of sexuality. A remedy to women's oppression lies in the overthrow of the conventional notions that put men and women in

different social spheres and unequal statuses. She claims that feminism should reconsider sex/gender system and fight against compulsory sexual roles. The abolition of gender hierarchy requires justice regarding the social meaning of sexes and a break away from kinship structures with their associated social values. If *The Handmaid's Tale* is a call for a feminist revolt against the current discrimination of women and an implicit appeal to change, then Gayle Rubin's ideas can be applied successfully in order to understand the social situation of women and the cultural mechanisms that allow for female oppression. The novel offers a flagrant illustration of kinship relations taken to the extreme. In fact, Handmaids are used as gifts which are offered to 'superior' male figures. They are indoctrinated to be docile, and made to live as servants to the patriarchal system of Gilead just as girls in real societies unconsciously internalize their social inferiority. Rubin provides an interesting perspective through which I could understand how the dystopic body is deeply built in cultures. *The Handmaid's Tale* and Rubin's article can be considered as complementary texts. Atwood exposes what would happen if women accept their inferior position in society and do not resist patriarchal regimes. She pictures the extent to which women would be oppressed if they ignore the sexual roles imposed on them. Rubin analyzes the 'subterranean' reasons behind the subordination of women and reveals the cultural constructs and the social conventions that make of woman the victim of male domination, in order to provide answers to how this dystopia can be avoided. In delimiting the roots of the problem, feminists would be able to rehabilitate the situation of women in any given society.

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