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Discourse and Oppression in Margaret Atwood's
The Handmaid's Tale

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a thought provoking novel about the domination and governing of women by men. It presents a dystopia where freedom for women is restricted because of the new Christian government's extreme policies. This new society, The Republic of Gilead, is described by a woman called Offred. She is a so-called Handmaid, a kind of breeding tool for the republic. The ideology and ideas of this Christian government are presented to us through Offred's first-person narrative. Flashbacks also provide a picture of the society "before" Gilead.

Gilead is described by Offred in a diversified way. She depicts Gilead within the framework of the discourse but she also describes it in a critical way with ironic undertones. Furthermore, in her flashbacks, she depicts the society "before" the revolution, before the creation of Gilead, which is important if one is to understand why Gilead exists. An essential part of the display of these two different societies is the way in which Offred highlights gender inequalities and power structures. This is most evident in Offred's description of Gilead and more subtle in the description of the society "before". Although Offred seemingly describes the latter as better, the type of language she uses when describing her former life indicates that is not necessarily the case.

The claim of this essay is that language, "truth" and actions, within the frame of discourse, are used as means of oppressing women in both Gilead and the society "before". My aim is to show this by applying theories of discourse and language together with feminist theory on the *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The essay will proceed with theories of discourse by Michel Foucault, in order to conclude how power, in the form of oppression, works and how the terms language, "truth" and action are used to make that possible in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Then, in chapters three through six I will show in what ways the Gilead regime goes about controlling women and

how Offred's flashbacks reveal the underlying values of the society "before". In addition, in chapter seven, I will show how they try to justify their drastic measures to women, and then finally, in chapter eight, I will reveal the disturbing consequences of Gilead discourse.

Gilead Discourse

The regime in Gilead uses two main devices to control women. Firstly, they use a certain type of language to maintain the oppression of women. Secondly, they use actions or violence, which represent a more direct and harsh type of oppression. By combining these two the regime maintains its control of women in Gilead. In order to discuss the intrinsic link between language and oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this essay will make use of Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse. It will, in this essay, refer to certain rules of what the "truth" is. According to Foucault, interpretations, opinions, actions and statements must be within the field of what the fundamental "truth" of the values of that discourse is. "Each society has its regime of truth. Its 'general politics' of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanism and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements" (*Essential* 131). Hence, what this means in Gilead is that certain statements, for example that women should not be allowed to dress the way they like lies within this "truth". It would not be a "false" statement. In the society "before", making such a statement would be to challenge the official equality between men and women and would not be within the "truth" of the generally accepted discourse. However, there is a problem. Even unspoken or unofficial "truths" are part of discourse, which means that while a statement like the one above would be violating the official discourse of the society "before", it has its roots in that very society.

The reason for this is that no discourse comes out of itself, but "All Manifest Discourse is based on 'already said' " (*Archaeology* 25). It is supposed that everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in a semi-silence that precedes it. "This 'not-said' is a

hollow that undermines from within all that is said” (*Archaeology* 25). Subsequently, the society “before” was not free from the ideas and values displayed in Gilead, but they were incubated in the discourse. This is the reason why it would be problematic to view Offred’s story as if it describes the “good” society “before” and the “evil” Gilead that followed. It would not be possible to claim that she describes them with entirely different values and “truths”.

The values of Gilead are grounded in the society “before”. As a result, the discourse of Gilead has already been constructed before it appeared but at the same time it is something new. It has been constructed in what Foucault calls “semi-silence”. Consequently the discourse of Gilead will contain features of the society “before” and vice versa and the interpretation of Offred’s narrative is therefore quite problematic. Offred’s story is dependent on the framework of Gilead discourse, but at the same time her narrative contains remnants of the society “before”. She moves between these two discourses. In other words, what she tells in her story depends both on the “truths” of Gilead and the society “before”.

Furthermore, the boundaries of how language may be used are based on the discourse of the new regime in Gilead. At a lower level words and terms used are dependent on the “truth” and rules of the discourse. Thus, certain rhetoric will be preferred because it lies within the “truth” of that discourse. This is what this essay will refer to as language.

In the world of the novel discourse oppresses women, hence the important relationship with feminism. In her work *Feminism*, Judith Harlan discusses some points that basically all feminists agree upon. She says that feminists seek access to education, economics and politics, and that they furthermore seek a change in control over reproduction, sexuality, violence and society (79). Obviously, these are pretty general points and how this is supposed to be achieved is where the different schools of feminism disagree. Yet, the important thing for this essay is that all these different aspects of human life are controlled mainly by men,

that they mainly work to be beneficial for men and that men use language, truth and action as means of maintaining the control all feminists strive to acquire. This, as will be shown, is very prominent in Gilead.

Offred in Gilead Discourse

The first-person, female, narrative perspective in *The Handmaid's Tale* is essential to the feminist message of the novel and Offred's account of her life in Gilead and "before" is fascinating in its own right. As Karen F. Stein explains in her essay "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia": "Feminists are particularly interested in stories, because as a marginal group of society, women have often been the objects rather than the creators of narrative: their stories have often been untold. People on the margins of societies often find they are denied access to the discourses that confer power and status" (269). As Stein points out, this is Offred's narrative. However, it is not free from male interference. What is important for this essay is the way in which Offred tells her story. Despite the fact that she tells it in retrospect it is not one that takes on a solely critical standpoint, far from it. The language she uses is to a great extent the one practiced and accepted in Gilead. It is a language that is male dominated and Offred can be seen to exist within a male discourse, which limits her position in the society of Gilead. Hence, Offred's narrative is, although written in a place outside Gilead's discursive reach, not free from the frames of what Gilead discourse allows her to think.

Although Offred evidently produces her story, reading and writing are banned for most people as a result of the regime's attempt to control and repress opposition, but that the ability to use language is important to Offred, can be seen the first time she is invited to the Commander's private chambers. The Commander is a high-rank member of the regime and also the boss of the household she has been assigned to. He wants her, for example, to play board games with him. "We play two games. *Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold

the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it” (149). She uses the word freedom, as if to say that for an instance she is uncontrolled. In other words, for the moment, she controls language, language does not control her.

However, the fact is that Offred is not really in control of language. At the moment, she might be able to construct some self chosen sentences in a game, but her story cannot be expressed entirely outside the frames of Gilead discourse.

Offred also mediates worries about the male control of the display of women in one of her flashbacks: “I remember walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had then with harems [...] [s]tudies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who’d never been there” (79). This is one of several of Offred’s flashbacks where she rethinks her former ignorant and perhaps naïve image of the society “before” as something good. It shows that she has realized that the way she lived her life contributed to the creation of Gilead, since she allowed herself not to question the way women were displayed, adjusting to that image in order to gain personal success, something that would probably not have been possible if she had questioned the official “truth” of women. Shirley Neuman also discusses this in her article “ ‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*”. “Her commentary is often ironic, often analytic, often critical of herself and her peers in ‘the time before’. It also shows her as having gained political awareness and as reassessing her earlier more individualist positions” (861). Although Offred has reached some form of “awareness” of the state of things, which Neuman obviously sees as an important process for Offred, she is not strong enough to act on that in any form of resistance. I will return to her lack of action later on. Nevertheless, Offred has realized that Foucault’s “truth”, which in this case would be the “truth” about women, is controlled and determined by men.

Offred's technique of revealing the patriarchal male discourse is by describing Gilead using the language and "truth" of the new regime. The issue at hand here is whether this "truth" is portrayed from a solely critical standpoint. I would argue that Offred is aware of a different "truth" but presents it in a way that creates a hesitancy of whether she has been "affected" by the Gilead "truth". In other words, it is unclear whether Gilead discourse has led her to view its values as somewhat acceptable. An example of this is when she is at the doctor's to test her fertility since her function as a Handmaid is merely to conceive a child. The doctor offers to impregnate her himself as her commander might be sterile. This is forbidden but the risk of getting caught is minimal. Despite this she hesitates:

'I could help you', he says. Whispers. 'What?' I say [...] 'I could help you. I've helped others' [...] '[t]he door is locked. No one will come in. They'll never know it isn't his.' [...] 'Most of the old guys can't make it any more [...] or they're sterile.' I almost gasp: he said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. 'It's too dangerous,' I say. 'No I can't.' The penalty is death. I put on my clothes again behind the screen. My hands are shaking. Why am I frightened? I've crossed no boundaries, I've given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation. (70-71)

It is not likely that fear alone would affect Offred since if she does not get pregnant in three attempts with her commander she will be declared an 'unwoman' and sent to the Colonies. She shows no sign of hesitation based on the actual sexual act with the doctor. It would hardly be any different (or more disgusting) for Offred than the sexual act with the Commander. Thus, it is reasonable to say that it is actually the values of Gilead, or patriarchal discourse, which has intruded on Offred's way of thinking. This aspect has been described by Hilde Staels as "the discursive law of the theocracy". She distinguishes this from Offred's "personal, aesthetic discourse with which she counters the authoritarian speech of Gilead" (456). Subsequently, despite the fact that the theocratic values have affected her, she also acts out of the "truth" of another discourse. As a result, she does not report the doctor for his

sexual suggestion, something that a woman who knew no other values might have done. She might not have any real belief in the theocratic values, but they affect her life and actions none the less.

Sometimes she is aware that she acts according to the Gilead discourse, like when she goes to the store with Ofglen and they encounter some Japanese tourists.

Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before. I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. (38)

What used to be Offred's way of dressing in the time "before" has now become something that is not done. She thinks it is wrong to dress in that manner and to wear makeup. She cannot help herself having that opinion. The discourse of Gilead is too powerful. However, she is aware of it and she knows that she actually does not want to think like that, yet it is unavoidable.

Furthermore, what is equally interesting is an issue that lies within the area of discourse, namely: knowledge. The one who is in control of knowledge is in control of power and subsequently controls what can be said and claimed. This is power and Foucault concludes that "[t]here are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to" (*Essential* 331). Hence, the "subjects to", or women like Offred, are not allowed to read in order to keep them from gaining knowledge. The televised broadcasting she is allowed to watch is state-controlled and broadcasts only government-friendly content and at the same time it does not reveal any negative news of the wars the republic is involved in and it does not show any news of an organized resistance, which is what Offred is most eager to know about. About the news she

says: “who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none” (92). At the same time she has to fight against a part of her that wants to give in to the “truth” of the regime. She describes the propaganda-elocutionist: “He tells us what we long to believe. He’s very convincing. I struggle against him. He’s like an old movie star, I tell myself, with false teeth and a face job. At the same time I stay towards him, like one hypnotized. If only it were true. If only I could believe” (93). It is obvious that Offred is struggling with two different “truths”. She knows that what they say on television is probably false, but a part of her wants to believe it. It would be easier just to give in and accept that “truth”, just like it would be easier just to let the doctor impregnate her, but she cannot do it. Yet, it would mean that she would regain control of knowledge, of power. Subsequently, Offred cannot provide the real “truth” in her story because she does not know it. Her “truth” is therefore limited to the discourse of Gilead, which shows the power of the regime.

The importance of knowledge for Offred is further suggested in one of her private encounters with the Commander.

“What would you like”? He says, still with that lightness, as if it’s a money transaction merely, and a minor one at that: candy, cigarettes. “Besides hand lotion, you mean” I say. “Besides hand lotion,” he agrees. “I would like [...]” I say. “I would like to know.” It sounds indecisive, stupid even. I say it without thinking. “Know what?” he says. “Whatever there is to know” I say. (198)

At first, Offred wants material things, but as their encounters continue that changes and she realizes that what she really wants is knowledge. It is not knowing the real “truth” that is worst for her. Keeping people in ignorance is an important device for the regime, since one cannot exert any resistance without knowledge of an alternative. Resistance is based on a “cause”, which, in its own right, is based on an understood “truth”. The regime hinders Offred from distinguishing the alternative, hence, keeping her within their discourse.

The Women of Gilead

Offred is, in some respect, a rather weak person. There are several examples of other women in the novel who have not been nearly as affected by the “truth” of Gilead as Offred. They are active and determined not to live by the rules of the Gilead discourse. Offred’s mother was involved in the feminist movement in the society “before”, burning pornographic material and marching in support of women’s right to abortion. She was frustrated about Offred’s lack of interest in the women’s movement and her habit of taking her rights for granted. “You young people don’t appreciate things, she’d say. You don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are” (131). Offred’s mother fears the consequences of slacking in this area, a fear that would prove to be justified, and after the creation of Gilead she is sent to the Colonies.

Furthermore, Offred’s fellow Handmaid, Ofglen is another woman who is seemingly much braver than Offred. Ofglen is involved in the resistance and she is the one who pushes their relationship beyond what is generally accepted among Handmaids. She gives Offred information about the resistance and wants Offred to pass on information received from her Commander, which is something Offred does not dare. When Ofglen hangs herself instead of being arrested by “The Eyes” (the secret police in Gilead) Offred is relieved since Ofglen then cannot reveal anything about her. “She did it before they came. I feel great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later” (298). Offred does not express any sadness, but rather relief that she, for the moment, is safe. While other women, like Ofglen, sacrifice their lives rather than to reveal anything that might hurt the resistance, Offred is satisfied just being alive. In her essay “From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor also notes this. “She is flooded with relief when the first Ofglen kills herself, because it means that no one will learn of her own disobedience and indirect affiliations with MayDay (the resistance, own

note). Immediately afterward, she realizes that in feeling so, she has betrayed herself: “I am abject”, she says. “I feel, for the first time their true power” (Wagner-Lawlor 86). The effective Gilead discourse has made Offred “betray” her comrade Ofglen, by feeling relief rather than sadness. She becomes aware that the regime’s power has really affected her mind.

Yet another example of this is Offred’s friend from the time “before”, Moira. In the society “before”, Moira was, like Offred’s mother, an active feminist. The novel reveals instances of this in Offred’s flashbacks. “Now, said Moira. You don’t need to paint your face, it’s only me. What’s your paper on? I just did one on date rape” (47). These interjections like the one above on the subject of date rape provide the critique against the society “before” since it displays the conditions for women then. Moira also becomes a Handmaid, but she manages to escape from the Red Centre. However, she is eventually captured and put to work in a brothel. The common trait for all these three women is their failure, which Stephanie Barbé Hammer discusses in “The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”.

Significantly, the rebellious females of Offred’s world are all defeated: Ofglen commits suicide in order to protect the May Day under-42 ground; Moira’s escape attempt is thwarted and she is imprisoned in the city’s brothel; Offred’s own mother is glimpsed in a film-documentary about the dreaded toxic-waste colonies. To survive, Offred seems to suggest, one must surrender. (6)

As Hammer notes, Offred surrenders to survive. All her life she has been surrounded by women who fight and sacrifice themselves for the cause, but she has not been able to join them. As a result, she gives in to Gilead discourse in order to survive, while the women who do not surrender end up dead. Offred wants Gilead to fall, but she does not have the power to participate in making it happen. Consequently, she relies on other women, but they fail. In an important way, however, her strategy did work as she actually manages to escape and her story is saved and later rediscovered. According to the historical notes, this would have taken

place in the early years of Gilead, which would mean that Offred probably did not witness its fall.

The regime is rather successful in maintaining the rules of their discourse uncritically because of the severe punishments anyone who criticizes the regime will be subjected to. The problem for the opposition is the widespread system of reporting anyone who speaks negatively of the state. Some people are employed as ‘eyes’, so one can never know who to entrust with ones discontent. Although Gilead is a society built on male dominance there are plenty of women who help maintain that system, which is a common and effective “divide and conquer” tactic. A limited amount of power is given to a small segment of the group of people who are the aim of control, thus creating a crack in the unity of that group. Those who have been given this power will strive to retain it because of the advantages it provides but also, inevitably, in fear of retaliation; while those who are really in power, in this case the ruling males of Gilead, have created a security buffer between them and the oppressed women. Men (or a minority of the men) are the rulers, some women have limited (but no actual) power, and most women are controlled and have no power. The representatives of these women with limited power in the novel are the ‘Aunts’. They are women who are convinced that this kind of rule is justified and they help to control the other women. The ‘Aunts’ are in charge of the re-education of the women who are Handmaids. This type of tactics is described by Rhonda Hammer in *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism*, where she is especially interested in the anti-feminist movement and the women who aid it:

The most effective way to both paralyze and prevent widespread support for the feminist movement was not so much to disseminate those voices who represent the hardcore conservative and patriarchal opponents to feminism. Rather, publicizing and exploiting critiques by women was a more effective antifeminist tactic, employing members of the very disenfranchised groups the feminist platform resolved to empower. (13)

Although not specifically discussing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Hammer indirectly describes how the Gilead regime uses women to oppress women. Hence, by using women to represent anti-feminist ideas it gets that more effective, since it will be more difficult to realize that other women would want to prevent the evolvment of female rights and power, consequently convincing other women that the feminist ideas and arguments are not legitimate.

Moreover, these women help to enforce the notion that it is women who are to be blamed for the sexual violence of men. Hammer further describes a review in New York Times from 1999 where Katha Pollit discusses antifeminist Wendy Shalit's work. In *A Return to Modesty*, the 23-year-old conservative journalist, Shalit, cites her experience in fourth grade sex ed to argue that feminism and liberal sexual mores have encouraged men to degrade women. "The solution: women should stay virgins and arm themselves [...] with blushes and long skirts to inspire chivalry in men" (15). Hammer addresses an important issue of feminism here. Despite the fact that it is men who are committing sexual crimes the logic is that women should change their behavior and not the other way around. This logic is exactly what the 'Aunts' have adopted and are teaching the Handmaids. The absence of this change of attitude in the society "before", which resulted in a large quantity of attacks on women, is one of the pretexts for creating Gilead. However, I will return to this later on.

Here, I would like to turn to the issue of how the 'Aunts' work to change the minds of the Handmaids: "It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion" [...] "But who's fault was it? Aunt Helena Says, holding up one plump finger" [...] "Her, fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison" (82). As one can see from the examples above, Shalit's and the Aunts' logic is quite similar as the consequence of both of them is that the violence of men is not men's fault but women's "for leading them on". Anti-feminist reasoning thus holds that women should, for example, cover their bodies to a greater extent and restrain from sexual activity. Hence, these "opportunistic anti-feminist women" (Hammer

14) “exploit and commodify feminist issues” (Hammer 16), both for their own personal profit but inevitably for the profit of the whole anti-feminist movement. In theory, these traits described by Hammer, are quite similar to the traits of the ‘Aunts’, who gain personal profit from their kind of work, however, it will be very limited and the main consequence will be a strengthening of power for the Gilead government.

In addition, there are serious consequences for the women whom Hammer describes as “collaborators” when power is in the hands of the anti-feminist movement. Serena Joy, the wife of Offred’s Commander is, ironically, a symbol of the loss of power for women. Before the revolution she was an agitator of the values that would later be law in Gilead. Offred remembers watching her on TV. “*Time or Newsweek* it was, it must have been. She wasn’t singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home” (55). Obviously, the irony is that Serena Joy was advocating that women shouldn’t be handling public affairs, but that was exactly what she was doing. Nevertheless, Serena Joy does not seem pleased with what Gilead has become, she seems bitter. Offred notices this. “She doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (56). What is interesting is that while Serena Joy had the power of expressing herself, she used it to undermine that very power.

As Offred notices, she is not happy with the situation. Consequently, advocating such ideas was all very well in theory, but the subsequent reality was not what she had expected it to be. Her bitterness has made her lose conviction and respect of the tough laws of Gilead. This is shown when Serena suggests that Offred should try to get pregnant with someone else since the Commander might not be able to do it. “ ‘Maybe he can’t’, she says [...] ‘No,’ I say. ‘Maybe he can’t’ [...] ‘Maybe you should try it another way’ [...] ‘what other way?’ [...]”

‘Another man’, she says. ‘You know I can’t’ I say, careful not to let my irritation show. ‘It is against the law. You know the penalty’ ” (215). Firstly, Serena Joy recognizes that she does not believe in the official notion that men cannot be sterile. Rather, it seems she actually suspects that her husband in fact is, sterile. Then she suggests that Offred should commit a crime punishable by death. All this indicates a disrespect of the values of Gilead unfitting a person of conviction. Serena Joy has been transformed from a “collaborator” to a woman who seemingly regrets her choices in life which led her to lose the power of expressing her opinions.

Re-identification

To further remove traces of the discourse in the society “before”, the Handmaids are subjected to a re-identification process where their former identity is to be exchanged for a new one more befitted to the values of Gilead. One step in that process is to give them new names. “So the planners of Gilead have taken it upon themselves to change the names of the women who become Handmaids [...] As a part of the system promoted at the Red Center, each Handmaid will eventually be forced to give up her name and adopt a patronymic consisting of the preposition “of” and the first name of the commander to whom she is temporarily assigned” (Thomas 92). As a result, the protagonist of the novel is called Offred, as her Commander’s first name is Fred. The regime needs the Handmaid’s to forget their former lives and their values of that time. Their former personality and means of self-identification must be removed, and one device is to change their names. Although this example may seem inessential compared to other, more severe, measures, the male dominated language of Gilead becomes ever so clear as it shows how the regime works to limit any “power” for women, even the power of having a personality that is separated from men and thus in a way, “uncontrolled”.

The re-identification process is crucial for the survival of a totalitarian regime like Gilead. It must make sure that people who have lived in the society “before” and act not only within the frame of Gilead discourse but also another discourse and are aware of another “truth”, do not transfer their knowledge and opinions to the next generation. The regime’s tool is, as previously mentioned, the use and control of language to make their discourse the only one. Moreover, they will also use harsh violence (action) to prevent any risk of an alternative discourse gaining public access.

The next generation of Handmaids will have it easier since they will have no memory of another way of living and will be brought up with the values of the regime:

You are the transition generation, said aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. (127)

This is a very good example of how language is manipulated to cover up the negative aspects of Gilead. Indeed, it will be easier for the future Handmaids to accept their position since they have no knowledge of an alternative. However, the question of its moral legitimacy is not changed by this fact.

Truth Redefined

The subject of sterility of men in Gilead, or rather the absence of sterility, is another example of how the regime works to devalue women by claiming that the failure of producing children can only be the fault of the woman, never the man. It is her body that is broken. A Handmaid will, if unlucky, end up with a commander who is in fact sterile. However, she will be blamed for the lack of children and declared an ‘unwoman’ which is practically a death sentence. The value of women is determined by their ability to produce offspring. Everything else is secondary or even irrelevant.

Consequently, what the regime says is true will become true, no matter what the truth really is. This is not unusual in dystopian fiction. It is also used by the totalitarian regime in George Orwell's *1984* as Lois Feuer notes in her article where she compares *The Handmaid's Tale* to *1984*: "O'Brien forces Winston to acknowledge that two plus two can equal five if the Party says so [...] O'Brien's point is that truth, even the *a priori* truth of mathematics, is relative and subject to the violence-enforced will of whoever is in power." (87-88). Hence, the "mathematics" of *The Handmaid's Tale*, i.e. the science of bodily deficiency, is whatever the male dominated regime wants it to be. They have taken "truth" to a level where it may not be questioned however absurd it might seem.

Moreover, Staels points out that: "[i]n the *Handmaid's Tale* Offred retrospectively witnesses her personal victimization as a Handmaid in Gilead's theocracy. The totalitarian regime forces the inhabitants to submit to the power of one (moral) law, one true religion, one language code" (475). Staels describes how the society "before" changes into Gilead. However, as mentioned in the Foucault discussion, no discourse can be created from nothing; one cannot simply create a "truth". Even if the new "truths" might seem absurd, it must be justified in relation to the conditions of the previous "truths". In the next chapter I will show how the regime justifies their "truth".

Why Gilead?

The regime's goal is a Christian society and they take advantage of the negative aspects of the society before to justify Gilead. By the flashbacks of Offred we are told about the unsafe conditions for women in the past.

Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a Laundromat, by yourself, at night. (34)

The unspoken rules, which were discussed in the introduction, return in this passage from the novel; although assaults on women were not legal, the attitude among men in the society “before” resulted in women constantly having to worry about being assaulted and raped. The discourse contained male values about women that were degrading, and though the freedom for women is very limited in Gilead, the need of always having to take measures not to be attacked is a type of restricted freedom as well.

The Handmaids are told stories about these conditions to justify their situation. They are told that “[m]en are sex machines [...] and not much more. They only want one thing” (153). Again the Gilead discourse returns to the fact that men cannot be blamed for their behavior since it is something “natural”. The Handmaids are told that: “It’s up to you to set the boundaries” (55). This is part of changing the “truths” in Gilead, just like the “truth” of sterility.

In addition, the ‘Aunts’ describe the conditions of Gilead as a different kind of freedom: “There is more than one kind of freedom said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of the anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (34). Subsequently, the logic of Gilead is that the dynamic freedom, in other words the freedom to actively do what you like, might not have been something entirely bad, but the consequences were too severe. This freedom was the cause of men’s violence towards women and since the logic is that men cannot be responsible for their actions, women’s freedom must be taken away.

Instead, women now have static freedom. In other words, they have the freedom not to be negatively affected by men’s dynamic freedom. Feuer discusses this as “the choice-between happiness without freedom or freedom without happiness-is presented [...] by Atwood’s Aunt Lydia, trainer of handmaids and explicator of the regime’s rationale for its oppression” (83). Feuer’s description of the Handmaid’s situation as happiness or pre-Gilead women’s situation

as totally lacking happiness might be a stretch too far. Nevertheless, the point is worth making as the irony of this is, of course, that although women did not abuse their dynamic freedom as men did, they still get the severest restrictions of their freedom.

Offred's flashbacks show very clearly that the society "before" is not a place she wishes to return to. She has reached an awareness she did not possess before Gilead. Ironically, it took such a drastic change as this for her to notice the flaws of the past. In her essay, Neuman annihilates any claim that Atwood's description of the "time before" would be any kind of ideal freedom state: "Here some readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* [...] have misread the novel by conflating Offred's desire to have everything back, the way it was" (865). Women were not free from the oppression of men in the past either. It was a different kind of oppression, but oppression nonetheless.

Another justification the Handmaids are subjected to, which is quite important for the justification of having Handmaids, is the declining birthrates in the society "before".

Aunt Lydia [...] showing the birth rate per thousand, for years and years: a slippery slope, down past the zero line of replacement, and down and down. Of course some women believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode. That was the excuse they used, says aunt Lydia. They said there was no sense in breeding. Aunt Lydia's nostrils narrow: such wickedness. They were lazy women, she says. They were sluts. (123)

Women in the society "before" had jobs and property which many focused on instead of children. This sort of behavior could not be accepted and the first step the regime of Gilead took when in power was to dissolve women's rights of property and to fire them from their jobs. All property was to be transferred to a husband or close male relative. The important principle that women should be in control of their lives and their bodies have been replaced with the principle that what is important is reproduction. In her essay "Popular culture and the reproductive politics: *Juno, Knocked Up* and the enduring legacy of *The Handmaid's Tale*", Heather Latimer addresses this issue.

Through Offred's narrative, readers are offered a picture of what the world might look like if a woman's only reproductive 'choice' is pregnancy or death. The novel, therefore, offers an ironic counter-narrative to the films, in that its futuristic setting satirizes the idea of reproductive 'freedom' by showing us a world where every pregnancy is a wanted one, and where foetal personhood is not only taken-for-granted, but sanctified. (213)

The issue between the right of the woman to control her own body and the right to life for the foetus, is an important issue in feminist theory. In Gilead, this issue has been decided and women like Offred should forget any other state. "People's identity is supposed to coalesce with the coded concepts and the predicated state by which they are defined. Handmaids are supposed to merely think of themselves 'as seeds', as objects with a procreative function that should save the world from threat of sterility, as 'two-legged wombs' (Stael 457). As a result, the child is what is important and the Handmaid is only a tool. Women should no longer think that they decide over their own body. It is now a state controlled object. While Stael's description of what they are certainly is correct, the discourse of Gilead disguises this fact. The Handmaids are supposed to see themselves, not as objects, but as part of a sisterhood, which is something the 'Aunts' try to indoctrinate. Comparing this to the society "before", the resemblance is quite striking. The discourse here disguises the values men have about women, by claiming that female equality exists officially.

Furthermore, that the values of Gilead discourse have affected the minds of Offred and other women is quite clear when one looks at the scene in the novel when a couple of doctors have been executed for performing abortions in the society "before". "They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples, for the rest. Though this is hardly needed. No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive" (43). This statement clearly shows how the discourse of the society "before" has lost its power. Then, among women, abortion was not something that would have been seen as an "atrocious". However, in Gilead, women's minds have changed and everyone "in her

right mind” now believes that producing children is an important part of life. Of course this is Offred’s position and may not include all women in Gilead. Nevertheless, it shows that the discourse has had effect.

While the ‘Aunts’ justify Gilead by referring to the problems with violence and birth rates in the past, Offred’s Commander also has other ideas of why change was necessary. In his and Offred’s private encounters he tries to justify things to her and claims that “the problem wasn’t only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore [...] the sex was too easy, anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel” (221). Barbé Hammer explains that the Commander “calmly justifies the oppressive regime which he partly masterminded with the observation that in the old society men felt they were no longer needed by women; he thereby suggests that women's liberation forced American men to take this drastic action; ergo the present regime is ultimately the women's ‘fault’ “ (3).

Subsequently, women had gained too much influence in society. They were no longer dependent on men in the same way they had been before. The “nothing for them” the Commander talks about is most likely one of the explanations to the increased sexual violence against women in the society “before”. Since women were able to decide themselves who to marry and to be with, some men would use force to compensate for the fact that they were no longer in a position of control of women. Moreover, the lack of moral values, like prostitution, had made men lose their “ability to feel”. Sex had become trivialized, which would mean that sexual violence had become less serious as the seriousness of sex had subsided.

Furthermore, the Commander also tries to justify Gilead from women’s perspectives.

We've given them more than we have taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before [...] don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin and or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. (231)

According to the Commander, the society "before" was a place of ruthless competition which women could not handle. He claims that now it is better since "this way they all get a man" (231). However, in the middle of this discussion where he tries to show that they thought of the women, he slips into the subject of the lack of children, which the aunts used to justify Gilead. "Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business (of making children). This way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement" (231). The language of Gilead makes it sound like they are only doing what they do for the women's own good. The Commander describes the society "before" as a place where only money mattered and people did not, and that in Gilead the worth of women is appreciated. However, the quotation above reveals that what the regime is really concerned about is the lack of children. In addition, he defines making children as women's "biological destiny". Thus, he more or less says that women have no other purpose in life than producing children and taking care of them.

The Result-a Paradox

That Gilead would be any more humane than the society that the Commander describes as all about money is practically empty words. Women who cannot produce children are seen as 'unwomen' not worthy of the "full support" Gilead supposedly give women. This similarity between Gilead and capitalism is best described by Barbé Hammer: "All human qualities are instrumentalized, and reduced to quantitative values of exchange. In other words, the new rulers equate the value of something and someone solely with validity, usefulness,

functionality, economic profit” (457). Gilead is supposed to be a place with Christian values, but messages in the bible are distorted to fit the goals of the regime. For example the use of Handmaids is questionably justified with a reference to a passage in the Old Testament, where Abraham impregnates his domestic servant with his wife’s blessing since she is unable to reproduce.

Despite the official discourse of Gilead, which is filled with strict rules and regulations, no character in the novel actually really follows them or believes in them. I have already mentioned Serena Joy, Ofglen and Moira, but also Offred’s Commander and the driver, Nick, lack total conviction. Especially the Commander uses his position of power to do things that used to be done in the society “before” but now is forbidden. In his private chambers, the Commander keeps magazines which he lets Offred read. These are not supposed to exist. When Offred asks him why he has the magazines, he answers: “Some of us, he said, retain an appreciation for the old things” (166). His private encounters with Offred are not permitted either, and the previous Handmaid that was assigned to the Commander’s household was arrested for the very same encounters when Serena Joy found out about it. Gilead has its discourse but all characters are affected by the discourse of the society “before” and cannot become entirely committed to the strict rules and regulations. It is like a game where everyone plays their part in the “production” that is Gilead. Although no character is fully dedicated to the “production” one can never know who will reveal your lack of conviction to the authorities, consequently getting you arrested. Barbé Hammer describes this aspect of Gilead.

In this manner, an allegedly profoundly Christian society ironically transforms every citizen into a sinner in so far as each person must become a liar and a hypocrite in order to exist within the system. This is, of course, the supreme irony of Atwood’s fictional future world; this is a theocracy where not one person is devout and where such notions as faith and morality simply have no meaning. (3)

As a result, if you live in Gilead, you cannot reveal your lack of conviction because you will get severely punished, but since all characters seemingly have doubts, they all become “liars and hypocrites”.

The Commander is, in Gileadean terms, perhaps the biggest sinner of all. He keeps, as previously mentioned, forbidden texts, he meets with his Handmaids privately and he takes Offred to an underground club where he and other Commanders drink and use the prostitutes that work there. This club and the women who work there provide a substantially ironic picture of the Gilead that claims to be built on some form of higher values and superior morality. The Commander describes to Offred what kind of women work there.

‘Well some of them are real pros. Working girls’ –he laughs- ‘from the time before. They couldn’t be assimilated; anyway, most of them prefer it here’. ‘And the others?’ ‘The others’, he says. ‘Well we have quite a collection. That one there, the one in green, she’s a sociologist. Or was. That one was a lawyer, that one was in business, an executive position; some sort of fast-food chain or maybe it was hotels’. (249)

This club, or brothel if you will, represents the ultimate paradox to the Gilead discourse, a world far from the Red Centre where the ‘Aunts’ advocate moral values. Here, women are subjected to the same type of sexual violence so common in the society “before”. Ironically, the Commander gives Offred a lesson in how prostitution resulted in that “sex was too easy, anyone could just buy it” and that it made men “unable to feel”. Yet he still visits these kinds of places and shows no remorse in doing so, justifying it by claiming that “most of them prefer it here”. Consequently, the Commander is unavoidably insulting the Gilead he participated in creating by claiming that these women prefer a life in a brothel to a life in the “real” Gilead. Furthermore, the women who work in the brothel used to be successful career women. Now they are merely sexual objects available for the forbidden pleasures of the elite who are supposed to uphold the values of the state.

Nick, on the other hand, is a more difficult character to analyze. He works as a driver for the Commander, but he does not act like he is a servant. He does not seem to have the same fear Offred has. She subsequently suspects that he is an "Eye". However, Nick becomes Offred's lover whom she becomes totally obsessed with. Offred's seems to compensate for the fact that she is otherwise consistently passive, but in Nick she finds a meaning with life. Eventually it is he who rescues her from being arrested when Serena Joy finds out about the relationship between Offred and the Commander. Nick is most likely also involved in the resistance, but at the same time he is an "Eye". Furthermore, he is also involved in helping the Commander with his questionable living. Again, no character in Gilead is what he or she seems on the surface, not even the "Eyes", who are suppose to uphold law and order, are dedicated to the values of Gilead.

The discourse of Gilead only exists as means of maintaining power in the hands of men. As I have showed, The Commander, who is most likely to be dedicated to its values, is the worst offender of them all. He tries to justify Gilead to Offred, but at the same time he visits prostitutes and uses his powers to make Offred his mistress. Subsequently, he also cheats on his wife.

The ambiguity about who is really running Gilead is noticed by Barbé Hammer.

We see no rulers in Atwood's fictional world, but everyone in it from Commander Fred to his domestic ser-vants, from the doctor who inspects Offred to Offred herself is caught up in a network of surveillance and counter-surveillance. The novel constantly emphasizes the omnipresence of the scrutinizing gaze; the word "eye" is everywhere; the secret police are called "eyes," and the farewell greeting "under his eye" refers to the divine gaze but also testifies to the fact that everyone is indeed under the eye of someone else. (8)

There are no leaders who have absolute power, but all must, officially, adjust to the Gilead discourse and law. However there is nobody who absolutely lives by the values of the official discourse of Gilead. There are exclusively people who disregard these values and use their

power for personal satisfaction. Gilead is thus nothing else but a place where women are suppressed for the reason that men want power and want to hinder women from getting it.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to show that language, “truth” and action, within the Foucauldian notion of discourse, are used to oppress women both in Gilead and in the society “before”. It is clear that when living in a society like Gilead one must adjust to the discourse of that society. It is very difficult not to adjust. The failure of doing this will most likely result in alienation or even death, which is clear when looking at the women of Gilead who tried to rebel against the regime. Offred, on the other hand, does not rebel, but is affected by the Gilead discourse. She partly adjusts to it, which makes her life more bearable. However, she is aware that she does this and does not want to do it, but she is not strong enough to resist. In addition, Offred contemplates the possibility to just surrender completely to the “truth” of Gilead. By doing this she would fit in, but she cannot do that either, since she is also affected by the “truth” of the discourse from the society “before”, so she knows Gilead “truth” might not be correct. Surrender to the “truth” is exactly what Offred did in the society “before” so she is now reluctant to repeat that mistake.

Gilead discourse is, officially, so effective because no other “truths” than the official one is allowed to be voiced in public. If people are not aware of any other “truth”, then it is difficult to create an organized and effective resistance. Offred, for example, who seek such a resistance, can only come into contact with the surface of it.

The problem with discourse and with creating such an extreme society as Gilead is clearly shown in this essay. No character is totally devoted to the values and the “truths”. The reason for this is, like in Offred’s case, that they also have lived in the society “before” and have problems with letting that go entirely. Consequently, the

values of Gilead can only survive if nobody is aware of an alternative discourse, and that is why there are such harsh punishments for offenders. The children born in Gilead are not supposed to be affected by any other “truth”.

The Gilead regime uses the negative aspects of the society “before” to justify the situation for women, especially for Handmaids like Offred. They try to justify that women have lost their freedom and their right to decide over their own body by claiming that the conditions for women were worse before, with the sexual violence. Indeed, any notion that the society “before” was an ideal place for women is refuted by Offred’s flashbacks. This leads to the conclusion that both the discourse of Gilead and of the society “before” is one where the values result in oppression of women. In Gilead, it is a state system of keeping women controlled as, for example, Handmaids. In the society “before” the sexual attacks on women show that the “truth”, or the value system, implicated that attacking women was not something overly serious. The image of women, aunt Lydia describes them as “sluts”, shows the oppression in the form of degrading women.

These values of the discourse of the society “before” were the foundation upon which the values of Gilead were built. There common trait is the position of women. In Gilead, men’s supposedly natural violent side is recognized as something unavoidable, and thus women’s freedom must be restricted. In the society “before”, women’s equal rights were officially recognized, but the underlying values of the discourse prevented it from being the reality. As a result, women are involuntarily trapped in a type of catch twenty-two.

To sum up, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is, in fact, a rather tragic story where no woman is successful. Offred’s mother ends up in the colonies, Moira in a brothel, Serena Joy as a miserable housewife, and Ofglen ends up killing herself. Ironically, Offred, the character who

tried the least to affect her situation, is the most successful as she manages to escape and tell her story. Offred finds herself hiding in a safe house somewhere, and the only two societies she has ever lived in are both societies where women were in one way or another oppressed, be it by means of sexual violence, language, knowledge or power.

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