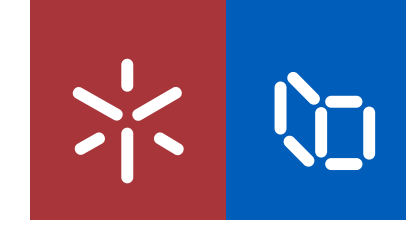




Bárbara de Amorim Ferreira

**Is Gilead that far from our reality? –  
What future feminism is evoked in  
Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale  
and The Testaments?**

**Universidade do Minho**  
Escola de Letras, Artes e Ciências Humanas







**Universidade do Minho**

Escola de Letras, Artes e Ciências Humanas

Bárbara de Amorim Ferreira

**Is Gilead that far from our reality? – What future feminism is evoked in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*?**

Dissertação de Mestrado

Mestrado em Língua, Literatura e Cultura Inglesas

Trabalho efetuado sob a orientação da:

**Professora Doutora Margarida Isabel Esteves Pereira**

## **DIREITOS DE AUTOR E CONDIÇÕES DE UTILIZAÇÃO DO TRABALHO POR TERCEIROS**

Este é um trabalho académico que pode ser utilizado por terceiros desde que respeitadas as regras e boas práticas internacionalmente aceites, no que concerne aos direitos de autor e direitos conexos.

Assim, o presente trabalho pode ser utilizado nos termos previstos na licença abaixo indicada.

Caso o utilizador necessite de permissão para poder fazer um uso do trabalho em condições não previstas no licenciamento indicado, deverá contactar o autor, através do RepositóriUM da Universidade do Minho.

### ***Licença concedida aos utilizadores deste trabalho***



**Atribuição-NãoComercial-Compartilhalgual**

**CC BY-NC-SA**

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

## **AGRADECIMENTOS**

À Universidade do Minho por me ter proporcionado a oportunidade de fazer formação na área das Línguas e Literaturas.

À Professora Margarida Isabel Pereira, orientadora deste trabalho, cuja ajuda e conselhos em muito contribuíram para chegar ao fim desta etapa e por inspirar uma abordagem diferente às obras literárias.

A todos os professores da minha Licenciatura e Mestrado que se mostraram compreensivos perante as minhas dificuldades e marcaram o meu percurso de uma forma positiva.

À minha Professora de Inglês do 3º ciclo que me cultivou a paixão pela Língua Inglesa.

Agradecer aos meus pais por todo o apoio que sempre me deram. A ambos que fizeram com que fosse possível chegar onde cheguei. Que me ensinaram a nunca desistir e a lutar por aquilo em que acredito. À minha mãe que nunca duvidou e a quem devo a minha paixão pela literatura. Ao meu pai que me apoiou e ajudou neste percurso.

Às minhas irmãs que me incentivam sempre a ser a melhor versão de mim. À Beatriz que sempre foi um exemplo a seguir e à Gabriela que me ensinou a ser o melhor exemplo possível para ela.

Ao meu marido que sempre esteve ao meu lado e nunca me deixou duvidar de mim mesma.

Ao meu amigo de coração Bruno por todas as dúvidas que me tirou e todas as discussões literárias que tivemos.

À minha amiga Margarida Cunha cujos conhecimentos me ajudaram a superar esta etapa.

## **STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY**

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism or any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Code of Ethical Conduct of the Universidade do Minho.

## RESUMO

### **Está Gilead longe da nossa realidade? – Que futuro feminismo é evocado em *A História de Uma Serva* e *Os Testamentos* de Margaret Atwood?**

Nesta dissertação é feita uma análise das obras *A História de Uma Serva* e *Os Testamentos* escritas pela romancista canadiana Margaret Atwood. Estes romances são considerados ficção especulativa, particularmente, uma distopia feminista. *A História de Uma Serva* e *Os Testamentos* foram inspirados por acontecimentos da vida real que ocorreram em algum momento na história da humanidade. Tendo isto em mente, foram realizadas pesquisas para realçar os momentos e contextos sociais que inspiraram a autora a escrever os romances. Contudo, os contextos sociais em que a autora baseou os seus romances não são aqueles de que a humanidade se deva orgulhar. São circunstâncias que privam as personagens, na sua maioria mulheres dos seus direitos humanos. Alguns destes contextos sociais nos romances não estão assim tão longe do hoje em dia e outros ainda são recorrentes. Os eventos apresentados nos romances, exemplos atuais passados de tais situações são destacados. É feita uma comparação entre eles e as circunstâncias históricas que poderiam ter inspirado Atwood a escrever estas ficções especulativas.

**Palavras - chave:** Margaret Atwood, feminismo, Gilead, *A História de Uma Serva*, *Os Testamentos*

## ABSTRACT

### **Is Gilead that far from our reality? – What future feminism is evoked in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*?**

In this dissertation, an analysis of the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* written by Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood is made. These novels are considered speculative fiction, particularly a feminist dystopia. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* were inspired by real-life events that occurred at some point in the history of humanity. Having that in mind, research was conducted to highlight the moments and social contexts which inspired the author to write the novels. However, the social contexts on which the author based her novels are not those humanity should be proud of. They are circumstances that deprive the characters, mostly women, of their human rights. Some of these social contexts in the novels are not that far behind today, and others are still recurring. Those events presented in the novels and current and past examples of such situations are highlighted. A comparison is made with them and historical circumstances that could have inspired Atwood to write these speculative fictions.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, feminism, Gilead, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*



## INDEX

<b>RESUMO.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>INDEX.....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. The Path through <i>Herstory</i>.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1. The Power of Pornography .....	8
1.2. Women’s Fertility – A Manipulation Tool.....	14
<b>2. Entering Gilead .....</b>	<b>21</b>
2.1. A Handmaid’s Journey.....	21
2.2. Going Back to Gilead .....	24
2.3. Is There an Improvement? .....	28
2.4. Defining Atwood’s Novels.....	29
<b>3. Female Suffering.....</b>	<b>32</b>
3.1. The Way to Oppress Women .....	32
3.2. Even God Is to Be Blamed For.....	38
3.3. Despair Eats the Soul Away.....	39
<b>4. Learning Through Atwood’s Work .....</b>	<b>44</b>
4.1. History Repeating Itself .....	44
4.2. The Shocking Reality of Some Girls .....	51
4.3 A Warning in the Shape of a Book.....	54
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>60</b>

## Introduction

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines feminism as “the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men” (Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 275). The truth is that many dictionaries and languages define this unique word in different ways and terms. The *Dicionário da Crítica Feminista*<sup>1</sup> by Professor Ana Gabriela Macedo and Ana Luísa Amaral, defines it as an eminent claimant movement, which, in noting the inferiority to which women have been subjected, demands uniform rights for them (Macedo and Amaral, 2005, p. 76). The word ends up being just as unique as women.

The main objective of this work lies in analysing two novels by Margaret Atwood from a feminist perspective, keeping in mind that the USA feminist movements will be referred to in relation to the novels. The novels are *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019). The feminist movement can be divided into four waves, there being a disagreement regarding the existence of a fourth wave or continuation of the third. In the USA, the first wave began in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention and faded away in 1920. As Sarah Gamble stated in her work *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, “[i]n America, feminist **activism** started slightly earlier with the **Seneca Falls** Convention of 1848, a meeting attended by 300 people (including 40 men) to demand an end to all discrimination based on sex” (Gamble, 2001, p. 20).

The second wave took off around the 60s and decreased towards the 80s. “[T]he origins of the Women’s Liberation Movement in America lay in the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War and student movements of the 1960s” (Gamble, 2001, p. 26).

The third wave began in the 90s as they tried to tackle “[...] problems that still existed, including sexual harassment in the workplace and a shortage of women in positions of power” (Pruitt, 2022). This wave started not only as a response to the *Backlash*, especially in the 80s, but also due to a judicial case involving Anita Hill. “In 1991, Anita Hill testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee that Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her at work” (Grady, 2018).

Despite these being the main historical phases of feminism and women fighting for their rights, many believe we are in the fourth wave of feminism, which started in 2012 with the protests due to the passing of a young woman who passed away after being gang raped. However, some researchers disagree saying it is only an extension of the third phase. This new wave gained strength with the movement #MeToo. “Launched by Tarana Burke in 2007, the #MeToo movement took off in 2017 in the wake of revelations about the sexual misconduct of influential film producer Harvey Weinstein” (Pruitt,

---

<sup>1</sup> Feminist Criticism Dictionary – author’s translation.

2022). Living the fourth wave or not, the fact is that when we watch the news, we can see how women are regaining their spirit to fight and abolish, or at least diminish, the inequality still present in many areas. In work, in politics, in reproduction rights and especially in the way the world sees women. I say world, because many women also maintain a wrongful pre-made idea of our fragility and inferiority towards men.

Many works about feminism tend to focus on these waves mentioned above, the truth is that women have always been fighting for their rights. Unfortunately, before 1848 most of these attempts to achieve their rightful place or bring down the patriarchy were done individually.

One woman who keeps the fight alive is Margaret Atwood, a famous Canadian writer. Not only that, but she is an advocate for female equality and the environment. One of her most famous novels is *The Handmaid's Tale*, a feminist dystopian novel. I say feminist, as many critics characterise it in such way, due to being narrated by female character, and because many topics swirl around female rights. In terms of dystopia, this was not usual. This genre tended to be told by a male character, and female characters had less relevance if even any relevance at all. This novel took even more relevance in recent years with women using the Handmaid's outfits to protest.

The outfit worn by Margaret Atwood's handmaids in her 1985 dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and its recent TV adaptation has been in evidence from Argentina to the US, the UK and Ireland, and has emerged as one of the most powerful current feminist symbols of protest, in a subversive inversion of its association with the oppression of women. (Beaumont and Holpuch, 2018)

In 2019, Atwood published *The Testaments*. This novel had two primary aims for the author: to show how we may be walking in the direction of the fictional Republic of Gilead, especially with the election of President Trump in 2016; to give a sort of ending to the previous novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the protagonist's fate was left for the reader to decide. With the release of the TV show, even more fans gravitated towards the novel, which made the second one come almost as a present and had a huge success.

In my work, I intend to highlight the events from these two dystopian novels that relate to events in the history of the Western world, especially, having in mind the North-American context. This is a way to show how these novels, which seem to us so far away from reality, were a reality for so many women.

## 1. The Path through *Herstory*

As referred to in the introduction, the feminist movement went through four waves, and we are living the fourth. I want to begin by referring to a time when there was no reason to stand ground for equal rights, a time that is not always mentioned, which started prior to the twentieth century.

Many historians agree that patriarchy started with the advent of agriculture. Firstly, what is patriarchy? “The term ‘patriarchal’ refers to power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interest of men” (Weedon, 1987, p. 2). The same work mentions that “[p]atriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to the biological sexual difference” (Weedon, 1987, p. 2). In short, we can tell that the patriarchal society does not believe in equality but thinks biological sex differences make men superior to women. Unfortunately, we still live in such a society, even if we do not notice it. It is a fact that women’s conditions have been improving over the years, but there is still a long path to walk. One example can be seen in our history classes. Most of the important figures are men; not that women did not achieve great things, they are simply not given the deserved importance. One of the things we are taught in school is that in Pre-history, only men were hunters, giving them a higher status, which is no longer accurate and needs to be changed. Recently, some discoveries proved that women in Pre-history were not as weak and useless as our history professors made us believe. Hunting tools were discovered in 2018 by Randall Haas and his team alongside female burials. Hunting during Pre-history was thought to be a men’s only activity for many years. These findings of hunting tools besides women come to prove the opposite. “Study shows that modern hunter-gatherer tribes operate on egalitarian basis, suggesting inequality was an aberration that came with the advent of agriculture” (Devlin, 2015). Many historians agree that patriarchy started with the advent of agriculture. Before the advent of agriculture, humans lived in an equalitarian society.

Mark Dyble, an anthropologist who led the study at University College London, said: ‘There is still this wider perception that hunter-gatherers are more macho or male-dominated. We’d argue it was only with the emergence of agriculture, when people could start to accumulate resources, that inequality emerged. (Devlin, 2015)

Everyone had their assigned role, as expected, but there was no such thing as labels. What is meant by this is that men and women saw themselves as equals. Men did not need to prove their superiority or label women as the weaker gender. They had no problems taking them on their hunting trips, and possibly some men would stay behind to take care of the children (something that would later be seen as a female duty).

With the advent of agriculture, humans developed the ability to stash food. The concept of property was, in a way, created. “[A]s agriculture took over, and patriarchy set in, women and children came to be viewed as property – men’s property, to be bought, sold, traded, stolen or killed” (Atwood, 2022, p. 23). Unfortunately, the notion of bloodline also emerged. Men started to understand that they had to keep women away from other men to ensure the child she would bear would be his. For that achievement and insurance, women had to be their property. Since then, women have been fighting to regain their rightful place since they were put under men’s grip. Later they even had to fight for their right to learn to read, study, own property, work and make their voices heard.

The fact is that patriarchy is deeply rooted in our society and even in our minds. I will make an example of such an imminent and unfailing presence. To all my female readers, imagine you are jogging at the park. It is late. Dark surrounds you when a man surprises you. You know his intentions as soon as you catch a glimpse of his eyes. You start running in hopes of finding someone to help you. You reach a crossroads. To your right, there is a woman; to your left, there is a man. Which path would you choose without time to think, just to take action? Sadly, many of us, if not all of us, would choose the left path. There is a reason, though, behind this choice. From the time we start to perceive and understand the danger we face, we are also confronted with a contradiction. Men can be our downfall and also our heroes in shining armour. We are built and educated to believe that men are the stronger sex. They hold the power to protect us. Even when we reach an older age and start to perceive how we women can have the same strength or even more, we still would unconsciously run towards a man for help.

Why does this happen? Because we are raised this way. The male gender is still seen as superior, as the family’s breadwinner. Domestic men are still seen with judging eyes and even comments. We are trying to change things, but we cannot achieve an equalitarian society until we change our way of thinking. Take, for example, fairy tales. Every child has heard at least one fairy tale in their life. If you were lucky, your parents would tell them before you went to sleep. When we read fairy tales, we see the silent and devoted woman who gets saved by a powerful and strong man. Even if a man is also responsible for our imprisonment or dramatic fate. Of course, we also have witches and wicked stepmothers who can lead us to our doom as much as men. These fairy tales transmit that women must always wait and expect to be saved by men, no matter the circumstances or even the possibility that many could save themselves and take their destiny into their own hands. One example of a woman who tried to break these stereotypes of fairy tales is A.S. Byatt in her book *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye – Five Fairy Stories*. In this collection, the author recreates classic fairy tales with a twist. The female character knows how to stand up for herself and even take her destiny into her hands (as in the tale *The Story of the Eldest Princess*).

What we nowadays call feminism started to emerge when women, faced with these horrific reality-imposed ideals, started to ask for equality. They were questioning what they were told from a young age and what society expected from them. Since they were supposed to be kept in ignorance and away from knowledge, these defying women were seen as huge threats to men, who wished to remain in their high-power position. “[T]he period 1550–1700 saw no legislated improvement in the position of women” (Gamble, 2001, p. 3). With these women came the Witch Trials.

Ela representa tudo o que é mais temido e odiado na mulher. Em termos simbólicos, a afirmação de uma identidade feminina forte é sentida como uma ameaça à identidade masculina. Por isso, a bruxa é uma figura castradora que inspira profundos sentimentos misóginos. (Macedo and Amaral, 2005, p. 11)<sup>2</sup>

This happened worldwide, not only in the USA, as many only associate it with the Salem Trials.

The events in Salem in 1692 were but one chapter in a long story of witch hunts that began in Europe between 1300 and 1330 and ended in the late 18th century (with the last known execution for witchcraft taking place in Switzerland in 1782). (Wallenfeldt, 2022)

These events led to numerous deaths of innocent women. “[I]t is generally believed that some 110,000 persons in total were tried for witchcraft and between 40,000 to 60,000 were executed” (Wallenfeldt, 2022). One of the reasons behind these accusations? The practice of medicine. If we think about it, many medicaments are a combination of herbs. The so-called witches knew how to make these combinations. They could make you sick, yes, it is a fact, but they could also cure you or ease your pain. They were owners of their noses and were previously worshipped for their skills. With the institutionalisation of medicine, as men tried to take medicine under their control, these women started to be seen as a threat. The elderly women who once represented wisdom were now seen as dangerous and even Satan worshipers.

In medieval Europe, midwives had developed a sophisticated natural pharmacy of herbal medicines. However, as the practice of medicine became more institutionalised, women were systematically excluded. The Malleus Maleficarum, a witch-hunter’s guide of 1486, states that ‘if a woman dares to cure without having studied, she is a witch and must die. (Gamble, 2001, p. 322)

As they sought to be free and not be ruled by a patriarchal society, which commended their every

---

<sup>2</sup> She represents everything that is most feared and hated in women. In symbolic terms, the assertion of a strong female identity is felt as a threat to the male identity. Therefore, the witch is a castrating figure who inspires deep misogynistic feelings – author’s translation.

move and decision, they often were marginalised or ended up living away from this same society. Because of this, they were seen as rule breakers. “Este isolamento é ainda mais perturbador na medida em que sugere liberdade sexual e autodeterminação, duas características inaceitáveis no papel que se esperava que as mulheres desempenhassem na sociedade” (Macedo and Amaral, 2005, p. 11)<sup>3</sup>.

It is known that there were not only women who could be accused and then executed for witchcraft or devil-worshipping. Some men were also hanged alongside the women who sought knowledge, but despite it, the reason for their execution was different. “As historian John Demos has established, the few Puritan men tried for witchcraft were mostly the husbands or brothers of alleged female witches” (Marshall, 2019).

Another battle for women was the one for fundamental rights. Women were seen and treated as property. “For women it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full-scale human beings” (Walters, 2005, p. 99). When married, they went from belonging to their fathers to their husbands. “[A] man and his wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed to that of her husband” (Walters, 2005, p. 58). However, that was not only on paper. That was expected. They should breathe, sleep and live entirely for their husbands. Moreover, in the case of having children, they were added to the equation. A son would have more rights than his mother, whom he would also start to view as inferior.

“Wollstonecraft admitted that, in the times in which she lived, women were inferior; oppressed from birth, uneducated, and insulated from the real world, most women, inevitably, grew up ignorant and lazy” (Walters, 2005, p. 33). This was, of course, not only a problem in the 18th century. Women had been suffering from all this for a long time. So much that it ended up considered normal. After years and years of oppression, mothers either said to their daughters that it was the way it was or saw no wrong in men expecting their child to be simply an heir carrier. A simple enslaved person to please every single desire of her future husband. She was expected to lie down and remain still whenever her husband wanted to have sexual intercourse. They were viewed as simple objects. Not more than the chair where he would rest. Women had only one purpose. To please men!

Keeping them away from education had also its purpose. They needed to keep them away from knowledge, as it is a powerful weapon. The world is ruled by the powerful, but knowledge plays a huge role, even if it is only for manipulation. Those who are ignorant are easier to control. To keep submissive. That was the position they desired for women; ignorant and submissive.

---

<sup>3</sup> This isolation is all the more disturbing in that it suggests sexual freedom and self-determination, two unacceptable characteristics in the role which women were expected to play in society – author’s translation.

All the previous rebellious women had more difficulties gathering to fight with the same objective. “It was not until the second half of the 19th century that anything like a true women’s ‘movement’ began to emerge in England” (Walters, 2005, p. 56). Fighting for the right to vote was much more than gaining equality, which meant that women would start to have a voice in politics. A possibility to start the change needed to reach social and psychological equality. As soon as women’s movements started to gain public attention, a backlash emerged. One example is the term ‘suffragette’. It “was coined in 1906 by the Daily Mail; it was a derogatory label” (Walters, 2005, p. 75). Despite the attempt to coin the movement negatively or even discourage those who participated, that did not happen. Taken that there is no such thing as bad publicity, they accepted the term and made it their own. This happened especially around women acknowledging that they had as much right to vote as men.

[I]n the early decades of the twentieth century, the emphasis on social and political emancipation that was the essence of first wave feminism coexisted alongside a desire (expressed, for example, by female modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson) to define a ‘feminine’ identity and discourse: an impulse which was to become a central concern of certain sectors of second wave feminism. (Gamble, 2001, p. ix)

This proved to be an arduous fight that only ended in 1928. Especially when women started to be arrested for protesting, those suffragettes started to go on hunger strikes. Some were released until their health improved and then arrested again. Others suffered much more deeply by being force-fed. Despite it, all their efforts and the pain they had to go through were not in vain. “In 1918, women over the age of 30 were given the vote; and in March 1928, under a Conservative government, they finally won it on equal terms with men” (Walters, 2005, p. 85).

Margaret Walters starts her introduction to *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* with a quote from writer Rebecca West “I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate from a doormat or a prostitute” (Walters, 2005, p. 1). As we are all aware, since the beginning of the labelling of women as feminists, the word has carried a negative meaning. Many times, used to criticise or prejudice someone. Although Charles Fourier coined the word in 1837, and being himself an advocate for women’s rights, “[...] in England, right up until the ‘60s at least, the word “feminist” was usually pejorative” (Walters, 2005, p. 3). This was, of course, a way to try to pull back women from such a movement that could put in danger the high position of men in society. For them, women should stay at home with a small leash. “They argued that ‘attacks on feminism frequently merged into a wider misogyny; ‘the feminist’ is now the name given to the disliked or despised women, much as ‘man-hater’ or ‘castrating bitch’, ‘harridan’ or ‘witch’, were used before the 1960’s” (Walters, 2005, p. 3).



With the Second World War and the departure of men to fight, women were sought to work in place of men. Unfortunately, when the war ended, they were sent back home and expected to make no complaints. Women had tried what it was like “to live like a man”, and they wanted to continue.

By the time the war was over, women’s participation in public events had come about by historical accident, and the new challenge was to educate them for active and responsible citizenship. Developments slowed down again until the next major outbreak of feminism in the 1970s. (Gamble, 2001, p. 23)

The second wave of feminism focused more on fighting for reproductive and social roles. Equality was still yet to be achieved, but women had the notion that, unfortunately, there were more urgent matters, such as their lack of power over their own bodies. “Second wave feminism did not just make an impact upon western societies, but has also continued to inspire the struggle for women’s rights across the world” (Gamble, 2001, p. 292).

Topics like contraception and abortion came up and saw considerable repercussions. Giving women contraception meant they could control when to get pregnant. That would take men’s control over their bodies and their uterus. “In the 20th century, ‘first-wave’ feminists had demanded civil and political equality. In the 1970s, ‘second-wave’ feminism concentrated on, and gave great prominence to, sexual and family rights for women” (Walters, 2005, p. 137). Abortion, on the other hand, also came with great controversy. Though claiming only to try to save an innocent soul, the truth was the same behind contraceptive methods for women. They wanted to hold power over their reproductive organs. “Feminism, then, sought both to voice (in Friedan’s terms, to name) women’s immediate and subjective experience and to formulate a political agenda and vision” (Gamble, 2001, p. 27).

To move forwards and achieve equality, we got understand and admit that “[...] patriarchy is the primary form of human oppression, without whose elimination other forms of oppression—racial, political or economic—will continue” (Gamble, 2001, p. 31).

### **1.1. The Power of Pornography**

“For as far back as women could remember something had hurt about being female” (Wolf, 2002, p. 219)

Through the course of history, that something could had been several things. It could go from childbirth to complications after giving birth or sexual relations. At the time, during the second wave of

feminism, that something was female beauty. As Naomi Wolf completes “Today, what hurts is beauty” (Wolf, 2002, p. 219). Images and idealisations of the perfect woman started to emerge. Everyone had something to say about what a perfect woman should look like; the same could not be said about male imagery. During the Victorian Era, their behaviour described the “perfect” woman. She had to be ladylike. Nothing more than a pure and chaste woman was expected. They lived to dream about marriage and serving their husband. Due to it, when women started to speak their wish to vote and work was viewed negatively. A woman who voted or worked could not be considered decent. “Male decency miraculously survives the commission of murder and rape; female decency is abnegated when the woman steps out of the house to work or vote” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 64)

Over the years, little has changed from Victorian-era expectations of women, although they have since gained the right to vote and work. People were told they were entering a new chapter in history. Changes had been made, the start of the walk towards gender equality being one of them. By the end of the twentieth century, capitalism became the only narrative encompassing how we all lived. As Margaret Atwood states: “The end of history had occurred, we were told: capitalism was the way forward, shopping was king, your lifestyle choices defined you and what more could women want?” (Atwood, 2022, p. xvi). The ultimate goal was to make women feel shallow. Not only would they then help capitalism through consumerism, but they would also be occupying their minds with futile subjects. It was also meant to keep them busy and at home or at least away from men’s business. “Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figure out that they [women] will buy more things if they are kept in self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring beauties” (Wolf, 2002, p. 66).

According to Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*, “[...] a woman’s beauty became at once her job and her fault” (Wolf, 2002, p. 38). But, as Wolf goes on to argue in her book, this came with a contradiction. If women were not attractive, they were discarded. Who would want to employ an ugly woman? However, if they were, in fact, attractive, they would have to submit to the sexual harassment and, in many cases, even rape. The other side of the coin was that to obtain such products that promised beauty, money was needed. So, women actually had to work to pay for the products or even medical interventions. This became a vicious cycle. Without a job, they could not be pretty. Without being pretty, they would not be given a job. Moreover, if they were given one, they had to subject themselves to sexual harassment, which grew in numbers yearly. “[I]f a woman’s unique physical characteristics - red hair, say, or large breasts - were the reason given by her employer for sexual harassment, then her personal appearance was the issue and not her gender” (Wolf, 2002, p. 38).

“An ideology that makes women feel ‘worth less’ was urgently needed to counteract the way

feminism had begun to make us feel worth more” (Wolf, 2002, p. 18). The fashion industry depended on it, as the economy depended on the industry. The perfection was presented as reachable when it was not. Women were persuaded to buy new clothes and makeup or undergo cosmetic surgeries to feel more beautiful. To feel desirable or have men on a line to marry them, women felt like they had to look like the girls on commercial campaigns. They had to look like Aphrodite and leave a trail of perfume that would seduce anyone and grant them the support they thought they needed.

“An economy that depends on slavery needs to promote images of slaves that ‘justify’ the institution of slavery” (Wolf, 2002, p. 18). In this case, it is the fashion, cosmetics and surgeries industry. Why should women increase their breast size if it was not for an advertisement showing how beautiful a woman can be with a larger breast? Unfortunately, one of the things that led these strategies to success was jealousy. We are constantly comparing ourselves to others. Continuously checking who is prettier, who has the most enormous breasts, the more defined buttocks, the taller, among others. Often, women seek to look beautiful not for themselves but to be better than their “rivals”.

Wolf also presents ageism as a woman’s problem. “Ageing in women is ‘unbeautiful’ since women grow more powerful with time” (Wolf, 2002, p. 14). While an ageing man is viewed with admiration and respect, women’s ageing is viewed negatively. Society still sees knowledge as a powerful tool for women. They fear that knowledge as they also fear that they will be taken down from their high-status position. Men must control the world, and to control it, they must control women.

In association with all this, which Naomi Wolf calls *The Beauty Myth*, comes also the topic of pornography. Pornography also sets the standards of beauty. Men would not watch or read it if the female character was considered ugly or undesirable.

Pornography, according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, is defined as “books, magazines, films, etc. that describe or show sexual acts in order to cause sexual excitement” (Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 550). According to Andrea Dworkin, however, “[p]ornography is defined as the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures and/or words that include women presented dehumanized as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation” (Dworkin, 1989, p. xxxiii). The definition continues, but I do believe we get the point. The fact is that overpowering and humiliating women becomes easier if they are seen as mere objects. No one has problems kicking a chair or a ball. They are objects. They do not feel pain or can complain. These brutal and violent actions depicted in pornography became as banal as kicking a chair by viewing women through the same spectre — a simple object. Women must not complain and certainly do not feel pain. Otherwise, why would they be depicted in such a way? We must remember that Andrea Dworkin’s book, with the title *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, was published in 1981,

merely 40 years from our days. “Becoming a man requires that the boy learn to be indifferent to the fate of women. Indifference requires that the boy learn to experience women as objects” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 49).

Thus, states Dworkin, “[o]ne does not violate something by using it for what it is” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 203). Since women have a uterus, their natural purpose is to conceive. For such natural composition, they are seen only for reproductive purposes. While men have a penis, the seed, as we often tell children, they have superiority. However, none can conceive without the other<sup>4</sup>. Men see themselves as superior due to their penis. “[T]he use of the female body for sexual or reproductive purposes is a natural right of men” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 203). Arguments like these are used to excuse rape, even in current days. Men possess a mentality of ownership towards the opposite sex, which leads them to believe they must not be punished for using women the way they please. After all, you are not punished for drinking water from a glass; you are merely using the object for its purpose. It sounds horrifying and revolting, and it actually should. Despite it, that is how many continue to see women and change is required! “Women, the logs at issue, cannot be objective or act objectively because objects do not see or know” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 108).

Naomi Wolf argues that ours is a rape culture, stating that “[...] our culture is depicting sex as rape so that men and women will become interested in it” (Wolf, 2002, p. 138). The problem is that in such situations, only women seem to suffer. Men get what they want, either by physical violence or rape. Their sexual desires and his fantasies are fulfilled. While on the other hand, the women get scarred for life. Why would anyone choose to be raped? If it were a choice, something we did freely, it would not be denominated as rape. It would simply be called sex. The definition of the word rape by the *Oxford Dictionary* leaves no doubt about the lack of choice present in such act, “to force a person to have sex when they do not want to, using threats or violence” (Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 585). The most important step to eradicate rape crimes is establishing the difference between *willing* and *unwilling*.

In cases of rape, as Susan Faludi points out, the blame usually falls on the woman. “The U.S. Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography even proposed that women’s professional advances might be responsible for rising rape rates” (Faludi, 2006, p. 4). Not only are women to blame, as there is a tendency to blame feminists for an increase in cases of rape. According to their narrow perspective, the logic is: if women stayed home as men desired, they would not be raped. That, of course, is not accurate. Women can be raped anywhere, at any time, by anyone, not only at work or college, as the

---

<sup>4</sup> The reproductive technologies nowadays allow for reproduction without the biological parents being present or acknowledged, but there is still the need for a man’s spermatozoid and a woman’s egg.

Attorney General tries to convince his listeners. Rape is a constant fear in women's lives. Statistics provided for 2022 confirm how much we still have to fear. The data provided below only refers to rape cases inside the USA; other countries have similar or even more alarming data.

While the frequency of rape in the United States varies from state to state, it averages out to one every 1-2 minutes. Women ages 16-19 are four times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape or sexual assault.

94% of women who are raped experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during the two weeks following the rape. 30% of those PTSD cases last at least nine months.

33% of women who are raped contemplate suicide.

A high percentage of rape victims experience ongoing professional and/or emotional issues as a result of the attack.

While the majority of sexual assault victims are female (82% of juveniles and 90% of adults), males around the world also experience sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape every day.

Transgender people and those with disabilities are twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault or rape.

In the United States, 70% of rapes are committed by someone the victim knows. (World Population Review, 2022)<sup>5</sup>

The data shows that 70% of rapists are known to the victim. This can mean a co-worker, a friend or even someone from the family (including the husband). Even if women barricade themselves at home with the sole purpose of serving their husbands, they are still at risk of being just another one in the statistics. "Marital rape was not recognized as a crime in all US states until 1993. Prior to that, sexual access to a wife's body, with or without her consent, was considered a husband's prerogative" (Beau, 2018).

In Faludi's work, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, it is referred how the film *The Accused* had the opposite reaction expected. The film was released in 1988, and the female protagonist is gang raped in one of the scenes. The film was intended to bring a reminder of the horrific

---

<sup>5</sup> World Population Review. (2022). Rape Statistics by Country 2022. Retrieved from World Population Review: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/rape-statistics-by-country>

pain that rape brings, instead it brought an expected response from male audience. "Apparently many young men watching this film needed the reminder, to: they hooted cheered the film's rape scene" (Faludi, 2006, p. 151). There could be two reasons behind these horrific actions toward a rape scene. The first one is the glorification of the brutalisation of women. This is mainly seen in pornography films where extreme violence is used. Young men will see it as only natural if it is seen as something that can be done. They cheer as the men portraying the gang members are only using women for their natural purposes. They glorify the violence as a conquest; the men have power over women, which is shown by such cruel acts. The second hypothesis is the one of "following the masses". What I mean by this is that those who are watching do nothing or even cheer in the film. The young men watching the film mimic this behaviour as they see it as normal. Technically speaking, such mimicking of behaviours can lead them to practice the same crimes, while in their heads, they are not doing anything wrong. The woman's body is theirs to be used the way they please, the way it fully satisfies them. These are the same men that will be responsible for our future. The ones who cheer rape scenes. How can we achieve equality when women are depicted in such ways in Hollywood films?

Men arrive home and expect to see the perfectly curvy woman they lust for, which is also the woman they can see in pornography, but also in advertising, cinema, television and a little all over the media. Due to this, many women end up doing breast enlargement surgeries, liposuction, or other similar procedures. The only goal being to achieve an idealised image that their husbands desire. "Liposuction shows the way to the future: It is the first of many procedures to come for which all women will be eligible by virtue of being women" (Wolf, 2002, p. 264). It should be referred that plastic surgery has been massively expanded and englobes men now.

Due to social precedents and wrongful media representations of women, it is often inconceivable that woman do not wish to have sex. "The female is never entitled not to want sex. Force used against her when she refuses is always warranted because she is never either justified or serious in not wanting sex" (Dworkin, 1989, p. 198). The ones from porn videos are always ready to fulfil men's fantasies, so wives should be too. The only problem is men make that porn; according to their desires and fetiches, never the women's. Society tends to have difficulties in separating both spheres, reality and fantasies. Not everything can go according to one's wishes. If it is portrayed on television or even in literature, it does not mean it is accurate or that we must expect it to happen on the opposite side of the television.

"[T]he argument is that women have sexual power because erection is involuntary; a woman is the presumed cause; therefore, the man is helpless, the woman is powerful. The male reacts to a stimulation for which he is not responsible" (Dworkin, 1989, p. 22). Women do not have erections, but sexual desire

is not only available to men. Even if we do not have a feature that exhibits when we are aroused, that does not exclude that same desire. The difference between men and women, apart from one having a penis and the other not, is that women know and do control this same enticement. They do not blame men for arousing them. When they actually are, they would not say no if the men felt the same way. “The male conceit that women have sexual power (cause erections) conveniently protects men from responsibility for the consequences of their acts, especially their acts of sexual conquest” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 24).

## **1.2. Women’s Fertility – A Manipulation Tool**

“Sexual independence, not murder, may have been the feminists’ greater crime” (Faludi, 2006, p. 411)

While the first wave of feminism witnessed the horrors of the first world war, the second one came after the second world war. Although some changes had already been made, one of the major ones being gaining the right to vote, there was still much work ahead of them. One of the main topics women wanted to approach was abortion and contraceptives.

The second wave of feminism focused on fighting for reproductive and social roles. Equality was still yet to be achieved, but women had the notion that, unfortunately, there were more urgent matters. Their lack of power and decision over their bodies was one of them. “What is important to note, though, is that once paternity becomes important, controlling women is inevitable, because only by controlling women can it be reliably known who the father is” (Beau, 2018).

During this period, one of the arguments that scared women was the one of being left alone. Never marrying and staying a spinster was becoming a recurring nightmare. Single women were seen with bad eyes for a long time, but this appeared to resurface stronger to keep women in line. The main objective was to make them believe they were not complete or fulfilled if they were not married. “The more economically independent women are, the less attractive marriage becomes” (Faludi, 2006, p. 32). Adding to this aversion to working women, there was also a “disease” affecting women these same women.

[G]ynecologists began calling endometriosis, a uterine ailment that can cause infertility, the ‘career woman’s disease’. It afflicts women who are ‘intelligent, living with stress [and] determined to succeed at a role other than mother’ early in life,’ Niels Lauersen, a New York Medical College obstetrics professor at the time, asserted in the press. (In fact,

epidemiologists find endometriosis no more prevalent among professional women than any other group). (Faludi, 2006, p. 45)

Even if there were no studies to prove such argument, many used them to dissuade women from working, making them return to their houses and submit to their husbands as it should be. The statement was effective since it appealed to women's maternity calling. Those who desired to become mothers would question if they would risk it for a career.

During the Victorian Period, "[...] medical opinion varied on whether female castration worked in returning women to their 'normal' role" (Wolf, 2002, p. 244). To keep them submissive to their husbands, as was expected from a lady, castration was the way to proceed. They had the ultimate form to control their sexual desire and pleasure through it. Later, it would escalate to a battle to control the female reproductive organs.

Naomi Wolf refers how in the nineteenth century, there was little legislation regarding medicine and how: "Patients were more likely, until around 1912, to be harmed by medical interventions than helped" (Wolf, 2002, p. 239). The situation had previously been worse, as little to no knowledge of women's reproductive system was available. The lack of knowledge was witnessed by many and caused even more suffering to a tremendous amount of women. When a woman complained, they were usually rapidly discarded with the excuse of only being hysterical or lacking a strong man in her life. A husband was many times the cure for female maladies. This lack of knowledge and even caring towards women led to wrong diagnoses, unnecessary surgeries and even the prescription of excessive and often addictive medicine. "The American Medical Association had no legal control over who could call himself a doctor. Doctors had virtually free rein to peddle opiate-based, addictive snake oils, and miracle cures for vague female maladies" (Wolf, 2002, p. 239). How scary to be a woman who could not even rely on medical assistance. Several experiments were done on female bodies with the excuse of only trying to find out more about their reproductive organs. It was all done in the name of science. Constant controversy was also present in the medical sphere. None would protest or find the procedures women were subject to were controversial, such as removing the clitoris to calm women or removing the ovaries as a cure for female masturbation. "The removal of the ovaries was developed in 1872. The next year, it was recommended for 'non-ovarian conditions', especially masturbation, so that by 1906 about 150,000 American women were without ovaries" (Wolf, 2002, pp. 245-246). On the other side, a simple medicine that would lower the level of libido, which was to be administered only to male criminals, was seen as controversial. "Depo-Provera, a drug that lowers the libido of male criminals, is controversial because it is barbaric to intervene in male sexuality" (Wolf, 2002, p. 249). While female sexuality was wide open to



interference and experiment, male sexuality was limited. Medicine or procedures that could affect male sexuality were considered wrongful and widely questioned. Female castration was beneficial since it would calm women and help them be better wives for their husbands. A better wife meant a happier husband and would mean a better society.

Although the effects of silicone on the body were unknown, that did not stop the breast enlargement surgeries and injections on the faces of several women. “The long-term carcinogenic effect of silicone is unknown” (Wolf, 2002, p. 239). The only thing that mattered was how to make women feel more unsure about their bodies and how much they would cash in with all those new medical procedures.

On another topic, Susan Faludi approaches the subject of mental health. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Faludi refers how rises in mental health cases in the female gender were due to their ascension to independence. “If baby-boom women hadn’t received their independence, their theory went, then the single ones would be married and the careerists would be home with their children—in both cases, feeling calmer, healthier, and saner” (Faludi, 2006, p. 50). Once again, this, of course, had no way of being proven. There could be many reasons behind the choice of women to stay single; it could also be due to a matter of sexual orientation, which had nothing to do with the so-called “independence”. Adding to this, during the war, many women worked even though they were married and with children. Although it was, and still is, more challenging for a woman to progress in her career and being a mother, working does not prevent a woman to be a mother. If women were given better working conditions, the number of births could increase. Women can do both if only given the proper conditions. Unfortunately, men preferred to worsen or make it harder for women to have a career as they would assume such strategy would lead them to run back home and procreate as if they were rabbits. I do believe that it had precisely the opposite result. Without the proper conditions to support their children, many had to opt to delay their motherhood time and time again.

All this business about how hard it is to be a single woman doesn’t make much sense when you look at what’s really going on. It’s single men who have the worst of it. When men marry, their mental health massively increases. (Faludi, 2006, p. 33)

Regarding mental health, children are not a synonym for healthiness in the mother. In fact, they can add to depression and stress. “Single women who worked, they found, were in far better mental and physical shape than married women, with or without children, who stayed home” (Faludi, 2006, p. 51). The decrease in women’s mental health was not due to them “fleeing” from their female duties. Instead, it was due to their realisation of the world they were living in. The realisation that they are only expected to procreate and fulfil men’s desires. Adding to this, those who could find a job suffered from the pressure

many employees put on them to make them quit. Piling up on this, there were cases of sexual harassment in workplaces which were shared and regarded by men as expected. Their co-worker's point of view was that they should stay home if they did not want to be harassed. As always, throughout the course of history, the female gender has always been blamed. If their co-workers made sexual comments about her body, it was her fault, either by how she dressed or her undesired presence. "Although historically it became an issue at the workplace, before that, women were already victims of sexual harassment on the streets, in shops, in private gatherings or public meetings" (Amâncio, 2001, p. 10). Women's job was to prevent men from having these thoughts or desires. It was not a man's responsibility to control their urges but a woman's responsibility to prevent them. "[W]omen are expected to control men's desire and to protect their own dignity" (Amâncio, 2001, p. 10). Putting that aside, although many magazines and articles claimed that female entry into the work sphere led to an increase in cases of depression, Faludi argues that those claims had no actual fundament. "In fact, no one knew whether single women were more or less depressed in the '80s; no epidemiological study had actually tracked changes in single women's mental health" (Faludi, 2006, p. 51).

Contrary to what the media was trying to show, women entering work and improved access to education had helped improve their health. "In reality, women's quest for economic and educational equality has only improved reproductive health and fertility. Better education and bigger paychecks breed better nutrition, fitness, and health care, all important contributors to higher fecundity" (Faludi, 2006, p. 45). Contrary to what the media led to believe, women entering the working sphere did not contribute to lower birth numbers. One of the contributors to the decrease in births was also one which men claimed as a taboo – male infertility. "A 1988 congressional study on infertility concluded that, given the lack of information on male infertility, 'efforts on prevention and treatment are largely guesswork'" (Faludi, 2006, p. 47). Women's infertility is widely spoken about and constantly discussed. It is known that they can have various medical problems which can cause it, and ways to prevent it or fight are searched. While it is known that a woman cannot get pregnant if there is no sexual relation between both genders (although now there are medical procedures), men's fertility is usually kept in the dark. While in our society, men's infertility is often judged and viewed as downgrading, in Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is not only a forbidden topic as it is a forbidden word. "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (Atwood, 2017, p. 70). Even if in our reality there is not a written law forbidding the use of the word sterile, there is a sort of law still present. Women know better than to claim a man can be sterile. Even if only to approach the possibility of him being the cause of failed

pregnancies.

As previously mentioned, in the 60s, abortion became a constant topic of discussion. Everyone had something to say about a woman's pregnancy, especially if it was unwanted. Through the following years, there was unprecedented persecution of all pregnant women. It occurred whether they were planning to carry the pregnancy to the end or interrupt it. "In periods of backlash, birth control becomes less available, abortion is restricted, and women who avail themselves of it are painted as 'selfish' or 'immoral'" (Faludi, 2006, p. 70). If men wanted to keep women under their grasp, the ultimate way of doing it was by controlling their bodies, specifically their reproductive organs. They probably viewed such movement as a persuasion tool. They had to let women know that if they continued with their marches and advocacies for equal rights, they were the ones holding the real power and could make things worse for them. Not only, as Faludi refers, do they get a grip over birth control as a repercussion against abortions emerges. A Pro-Life campaign gained strength at this time, and things escalated as never before.

At their instigation, between 1977 and 1989, seventy-seven family-planning clinics were torched or bombed (in at least seven instances, during working hours, with employees and patients inside), 117 were targets of arson, 250 received bomb threats, 231 were invaded, and 224 vandalized. (Faludi, 2006, p. 420)

Abortion became rapidly viewed as a maleficent attitude of the woman who decided to recur to it, instead of carrying on with the pregnancy. Evoking the echoes of the Witch-Hunting Era, these women started to be persecuted and judged wherever they went. Anti-abortion movements grew by the day, and the United States reached a point where the fetus had more rights than the women who carried it.

"The fetus is a conscious, even rambunctious tyke, the mother a passive, formless, and inanimate 'environment.' The fetus is the occupant, the mother is temporary living quarters" (Faludi, 2006, p. 429). The use of the word occupant hints at a predominance of the fetus over the woman carrying it. Such wording implies that in this equation, the one who matters is the unborn baby. A more brutal metaphor could be making bread. When making bread, the element we find relevant is the bread itself. No one asks about the oven where it was prepared. It is normal to focus on what comes from it once it is ready. The same thing started to happen to pregnant women. There was no sympathy or compassion towards them. People only cared about what would form in them. The fetus was the priority, not the woman carrying him. Such metaphor comes to mind as the uterus is often referred to as an oven and the baby or fetus as the bum.

More extreme measures started to rise when: "Several state and local governments even enacted

laws requiring physicians to advise women that abortions could lead to later miscarriages, premature births, and infertility” (Faludi, 2006, p. 45). If they could not discourage them with laws or the eminence of going to hell, they tried to manipulate them through doctors. We are to believe that when we enter a doctor’s office, we will receive nothing but the truth. That is, their advice and prescriptions will be not only for our good as they will be impartial to social pressures. In reality, during this period of history, doctors could be giving wrongful advice and manipulating information regarding the damages an abortion could bring to a woman. “By identifying women as victims of their right to an abortion, the antiabortion movement did more than debase the rhetoric – it reinforced the backlash thesis” (Faludi, 2006, p. 415).

One of the most shocking discoveries I made while studying for the elaboration of this dissertation was the one about the “forced” sterilisations some women had to undergo. “Now they could choose to give up the jobs that they needed to survive or become sterilized and give up what they had been told was their most glorious reason for living” (Faludi, 2006, p. 459). In an effort to eliminate women from the workplace, many companies emitted a communication saying that if women wanted to maintain their job, they had to undergo sterilisation. This was based on the fact that their jobs required them to be in contact with chemicals that could cause fertile problems. They should proceed with the surgery if they wished to carry on with their positions. This way, the company could not be blamed for infertility consequences and found it also to be a way to encourage women to go home and do what they were born for, being a mother. Although they were promised they would maintain their jobs if they underwent surgery, later it was revealed to not be true. “First the company’s fetal protection policy defined the women by their wombs, then it forced them to make the decision themselves to cut their wombs from their bodies. And having compelled the choice, the company ultimately revoked all options—the working women were sent home anyway, without their uteruses” (Faludi, 2006, p. 460). Many were the cases of women who underwent surgery and found themselves jobless after it. They had no choice but to comply with removing their uterus so they could sustain themselves, and even possibly their children, only to find themselves jobless, nevertheless.

On a final note, in the 60s, a measure which sought to fight inequality was heavily criticised both by men and women. The Equal Pay Act was signed in 1963 by USA President John F. Kennedy. With this amendment, the objective was to end the pay gap between women’s and men’s salaries for equal work. As in every passing of laws that aimed to reach equality between genders, there were opposers. For many, the passing of this amendment meant that more women would seek jobs, resulting in fewer women at home focussing on procreating. “Allan Carlson, president of the conservative Rockford Institute, proposed that the best way to cure birth dearth was to get rid of the Equal Pay Act and federal laws banning sex

discrimination in employment” (Faludi, 2006, p. 49).

## **2. Entering Gilead**

### **2.1. A Handmaid's Journey**

When Margaret Atwood wrote her novel, she did not know the immense impact that it would bring. This novel, published in 1985, would be used in the future to protest and expose what is wrong with the society we live in.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, we follow the narration of a Handmaid, whose real name is never revealed. Through a series of flash-forward and flashbacks, we get to know her story but also the new reality in which she is now forced to live. She is now under a new totalitarian regime called Gilead. This regime has occupied most of the continental United States, with exceptions such as Chicago that is still fighting back the occupation. The narration and set take place in the city of Boston.

At the beginning of the novel Offred, the protagonist and narrator, introduces us to a visual representation of the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center. There, the Handmaids are re-educated and live until they are posted. Constant surveillance shows the fearful atmosphere that surrounds them. "The lights were turned down but not out" (Atwood, 2017, p. 19). By recounting this specific proceeding, it is perceptible how they are under constant observation. There is no room for secrets or rebellion. There is no trust.

This new world is constructed upon social classes. Each class has its function. The Commanders are the most powerful, they control everything. They can be politicians, military leaders or lawmakers. This class is served by Guardians and Marthas. Guardians are the guards or police of the new regime. They can be promoted to Angels which will then be allowed a Wife. The Wives are the women of Commanders of Angels. Their power only lies in giving orders to Marthas, which can be overruled by their husbands. Marthas are the domestic servants. They can serve at a house or in domestic industries, for example, laundries. Above them, there is the class of the Aunts. These women are responsible for the re-education of the Handmaids, take care of births, and teach the Daughters and they are the only female class allowed to read and write. This comes from the need of keeping genealogical records so there are no Handmaids, or future Wives, assigned to a related man.

In the second chapter, some time has already passed. Offred is already in her third colocation, as later is revealed. More of the rules and costumes of this new society are unveiled. New characters are introduced as well as new social classes. In her new posting, there are two Marthas, Cora and Rita. They are responsible for all domestic chores around the house and are not allowed to marry or have relationships. As for the Wife, she is the female ruler of the house. Her time must only be occupied by

knitting, caring for her garden or gossiping with other Wives.

When talking about the Wife, Offred mentions that she seems to recognize her, and later she acknowledges her as being Serena Joy. Through a memory, of the time before, we learn that Serena Joy (whose real name was Pam) used to publicly speak about how women should stay at home. Although at the time she did not live according to what she spoke or condemn others for, she now has no choice. Her speeches had come to reality and as living under the rules of Gilead, “[...] she has become speechless” (Atwood, 2017, p. 56) Here we can note the utter irony of the situation. Before the Republic of Gilead was established, Serena Joy had a freedom she defended that should end. In her perspective, women should return home and dedicate themselves to “[...] the sanctity of the home” (Atwood, 2017, p. 56). Although she was not complying with what she wanted to “implant” her course of action certainly had an impact on her current situation. In the novel, it is visible that Commander Waterford, her husband, is a powerful man. We know also that they were married previously (or else she would have become an Aunt or even an Unwoman). Her words shaped the creation of the rules and positions that the Wives are now underneath. Now she is at home, but at what cost? She used to make her life by singing and afterwards by speeches. Now she does not have the right to an opinion. Even if she does achieve her dream of being a mother, through the sacrifice of the Handmaids, what kind of life will her child have? What sufferings will come to her child if she has the mischance of being born a female? What kind of mother will she be as she must measure each of the words that come out of her lips? If she is and will be helpless. She has no power, not even to protect what she desires the most.

For women, despite their role, reading and writing are absolutely forbidden. Due to this, changes were made. For example, to differentiate the tokens she receives to go shopping, there are drawings of what she can get. “[...] even the names of shops were too much temptation for us” (Atwood, 2017, p. 39). Even if changes to the ways shopping was done, nothing changed regarding women being seen as the mere responsible for everything that involves the house. Women are expected to take care of everything and do it with a smile on their faces. Men must not waste time with things like shopping.

The night of the Ceremony arrives and with it one of the most grotesque acts that the new regime imposes. On this particular night, when the Handmaid is fertile, it is expected for the Handmaid and the Commander to have intercourse, all this done under the Wife's surveillance. The entire household must first gather. “They too have been summoned by the bell, they resent it, [...] But they need to be here, they all need to be here, the ceremony demands it” (Atwood, 2017, p. 88). Offred is the first to arrive; followed by the Marthas, Nick (the Commander's *chauffeur*), the Wife and later the Commander. The Commander reads a Biblical passage of Rachel and Leah. She will then have to go to the Wife's room,

where she will lay her head on Serena's hip. All clothes remain as the Commander will do his duty to fertilize the Handmaid. Ceremony consists on the Commander having a sexual intercourse with the Handmaid, while the Wife holds her wrists; the Handmaid has no choice. Either she performs the Ceremony or she will be sent to the Colonies, which is certain death.

As the reader is now aware of the method used to inseminate the Handmaids, a Birth follows it. All the Handmaids are called upon it to testify, as a sort of incentive. Once again, the Handmaid must suffer. The Handmaid she knows to be Janine is ready to deliver. She does not receive any sort of medication. She even runs the risk of going through all the pain of labour to give birth to a stillborn, which would be renamed as an Unbaby. To make the situation eerier, while Janine screams due to the contractions, in the living room the Wives enact labour. The Wife, who will swipe the newborn from Janine's arms, screams and does breathing exercises while encouraged by the Wives who happily surround her. When the Handmaid is ready to give birth, she is transferred to a unique chair where the Wife will seat behind her. This specific chair serves to enact the biblical passage where Leah delivers upon Rachel's knees. Luckily the baby seems healthy, despite it, not all is good news; "[...] a girl, poor thing" (Atwood, 2017, p. 127).

Along the novel the narrator exposes some of her memories, some from the time previous to Gilead and others from her time at the Red Centre. This particular one is aided by what she heard from Alma, a Handmaid like her. Together with what she experienced and what she heard from them, she retells the time Moira was last seen. The story is told as she was a little fly on the wall and observed a conversation between Aunt Lydia and Janine. She had been called there as an attempt by Aunt Lydia to obtain more info or even find an accomplice on Moira's escape. At the end of this narrative, Offred tells what Moira's break out ended up representing to the Handmaids. Through her escape, she became a symbol of hope. She was the crack on the castle of glass that was Gilead. Even so, the fear, as always, is still present. The Handmaids still believe that sooner or later, she might reaper in that doomed place. Worse would be the punishment she would receive. If there is something Gilead is great at is punishing every single crime. The penalty is always feared and menacing no matter what the crime is.

On an inevitable night, Nick tells Offred that the Commander wants to see her. The reader is left hanging as several passages go until we reach the night where they meet. Her fate lies in his hands and the thought of meeting him alone, against the rules, makes her heart pound as fast as the readers'. The first meeting reveals itself to be innocent. He asks her to play a game of Scrabble, once again bending the rules. The clandestine meetings proceed as she profits from his attempt to connect to make herself safe. She knows that she must be cautious as she is replaceable, a mere object for company and eventual



pleasure. “For him, I must remember, I am only a whim” (Atwood, 2017, p. 157).

After some nocturnal meetings with her Commander, he asks her “Up for a little excitement?” (Atwood, 2017, p. 221). He gives her a dress with feathers which by its looks is certainly from the society before. She is told to dress and some makeup is also provided. Hidden under a blue cloak, which she is sure to be one of Serena’s belongings, he takes her to a hotel. She immediately recognizes it. That hotel was where Luke and she used to meet before his divorce. Those memories even if filled with love will not save her from her current situation. The hotel is now used by diplomats and Commanders for only one purpose. Getting the sex which, they had claimed had become too easy. His true purposes and intentions are finally unveiled. He sees her as an object like everyone else. Particularly as a sexual object. A way to obtain pleasure. Despite the repugnant reason for her presence at Jezebel’s, this visit ends up bringing her something positive. There, between all the women she reunites with Moira. She discovers that she had been caught. She tells her that they proposed an escape from the Colonies. That is how she ended up working at Jezebel’s.

At a certain point, Serena calls her as Offred was not getting pregnant. She is aware that her time is running out. If she does not get pregnant, she will be moved to a new house; to a new Commander. In a somehow desperate but still cruel moment, she says that they should try with another man. She wants her to have sexual relations with Nick in her fertile period. Offred has no other choice but to accept. Even if the circumstances for their first real encounter were surrounded by selfishness and apathy, later they continue it in secrecy. These meetings make her feel she is cheating on Luke, her husband. Despite it, Nick becomes her refuge, her only escape from her unbearable life. This seems to bring a spark of hope to the character’s life. Nonetheless, it also has a downside. Due to it, the Handmaid starts to be more distracted. She does not pay as much attention to her surroundings as she did, which in the end explains why she did not expect the Eyes to pick her, even if it is the way Nick found to save her. She was careless, and that could have led her to her end.

After this cliff-hanging ending, the reader is presented with some new information. This is done through Historical Notes. This sort of epilogue does not confirm or deny Offred’s ending. Professor Pieixoto, the researcher who founded Offred’s records, seems to dismiss the narrator’s pain and suffering. He even questions the authenticity of those tapes in some passages.

## **2.2. Going Back to Gilead**

Thirty-four years after the release of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood presented her readers with a sequel to the narrative. *The Testaments* was published in 2019 and gave the readers a new path into

Gilead Regime. Differing from her previous novel, this one presents the narrative of three distinct characters. We follow the written pages by Aunt Lydia, a character introduced in the first novel. Agnes, the daughter of Offred, which is only mentioned through memories, and Daisy. For those who have watched the TV show, it is easy to understand who Daisy truly is.

The book flows between these three testimonies. To indicate that it is Aunt Lydia writing we get the title *The Ardua Hall Holograph*. For Offred's daughters, we get (Witness) 369 A for Agnes, and (Witness) 369 B for Daisy, which is later revealed to be Nicole.

Diverging from the previous novel, we know from the beginning that both girls might have survived, otherwise they would not be recounting their story as a testimony against Gilead.

In the novel, we follow Gilead some years later. Both speaking testimonies are given from the present, which is 15 years after the events of the first novel.

The novel begins with Aunt Lydia telling how she received a statue of herself to honour her good work. She does not seem pleased as "Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive" (Atwood, 2019, p. 10). This makes her shiver as it appears before her as a premonition to her ending. Just like Offred, she hungers for a reader. For someone to know her story.

After this, we are taken to Agnes. She is the daughter of an important Commander and had three Marthas, which showed power. She believed her mother was the Wife Tabitha, but, from the beginning, the reader is aware that Agnes is in fact Hannah, daughter of Offred. Although Agnes is not aware of that reality herself.

Our third narrator is introduced as Daisy. She is a child living in Canada and her parents are Neil and Melanie. Knowing what this novel is about it is easy to make the connection that this girl was associated with Gilead, even if she is not aware of it. Her life soon turns tragic as on the day of her birthday both her parents die due to a car bomb. This ends up being revealed to be a consequence of her disobedience which led her to participate in a protest march about Gilead. This ended up showing her face on television making Gilead aware of her whereabouts. Thanks to this single event her life starts to crumble.

Little by little, Aunt Lydia unveils what her life was like before Gilead. When she had the right to work, she was a judge. The irony is laid upon this. How could someone who was a judge become what she became? All her injustice and cruel acts? The truth is that she "had to kill or be killed". Despite all the pain she had inflicted it was that or be condemned to the same fate she condemned many.

Tragedy does not afflict only Daisy (Nicole). Agnes's mother dies and not long after her father, Commander Kyle, remarries a Wife named Paula. Her father seems to only pay attention to his new wife

and when she expresses her wish to have a child, they get a Handmaid. "It was as if I had become invisible to both of them. They looked at me, and through me, and saw the wall" (Atwood, 2019, p. 74). Along with all the suffering she is already going through her friend Shunamite adds a piece of new information. She tells her how Tabitha was not her real mother; she was the daughter of a Handmaid.

In a disturbing passage, Agnes is sent to the dentist alone, for the first time. The dentist, the father of a friend of hers, abuses her sexually. Agnes suspects that Paula knew that would happen and that is the reason why she did not allow a Martha to accompany her. "After that I stopped praying for forgiveness about the hatred I felt towards her" (Atwood, 2019, p. 88). Her eyes start to unveil the truth from this point.

The Handmaid posted at her house dies during birth. Ofkyle was her name. Agnes feels sick when she finds out that the poor woman had been cut open mercilessly to save the baby. It was clear that she had no choice and that what the doctors saw before their eyes was only a "two-legged womb" and a baby needing rescue. Agnes later finds out that her name was Crystal and promises she will not fall into oblivion. The death of her Handmaid brings even more pain to her as she starts being avoided in school. Due to superstition, she becomes taboo.

We are then transported again to Daisy's testimony. A friend of her parents has picked her up from school. On the following day, a man called Elijah tells her the truth. She has not yet recovered from her parents' death news when she finds out she is from Gilead. She is baby Nicole. She is the symbol of hope that she fails to understand.

Letting the reader hang on to that thought, Aunt Lydia narrates what happened to her after she was picked from work by armed men. All the women transported to those facilities were treated inhumanly. They were living like jailed animals, with faeces and other body excrements surrounding them and nauseating the air. "If I looked deep into the eyes of one of these men, would there be a human being looking out at me? And if not, then what?" (Atwood, 2019, p. 104). To worsen their situation, now and then, some women are taken away and publicly executed. After some time, women in brown garments began to replace the armed man in the public executions. The premise at this point is evident. Kill or be killed!

Agnes recounts how she was only 13 years old when her marriage arrangements began. "Thirteen is not too young. [...] It does wonders for them if we can find the proper match. They settle right down" (Atwood, 2019, p. 136). Now that she is on her way to becoming a Wife, she starts to attend the Rubies Premarital Preparatory. Both her friends, Becka and Shunamite, are also attending classes there. Her friends suffer a turn in their lives as Shunamite had discovered she was also the daughter of a

Handmaid. Becca tries to commit suicide during class. She does so by cutting her wrists.

A new man is revealed to Daisy to be part of the resistance. George, a man who used to go to her parents' shop, recounts he was there when her parents died. He retells how her parents were already dead when they were put in the car by unknown people. This narration shows how Gilead must be behind the plotting of Daisy parents' death. It was no accident. They were the target.

On a desperate note, Aunt Lise goes to Aunt Lydia. She recounts how Becca had tried to commit suicide as she rejects to get married. To save the girl's life, Aunt Lydia decides to accept her to become an Aunt. She does speak with the girl as it is clear that all that aversion to the male sexual organ must come from trauma. Knowing who her father is, the reader can assume that what happened to Agnes might have occurred to Becca as well. In this passage, we get a glimpse of a heartfelt and kind Aunt Lydia, which is not even close to the depiction we get of her in the first novel.

Soon after the beginning of her wedding plans, she finds who her suitors are. Amongst them is Commander Judd. He is a senior Commander whose Wives tend to mysteriously fall ill, as soon as they lose their youth. Despite being presented to her three suitors; the choice does not lay in her hands. It is no surprise that her father is the decision-maker. She is then promised to Commander Judd, who is old enough to be her grandfather. Knowing of this arrangement, and the history of Commander's Judd Wives, Aunt Lydia visits her. Three days before her wedding Aunt Lydia subtly suggests there is a way out of that marriage. "Not every girl is suitable for marriage" (Atwood, 2019, p. 198). Here she finds that her friend Becca has become a Supplicant, and so can she. Later on, the reader finds that Shunammite took Agnes place on marrying Commander Judd.

Through Aunt Lydia's scriptures, it is confirmed that Becca was also sexually abused by her father. Becca had opened up to Agnes regarding that subject. To give the dentist the punishment he deserves, she calls upon one of her more trustworthy Aunts. She asks Aunt Elizabeth to bear false witness against the dentist. Due to it, he gets condemned. "All things come to she who waits. Time wounds all heels. Patience is virtue. Vengeance is mine" (Atwood, 2019, p. 216).

According to the plan that had been going on in Canada, Daisy gets taken away by the Pearl Girls to Gilead. They planned to get Daisy in to get information out. All of this by trusting an unidentified contact they had there. The Pearl Girls are Supplicants whose temporary departure from Gilead is permitted. Their mission is to bring more faithful back home with them. Without really knowing what waits, Daisy goes with them and joins the Aunts to be trained.

Aunt Lydia visits Commander Judd to let him know that Nichole has arrived. Daisy, who has adopted the name Jade, joins Becca and Agnes. During her training and readings, some mysterious files

appear on Agnes desk. Through them, she discovers the truth behind Paula's first husband's death. Paula and her father, Commander Kyle, were having an affair even before Tabitha had passed away. It had been her who killed her first husband and blamed the Handmaid. With new papers showing up at her desk, she also discovers what tends to happen to Commander Judd's Wives. Later on, she receives the most relevant document. In it, she finds who her biological mother was. She finds out that Nichole is her sister, and she is currently back in Gilead.

Aunt Lydia calls the three of them. Seeing her time running out, she tells Becka and Agnes who Jade truly is. Jade is baby Nichole. She fills them in on her plan to get Nichole back to Canada with information to take Gilead down for good. Nichole will go instead of Becka, disguised as a Pearl Girl since their first mission abroad is coming soon. Becka, not wanting to be responsible for the failure of their plan, ends up committing suicide in the water cistern. By doing so, they will have enough time to escape, as her body would take some time to be discovered. Finally reunited, Agnes and Nichole, after some setbacks, reach Canada. The rebels retrieve the information from Nichole, and the Gilead Regime meets at last its end. "I said in my heart, Dear God. Thank you" (Atwood, 2019, p. 336).

### **2.3. Is There an Improvement?**

After reading the first novel we may find, behind all the horror and cruelty, a certain bright side. Thanks to its oppressive regime and rigid laws, women are no longer harassed or raped. It is at least shown that if it does happen, men are severely punished. "The Handmaids in my book are free from rape, narrowly defined" (Atwood, 2022, p. 314). Such punishment is showed at a Particution, which Offred narrates. "'This man,' says Aunt Lydia, 'has been convicted of rape.' Her voice trembles with rage, and a kind of triumph. 'He was once a Guardian. [...] The penalty for rape, as you know, is death. Deuteronomy 22:23-29'" (Atwood, 2017, p. 264). When Aunt Lydia blows the whistle, the Handmaids are allowed to do as they please, which ends up being to kill the man with their bare hands and pulsating rage. The narrator also feels the rage and finds the punishment to be deserved, until Ofglen discloses the reality. "He wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours" (Atwood, 2017, p. 266). Meaning he was indeed part of Mayday, the underground resistance. Gilead had convicted him, a certainly known member of Mayday, of rape for knowing to be a crime that would instigate rage and would give him a painful death. Such crime was better than letting them know of the underground rebellion. This way he would not go down as a martyr but as a vile man who had committed the atrocity of rapping a Handmaid. This allusion of bright side is completely shattered in the second novel. Through the narration of Agnes and Aunt Lydia, the reader becomes aware of how many cases of crimes against the female gender might

actually have simply been swept under the carpet. It is noticeable that cases omitted tend to have been practiced by men in high positions. Nothing has truly changed, those who hold power break the same laws they created and carry on unpunished, untouched. Becka's father is first introduced when Agnes is sent alone to the dentist at the orders of her stepmother. He is shown to be a powerful man since her daughter frequents the same school of Commanders daughters. "He was the best dentist, said Vera: all the top Commanders and their families went to him" (Atwood, 2019, p. 85). All seems to go well until he touches Agnes breasts and proceeds to molest her behind the doors of his medical office. "The Aunts at school taught us that you should tell someone in authority – meaning them – if any man touched you inappropriately, but we knew not to be so dumb as to make a fuss, especially if it was a well-respected man like Dr. Grove" (Atwood, 2019, p. 87). Agnes leaves traumatized and develops a profound fear of men and their sexual organs, as it is shown later. The traumatic experience of the young girl serves to show how sexual crimes are still present in this new society. She is harassed and certainly many before and even after her. A hint of the possible knowledge of her stepmother is also visible, as Agnes herself believes such is the reason why she was for the first time, sent alone. The girl is also aware that she cannot do anything as her word would not be taken as truthful or even considerate. Female word continues to hold no power. "Even with grown women, four female witnesses are the equivalent of one male, here in Gilead" (Atwood, 2019,p 217).

#### **2.4. Defining Atwood's Novels**

In her article entitled *Dystopia, Gerontology and the Writing of Margaret Atwood*, Helen Snaith refers to Margaret Atwood's novel as "a feminist dystopia wherein women are categorised by their ability to reproduce" (Snaith, 2017, p. 117). A dystopia is the antithesis of a utopia, which is "a place or state that exists only in the imagination, where everything is perfect" (Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 776). Furthermore, "[d]ystopian literature is a form of speculative fiction that began as a response to utopian literature. A dystopia is an imagined community or society that is dehumanizing and frightening" (MasterClass, 2022).

Atwood defines her 1985 novel as "a classic dystopia" (Atwood, 2022, p. 9), which is in turn a sub-genre of speculative fiction. "I myself have written two works of 'science fiction' or, if you prefer, 'speculative fiction': *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*" (Atwood, 2022, p. 9).

The main difference between science fiction and speculative is that the first one creates a world with creations or rules which cannot take shape in reality without breaking the laws of physics.

However, speculative fiction is not fantasy fiction, as it rules out the use of anything as

material which violates established scientific fact, laws of nature, call it what you will, i.e., it must [be] possible to the universe as we know it. (Heinlein, 1990, p. 49)

Once again, the author provides a summarized differentiation of the science fiction genre from the speculative one; “this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, [...] speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, such as credit cards, and takes place on Planet Earth” (Atwood, 2022, p. 8). Since her novel is not written to occur in the present, but instead in a near-by future (as a way of warning to what kind of future our choices might lead) she claims, “[i]f you are writing about the future and you aren’t doing forecast journalism, you’ll most likely be writing something people will call either science fiction or speculative fiction” (Atwood, 2022, p. 7).

When discussing *The Handmaid’s Tale* novel there is a topic where the author majorly disagrees with the large number of critics that classify her work as a *feminist dystopia*. At the time she published her novel, dystopias had mainly a male lead character and were written according to that same male point of view. I do agree that writing a dystopia with a female main character and following her point of view does not turn the novel into a feminist one; “[...] except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered ‘feminist’ by those who think women ought not to have these things” (Atwood, 2022, p. 10). Here the main problem is denoted. Critics tend to label her novel as *feminist* solely based on the fact that it is narrated by one and we view Gilead through female eyes. There would not be such a distinction if we did not live in a society where the patriarchal roots are still visible. It could be referred to as a feminist dystopia if the foundation for its argument would be laid on the representation of the constant downgrading of women and not by the gender of its main protagonist. If the character would be male, it could well evidence as equally the inequality between both genders. Such as it could have a female character and not approach feminist topics. History has actually proven time and time again that men can be feminists (defenders of equality between genders) and that not all women are born feminists or support feminism (take the example of Phyllis Schlafly who many believe was the inspiration for Serena Joy’s character).

*The Testaments* is a continuation of the previous novel which takes time fifteen years after the ending events of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This novel is also speculative fiction and a dystopia. One of the improvements it brought was not the narration done by a female lead, but three. The 2019 novel brings three female characters forwards so they can share their stories and their individual point of view on the theocracy which is Gilead. “In other respects, the despotism I describe is the same as all real ones and most imagined ones” (Atwood, 2022, p. 10). Which means Gilead is not totally invented as it reflects many aspects from real totalitarian regimes. This can apply to both novels as in both there are connection

points to real events. Atwood mentioned several times that in these two particular novels she does not invent much. That is the social events that do take place have occurred at some point in our history. It is that innovation which makes the novels such well-constructed and terrifying warnings of what we can be walking towards if we do not take action.



### **3. Female Suffering**

In the work *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, Susan Faludi reflects on humanity's reaction to the feminist movement. Particularly in the second wave of feminism there is a noticeable backlash present on the oppositional movements or even marketing techniques. For centuries men walked the earth with the certainty that there would always be someone under. At the lowest of the social hierarchy, women gave them a sense of security.

Susan Faludi provides what men considered to be the definition of manhood.

For twenty years, the Monitor's pollsters have asked its subjects to define masculinity. And for twenty years, the leading definition, ahead by a huge margin, has never changed. It isn't being a leader, athlete, lothario, decision maker, or even just being 'born male.' It is simply this: being a 'good provider for his family'. (Faludi, 2006, p. 79)

This perspective not only puts men, as it has been, above women but it also provides imagery of women as the weak gender, unable to provide for themselves. Not only do they see themselves as superior but they consider themselves essential for the sustaining of humanity. Evoking the Renaissance Era, they put themselves at the very centre of the Universe. No sun has a chance against the virile and powerful man!

Guided by this narrowed view of society many are aggravated by the advances in the race for equality. Step by step, women move forward leaving men behind. Or at last, that is how they see it. The thing they fear the most is not even their mortality but the possibility of women achieving a powerful position. Independent women always provoked a cold shiver down their spines, why should it be any different now?

Atwood takes this fear alongside its negative reaction and builds a novel around it. She provides an immersive reality that answers the question "What would happen if men won?" Gilead brings what they see as the traditional roles back to the reality of society.

#### **3.1. The Way to Oppress Women**

Margaret Atwood was living through the second wave of feminism while writing the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The narrator, Offred, also lived her adult life through such a phase of history. This is shown through her memories that even recollects going with her mother to a protest against pornography where magazines were burned. "The woman handed me one of the magazines. It had a pretty woman

on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands” (Atwood, 2017, p. 51). Offred tells how even if grotesque, the picture did not scare her at the time. Her childhood innocence views the image as a woman “[...] swinging, like Tarzan from a vine” (Atwood, 2017, p. 51). Now, an adult, she sees the image for what it truly means. The depiction of women as inferior, as sexual tools for men. As Andrea Dworkin states in her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*,

In 1975 in the United States, organized crime reportedly sold “snuff” films to private collectors of pornography. In these films, women actually were maimed, sliced into pieces, fucked, and killed—the perfect Sadean synthesis. Magazines and films depicting the mutilation of women for the sake of sexual pleasure now abound. (Dworkin, 1989, p. 71)

The increasing violence in pornography gave rise to a movement against the depiction of women in such brutal and violent fantasies. “We said that particular images of women—bound and gagged in pornography magazines, draped over cars in advertisements, caricatured as mothers-in-law or nagging wives in sitcoms—were oppressive and degrading” (Gamble, 2001, pp. 88,89). This in its own time gave rise to an anti-pornography movement (to note the two main activists, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon), which is also depicted in the novel by the burning of the magazines. The flames are a symbol of purification and rebirth, both things needed to end the ascension of violence not only in films and magazines but in real life relationships as well. The depiction of women as objects contributed to an increase in the number of rapes as much as it did bring violence to sexual relationships. Women were expected to behave just like in pornography. “The object, the woman, goes out into the world formed as men have formed her to be used as men wish to use her” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 111). Or “[w]omen, the logs at issue, cannot be objective or act objectively because objects do not see or know” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 108).

During their time at the Red Centre, the Handmaids are shown pornographic films but also films that seem to depict women’s rights manifestations. In those later films, they exhibited without sound although during the pornographic one the sound is mandatory so the screams can be heard and also be discouraging. “They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once, but they don’t want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying” (Atwood, 2017, pp. 121-122).

It is in one of these films that she sees her mother along with other women in the *Take Back The Night* movement. This was a movement (which some believed to have its beginning in London in 1877) that brought the subject of violence against women and sexual violence to the streets. “The New York Radical Feminists hosted the first ever rape speak-out in 1971, acknowledging a long-silenced issue in a

way that resonated with many survivors” (Hutton, 2020). The movement got its name from the constant episodes of women being raped while walking the streets at night. This particular movement is used to reflect on the so-called “freedom from” presented in the novel. One might discuss that women in Gilead are now safer since the night is no longer something to avoid or be afraid of. Despite this seeming safety, women end up suffering due to new situations. Not only are the Handmaids forced to have sexual interactions with the Commanders, majorly older than them, but they also do not possess any sort of freedom. Not even of speech or even choice. Gilead might bring some changes that, viewed from a certain light, can be interpreted as positive, still it ends up being a false safety. The streets do seem to be safe and free from crimes, but at what cost? Are women truly safe or are these crimes hidden or more discreet?

With the use of Offred’s memories, the reader is able to see how Gilead worked to achieve its current position. It is clear that such rise to power was not done without a careful and well-thought plan. The narrator recollects how the money had become obsolete and the *Compubank* became the new currency. The term *Compubank* suggests that it was done digitally as it is nowadays. With new ways of virtual payment such as Paypal or Applepay, we are also on the path for cash being discontinued, not to mention the rise of bitcoins and other forms of virtual money that are emerging. Virtual and online transactions make it easier to control money especially if the plan is to keep people from fleeing. “I guess that’s how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand. If there had still been portable money, it would have been more difficult” (Atwood, 2017, p. 170). The Sons of Jacob (founders of Gilead), suspend the Constitution after it is declared state of emergency by the army. This occurs after the entire government is killed, on what initially was believed to be a terrorist attack, a state of emergency is declared by the army. Such course of action gave them the power to do what they pleased. Their rules were imposed and step by step women were taken back in time. Their rights were being erased as once before. First, they lost access to their money and bank accounts. “Women can’t hold property any more, she said. It’s a new law” (Atwood, 2017, p. 175). Echoing the voices of the past women’s property was passed to their husbands or the next male of kin. Following the loss of possession, women were let go of their jobs. Early signs of a totalitarian regime started to appear “Newspapers were censored and some were closed down, for security reasons they said. The roadblocks began to appear, and Identipasses” (Atwood, 2017, p. 171). The main purpose of the roadblocks was to avoid fertile women to escape. They were essential for their new view on society. “There was a lot more music on the radio than usual, and fewer words” (Atwood, 2017, p. 171). Showing that it was an abrupt transaction as people could not know what to say or were forbidden from doing so by those now holding the power.

What during the transition to the new regime seemed irrelevant or even positive was the shutdown of *Pornomarts*. With the feminist movements against pornography due to its decrepit depiction of women, it was only natural that they saw such action as a positive one. The real problem was what end did those who run these establishments have. Were they executed? Were they spared or escaped? One of the hints Atwood gives us about the controversy of pornography is the fact that Aunt Lydia speaks ill of it. Controlling pornography is a way to also control sex, by doing so the traditional woman is reborn as she is seen as pure. Since Gilead intends to bring society back to the “traditional” roles this seemingly inoffensive measure has a deeper and more tactical focus.

Atwood shows how even if we do believe we have achieved equality, men, and even women, can continue to see it as more of a caprice than a given right. When Offred tells her husband, Luke, that she has lost her job and all her possessions are now his, he brings a patriarchal tone to the conversation. He only underlines that he will take care of her, not that he will try to do something about the injustice that is crushing her down. “It’s only a job, he said, trying to soothe me” (Atwood, 2017, p. 175). Such sentence might seem innocent and caring, hence deceiving the reader of its masculine meaning. Luke says it is only a job as if he were merely talking about a broken cup. As if it were meaningless. It does seem meaningless to him since he did not have to fight for years to be considered fit for a job. In his masculine perspective, it is only a job because she does not need it since he is the one who has to provide for the family.

Offred’s presence at Jezebel’s is the most evident proof that things did not change that much. When during her nocturnal meetings with the Commander he ends up trying to justify Gilead’s course of action. He starts by saying that the major issue was not with women but actually with men. “There was nothing for them anymore” (Atwood, 2017, p. 203). Offred replies that they had money and then refers to sex through the mention of the *Pornycorners* to which he replies: “I’m not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for” (Atwood, 2017, p. 203). This ends up being a major contradiction for the Commander. When in the company of his Handmaid he tells her how easy it was for a man to get sex, since he could even buy it. With this comes also the feeling of lack of effort to achieve such intimacy. It almost seems to show a more sentimental and human side of the Commander, which ends up being erased a few pages later. He takes her to a hotel she immediately recognises as it was the same one she went to with Luke during his marital escapes. Such hotel is now the lobby of Jezebel’s which is simply a prostitution lobby. There is no payment and the girls are only there for lack of choice. Moira, Offred’s friend, tells her how after her attempt to escape she was given a choice or something masked as a choice. She could go to Jezebel’s

or to the Colonies, where she knew certain death awaited her. The core basis of Jezebel contradicts the explanation of the Commander. There, sex is still easy as it seems men cannot go out without it.

As witnessed through Offred's memories of her time in the Red Centre, women are constantly blamed for the current situation in the country she once knew as the United States of America. The low natality rate is majorly due to infertility (not only female) or malformations. These are due to the accumulation of pollution in the atmosphere, which was done at the hands of men. In spite of this, blame is still put on female shoulders. Aunt Lydia, during her lectures, claims that it was the way women lived that decreased birth numbers.

Such narrowed view is reflected in our society. The fault only falls on those who were born with a uterus, not on those who make it difficult for a woman to be both a mother and hold a job. If politics are so kin on increasing the birth rate, there should be a wider investment/ support instead of proceeding with the basic/easiest. Simply sending women home with the hopes/mindset that lacking other options they will dedicate themselves to being mothers will not solve the problem. "The New Right leaders were among the first to articulate the central argument of the backlash—that women's equality is responsible for women's unhappiness" (Faludi, 2006, p. 242). This backlash argument is commonly used to maintain women within the private atmosphere, that is, enclosure by four walls. When women started fighting for equal rights and started to persuade careers of their own, those who are against it leaned upon such argument. Despite the fact that women are not all the same, nor all desire the same, we cannot be blamed for men's inability to see us as equals. These leaders cannot blame the ones who support them for women's emancipation and career access, the only scapegoat left is the opposite gender. Just like the Sons of Jacob (founders of Gilead), they need someone they can blame; women are the easiest ones. Since what they stand for is returning to "traditional" values, they are easily blamed as they are the ones who "left" this so-called tradition. They are to believe that women's unhappiness only came when they finally started to taste the beginnings of equality, when in fact the truth is that they were unhappy before, they just did not have the right to expose it.

In her second novel, *The Testaments*, the only glimpses we have of the past (of life prior to Gilead) is through the writing of Aunt Lydia. Her narration goes into her capturing small details of her previous life. It shows her ascension to power and her determination to survive. The reader discovers that she was a judge previous to the right to work being snatched away, "I was a family court judge" (Atwood, 2019, p. 36). Right at the beginning of her testimony, she states that "[...] writing can be dangerous" (Atwood, 2019, p. 11). Just like in the previous novel we are aware that writing, just like reading, is forbidden to women. The only exception is the Aunts, the class of women who re-educate Handmaids and must keep

geological records of Gilead. They are the ones who set unmarried girls with Commanders and who attribute a Handmaid to the Commander's house. To do so they need to be able to read and write so that the bloodlines will not be stained. In this particular case if she was caught writing she would not be punished for the act itself. The danger does not lie in the action but in the words she is leaving behind. Adding to that fear the one of never having a reader adds to the one mentioned by Offred of never having a listener, "[...] perhaps I will never have a reader" (Atwood, 2019, p. 11).

The most powerful imagery comes from her narration of the process to dehumanize women into becoming Aunts. She recalls how she and her work companions were taken one day from their job-place. How they were put on a gymnasium and all the atrocities that took place in such place. "To breathe was to be nauseated. They were reducing us to animals—to penned-up animals—to our animal nature. They were rubbing our noses in that nature. We were to consider ourselves subhuman" (Atwood, 2019, p. 126). Reading through these passages a question persisted. Were men also doomed to such treatment? "All that was necessary was a law degree and a uterus: a lethal combination" (Atwood, 2019, p. 127). People were now divided by their sexual organs, not intellect or capacities. What biology had put between their legs would define them completely. The choice of women with law degrees was of course not random. Those who were used to judging and condemning would be useful in a regime where condemnation is around every corner.

As the days passed the executions that they were obliged to watch came with a difference. The men with rifles started to be replaced by women in brown garments. "On the fourth day there was a variation: three of the shooters were women" (Atwood, 2019, p. 127). Women executing women whose only sin was to have been born with a uterus. At this point the premise is evident. The ultimate goal is to turn women against women. To make them obedient to men's commands. To kill in the name of a merciless God. The narrator's turn comes on the seventh day. On the same day, she meets one of the major characters of this novel, Commander Judd. The Commander's goal is at first ambiguous. "'Are you thankful that God made you in a woman's body?' 'I suppose so,' I said. 'I've never thought about it.' 'I am not sure you are thankful enough,' he said" (Atwood, 2019, p. 130). How could Aunt Lydia be grateful to be a woman if that was the mere reason why she was standing there at the moment? What he truly wants to know is if she is thankful for being spared even if she is a woman. The way to show it is by cooperating with the men who put them in such a position.

The way men know of breaking someone is always based on torture and so it is what awaits Aunt Lydia in the *Thank Tank*. Here we have a direct reference to George Orwell's novel *1984*, in particular to the *Ministry of Love*. Not only through the use of positive naming but also the breaking of the soul. "One

did not know what happened inside the Ministry of Love, but it was possible to guess: tortures, drugs, delicate instruments that registered your nervous reactions, gradual wearing-down by sleeplessness and solitude and persistent questioning” (Orwell, 2010, p. 133). The endless waiting, the hearing of screams without knowing where they came from, the painful ignorance of one’s fate. The only thing left to the mind is a dark place where all the possibilities behind the deafening sounds can come from. “You’d be surprised how quickly the mind goes soggy in the absence of other people” (Atwood, 2019, p. 131). Just like in Edgar Allan Poe’s tale of the *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the mind is slowly shattered by the loneliness and clueless. After the passing of time without a proper notion, she is taken to a hotel. Such improvement of facilities ends up seeming just like paradise. “It seemed I could think again; it seemed I could think the word I” (Atwood, 2019, p. 133). The reason for her now new residence is evident when she finds a brown garment in her room. To survive she must join those women who she witnessed shooting her companions. Reality is laid upon her. In this world, she can kill or be killed. “I put it on. What else should I have done?” (Atwood, 2019, p. 133).

### **3.2. Even God Is to Be Blamed For**

Throughout the years, women have been fighting to achieve the equality we deserve. Even better, the equality that should be ours by right. Frequently, the *Bible* is evoked to justify the world where it is only logical that women are less than men. This is of course based on the passage of Adam and Eve. This topic can be used in two different manners. The first one is that Adam was created first, as a result, he is the primordial being. He is the pure human, as Eve was created through a rib of Adam. That method and position of creation make Eve only second best. A second creation which was only necessary to make company to Adam. The second stance is that Eve is to be blamed for the casting of paradise. If Eve had not been corrupted by the snake and eaten the apple there would be no pain in the world. We would all still be living in paradise. In relation to this, I have also two different perspectives. If men are so superior to us, so intelligent as they claim to be, why did not Adam stop Eve from eating the apple? Why did he take a bite from it? Secondly, through the narration of the creation of the world through the powerful hands of God, it is mentioned that he created monsters. If the term monsters is used, then it is proof of a negative connotation (even if God adores them as much as all his creations). This ends up proving that evil was already present in the world as the serpent is also proof of it. Corruption and wickedness were always there. Eve was first touched by it but that does not prove that the same would not happen at the hands of Adam. Christianity is one of the greatest topics on the Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaids Tale*. That is no coincidence as religion has always played a role in undermining women. In Gilead things

are taken to another level when the story of Rachel and Jacob is used to force fertile women to become surrogates. In order to maintain the patriarchy intact, the men in power started to blame all the problems on feminism. If they were more depressed it was due to feminism. If the economy was struggling it sure should be due to feminism. Women should be at home and not working. By breaking this perfect balance, they were responsible for all the negative/disastrous things that would and could happen. As it happens with religion there are those who believe and those who do not. With this, I affirm that there were women who believed in equality and the benefits of keep fighting, which called themselves feminists with pride. And to oppose them there were those who were supporters of the patriarchy and agreed with the men regarding the women's place in society. Those who appealed for women to remain at home caring for their husbands and children, because these were their natural duties. "Identifying feminism as women's enemy only furthers the ends of a backlash against women's equality, simultaneously deflecting attention from the backlash's central role and recruiting women to attack their own cause" (Faludi, 2006, p. 10). Only when women are on the verge of achieving something do they tremble and try to fight it back. This can be done by spreading lies or propagandas. "[...] efforts that have been interpreted time and again by men—especially men grappling with real threats to their economic and social well-being on other fronts—as spelling their own masculine doom" (Faludi, 2006, p. 11). Offred tells more about herself or lets her mind wander through her memories in the chapters entitled *Night*. In the *Bible*, God's first act is to cast away darkness and creates light. In the novel, since a new image of God is created, and all is done in God's name, Offred only feels safe in the dark. The dark represents the absence of God, the absence of a God she does not follow as her own. This cruel and vengeful God is not the one she might seek in her more needing moments.

### **3.3. Despair Eats the Soul Away**

"Sex-role expectations are shown to be essential in explaining female self-injury and suicide attempts" (Heshusius, 1980, p. 843)

Along the pages of the novel, the theme of suicide appears. It is mostly presented as the only way to escape the horrific reality of Gilead. The first time the narrator refers to it is when she is describing the room. "They've removed anything you could tie a rope to" (Atwood, 2017, p. 22). With this simple sentence, the reader is provided with the inhuman reality. Handmaids have been hanging themselves. We then learn that the window does not open completely. This clearly indicates another possible suicide



attempt, as Handmaids know they would not get far if they were given the chance to run away. “It isn’t running away they’re afraid of. We wouldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge” (Atwood, 2017, p. 22).

Even paintings are now suicide-proof. Only in desperation can someone see everything as a tool to leave all pain behind. The true horror is shown by the fact that even the choice of ending one’s own life has been taken away.

Their absence of choice is not the only thing taken away. Their privacy also no longer exists. “The door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say my – is not locked. In fact, it doesn’t shut properly” (Atwood, 2017, p. 23).

As humans, contact or touch of others is something essential. We live in society due to the need for experiences and exchanges. Solitude can lead someone to madness which is why isolation is used as a form of torture or with the intention of breaking one’s spirit. Offred experiences such suffering through her life as a Handmaid. The only time where she is touched is during the Ceremony. A touch she does not hunger for. Her wrists are squeezed by the Wife’s hands while she is penetrated by the Commander. She wishes none of that. How could someone wish to be raped? She tells the reader, “I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch” (Atwood, 2017, p. 26). The use of the word “commit” is relevant as it brings a negative connotation. She uses such word since she knows that what she desires is now considered a crime. Gilead has already at this point implemented its ideals. They have changed the mere core of socialization. She is aware she is not to be touched, but she cannot help but still desire it deeply. Human touch can bring comfort and a sense of protection. However, the only touch she is allowed only brings her pain and even disgust.

When meeting Serena Joy, the Wife of her new Commander, she states: “They can hit us, there’s Scriptural precedent” (Atwood, 2017, p. 31). In this passage the fear present in a Handmaid’s life is shown on a new level. They can be beaten by any men, the Aunts and the Wives. This shows the hatred they suffer at the hands of the Wives who are constantly reminded of their “failure” by the red figure’s presence. She is surrounded by cruelty and constant fear, no wonder their minds tend to see suicide as their only escape.

The reality around her starts to distort the way she even sees herself. “I discovered it three days after I was moved here” (Atwood, 2017, p. 61). The narrator does not say she moved there but rather that she “was moved”. Objects are moved by others not people. Via this, the reader is shown how Offred has internalized that she no longer is to be considered human. “We are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (Atwood, 2017, p. 102). In the particular case of Handmaids only their

reproductive system is important. They are aware of it as it is to be considered common knowledge. It is to become the new normal. Those who will be raised between the suffocating walls of Gilead will know no other reality. "She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: Because they won't want things they can't have" (Atwood, 2017, p. 120). All the Handmaids are ripped of their names. Of their identities.

Not allowing females a personal sense of identity but making their identity dependent upon the male is what Suter (1976, p. 137) calls 'the Sleeping Beauty Syndrome': autonomy, independence, self-worth, and competence are not expected or allowed from females, in fact the opposite is actively encouraged. (Heshusius, 1980, p. 851)

From the moment they become Handmaids, not by choice but only for survival, they lose themselves. As they are put in the same situation of despair when some start giving up the affliction becomes contagious. If we see that we are not alone in a situation it ends up assuming a more anguished form. The contagious act of surrender and even embracing death is marked in both novels. In the first novel, we see it through Janine at the Red Centre. She wakes up and seems wrapped in a now far way reality, where she previously had a job as a *waitperson*. Moira comes forward and brings her back to reality before Janine and the others might face consequences. She then warns her companions, "You can't let her go slipping over the edge. That stuff is catching" (Atwood, 2017, p. 209). We get not only a warning but a foreshadow of many Handmaids' fates. Offred's predecessor hanged herself in the room she now occupies. Janine, after the death of her second child under the regime of Gilead, starts to wander off as she previously did at the Red Centre. Lous Heshusius describes, in his work *Sex Roles*, how the lack of hope can indicate suicide. The Handmaids are deprived from hope and constantly give up as there is nothing for them to hold on to. "These researchers found hopelessness a stronger indication of suicide intent than depression itself." (Heshusius, 1980, p. 848).

The same hopelessness can be seen in *The Testaments* via the testimony of Aunt Lydia. Her time in the Stadium is portrayed as almost a punishment for being born with a uterus. "Giving up was the new normal, and I have to say it was catching" (Atwood, 2019, p. 126). Here she is referring to the fact that some of her companions tried to clean the washrooms of their captivity place. With time they find it pointless and soon they gave up. Although she is initially referring to a specific action the sentence embraces a wider meaning. As it happened with many Handmaids, also those there trapped were beginning to give up. Not knowing what was intended from them or maybe even blaming themselves for an act they could not point a finger at, hopelessness started to caress them. Later the woman who would become Aunt Lydia is taken to Commander Judd. This is where she finds out about men's plans and

what happens to those who do not comply. Several women prefer death to having to work with their oppressors. That is not the case with Aunt Lydia.

“Why did she write it, why did she bother? There’s no way out of here” (Atwood, 2017, p. 147). Offred’s predecessor did find a way out. The only escape she could possibly imagine. “‘She hanged herself,’ he says; thoughtfully, not sadly. ‘That’s why we had the light fixture removed. In your room.’” (Atwood, 2017, p. 183). The Commander tells it in a tone that does not even reach remorse. He played a massive role in her final decision, in particular as he reveals that “‘Serena found out’” (Atwood, 2017, p. 183). With this, it is clear that his Wife found out about their night encounters. The same ones he continues to carry out with his new Handmaid, even knowing what it can lead to. He finds himself untouchable and therefore proceeds to risk both their lives. If the current Offred decides also to end her life, he only has to wait for the next one.

In this new reality, adults are not the only ones invaded by a sense of hopelessness or uselessness. From a very young age little girls are made aware of their social position. They are always to be underneath men, sometimes meaning it literally. As Agnes reflects, “Because if you weren’t an Aunt or a Martha, said Aunt Vidala, what earthly use were you if you didn’t have a baby” (Atwood, 2019, p. 74). Agnes knows what her purpose is. Even if she is allowed to get married, she will also have to bear a child to be considered useful. This brings an enormous pressure on girls who are not even aware of what bearing a child fully means. “If she reached eighteen unmarried, she’d be considered dried goods and would be out of the running for Commanders: she’d be lucky to get even a Guardian” (Atwood, 2019, p. 143). The marriage to a Commander is seen as a privilege, but only a privilege that young girls of high-rank fathers are eligible for. They have not yet fully matured before they are sent away to an unknown man’s house, most of the times even much older. Agnes feels suffocated to have such a fate, and just like Becka refuses to get married. Agnes imagines her marriage as the death of her spirit. Becka burdens up with despair and sees no other option but to end her life to avoid getting married. “Becka slashed her left wrist with the secateurs and had to be taken to the hospital” (Atwood, 2019, p. 146). The most horrific part is not her attempted suicide yet the reaction that it provokes. Aunt Lydia is visibly shaken by the news of another little girl attempting against her life. The reader is aware that it has happened previously, and most surely will happen again, through the shared thoughts of Aunt Lydia when she knows about Becka’s attempt. “Not a suicide; not again, I thought” (Atwood, 2019, p. 184). The way the minds of some have been shaped under the cruel regime of Gilead is shown through a conversation between Marthas about an unnamed girl who had taken her life also to avoid marriage. “‘Suicide is a failure of faith,’ Zilla said. ‘It makes a real mess,’ said Rosa. ‘Such a slur on the family,’ said Vera’” (Atwood, 2019, p. 193). The lack

of empathy towards not only a woman but a little girl is alarming. All of them are under similar circumstances. Although they are in different social positions, they are all victims of a totalitarian regime which imposes male superiority. There should be some sense of compassion while talking about a girl who broke down under the pressure of not wanting to get married. Not only this is shocking, but Rosa's only concern is how messy suicide can be. The problem with this passage is that it can be due to a lack of empathy or someone trying to keep safe. What I do mean is that since no one can be trusted, there is the possibility of this dialogue being made by what they assume the "true believers" expect to hear. Now it stands for everyone to consider which scenario is more alarming. The one where empathy seems to have abandoned them or where mistrust leads to say what the regime wants you to truly believe.

On another note, after the supposed suicide of a Pearl Girl, the reader is also shown how suicide is also common among Pear Girls, possibly even Aunts "The police said it was a suicide, self-strangulation in this manner being a common method" (Atwood, 2019, p. 53). No one is safe under the constant Eye. It watches and judges everyone. No one can escape, not even those who seem to be the more devotee believer.

## **4. Learning Through Atwood's Work**

Margaret Atwood stated in several interviews that her personal rule for writing *The Handmaid's Tale* was to use events that had occurred at any time in human history. "When I wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing went into it that had not happened in real life somewhere at some time" (MasterClass, 2020, 0:27). Such choice brings a different notion to the novel. Not only is the reader aware of what was a reality for many in the past, but it is also warned of the possibility of witnessing history repeating itself.

Atwood created her fictional regime based on what history had witnessed with the several rises and falls of totalitarian regimes. In this chapter, two of such regimes will be approached. The Nazi and the Pinochet's regime. Both regimes brought up the worst in many and caused suffering to uncountable lives. Additionally, the author used the Puritan's history to base Offred's new world. She highlights how religion is manipulated and often used to indoctrinate one's ideas.

### **4.1. History Repeating Itself**

Like in George Orwell's work *1984*, these novels present a world without trust or confidence. A world where we are obliged to always look behind our shoulders to stay alive. Everyone can accuse you, even if the accusations are false. People had no choice except to walk weightless as they were walking on streets of glass. Even a simple wink can be seen as much more. It can be seen as a dangerous act, a defiant act or even a test. "Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye" (Atwood, 2017, p. 33).

Such regimes depend on mistrust and suspicion to maintain themselves in command. "The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (Atwood, 2017, p. 34). If none can be trusted, it is assumed that everyone follows the strict new rules, and society's "rotten apples" are discovered if someone fails to do so. Suspicion feeds the regime in this novel just like it did, and unfortunately might, in real life. The Nazi regime not only started to make its opposition disappear, but it relied on Germans to come forwards and rant about those who were against them.

Totalitarian regimes always seek to eradicate any possible opposition. They do not enjoy feeling their position menaced. When thinking about such regimes, our mind tends to go to the Nazi one. It occurs because it is the most spoken about, not only due to its proximity to our times but also the immense cruelty the world has witnessed. Even after such reprehension worldwide, other similar regimes came to power. One of them is the Pinochet military Dictatorship in Chile. Augusto Pinochet held power from 1973 to 1990. Such sovereignty only ended thanks to the population protests and eventual free

elections, where they voted him out of power. Despite its end, even today, the victims of Pinochet continue to suffer. Mainly due to the lack of legal justice against their persecutors or executors. The “Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional”, the secret police of Chile at the behest of Pinochet, can be equated not only to the Nazi’s Gestapo but also to the Guardians in Atwood’s work. These were the men, and even women, responsible for several prisoners’ questioning, torture and rape. “The total number of people officially recognized as disappeared in Chile or killed between 1973 and 1990 stands at over 3,000 and survivors of political imprisonment and/or torture at around 40,000” (International Amnesty, 2013a). Such a dark time of history has its echoes in both novels. A testimony by Lelia Pérez, a girl victim of the sadistic police, shows a resemblance to the ones Offred refers to, while in the later novel, it is Aunt Lydia. “The first time Lelia Pérez felt the sear of a cattle prod it was at the hands of a Chilean soldier” (International Amnesty, 2013a). The same instrument is presented in the hands, or belts, of the Aunts. They are to be used to break and teach the women forced to become Handmaids. “Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts” (Atwood, 2017, p. 19). With the publishing of *The Testaments*, we have an opportunity to learn more about the torture applied by the new regime through Aunt Lydia’s experience, which is similar to the descriptions of torture in the infamous Villa Grimaldi during Pinochet’s dictatorship:

In Villa Grimaldi detainees would be electrocuted, water boarded, had their heads forced into buckets of urine and excrement, suffocated with bags, hanged by their feet or hands and beaten. Many women were raped and for some detainees, punishment was death. (International Amnesty, 2013b)

The terrifying experience worsens with the absence of knowledge. Lydia only heard screams. What they were doing, she could not know. She could only imagine what horrific deals would expect her.

Every once in a while, there would be a scream or a series of shrieks from nearby: brutalization on parade. Sometimes there would be a prolonged moaning; sometimes a series of grunts and breathy gasps that sounded sexual, and probably were. The powerless are so tempting. (Atwood, 2019, p. 131)

The Nazi regime was a horrific time that can only serve as a warning of what a man holding such power can achieve. Many of the atrocities depicted in the novel of 1985 occurred during this regime. The reader is aware that Gilead rose to power through violence. “[...] when they shot the President and machine gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency” (Atwood, 2017, p. 170). That was also the way Hitler and his Nazi party rise to power. Through the use of violence. Like Gilead,

Hitler had a personal army that ensured his rise to power. Similar to the massacre at the Congress narrated in the novel, the Reichstag fire occurred on 27 February 1933. “The Nazi leadership and its German Nationalist coalition partners exploited the fire to persuade President Paul von Hindenburg that Communists were planning a violent uprising to derail Germany’s ‘national renewal’” (Holocaust Encyclopedia, n.d.). This helped to throw suspicion over the communist regime and helped to pass the decree *For the Protection of the People and State*. The decree brought regulations that “suspended the right to assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and other constitutional protections, including all restraints on police investigations” (Holocaust Encyclopedia, n.d.). Offred recalls how the shooting of the President and later of the Congress was initially blamed on Islamic fanatics. As a consequence of those attacks, the Constitution was suspended, and censorship started to emerge as it is a known technique for the success of totalitarian regimes. The press is used as a manipulation tool and a way to filter information. Only what the totalitarian regime desires will be published and reach the inhabitants.

In the novel *The Testaments*, a known character reappears. This time her story is presented as a way to justify her actions in the corrupted regime of Gilead. Evidence of her will to destroy the regime she lives under is shown along with her lack of choice, “You take the first step, and to save yourself from the consequences, you take the next one. In times like ours, there are only two directions: up or plummet” (Atwood, 2019, p. 33). As Aunt Lydia mentions, there are only two options when caught up in such a situation. Survive or die or even kill or be killed. Like other animals, humans have a survival instinct that pushes them to close their eyes away from horrific or cruel actions to preserve their own life. Those who were unfortunate to be caught in the Nazi regime were not rotten core down evil; they had no choice but to comply or join the pile of dead bodies.

There are records of people saying that it was wrong when Jews were taken away from towns in south Germany – put on trains and taken away in public, taken to the east. But they felt powerless to do anything about it. (HistoryExtra, 2020)

Women did retain their recently acquired right to vote, although come to the essential, none had such right. During the Nazi regime, only one list of candidates ran for election; even if you could vote, you had no choice. That right was a mere illusion. Similar to the right to vote, there was the right to work. They could work, even if only on what their superiors decided. In this particular case, they were majorly allowed to sew clothes that were to be used by the troops. After all, they were preparing the country for war; God forbid, if a man sat behind a sewing machine, it would be outrageous. On the other hand, in Gilead, since *Wives* are only told to knit scarves which would be brought to the Angels, or at least they said, we have no concrete evidence of who was behind the maintenance of the army wardrobe. However,

we can surely assume that it would probably be Martha's class or even an Econowife (a lower rank Wife). A particular activity to not only keep their minds busy as to evoke a feeling of participation is required to maintain women under the regime's grip. In the novels, the Wives are kept under surveillance through knitting. "Perhaps she's sewing, in the sitting room, with her left foot on the footstool, because of her arthritis. Or knitting scarves, for the Angels at the front lines" (Atwood, 2017, p. 27). In the Nazi regime, they were guarded through the fabrication of clothes for the army. "They made clothes for the troops and organised supplies and welfare. But they were shut out of politics altogether" (HistoryExtra, 2020).

As it is proved time and time again, history does not reinvent itself but instead repeats itself. Even if the illusion of equality started to surround society, the truth was that patriarchy was still deeply rooted. It only took a patriarchal-mind man to rise to power to set back once again. Through the view of Nazi ideology, the purpose of women was the same as its ancestors had claimed. Serve their husbands and give children to the Nation. "Women were there to support their men, and for breeding and having lots of children" (History Extra, 2020). This is a shared view by many authoritarian and conservative politicians. When those of such ideal rise to power they have to regain control and one way of doing it is to take women down from their recently acquired jobs. "[...] as mulheres que ocupavam cargos importantes transformaram-se numa espécie em extinção. [...] de preferência deviam ficar em casa, ter filhos e tomar conta da família" (Super Interessante Extra, 2019, pp. 39-42)<sup>6</sup>. Offred, like every other woman, is laid off from her job. Women are forbidden to work under the new regime as they previously did. Some women continue to work but only under the terms the new leaders dictate. It is the example of the Aunts who constantly must report to a Commander and whose main task is to teach the Handmaids their new assigned roles. They are given such work as it would be degrading for a man to approach such matter, especially concerning women whose sole purpose is to procreate.

Several references to the likeness of the garments of the Aunts to the Nazi regime's uniforms have been made by several critics. On the second novel, Aunt Lydia mentions how the image of someone with uniform can be terrifying. Particularly, when we do not know what those beneath the clothes are capable of. "There's something spine-stiffening about uniforms, about insignia, about shiny lapel pins" (Atwood, 2019, p. 129). Uniforms serve not only to hide, to censor but also to indoctrinate a certain equality. Although it is not the positive equality we would desire. The regime wanted followers, not leaders (as every regime does). No one can stand up; everyone must look the same. They do not only keep the body wrapped as the brain. "From a very early age, they had to wear uniforms. As soon as they went to school,

---

<sup>6</sup> [...] women who held important positions became an endangered species [...] preferably they had to stay at home, have children and take care of the family – author's translation.



every day began with singing Nazi anthems and saluting the Nazi flag” (HistoryExtra, 2020).

When living under the regimes previously mentioned there is a constant fear of their own speech. People are burdened with the fear of saying the wrong word, of making the wrong expression. Once again, echoes of the novel *1984* are present. The main character of Orwell’s work constantly fears being discovered through his thoughts. The invasion is such that civilians do not feel safe inside their minds. Everything to them is penetrable. “Thoughtcrime, they called it. Thoughtcrime was not a thing that could be concealed forever” (Orwell, 2010, p. 18). In the Nazi regime era, there were reports done regarding people’s speech and thoughts. “Also the Social Democrats had secret reports smuggled out to their headquarters in exile, about what people were saying and thinking” (HistoryExtra, 2020). Atwood reflects this same fear in her dystopic novels. When walking the heavily guarded streets of Gilead, there is a constant fear of being picked up by the Eyes. “There must have been microphones, they’ve heard us after all” (Atwood, 2017, p. 167).

On another topic, we have those who disguised their oppressive views with the worshipping of a superior entity. In the case of these novels, it is Christianity that is approached. A well-known historical figure, Mary Webster, is not only the woman to whom Atwood dedicated her novel, but also a source of inspiration for the same novel and referred topic. In 17th century England, Mary Webster was a woman wrongly accused of witchcraft, like many others. She is a well-known victim as she survived her hanging due to the accusation of witchcraft. Due to her miraculous survival, she is viewed by many as a symbol of hope for those wrongfully accused. “The novelist says she dedicated *The Handmaid’s Tale* to Mary [...] because she was a wrongly accused woman who is ‘slightly a symbol of hope because they didn’t actually manage to kill her’” (Leonard, 2019). It is peaceful to start a novel with such a reference as it brings hope for the protagonist’s survival of another woman trapped in a wrongful reality.

Massachusetts became the setting of this dystopia for historical motifs. The Puritanism religion emerged in the 16th century in England. It was a new branch of the Church of England which sought to purify it. After having fled England due to persecution, many Puritans established themselves in New England. There they proceeded to indoctrinate their view on Christianity. They saw great importance in the reading of the scriptures. Their ultimate desire was to expand their ideals and costumes to the entire nation. Spreading a unique view of religion to impose it on an entire nation or country is precisely one of Gilead’s objectives. The Puritans did not only seek to establish their “purified” version of Christianity, but they also did persecute or exile those who had other ideals.

Winthrop, Dudley, the Rev. John Cotton, and other leaders zealously sought to prevent any independence of religious views, and many with differing religious beliefs — including Roger

Williams of Salem and Anne Hutchinson of Boston, as well as unrepentant Quakers and Anabaptists – were banished. (Britannica, 2018a)

Once again, we can view Gilead in this passage of the past. The Sons of Jacob also led the persecution of those of different beliefs, and several deaths occurred due to these. “The Puritans’ ecclesiastical order was as intolerant as the one they had fled” (History.com Editors, 2009). Those who commit themselves to bringing change end up consumed by power. This is an event that constantly occurs. If we consider the novel by George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, the critique is also there.

No one believes more firmly than Comrade Napoleon that all animals are equal. He would be only too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you might make the wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be? (Orwell, 2020, p. 17)

The pigs in the novel seek to overthrow the humans, so their exploration meets an end. What does end up occurring is the mimicking of human behaviours by the pigs. “The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which” (Orwell, 2020, p. 42).

While Gilead tries to impose a new image of a God, Offred refuses to take the new image of God, Gilead’s God, as her own. She knows this is propaganda. God is only being used as a tool to achieve one’s ends. Just like it happened in reality, the Quakers were also persecuted in the regime of Gilead, who found no other solution but to flee just like the Puritans had also been forced out of England.

The Quakers have gone underground, and are running an escape route to Canada, as – I suspect – they would. Offred herself has a private version of the Lord’s Prayer and refuses to believe that a just and merciful God has mandated this regime. (Atwood, 2017, p. 15)

In the second novel, this persecution or execution is also present to remind the reader to pay attention to those who proclaim to speak through God. “‘There’s a lot of people dying,’ I said. ‘The Quakers, and Neil and Melanie, and that Pearl Girl!’” (Atwood, 2019, p. 173). By the end of the second novel, it is confirmed with absolute certainty that Gilead was also based upon the Puritan Theocracy. This confirmation comes through the chapter entitled *The Thirteenth Symposium*. In this chapter, Professor Pieixoto reappears, after his previous controversial chapter *Historical Notes* (in *The Handmaid’s Tale*), where chauvinism is still present.

Now please welcome a speaker familiar to us all, both from his written publications and from his recent fascinating television series, *Inside Gilead: Daily Life in a Puritan Theocracy*. His presentation of objects from museum collections around the world—especially the

handcrafted textile items—has been truly spellbinding. I give you: Professor Pieixoto. (Atwood, 2019, p. 345)

His speech shows that the female audience did not receive his previous one well. Despite it, he cannot help but let his chauvinist side resurface. “Now that women are usurping leadership positions to such a terrifying extent, I hope you will not be too severe on me” (Atwood, 2019, p. 345). What we should note in this particular sentence is the negative tone while referring to women. He uses the word *usurping*, which the *Oxford Dictionary* defines as: “to take somebody’s position and/or power without having the right to” (Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 776). It is possible to see how he indeed views his female academic companions, and probably every human who has not the same gender as him. Professor Pieixoto’s character is evidence of how even with the overthrowing of a patriarchal regime and its moral condemnation, it is impossible to shape everyone’s mind to accept a simple truth. We are all equals.

The author witnessed the election of Ronald Reagan together with the creation and rise of the Moral Majority. “Falwell established the Moral Majority, which he described as pro-family and pro-American. It advanced conservative social values, notably opposing abortion, pornography, the ERA, and gay rights” (Britannica, 2018b).

Moral Majority aimed to project what they believed to be the proper way to live. They base it on Christianity, just like Gilead. “All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm” (Atwood, 2017, p. 212). The Bible praises being kind and welcoming. However, Moral Majority and Gilead end up being the exact opposite. They merely impose their way of living on others. They see themselves as the pure leaders while, in reality, they do not even live according to their values. Values which demand from others. An example of such hypocrisies lies between the Commanders and their night encounters in Jezebels. Gilead preaches purity, the sanctity of the home and fidelity while at the same time, they keep an underground brothel. “‘I thought this sort of thing was strictly forbidden,’ I say. ‘Well, officially,’ he says. ‘But everyone’s human, after all’” (Atwood, 2017, p. 228). When brought to such place, the narrator even recollects how she used to frequent the hotel. Once again, those visits were prior to her marriage to Luke, who was at the time still married to another person. Such recollection brings us to the topic of infidelity, which was a problem of the previous society and remains despite the new rigid new regime. Even with the imposition of what they claim to be Christian values and constant surveillance, those in power will continue to bend the rules as it suits them. “I know where I am. I’ve been here before: with Luke, in the afternoons, a long time ago” (Atwood, 2017, p. 226). Even in the second novel, we can see how men use and abuse their power to achieve what they desire, even if it is against the laws they helped erect. After a very short mention in the Historical Notes, Commanders Judd is presented as a vital character in *The Testaments*.

Just like Commander Waterford, he is an example of how men continue to do as they please and will carry on whether they made the rules or not. As Aunt Lydia states in her writings, “His Wives have a habit of dying: Commander Judd is a great believer in the restorative powers of young women” (Atwood, 2019, p. 60). Through the narration of Agnes from the second novel, we get access to the sins of many, which are kept in files at the Ardua Hall. The Aunts use these files as a tool for manipulation and even blackmail. Those files are the power that the Aunts have gathered for themselves. Such power is witnessed when Agnes’ stepmother goes to the Ardua Hall to retrieve Agnes and force her to proceed with the marriage. Although Agnes cannot hear what Aunt Lydia tells her stepmother, which leads her to change her mind, some chapters ahead, it becomes clearer. While she receives these files on her desk anonymously one night, Paula’s secret finds its way to her hands. There she finds out how Paula killed her husband, not the Handmaid who was accused and executed for such a horrific crime. “Paula had skewered Commander Saunders herself” (Atwood, 2019, p. 262). It is also revealed to her that her father, Commander Kyle, was already seeing Paula before the death of her husband. With this, the doubt surrounding Agnes’s mother resurfaces; was she poisoned, so they could be widowers and remarry? “However, Paula and Commander Kyle—my erstwhile father — had been having an affair even before Tabitha, my mother, had died” (Atwood, 2019, p. 261). This passage is evidence of the corruption creeping beneath a regime that is supposed to have its morals and basis in the bible. Behind doors, everyone is a sinner, even those who gospel about strictly following the word of God. In particular, if it is to directly profit them, as is the case of the forced Handmaids.

#### **4.2. The Shocking Reality of Some Girls**

“Little girls don’t have to be very old before they get tangled up with Beauty” (Atwood, 2022, p. 230). From a young age, girls are classified as beautiful, cute, adorable, amongst others. These make girls self-aware of their exterior image from a very young age. In turn, this has helped to foster the need to be perfect and has led to problems with body image even before girls could learn how to speak properly. Even if starting only with lip-gloss and nail polish, little girls were already walking towards the path of *The Beauty Myth*.

“A girl learns that stories happen to ‘beautiful’ women, whether they are interesting or not. And, interesting or not, stories do not happen to women who are not ‘beautiful’” (Wolf, 2002, 2002, p. 61). A good example is the reference to the Prometheus myth that Wolf makes in *The Beauty Myth*. It narrates the story of a hero and references a woman who made us all fall in disgrace. It represents the male protagonist as heroic, brave, fearless who stole from the Gods to gift humanity, while Pandora is a curse.

“Hesiod claimed Zeus sent Pandora to earth to punish men, who had offended him” (Walker, 1983, p. 767). This Greek myth about the creation of the first women, just like Eve from Christianity, carries the female gender with the guilty of all the suffering that torments humanity.

To a child being socialized into Western culture, it teaches that a great man risks all for intellectual daring, for progress and for the public good. But as a future woman, the little girl learns that the most beautiful woman in the world was man-made, and that her intellectual daring brought the first sickness and death onto men. The myth makes a reading girl skeptical of the moral coherence of her culture’s stories. (Wolf, 2002, p. 61)

As innocent as it may seem all the stories we contact with as we grow have an impact on our development. It helps us build the imagery of the world that surrounds us. It makes us paint a general portrait of the characteristics of the men and the women. They are also a gateway for knowledge, as Agnes shows in her testimony while she is at the Ardua Hall. “The most astonishing thing about these books was that Dick and Jane and Baby Sally lived in a house with nothing around it but a white wooden fence, so flimsy and low that anyone at all could climb over it” (Atwood, 2019, p. 250).

The major issue little girls face in our society is not the one of the wrongful images that can be portrayed on the books and novels. Only those dead-drop beautiful get a chance with the prince and that spinsters are always wicked and evil specially towards those young and beautiful. They face since a very young age the fears of being found alone in the dark. “Strange as it may seem, I too was once a teenage girl and then a young woman, which means I too was once a potential target - of gropers and exposure artists, in train stations and such [...]” (Atwood, 2022, p. 314). As we reach a certain age, we are often reminded and warned about the dangers of men. Of the things that can be done to us if we are found alone by them. We fear to go to the public bathrooms alone while men joke about us always going in groups. In the second novel, *The Testaments*, both teenage girls are also aware of such dangers. While Nicole only experiences the fear of knowing what can happen, Agnes experiences the physical act which scars her for life. “So it was all true then, about men and their rampaging, fiery urges, and merely by sitting in the dentist chair I was the cause” (Atwood, 2019, p. 86). Worse than the traumatic experience is the self-blaming. In Gilead, just like in many families, the victim of sexual crimes is often blamed for the offender’s actions. Things like beauty or clothes came to be blamed for the poor and innocent offender’s actions. We often hear when the subject is rape or harassment that if the girl had not worn provocative clothes such would not have happened. She is also to be blamed if she drank or if she was strolling alone. Agnes blames herself as she, even not knowing how, provoked the fiery urges. If she was to tell an adult the occurred there could be two possible scenarios as she later tells.

Some girls had reported such things. [...] The first girl had had the backs of her legs whipped for lying, the second had been told that nice girls did not notice the minor antics of men, they simply looked the other way. (Atwood, 2019, pp. 87-88)

The young girl has no other choice than suffer in silence. She has no one to confide the crime she suffered. She already knows that she will not be believed, especially since it is a man with a certain reputation. She is all alone not knowing she was not the only victim of the cruel doctor.

The first novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, focus on the narrator story and experiences. It focuses on the adult experience in the oppressive regime of Gilead. The second novel brings also an adult testimony, although it also takes a younger perspective through the characters of Agnes and Daisy (Nicole). Through the use of these younger characters, Atwood brilliantly brought to the table topics which concern the younger girls of our own world. She brings topics such as forced marriages and pregnancies as well as the embed guilt of the possible sex crimes they can be victims of. To add to this, she cleverly approaches the lack of choice that both girls suffer, even if one is more aware of it than the other. Daisy who grows in Canada does not take notice of the lack of choice she truly has. She is not aware of how the adults are stripping her from all the choices and how she is unfortunately manipulated into accepting to go on with the risky plan of entering in Gilead.

The character of Commander Judd brings to light an evident case of a paedophilia. Not only does he search for younger girls to spouse as they soon become ill and die. "His Wives have a habit of dying: Commander Judd is a great believer in the restorative powers of young women, as were King David and assorted Central American drug lords" (Atwood, 2019, p. 60). This is narrated by Aunt Lydia who ends up interfering when Agnes is to become the new victim of Commander Judd. "After each respectable period of mourning, he has let it be known that he is in the market for another child bride" (Atwood, 2019, p. 60).

Child marriage is used in Gilead to marry men who have proved their value to the regime. Since they get married, they are expected to get pregnant. Such marriage is used to settle the little girls and to increase the natality numbers. Before the arrangements with the three pretends are made, Aunts came to the houses to inspect the soon-to-be brides. Not only is beauty taken in consideration as the physical form and even teeth, which resembles the way horses are checked also by their teeth. It is left clear, without trace of doubt, that the main purpose of the child-bride is to bear children. "You'd be amazed at what some families try. She has nice wide hips, none of these narrow pelvises. Let me see your teeth, Agnes'" (Atwood, 2019, p. 136).

Although we would like to believe that child marriages are a thing of the past, in reality they continue

to occur frequently. “One third of girls in the developing world are married before the age of 18 and 1 in 9 are married before the age of 15” (ICRW, n.d.). Arguments are used to justify them since they are majorly done in developing countries. Despite it, due to the globalisation in which we live nowadays, more efforts to fight these cases should be carried out. Specially since these marriages have a tremendous effect on the little girls physical and mental health. “Child brides often show signs symptomatic of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress such as feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and severe depression” (ICRW, n.d.). Once again Atwood compels us also to take action towards this as she also references the critical consequences such marriages might bring. “I’d heard of a girl who’d hanged herself with her bathrobe sash to avoid a marriage” (Atwood, 2019, p. 193). Even Agnes weighed her options to avoid getting married, with a huge influence being the trauma she had suffered at the hands of the dentist. She knew that probably the only way out of it was suicide and might had attempted it if not for Aunt Lydia’s intervention.

### **4.3. A Warning in the Shape of a Book**

“The future is already here – it’s just not evenly distributed” (The Economist, December 4, 2003 - William Gibson)

As mentioned previously, Atwood based her narratives on real events. She cleverly used them to warn us of what we would achieve if we followed the Sons of Jacob’s steps. Atwood found it necessary to publish a sequel not only to provide some answers to fans but also because, for her, it was essential to try and warn, once again, of what our choices can lead to. The author analysed society so well that some events occurred in our days, despite her warnings.

The echoes of Atwood’s novels almost seem deafening with this new anti-abortion movement gaining ground once again, not only in the USA as well as in some European countries. Certain events have already shown how we are moving backwards, further away from advance. From the election of a misogynist President, in 2016, to the recent anti-abortion law, it has become clear that the USA has been further away from Gilead than it is now. With the new passing of the law on abortion, (“The Death of Roe”, as dubbed by newspapers), humanity takes another step further away from progress. Countless lives will be affected, and we hope deaths will not increase as many women will be forced to undergo illegal abortions.

In the novel *The Testaments*, Atwood brings another warning directed to the USA and the entire world. Themes such as emigration, censorship, forced marriage and manipulation by the government get

echoes of the path we might be already walking on without even realising. “We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” (Atwood, 2017, p. 67). Just like Offred admits to have been doing, we are living not in ignorance but ignoring. Humanity tends to discard awful events by assuring that they are occurring far from them, so they must be safe. The usual, “It is not happening to me, not my problem”.

Adolf Hitler is the face of what we do not want to experience or reach as humanity again. We know that what happened under his command was wrongful, a true crime against humanity. Despite this, new fascist movements are starting to rise in Europe. In the Portuguese magazine *Super Interessante* published in July 2019, we can read a warning right on the first page. “Quanto tempo nos falta para que um lúnatico, possivelmente eleito, como Hitler, considere que não tem alternativa se não começar uma guerra, talvez resguardado no seu arsenal nuclear?” (Super Interessante Extra, 2019, p. 3)<sup>7</sup>. If we stop to think about this, it is already occurring at the time I am writing. On the 24th February 2022, the Russian President Vladimir Putin commanded an invasion of Ukrainian territory. These events reminded us that it does not need to be happening to us for the consequences to reach us. The covid-19 pandemic had already severely affected the world’s economy, but things aggravated with the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory. Several times, I have heard how we never thought we would be witness to a war in Europe again. The signs were there, particularly since, in 2014, Putin invaded Crimea, and the world just let it happen. Because we were not involved or were at risk, the world did nothing but observe until it was too late. Countless lives have been lost due to our ability to ignore. Once again, it has been proven that men in power tend to always seek even more power, just like their historical predecessors.

When the Republic of Gilead began to show its true colours, a certain percentage of its inhabitants might have felt just like the frogs in the tale *The Frogs who desired a King*. This particular tale comes with a strong and powerful message. The tale is about a pond of frogs that turn to Zeus (or Jupiter, according to the version) and ask for a King. At first, he sends a log, and when the frogs see their new king is not alive, they demand a live one. Displeased by their behaviour, he sends a stork. When they start pleading for mercy, the mighty God only replies by saying they got what they asked for. A similar attitude also came from those who elected, in 2016, Donald Trump as their President and came to regret their choice. When people get tired of a particular situation, it is only normal to seek change. The problem is that when seeking it, they do not assure it will be a change for the better. As in the tale (and just like in the Republic of Gilead), we might be going from a log to a stork. Every time we step into a voting bout, we must reflect

---

<sup>7</sup> How long before a possibly elected lunatic like Hitler considers that he has no alternative but to start a war, perhaps holed up in his nuclear arsenal? – author’s translation.



if we are not electing a stork to replace a log.

Even so, it seems that some people are not reflecting. On January 6 of 2021, having already read *The Handmaid's Tale*, I was terrified of what would follow such event. On this day, that will forever mark USA history, we witnessed a crowd advancing towards the Capitol Building. They were there for a known reason. The defeat of former President Donald Trump, as he had lost against the current President, Joe Biden. Their motifs were violent, and we could sense the tension as we watched the news. Unfortunately, that day five people lost their lives, one of them being a police officer. "Family members and law enforcement have confirmed more details on the now five people who died in an attempted insurrection against the United States on Wednesday, including a Capitol police officer" (Evelyn, 2021). The other four victims were part of the violent outbreak. Adding to these, there were several people injured and damage done to the building. This was an apparent attempt to overthrow the government, which luckily failed. Had it succeeded, we would have witnessed one of the first steps towards Gilead.

Nowadays, it is hard to be sure of a news's veracity without doing research. The internet has opened doors to a flood of fake news:

It's no secret that the Internet is saturated with information of all kinds, and much of the information is of low or no quality. Yet, before we can blink, this information makes the rounds without being confirmed. It is all too easy to believe the latest gossip or innuendo or get lost in YouTube videos featuring pets and pranks. (Cooke, 2018, p. 10)

An excellent example is the news we receive from the ongoing War between Russia and Ukraine. News are filtered to show only a country's side of the event. Wars and conflicts end up being based on the news we receive, and it can be manipulated for people to believe what the countries want them to. In Gilead, the information the viewers receive can be controlled; as Offred notes, they do "Such as it is: who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked" (Atwood, 2017, p. 89). In his book *1984*, George Orwell chose a constant rewriting and correction of history. Through the main character, Winston Smith, we get a full demonstration of totalitarian regime power. His job is to sit behind a desk and "correct" not only clips of news but also history itself. "The messages he had received referred to articles or news items which for one reason or another it was thought necessary to alter, or, as the official phrase had it, to rectify." (Orwell, 2010, p. 33) He is required to do so quietly, without any questioning. Just like the citizens of Gilead must only watch what is broadcast on television the same way. They must hear every word as if the reporter was only spitting facts. "The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable" (Atwood, 2017, p. 67).

On June 24 of 2022, we witnessed history one more time. Unfortunately, not for a positive change but a rather negative one. On this day, in the USA, the Roe vs Wade case has been overruled. This change in the law grants freedom to every state to consider abortion legal or illegal. Abortion is not only a crime of the present but also a crime of the past that can be judged under the new laws. The current USA President manifested himself after the legal change pronouncing that this has been a tragic error. As Gilead has turned abortion illegal, so will many states bring to an end a law that was a step towards equality. These executions are mainly used to eradicate any possible thought of searching for such medical procedures. As if women now under the new regime would ever consider taking such a risk. "No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive" (Atwood, 2017, p. 48). Gilead continuously searches for men who previously performed medically assisted abortions. It was a completely different time, with different ideals and morals. However, the new regime executes men after minor actions, which are now considered crimes (death penalty). Atwood hints that medical records have been destroyed by the hospitals, which becomes clearer that it was done to prevent or avoid these massive executions. Despite this, doctors continue to suffer the death penalty due to the accusations of their previous work colleagues, for example, nurses.

In 2016, Atwood mentioned that we should pay attention to what surrounds us and what path we might be heading to without realising it. "This is a reminder to us that the hard-won rights for women and girls that many of us now take for granted could be snatched away at any moment" (Atwood, 2022, p. 313). This particular warning came due to the misogynist campaign we were witnessing at the time and the "[...] online effort aimed at repealing the 19th Amendment" (Atwood, 2022, p. 313), which is the Amendment that gave women the right to vote in the USA. These events remind us that what we have been fighting for years might be taken away in seconds. Our efforts and our ancestors' can all be washed away if the wrong type of person rises to power. Now more than ever, we have to fight to keep democracy alive and follow our sisters' work towards an equalitarian society.

## Conclusion

What we truly got to ask ourselves is the following. Have men truly suffered in the battle for equality? Is Atwood's novel really that distant from our reality?

To many, mere biology is a synonym for what you can or cannot do or achieve. Due to their biological formation, women are expected to be fragile and sensitive. Intricate thoughts are not expected from them, so they tend to bring negative consequences when presented. Only strong and virile men are meant to have the physical and mental capacity to work. It would be unnatural and a complete waste for men to dedicate their precious time to raising children (even if their own). The uterus is viewed as the representation of women's fragility and conducts its bearer to be viewed as the bearer of life and responsible for care. The education and care of children must lay on her shoulders (even if not her own).

One thing is evident, women still have an arduous path to pursuit with the hopes of achieving equality. History books have shown us time and time again that humanity tends to repeat itself. This year recent events end up being irrefutable proof of such repetition. "Will we never tire of the imprisonments, torturings, entrapments, and burnings at the stake?" (Atwood, 2022, p. 156). Humanity has to take a step back and reflect on what direction we truly desire to proceed. Nothing is completely lost; things can be changed, and we can resume towards a more positive future. Not only one for women but everyone. Without war and the constant fear of invasion and war repercussions (for example, economic), each individual can feel safe when leaving every day or night the comfort and sense of security of their houses. Through the analyses of herstory and the novels of Atwood it is shown the path woman have walked along and the one which we must not desire to follow or achieve. As we read *The Handmaid's Tale* one of the thoughts that tends to linger is the one of horror towards the possibility of the creation of such Regime. Before we judge we got to realize that we have been further from Gilead than we are now.

If we cannot learn from our past mistakes maybe, we can learn through the warnings that novels such as Atwood's provide us. "Alias Grace was how we'd been, *The Handmaid's Tale* was how we might be" (Atwood, 2022, p. xviii). Margaret Atwood declared in several interviews how her novel had been inspired by misogynist men through history and what would occur if they reached power. "So, *The Handmaid's Tale* was written in response to questions I was asking myself about what would happen if these people gained power, and what would they do" (Atwood, 2022, p. 418). Although we have witnessed what occurs when totalitarian and dictators hold power, particularly when guided by the entitled "traditional" values, Atwood takes it to a different level; a regime which claimed a woman's duty is to give children to the nation. The author, also declared: "I write books about possible unpleasant futures in the

hope that we will not allow these futures into reality” (Atwood, 2022, p. 422). It is her hope, and the hope of her readers who are alerted by her novels. Despite this, we tend to get alarmed when news about revoking of laws and rights appear. Such is the case of the “Death of Roe”. If such regimes rise again or find a new way to reach power, Atwood also brings hope. Through her novels she does not only show what would happen under this totalitarian regime, but she also shows the crumbling of such a regime. Atwood shows that even in a world where hope seems to have faded and the oppression is crushing, there is still a resistance movement operating in the dark. In her novel this is represented by *Mayday*. “It’s my own faith that when there is a tyrannical regime, there will be a resistance movement against it” (Atwood, 2022, p. 421).

## Bibliography

- Amâncio, L. (2001). Preface. In J. C. Cardoso, *Comparing Law in Europe on the Dignity of Women and Men* (pp. 9-11). Porto: Edições Universidade Fernando Pessoa.
- Atwood, M. (2017). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage.
- Atwood, M. (2019). *The Testaments*. Doubleday.
- Atwood, M. (2022). *Burning Questions*. Doubleday.
- Baxter, S. (2019). *Under our eye, the real warning in Margaret Atwood's novel, The Handmaid's Tale, goes unheard*. The Sunday Times. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Beau, E. (2018). *The History of Patriarchy - Inside of Elle Beau - Medium*. Inside of Elle Beau. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Beaumont, P., & Holpuch, A. (2018). *How The Handmaid's Tale dressed protests across the world*. The Guardian. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bloom, H. (2001). *Modern Critical Interpretations: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Britannica. (2018a). *Administration of Justice Act*. Encyclopedia Britannica. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Britannica. (2018b). *Moral Majority*. Encyclopedia Britannica. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Cooke, N. (2018). *Fake news and alternative facts information literacy in a post-truth era*. Chicago: ALA Editions.
- Crawley, K. (2018, October 22). *Reproducing whiteness: Feminist Genres, Legal Subjectivity and the Postracial Dystopia of The Handmaid's Tale*. Springer Nature. doi:10.1007/s10978-018-9229-8.
- Dam, D., & Polak, S. (2021). *Owning Gilead: Franchising feminism through Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments*. European Journal of English Studies, 25, 2, 172–189. doi:10.1080/13825577.2021.1950362.
- Devlin, H. (2015). *Early men and women were equal, say scientists*. The Guardian. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Dworkin, A. (1989). *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. Penguin Books.
- Evelyn, K. (2021). *Capitol attack: The five people who died*. The Guardian. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Faludi, S. (2006). *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Three Rivers Press.
- Fischer, M. (2022). *The real backlash never ended*. The New Yorker. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Fischlin, D. (1994). *Negation, Critical Theory, and Postmodern Textuality*. Quebec: Springer-Science+Business Media, B. V.
- Fraser, M., & Greco, M. (2005). *The Body: A Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Friedan, B. (1974). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
- Gamble, S. (2001). *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. Routledge.
- Gilbert, S., & Gubar, S. (2000). *The Mad Woman In the Attic: The woman writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale Nota Bene.
- Grady, C. (2018). *The waves of feminism, and why people keep fighting over them, explained*. Vox. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Hammer, S. (1990). *The World as It will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in The Handmaid's Tale*. Modern Language Studies, Vol. 20, No. 2–39.
- Heinlein, R. (1990). *Grumbles from Grave*. Ballantine Books.
- Heshusius, L. (1980). *Female Self-Injury and Suicide Attempts: Culturally Reinforced Techniques in Human Relations*. Sex Roles, Vol 6, No. 6.
- History.com Editors. (2009). *The Puritans*. History. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].

- HistoryExtra. (2020). *Life in Nazi Germany: Everything you wanted to know*. HistoryExtra. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Hollinger, V. (1993). *A New Alliance of Postmodernism and Feminist Speculative Fiction*. *Science Fiction Studies*, 20, 2, 272–276.
- Holocaust Encyclopedia. (n.d.). *The reichstag fire*. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-reichstag-fire>. [Online; accessed 2022-10-27].
- Hutton, L. (2020). *Why We March: The history of Take Back the Night*. Necessary Behavior. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- ICRW. (n.d.). *Child marriage facts and figures*. <https://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures/>. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- International Amnesty. (2013a). *Chile: 40 years on from Pinochet's coup, impunity must end*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/09/chile-years-pinochet-s-coup-impunity-must-end/>. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- International Amnesty. (2013b). *Life under Pinochet: "They were taking turns to electrocute us one after the other"*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/09/life-under-pinochet-they-were-taking-turns-electrocute-us-one-after-other/>. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Kemp, P. (2019). *The Testaments by Margaret Atwood review – The Handmaid's Tale sequel has many surprises*. *The Sunday Times*. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Kessler, R., & McRae, J. (1983). *Trends in the Relationship Between Sex and Attempted Suicide*. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 24, No. 2–98.
- Kuznetski, J. (2021). *Disempowerment and Bodily Agency in Margaret Atwood's The Testaments and The Handmaid's Tale TV Series*. *The European Legacy*, pp, 287–302. doi:10.1080/10848770.2021.1898108.
- Leonard, T. (2019). *Ahead of the release of Margaret Atwood's sequel, Tom Leonard details a macabre saga of sorcery*. *Daily Mail*. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Macedo, A., & Amaral, A. (2005). *Dicionário da Crítica Feminista*. Edições Afrontamento.
- Marshall, B. (2019). *Most witches are women, because witch hunts were all about persecuting the powerless*. <https://theconversation.com/most-witches-are-women-because-witch-hunts-were-all-about-persecuting-the-powerless-125427>. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- MasterClass. (2020). *Margaret Atwood teaches creative writing*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U\\_d0tlugpSA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_d0tlugpSA). [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- MasterClass. (2022). *What is dystopian fiction? 20 examples of dystopian fiction - 2022*. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-dystopian-fiction-learn-about-the-5-characteristics-of-dystopian-fiction-with-examples>. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Matthews, A. (2018). *Gender, Ontology, and the Power of the Patriarchy: A Postmodern Feminist Analysis of Octavia Butler's Wild Seed and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. *Women's Studies*, pp. 1–20. doi:10.1080/00497878.2018.1492403.
- Mead, R. (2017). *Margaret Atwood, the prophet of dystopia*. *The New Yorker*. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Neuman, S. (2006). *'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and The Handmaid's Tale*. *University of Toronto*, 75, 3–857.
- Orwell, G. (2010). *1984*. Signet Classics.
- Orwell, G. (2020). *Animal Farm*. Penguin.
- Oxford University Press. (2012). *Oxford Student's Dictionary*.
- Pruitt, S. (2022). *What are the four waves of feminism?* *History*. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Russo, M. (1995). *The female grotesque*. New York: Routledge.
- Santos, A. (2021). *Brief analysis of symbolism in the TV adaptation of The Handmaid's Tale*. *Academia*

Letters.

- Snaith, H. (2017). *Dystopia, gerontology and the writing of Margaret Atwood*. The Feminist Review Collective, pp.118-132. doi:10.1057/s41305-017-0068-5.
- Super Interessante Extra. (2019). A Ascensão do Terceiro Reich. *Super Interessante Extra*.
- Tolan, F. (2006, August 20). *Feminist utopias and questions of liberty: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as critique of second wave feminism*. Women: A Cultural Review, pp 19-32. doi:10.1080/09574040500045763.
- Tolan, F. (2007). *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Walker, B. (1983). *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Wallenfeldt, J. (2022). *Salem witch trials*. Encyclopedia Britannica. [Online; accessed 2022-10-26].
- Walters, M. (2005). *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. B. Blackwell.
- Wolf, N. (2002). *The Beauty Myth*. HarperCollins.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1796). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With strictures on political and moral subjects*. London.
- World Population Review. (2022). *Rape statistics by country 2022*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/rape-statistics-by-country>. [Online; accessed 2022-10-27].