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**The struggle for control: power dynamics amongst
women in Margaret Atwood's
*The Handmaid's Tale***

Treball de Fi de Grau / BA dissertation

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Abstract

The dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, published by Margaret Atwood in 1985, presents a futuristic dystopia set in a theocratic, patriarchal, and totalitarian society based on reproductive servitude where all women are presented in a subjugated position within the state of Gilead's hierarchy. Despite this loss of female agency and control over their identity and bodies, women try to mark status and show their power and control over each other. This paper aims to analyse this fight among the female community to state their power within an oppressed position in society. The main aspects examined are feminism and its influence in the novel, femininity and the need for individuality, motherhood and what it means to society, and Michael Foucault's idea of biopower and power circulation between women.

Keywords: *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood, power, feminism, women, motherhood, femininity, hierarchy, biopower.

1. Introduction

In 1985, Canadian—and feminist— author Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale*, a futuristic feminist dystopia set in a strongly patriarchal, totalitarian, theocratic state known as Gilead. It follows the story of a woman whose name is Offred—due to her assigned posting as a Handmaid, she is stripped of her individuality and name and given one formed by the preposition Of and Fred, the name of the Commander she is to serve— and who is forced to bear the children of dignitaries of the country due to low fertility rates. Written within the context of second-wave feminism, the novel explores themes of subjugated women, loss of female agency, control over women's reproductive systems, motherhood, and power over women's bodies, all while some of the feminine characters try to gain individuality and control over their lives.

This paper aims to analyse, in this tale of forced sexual servitude, how women constantly try to fight for power within the female community while being in an oppressed submission themselves with any and all tools available. The study will follow feminism and its influence on the characters and their choices; femininity and how women use it to fight for a higher place in the hierarchy; motherhood and the control over women's reproductive capacities; and how Michael Foucault's idea of biopower comprehends all three stated previously, how power circulates among women and its influence in Gileadean society and surroundings on individuals' ideas of their own body and identity. When examining the relations between women, at least one woman within each step of the ladder of the imposed society will be examined, to conduct an exhaustive study of all of women's classes.

2. Literary review

The Handmaid's Tale, by Margaret Atwood, was first published in 1985, while the second wave of Anglo-American feminism was flourishing with demands concerning women's lives, freedom, ways of procreation, and rights over their bodies. However, that current incorporated a wide variety of subjects focusing on gender, femininity, and sexuality (Tolan, 2007: 2) — which fits entirely with Atwood's political beliefs present in the novel, in which there is a portrayal of emotional and physical marginalisation and coercion of women in a totalitarian, patriarchal and religious regime.

Second-wave feminism emerged in a society with intrinsic conservative movements related to Christianity. Bowman (2014: 10-11) explains that such society based on essentialist gender roles was conceived in a biblical sense, which meant family-centrism that had the woman's role as child-bearer. Nevertheless, feminists took the initiative to dismantle this scriptural set of roles and to break from these traditional Christian values of family and gender, and eventually sexuality. According to Budgeon (2015: 305), a conservative body of thought marked a gendered division of labor and normatively ascribed sensibilities to each gender, such as exercising women's autonomy since it is not a feminine enough characteristic. Bowman (2014) keeps on explaining how these essentialist roles destroy womanhood and are, therefore, "deadly to women, and, if not carefully restrained, conservatives will try to assert them politically" (23).

Even though the author gives this warning to the reader —how conservatism can affect women's autonomy by imposing the biblical roles of family and gender—and is seemingly feminist, Atwood tends to dismiss political readings of her work due to her suggestion that feminism as a movement fails to achieve its goals (Loudermilk, 2004: 120). The author tries to warn feminists about the path that some feminist politics have taken in what she calls 'speculative fiction', according to Loudermilk (2004: 121).

However, an essential idea of second-wave feminism —the fight for reproductive rights— crashes with the fundamentals of femininity since, as Budgeon develops in her article *Individualised femininity and feminist politics of choice* (2015: 306-308), this movement associates traditional sex roles and the base of femininity as passivity, dependence, and self-sacrifice, all of which are subdued by patriarchal dominance. Femininity, though, can be considered as the normative demands that represent the social reality of gender within one determinate group, even if women do not share an understanding or experience of femininity; and enacting it properly supposes conforming oneself within these hegemonic cultural prescriptions of what a woman should be and behave like (Budgeon, 2015: 306-308). According to Moosavinia, and Yousefi (2018: 162), this idea of gender performativity is grounded on the performance of gender within society's established norms. The repetition of these performances defines what is socially acceptable as masculinity and femininity. Another author, Schippers (2007: 89), mentions different theories of femininity that present men and women as different classes of people —an idea that is present in the novel through the differentiation of gender's duties in Gilead—and the suggestion that within the context of male dominance, femininity could be the subordination to the power of men —also present in the novel through the oppression of women and their lack of a voice.

Bowman (2014: 12) explains that in the world of Gilead, any woman that poses a danger to these essentialist feminine roles, usually of motherhood and submission, ceases to exist as a woman —when the only feminine power they have are their wombs— and as a person, becoming a nonperson to society. According to Bowman, this is the case of Janine, who does not fulfill Gilead's gender roles and ceases to be an entity without the ability to function within society. He keeps on explaining how, opposed to her, there is Moira, a woman who ends up encapsulating masculinity —she has a desire for control and power over her body and life—

but still acts under the regime giving up her will to obtain true freedom and trading it for the fake freedom that her body and sexuality can give her in Gilead, which is at Jezebel's.

These two last characters are stripped of their real feminine identity and are on opposite sides of the feminine spectrum in the novel. Nevertheless, there is a middle ground: Offred, who unites the conservative and liberal traits of what femininity is supposed to be. In pre-Gilead society, she had a life that conformed to social expectations: she had a husband, birthed a daughter, and went to college and had a job. She incorporated elements of the conservative view of femininity and the liberal feminist ideas that her mother taught her into her life. Bowman (2014: 14) goes as far as to say that this combination is the result of "her understanding of this real self, that synchronistic and muddles internal self, versus the artificial societal self she externalizes". In the present, she does not lose her consciousness like Janine, nor fights to break free from Gilead like Moira, since she spends most of her time reminiscing about her past life —the union of the two opposites—, which results in the demand for knowledge, "the ultimate symbol of rejection of a patriarchal authority" (Bowman, 2014: 16).

Moreover, Zarrinjooee (2016) presents an accurate view of how femininity is portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*: "wombs, an ovary, and the female" (68). The State controls women's biological and reproductive capacities and places them at the centre of the dialogue. Their sole function is to procreate as a way of oppression. Femininity is reduced to slavery and machinery to produce offspring.

Turning to the topic of motherhood, Chodorow (1978: 31-32) says it is a conscious and unconscious fantasy of the gendered body and a cultural experience for women. The author takes the ideas of femininity and motherhood and turns them into the female's sole purpose and potential, but also their power (Kołodziejuk, 2020: 70). Although, it transforms the traditional concept of a mother into a victim of an oppressive and male-dominated society. Women are reduced to their physical abilities, to their wombs, and are regarded as precious for fertility by

giving up their one apparent power —the capacity to bear children— to the government while still using it as a way to manipulate, get benefits, and exert dominance against other women.

This change in the purposes of motherhood comes from how the previously unquestioned biological and reproductive roles of women were starting to get challenged by second-wave feminism by querying the nature of the biological impulse and the decision-making behind having children; and even whether it was an option at that time (Kaplan, 1989: 24). Feminism thinks motherhood is one of "the main supports of patriarchal oppression and one of the strongholds of feminine identity" (McNay, 1992: 23-24). Throughout history, "the most privileged women [...] have been tacitly and legitimately able to "slough off" the more onerous parts of mothering onto working-class and minority women" (Hansen, 1997: 168), and *The Handmaid's Tale* does not present a different reality: bearing and raising children becomes a privilege of the upper classes and the Handmaids are their way to do it, they become victims of procreation (Bacci, 2017: 160). Nonetheless, this exploitation of motherhood is taken to an extreme when, as Hansen puts it, the handmaid's survival depends entirely on their childbearing biological capacity and the later birth of a healthy child without imperfections. If they cannot produce offspring within a limited period, they are declared unwomen and stripped of their identity, womanhood, and femininity (1997: 168).

This power that the State of Gilead has over women can be understood through Foucault's theory of biopower: the mechanisms of discipline, security, sexuality and government that form power relations (Toscano, 2008: 42). Foucault creates different theories, or postulates, on how biopower gets manifested in society, but the one that can be easily identified in the novel is power as a repressive hypothesis. This conceives power as prohibition, negativity, and domination, implying the denial of truth (Toscano, 2008: 46). Foucault (1986:17) describes biopower concerning the human body, not approached due to its biology, but as an object that can be controlled, as a 'docile body' that can be subjected, used,

transformed, and improved—even forced to carry out tasks and ceremonies (173). This new bodily discipline needs an enclosed space—one that can be seen as a prison, such as Gilead, the commander's house, and the Red Center. Despite this, the power exerted on the body is exercised and not possessed; a dominant class acquires it by force and with strategic positions that pressure the oppressed (174). For example, sexuality is used in the novel as an invasion of life and a productive and positive political force; hence, biopower makes it possible to discipline bodies and regulate societies (Toscano, 2008: 48-54). In the book *Foucault and Feminism* (1992) by Lois McNay, she discusses the applications of Foucault's theories concerning the body, femininity, and feminism. She explains how the notion of body is engraved in the discussion and analysis of the oppression of women since it is the most basic and biological difference between sexes (17). Also, the previous idea of what femininity is will further oppress the body through references to biological capacities and equate women's biology to their social roles (38). Therefore, as Minico puts it, the body turns into a battlefield for power and identity and becomes a site of repression and possession (2019: 8).

In conclusion, these four aspects—feminism, femininity, motherhood, and Foucault's biopower—all play an essential role in analyzing the relations between women and the oppression they exert against each other in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the analysis we will see how women constantly try to fight for power within their state of submission using all available tools.

3. Analysis

As stated in the first part of this dissertation, the main objective of this analysis is to prove how women use power dynamics and devices to diminish each other and declare their power, all within their position of oppression from the State —therefore, from men— that places them in an inferior role in society. This study will examine four aspects —feminism, femininity, motherhood, and biopower— by which women, or rather groups of women, in the novel declare their power.



Before getting to the analysis itself, there needs to be a specification of which groups will be considered and the hierarchy forced on them established by the State. We have six levels or groups of women (stated here from the highest to lowest in ranking): Aunts, Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, Jezebels, and Unwomen.

The first group, the Aunts, acts as a mix between guards and teachers to the Handmaids. They are the ones that hold a more typically masculine role by controlling the child-bearers. The second one of these is the Wives; women married to Commanders (men of high political rank) who have considerable power within society, considering that they played a significant role



in establishing Gilead and are the shadow of the heads of State. The Handmaids are fertile women assigned to Commanders, whose Wives are supposedly barren, with the sole duty of carrying their children and giving them up to the Wives once they are born. They are "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices." (Atwood, 1998: 136). Offred, the main character and narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is assigned to Wife Serena Joy and

Commander Waterford, who, in their home, have two Marthas: Rita and Cora. Their role is as household servants: cooking, cleaning and helping the Wives' children are among their duties. Econowives are women married to lower-rank men —thus cannot be allocated a Handmaid or a Martha and are to fulfill all their duties. Lastly, there are Jezebels and Unwomen. This first one is not legally stated as a women's social group; rather, they are young women who have been proven infertile and are given a choice to become underground prostitutes instead of going to the Colonies —concentration and labour camps full of radiation— to die. The women who do end up in these camps are declared



Unwomen. Within this category are divorced women, feminists, non-heteronormative women,



failed Handmaids —which refers to handmaids who have not been able to produce children after three two-year postings—and others. These are women who are incapable of social integration within the regime's controlled divisions of gender and hierarchy.

3. 1. Feminism

Feminism is weaponised by the author, who presents two main characters that represent the second-wave feminist movement in the book: Moira and Offred's mother. We do not know their age, although if we



consider that Moira was Offred's friend before the founding of Gilead, it can be said that they belong to two different generations, thus representing two different kinds of feminism: the one that fought and the one that lived.

The first one of the two, Moira, portrays the heroic woman in the novel and is the one Offred always looks up to: "If I were Moira, I'd know how to take it apart, reduce it to its cutting

edges. I have no screwdriver, but if I were Moira I could do it without a screwdriver. I'm not Moira" (171). Throughout, Moira is always braver and more logical than the other Handmaids, leading her to represent often what Offred and the other Handmaids wanted to be —"Moira was our fantasy" (133). She even gets to see a glimpse of freedom by escaping the educational institution for Handmaids, the Red Center, by tricking Aunt Elizabeth with her cleverness. Furthermore, she is someone who has liberated her mind, sexuality, and identity from the patriarchy—for example, she decided to "prefer women [...] because the balance of power was equal between women so sex was an even-stein transaction"¹ (172). This way, Moira establishes a relation of power, meaning that she influences the behaviour of others, in this case, Offred, by turning into a role model that gets to break with what is expected of her in Gileadean society. Offred will see her as such a powerful force that all kinds of rebellion will have her signature as if she were leaving a trace: "left by an unknown woman, with the face of Moira." (91)

However, Moira's awaited outcome is not the one the reader would expect. Her escape from the forces of the State and the Aunts results in her capture and posterior imprisonment with an apparent choice: becoming an underground prostitute at Jezabel's or being sent to the Colonies to work till death—"I had my choice, they said, this or the Colonies" (249). However, this is hardly a choice, but the first option satisfies some of her desires for freedom, at least some presumed or fake freedom in which she can explore her sexuality and not conform to heteronormativity, can smoke cigarettes—which to her are freedom and a constant craving—, and can obtain sisterhood. Therefore, she surrenders to the oppression of gender roles and Gilead's power by being forced to be a tool of male pleasure while thinking that she is living in an all-woman-free community.

¹ This quote can remind us about political lesbianism, a movement asserting that sexual orientation is a political choice, and how women should chose to be lesbians in order to advocate against sexism and the heteronormative and patriarchal society.

The other feminist role, Offred's mother, is only presented through Offred's memories of her pre-Gilead life. She participated in protests and fought for their rights to get out of the gender norms rooted in society — "You call it nothing. You don't understand, do you. You don't understand at all what I'm talking about" (121-122)—. Atwood wanted to portray her as such a powerful and liberated woman that she made her appearance in one of the supposedly educational movies shown to the Handmaids at the Red Centre about Godless women who did not respect their biological gendered duties according to Aunt Lydia: "Now my mother is moving forward, she's smiling, laughing, they all move forward, and now they're raising their fists in the air" (120). Offred will later become aware that her mother is in the Colonies due to her feminist beliefs, working the land with other Unwomen like her. Nevertheless, this character will not impose her power on other women. Instead, she is a warning from the author, together with Moira.

The two characters mentioned, two representations of second-wave feminism, are used by Margaret Atwood as a warning. As explained in the Literary Review, the feminist initiative to dismantle this conservative body of thought that surrounds women and that these two characters portray in the novel is in danger when traditional values are asserted politically. These two women have a fatal outcome resulting from the patriarchal and controlling society they are forced to live in.

Furthermore, with the already mentioned by Loudermilk (2004) in the Literary Review, this advice of the possible future that awaits feminists can also be seen through the character of Offred, who rejects her mother's radical feminist tendencies —by getting married and becoming a mother— while living in a society directly resulting from the victory of patriarchal and repressive politics. So, although the author's goal is to be treated as just a writer and not a feminist, it is not possible to separate art and politics, making this novel a perfect example of her thoughts on the second-wave movement.

Another point in which we see feminism exerting its power and presence between females is through the bonds of sisterhood shown between members of the same household. From the start of the novel, Offred declares her loneliness and her hope to create a connection with those women that live within the Waterford walls: "How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts." (Atwood, 1998: 11). However, they are not allowed to fraternise with one another, not between Marthas and Handmaids, and not among Handmaids. Nonetheless, with time, she develops a kind of sisterly relationship with one of the Marthas, Cora, who takes the liberty to fraternise with her: "It won't be long now, says Cora, doling out my monthly stack of sanitary napkins. Not long now, smiling at me shyly but also knowingly. Does she know?" (271). This is a defiance of Serena Joy's power in the household since she states, from the start, that there will be no honest communication and that the Handmaid must be a ghost. Although it needs to be said that Cora's hope is for Offred to get pregnant so she will have a baby in the house to spoil, this relationship is established by interests, in favour of a baby only when she is thought to be pregnant.

Although, the most transcendent form of stating her power is shown through Aunt Lydia in the Salvaging Ceremony:

Aunt Lydia rummages in her pocket, produces a crumpled piece of paper. This, she takes an undue length of time to unfold and scan. She's rubbing our noses in it, letting us know exactly who she is, making us watch her as she silently reads, flaunting her prerogative. Obscene, I think. Let's get this over with. (275)

She is allowed to read —when women in Gilead are forbidden to— since Aunts are the highest-ranking women. She is marking her status as the only group of women, Aunts, who are allowed the privilege to read and write, right that comes from the premise that they need to be able to read the Bible in order to indoctrinate their 'girls', the Handmaids. She portrays a vital role in the tyrannical, patriarchal, and oppressive system that rules Gilead by controlling all that is related to pregnancy, which also comes with the responsibility to oversee the Handmaids'

ideology —making sure they are believers and stay positively obedient— for which they need the sacred scriptures. At this moment, she is reading in front of all women in society —who are forbidden to read— at a public event. Hence she is flaunting her power by reading that paper, a right obtained through feminism and proto-feminism —a woman's right to an education.

3. 2. Femininity

In Gileadean society, hegemonic cultural prescriptions of femininity have changed from the normative demands of previous times. Freedom and the expression of one's own sexuality have been reduced to two-legged wombs that walk and are treated like little girls and not women as if they could not think.

Taking this into account, one of the many ways that femininity is used as a weapon is by taking away anything that can enhance sexuality and attractiveness from the Handmaids, anything that can make them appealing to the Commanders, anything that can make them appear as more than just a vessel to be fertilised. This is requested by the Wives, who even take away the access to lotion, which would soften the Handmaid's skin:

"There's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. Such things are considered vanities. We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut. This was a decree of the Wives, this absence of hand lotion. They don't want us to look attractive. For them, things are bad enough as it is" (96).

Nevertheless, Handmaids have found a way around this inaccessibility: butter. All butter that is leftover on their plate, they will use to moisturise, to get a sense of normalcy, and to feel remotely more attractive, feminine: "As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will someday get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire" (96-97). This, in itself, is a way to exert their little power, to overthrow the impositions made by the Wives that come from a place of insecurity in their own marriages and supposedly barren bodies. Offred, once she befriends or turns into the Commander's mistress, asks for lotion,

taking this rebellion a step further: "Hand lotion, I said. Or face lotion. Our skin gets very dry" (158).

Femininity, in Gilead, depends on a grand level of male validation and desire. Wives are threatened by the mere presence of the Handmaid in the household since, as can be seen with the relationship between Serena and the Commander, after the creation of Gilead, the only thing they have in common is marriage and the social need for a baby: "She wouldn't understand. Anyway, she won't talk to me much any more. We don't seem to have much in common, these days" (158). Offred will take advantage of this lack of connection to feel powerful when most powerless and vulnerable. Right after this confession, during the next Ceremony—a ceremony where the Wife holds the Handmaid down while the Commander rapes her—, Offred declares how her situation had changed from when she first was introduced in the house: "I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot" (162). The Handmaid has had trouble since the start of her posting establishing a relationship and understanding it with Serena. She wanted her to be a motherly figure from the start—"I was disappointed. I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me" (16)—, which is completely opposed to what the matron of the house desires—"I want to see as little of you as possible, she said. I expect you feel the same way about me" (15). Later on, she will start to reject this matriarchal authority by continuing her forced relationship with the Commander and meeting willingly and consensually with Nick, which results in a peek at the clandestine life in Gilead in an unconfirmed pregnancy, respectively.

3. 3. Motherhood

All women in the household—Serena, Rita, and even sometimes Cora, even though she is the closest to Offred—, use their power, as little as they have, to diminish the presence of the Handmaid and alienate her from her surroundings: "They're talking about me as though I can't

hear. To them I'm a household chore, one among many." (48). It could be said that the estrangement comes from their jealousy: the Handmaid can get pregnant, is fertile, and in a society that has been built with pregnancy and the increase of birth rates as its main objective, it is only logical that these women, who cannot get pregnant, will resent the full image of fertility they are forced to witness at all times of day. Therefore, for these women, "motherhood is naturally synonymous with womanhood, and that female identity cannot be (and ought not be) extricated from its motherhood role" (Hird and Abshoff 2000; Gillespie 2000; cited in Gotlib, 2016: 330), which would, in the eyes of these authors, justify their jealousy.

Nevertheless, this jealousy is encouraged among Handmaids, and they seek it:

"Show-off," a voice hisses, and this is true. A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out, doesn't have to go shopping. The daily walk is no longer prescribed, to keep her abdominal muscles in working order. She needs only the floor exercises, the breathing drill. She could stay at her house. And it's dangerous for her to be out, there must be a Guardian standing outside the door, waiting for her. Now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security. Jealousy could get her, it's happened before. All children are wanted now, but not by everyone." (Atwood, 1998: 26)

This pregnant woman is parading her triumphant pregnant belly when it is not safe nor mandated by the State that she needs to exercise in a public place where she knows there will be many other non-gestating women whose life depends on their womb's biological duties. She is flaunting her superiority as a Handmaid, reminding all other women how her life is saved from the Colonies since she cannot be declared an Unwoman after bearing a healthy child and how all the spectators' lives are at stake. Compared to this vastly pregnant woman, her companion "beside her looks spindly, shrunken; as we all do" (26).

Nonetheless, glory does not last long. Janine, the pregnant woman whose baby was born healthy, arrives at the Prayvaganza —a massive wedding— with another Wife, not the one that adopted Angela. Ofglen sheds light on the reader by explaining that "It was no good, you know," [...] "It was a shredder after all" (214). Janine feels ashamed that the result of the pregnancy was not satisfactory; therefore, she has failed her duty as a Handmaid. Since her survival depends entirely on her childbearing capacity and the birth of a completely healthy

baby, and Janine has not delivered what the State asks of her gendered social group, she feels as though she were being punished for not following all rules and being sinful.

The most important declaration of power while using motherhood is Offred, already a mother whose child has been taken away due to her allegedly bad parenting, and Serena, a desperate woman in want of a child—even if it means being an accomplice to rape—, make an exchange for obtaining some level of satisfaction from the agreement. They are placed at a similar human level, seen as two mothers at heart who would sacrifice themselves for their children or the opportunity to have children; they are exchanging power. Offred will have intercourse with Nick—the guardian of the household— due to the Commander's doubtful capability to have children so as to get pregnant and give the child up to Serena. Serena will give Offred a part of her dream: the chance to see her daughter. At this point, their whole power dynamic changes, going from a consistent fight to scale the hierarchy and satisfy their jealousies to a truce. "As these characters can neither transcend their bodies, nor the roles that those bodies are forced to play, they are fixed to one position of subjectivity— that which is defined by the reproductive abilities of their bodies" (Matthews, 2018: 644).

3. 4. Michael Foucault's biopower

There are many ways in which the State uses power to dominate and discipline women's bodies and the female society. The three past sections have talked about subduing the body in their own way, and in each of them, the notion of biopower could be used. However, there are many ways and moments in which biopower occurs in the novel.

One of the most notable instances in which biopower is present, is a subtle recurrent interaction between Serena and Offred:

"I don't sit, but take my place, kneeling, near the chair with the footstool where Serena Joy will shortly enthrone herself, leaning on her cane while she lowers herself down. Possibly she'll put a hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I'm a piece of furniture. She's done it before." (79)

First is the fact that Offred “take[s] her place” (79) in a position that portrays submission and shows her lower place in the hierarchy in relation to Serena, who sits on a chair that signifies a throne. Therefore, while Offred stays in an uncomfortable position that would probably end up causing a physical strain—“The posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive” (79)—, Serena does not even have to stay standing up, she will own the place with her presence, all while the Marthas are standing. Serena is the only one that can relax slightly by sitting back. In addition to this, the degradation of the narrator can also be seen, her debasement to an object: Offred explains how Serena uses her cane to lower herself to that throne, but she will probably also use the Handmaid, who is kneeling, to do so. This controlling act presents Serena’s power over Offred’s body and being, turning her into an object just like her cane, but it also represents how Offred is the cane of the marriage between Serena and the Commander, the one piece that is needed to try to achieve total happiness.

Rita also has her ways of making her distaste and disapproval for Offred known. As a Martha, her purpose in the household is to be a servant —cook, clean, help raise the kids—, so she has control over what is eaten in the house within the limitations of the government’s allowance. As a result, she shows her aversion to Offred by giving her bland or overcooked food, which controls Offred’s body in a small way, and makes her existence a little bit more miserable: “Rita has ways of making her resentment felt. A baked potato, green beans, salad. Canned pears for dessert. It’s good enough food, though bland. Healthy food. You have to get your vitamins and minerals, said Aunt Lydia coyly. You must be a worthy vessel.” (65). She declares one little victory with this act of control and power.

Offred holds power by being the centre of motherhood and representing pregnancy within the house. By being the only one who gives a future to society by carrying children as a Handmaid, she utilises her fertility as a tool to control Cora and Serena’s behaviour towards her. At the start of the novel, Cora is just respectful of Offred, but once there is a chance of the

existence of a foetus, Cora's behaviour changes to a kinder and more compassionate one. Her hope for a baby to spoil is greater than her hate for Handmaids. Serena's case involves biopower in another way, by Offred holding power over Serena's choices and physical integrity, meaning how Serena breaks the law by telling Offred to have intercourse with Nick to get pregnant. Offred has the choice to accept, knowing her reward—a picture of her daughter—and she chooses to accept within the limitations of her own condition. Therefore, Offred and all Handmaids hold power over the other women of the household by being the only ones who have the chance at the object of all their desires: pregnancy.

Last but not least, we have the feminine muscle of Gilead, the enforcers, and guardians of women: Aunts. The women occupying this position control the Handmaids and their view over their bodies, and how Marthas and Wives see these Handmaids. They are the ones enforcing the law and diminishing Handmaids to keep them under control and docile. They teach women who are to be Handmaids at the Red Centre about how special, lucky and precious they are for being in the position to serve Gilead, their nation: "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen – to be seen – is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls." (28). This last word holds the complete power of the Aunts since they use it when being alone with the Handmaids to patronise and paternalise the Handmaids, diminishing their condition as women when they are, in reality, the ones who are the representation of traditional scriptural values—they can bear children—and they make them assume the position of obedient little girls who have no will nor the capacity to choose. Nevertheless, this way of turning them into children by calling them "girls" (28), will only ever happen in private since Offred states that "It's ladies instead of girls because of the Wives" (274). This would mean that the knowledge of their methods to enforce the oppression of Gilead on these women is not common knowledge within society, showing once again that knowledge is power.

Even though there are many ways in the novel in which biopower circulates among women, they all are engulfed by a bigger power: the theocratic, oppressive and patriarchal State. With the hierarchy of women that the State imposes, the government influences all women's bodies. Not just by deciding who will have a chance to get pregnant but also by having the control over the decision of who has the right to be and exist in society and who will die for the nation or as a traitor in the Colonies. This means that women cannot make free decisions because the repercussion is death, and consequently, all judgement will make them settle for survival. By only giving this supposed choice—that is not really a choice but forcing the sense of free will among women when they are actually forced to compromise—this repressive State turns women into docile and controllable beings who will do all to live on.

4. Conclusions and Further Research

The hypothesis of this paper was that women try to fight for power among themselves regarding four aspects: feminism, femininity, motherhood, and Michael Foucault's biopower. In order to see how that occurs in the novel, power relations have been analysed, as well as the dynamics and relationships in and outside the household. Terms like sisterhood, jealousy, motherhood, femininity, bodies, autonomy, power, and control have ruled this paper to show how women holding different statuses in society indeed fight to make themselves heard and noticed by one another to regain their individuality and autonomy.

Each topic has shown different instances in which women declare their power. Atwood uses feminism as a weapon, as a way to warn the reader and second-wave feminists about the possible consequences of the movement in a conservative setting. She also presents some relationships of sisterhood within the oppressed household—which can be a representation of the author's desire for more of women helping women society—, although the home is mostly ruled by a lack of bonding, led by Serena's jealousy and status—which shows the preconceived societal norm that women are each other's rivals.

Wives and Handmaids mostly use femininity since it is part of the cultural prescriptions of pre-Gilead society. Wives take away every bit of the Handmaid's femininity at every chance they have due to their fear of being replaced because the Handmaids represent everything they cannot give to their husbands and their failure in their biological duties. Similarly, Offred takes advantage of this lack of communication and understanding between husband and wife and her feminine side to gain the Commander's favour and insight into other ways of life in Gilead.

Jealousy is what is most encouraged when talking about motherhood. When the government has power over who will and will not get pregnant, when they create a symbol so visual and clear like the Handmaids to represent fertility, they are using them as targets for women to direct their hatred. Whether it is between Handmaids themselves or as something to

trade with Wives, they all are bound to use maternity and fertility because of its power to define their bodies.

When looking at the four main aspects chosen in this dissertation —feminism, femininity, motherhood, and biopower— it can be seen how they can all be encompassed by this last one. The primary influence on women's bodies and autonomy is the State, Gilead, that oppresses them into submission and turns them against one another. They get a sense of power even though they have no rights in society. It is the State and its control of everyone's behaviour and relations that commands the nation. Therefore, biopower rules their interactions on a smaller scale while being engulfed by the State.

To conclude this paper, I would like to mention that this analysis could be done more in-depth, so much so that it could become MD or even a Ph.D. dissertation if more questions were asked. For example, instead of only analysing women, men could be placed in the mix because of how they influence other women. Characters such as the Commander, Nick, and the Guardians play a crucial role in women's oppression and in how women view one another. Just like this, there could be a more exhaustive analysis on other topics apart from those discussed in this dissertation, such as sexuality or language, to scrutinise other aspects of these women's lives. Or even another route could be taken by analysing how these relationships have been transformed in the Hulu TV series adaptation or in the movie from 1990.

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