

*You want to keep*

*the blood and the milk hidden*

*as if the womb and breast*

*never fed you*

*-rupi Kaur*



**Instrumentalization of Women's Bodies in the Novel  
*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood**

María Auxiliadora Castillo Soto  
2019

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## **Abstract**

The relegation of the body to a lower status in contrast to the mind has resulted in the subordination of women, who supposedly are more closely associated to the body. Due to this displacement, the present thesis aims at illustrating how the Gileadean society, a totalitarian regime in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood, instrumentalizes on women's bodies for society's own benefit. The analysis follows a Literary Criticism methodological approach, taking into consideration the roles and social positions of the novel's female characters: the Wives, the Aunts, the Marthas, the Handmaids, the Sex Workers and Econowives, and the Unwomen. This same categorization of women present in the novel is the one I use to lay out the argumentation in the analysis.

The analysis is developed through the in-depth study of societal dichotomies. Here, "societal dichotomies" work as an umbrella term which embeds the following categories of analysis: 1) the mind/body dualism, 2) the women's body as the lacking Other, 3) the hierarchy of bodies, 4) the lack of subjectivity and 5) the abject. These categories of analysis are applied to the different groups of women in the novel to illustrate the abovementioned instrumentalization of bodies, following the implicit hierarchy of bodies as the organizational pattern.

The results show how although the instrumentalization is undeniable, the level of subordination varies depending on the group of women that is being analyzed. For this reason, this thesis also aims at identifying different survival strategies that these female characters develop to escape the imposed victimization role. Although they do not escape physically, small acts of defiance such as positive self-talk and the creation of a female support network remind us that whenever there is oppression there is also resistance.

*Keywords:* *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood, women's bodies, societal dichotomies, dualism, lacking Other, hierarchy of bodies, subjectivity, abject.

## Resumen

La relegación del cuerpo a un estatus menor frente a la mente ha resultado en la subordinación de las mujeres, quienes supuestamente están más cercanamente asociadas con el cuerpo. Debido a este desplazamiento, la presente tesis ilustra cómo la sociedad de Gilead, un régimen totalitario en la novela *El cuento de la criada* escrita por Margaret Atwood, instrumentaliza los cuerpos de las mujeres para su propio beneficio. El análisis comprende una metodología de crítica literaria, tomando en consideración los roles y las posiciones sociales de los personajes femeninos de la novela: las Esposas, las Tías, las Marthas, las Criadas, las Trabajadoras Sexuales y las Econoesposas, y las No Mujeres. Es esta misma categorización de mujeres presente en la novela la cual utilizo para exponer la argumentación en el análisis.

El análisis se desarrolla a través de un estudio en profundidad de dicotomías sociales. Aquí, “dicotomías sociales” funciona como un término general que comprende las siguientes categorías de análisis: 1) el dualismo mente/cuerpo, 2) el cuerpo de la mujer como el Otro carente, 3) la jerarquía de cuerpos, 4) la carencia de subjetividad y 5) lo abyecto. Estas categorías de análisis se aplican a los diferentes grupos de mujeres en la novela para ilustrar la instrumentalización de los cuerpos mencionada anteriormente, siguiendo la implícita jerarquía de cuerpos en el patrón organizativo.

Los resultados demuestran cómo, aunque la instrumentalización es innegable, el nivel de subordinación depende del grupo de mujeres que está siendo analizado. Por esta razón, esta tesis también identifica diferentes estrategias de supervivencia que los personajes femeninos desarrollan para escapar del rol de víctima impuesto. Aunque ellas no escapan físicamente, pequeños actos de desafío como la motivación personal y la creación de una red de apoyo de mujeres nos recuerdan que donde sea que haya opresión hay también resistencia.

*Palabras clave:* *El cuento de la criada*, Margaret Atwood, cuerpo de mujeres, dicotomías sociales, dualismo, el Otro carente, jerarquía de cuerpos, subjetividad, abyecto.

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## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the GEMMA program for allowing me the opportunity to experience this master's degree full of adventures and academic journeys. It has been an amazing two-year program that I could not have lived without the support of GEMMA. So, thank you so much!

Also, I want to thank Dr. Gerardo Rodríguez Salas and Dr. Grażyna Zygałło for their support through this thesis. I have really enjoyed working with you two. I take everything that I have learned from you to apply in my future academic career. Thank you for your honesty and readiness to help!

Dedico este TFM a mis dos pilares en la vida, mami y tita. Hoy por hoy, soy la mujer que soy gracias a ellas. Dos mujeres fuertes que han confiado en mí y que día a día me apoyan incondicionalmente. Dos mujeres a quienes la vida muchas veces les ha dicho que no, pero sin importar el obstáculo han sabido sacar fuerzas de donde no las hay para seguir adelante. Estas dos mujeres son los ejemplos de pasión y perseverancia con los que he crecido y que aún tengo la gran fortuna de seguir observando. Todo lo que he logrado ha sido posible gracias a su empuje y a que hacen mi viaje por la vida más placentero. Por esto y mil cosas más, ¡gracias a las dos!

Finally, I want to thank Sergio for being so supportive and understanding. Writing this thesis has almost felt effortless because I had the great opportunity of writing it in a caring and loving environment. Many women have not had, and still do not have, the time or space to create their work, and because of this I consider myself lucky. Thank you for being part of this process!

## Introduction

This challenge is a great chance for those who, like women, who have historically been deprived of the right to self-determination; for them the crisis of the masculine rational subject can be a constructive positive moment.

(Braidotti 240)

The body has been relegated by Western philosophy as a heavy load that represents an obstacle between the mind and its full development. This understanding of the body has generated negative perceptions around the construct of ‘women’ because women have been more associated to the body than men. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Descartes, to quote a few, take part of the group of male thinkers who have downgraded the body in contrast to the mind; and even female philosophers have opted to deny this association to reclaim women’s position in society.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, a relationship between people, of any gender, and their bodies should not be seen as negative. What truly needs to change is the negative perception around the construct of the body that has so strongly been developed in Western countries. Here, I emphasize Western countries because the body’s perceptions vary greatly from one place to another. For instance, Stefanie Talley in her article “Considering the Body from a Cross-Cultural Perspective” reminds us that “culture is central in determining the ways in which the body is understood and acted upon” (21).<sup>2</sup> Even cultures among Western countries may present differences among themselves, but I have decided to use this term to narrow down my topic and because the novel itself is produced within a Western perspective. If we want the body’s perceptions to change, they must be understood from a more open and feminist point of view. As Rosi Braidotti expresses in her book *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, we must take advantage of the crisis of the masculine rational subject and create knowledge through experiences and the body itself. Because of this, I aim to study society’s-imposed control over women’s bodies in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In order to counteract this patriarchal control in our own society, it is fundamental to analyze how the body is instrumentalized as a tool to objectify women because of biological and cultural differences. Women have always lived under men’s shadows and we have been constantly compared to

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<sup>1</sup> I further discuss this point more thoroughly in Chapter I.

<sup>2</sup> For further readings about non-Western perspectives on the body see: Conklin, Beth, & Morgan, Lynn; Miner, Horace; Pillsbury, Barbara; and Rosenberg, Harriet G (qtd. in Talley).



men to understand our bodies, but thanks to the work of feminist scholars, this dreadful situation is changing with time. In these introductory lines, I would first like to present the author and the novel which I work with throughout this thesis. Later, I go over some important constructs for the development of the research, before closing the chapter with the methodology.

This social subordination of women due to a connection to our bodies is exemplified with the female characters in Atwood's novel. For this reason, the two objectives of this thesis are first, to illustrate the instrumentalization of women's bodies for the regime's own benefit through the analysis of societal dichotomies; and second, to identify different survival strategies that these female characters develop to escape the imposed victimization role. This novel was first written in 1985, and it resurged as a television series under the same name in 2017. This topic's resurgence made me wonder how women's bodies are treated in Western societies nowadays for this novel to have such great impact after 30 years of its original publication. Although it was written in the 80s, this novel also presents up to date issues faced by women. In an interview with author Margaret Atwood, she expresses how she "had been collecting newspaper clippings, which one did in those days. There was no internet. So my rule for it was, nothing goes in that didn't have a precedent in real life – somewhere, sometime" (*Variety*). Because the author used real life events, women identify with the novel and know that its affairs are possible and real. Nonetheless, there are people who still believe that women's subordination is a dystopia that has already been dealt with. In point of fact, the mere presentation of the novel as a dystopia is a strong proposition. Gerardo Rodríguez Salas in his article "E.G.E. Bulwer-Lytton's Covert Anti-Feminist in the *Coming Race*" defines Feminist utopianism as the "attempts to imagine an alternate, ideal world where sex difference is no longer a problem" (87). Furthermore, and contrary to this construct, dystopia is "negative visions of humanity . . . [from] social and political oppression; from the domination of humanity by machines, monsters, or alien species; from the imposition of norms derived from specific scientific and technological developments, such as eugenics or robotics; or from environmental catastrophe" (Claeys qtd. in Vieira 16).<sup>3</sup> Atwood's novel presents these environmental catastrophes in unison to social and political oppression. And although her novel is a fiction based on real events, these examples also serve as a

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough revision on the constructs of dystopia and utopia please refer to Rodríguez Salas' article quoted above.

warning to other societies who have not experienced them directly. Plus, Ana Ruano Tirado in her master's thesis *The Gender-space Paradigm in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985)* highlights how Atwood's novel "trespass[es] fiction and become[s] the magnifying glasses of true events" (1). So, by analyzing such novels, we may learn from history's mistakes to avoid repeating them.

Margaret Atwood is a well-known Canadian author who is famous for her varied bibliography, most of it dealing with women's and/or environmental issues. Some of her most popular works are: *Bodily Harm*; *The Blind Assassin*; *Cat's Eye*; *The Edible Woman*; and *Lady Oracle*, just to mention a few. She has been the recipient of a great number of awards and today, she continues to be an advocate of social fights that she stands for. "Atwood writes about art and its creation, the dangers of ideology and sexual politics; she deconstructs myths, fairytales and the classics for a new audience" (Malek *British Council*). She is widely known by varied audiences and serves as an example for contemporary authors. In an online interview with *Penguin Books Limited*, Margaret Atwood states that "the 1980s was a decade of pushback against the uprising of the many kinds of feminism in the 1970s. People were saying that they would like women to be back in the home in their rightful sphere, and that all of the gains that people thought they had made ought to be reversed" (*Penguin*). When Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, she was living in Berlin and she was stimulated by the social and civil situations that had developed in Germany. She did not create an alternative universe where none of these events had not happened and that is why her novel has been so successful. To briefly inform the reader about the novel's plot, I will cite Madonne Miner in her article "'Trust Me': Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" when she exposes that:

The Handmaid's Tale worries over the plight of women in a society governed by religious fundamentalists committed to bolstering a seriously low birthrate (the result of toxic waste, acid rain, and other environmental disasters which lead to sterility). In this "Republic of Gilead," fertile women are trained to serve as handmaids to infertile ones; each month, upon ovulation, the handmaid copulates with her mistress's husband (a Commander) and prays "let there be fruit." If conception occurs, the handmaid receives assistance in her labor and delivery from other handmaids, and then surrenders the child to her mistress. Having given birth successfully, the handmaid can rest assured that she will not be sent to the Colonies, where "unwomen" clean up toxic dumps and radiation spills. (149)

Just by reading this novel's short summary, the reader may assume two important aspects for this thesis. First, that there is an imposed regime; and second, that there exists a hierarchy of women's bodies, which contributes to women's subordination in this society.

Although Margaret Atwood's novel has been vastly analyzed, there is not yet an analysis of instrumentalization of women's bodies through societal dichotomies, especially not based on all the female groups in the novel. There are several articles that analyze the romantic aesthetic of the work. For instance, Barbara Ehrenreich states that "as in *1984*, the only truly subversive force appears to be love" (qtd. by Miner 150). The same author cites Amin Malak, who mentions that Atwood's novel "upholds and cherishes a man-woman axis" (150). I would like to go beyond the love feature of the story and focus on a more subversive aspect of it. My goal is to offer a critical analysis, which may be extrapolated to Western societies, to understand possible subordinations suffered by women and other minority groups through the instrumentalization of our bodies. It is undeniable that some authors, such as Miner and Stillman, have paid attention to the lack of power that women have in the story. For instance, Peter Stillman exposes in his article "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*" that "Gilead's power reaches into every nook and . . . Offred has no modes of resistance against Gilead, at least none that threaten Gilead in any way" (75). I use my own analysis to oppose these scholars, who deny the female characters' subversive acts. I do acknowledge that the situations that these women live in the novel erase their subjectivity up to a certain point, and it is in fact one of the societal dichotomies that I analyze; but, following Rodríguez Salas' analysis of Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad*,<sup>4</sup> I also highlight that the female character's survival strategies are tactics which allow them to regain their agency.

When there is a totalitarian government in control, it is fundamental to talk about power and its influence on people. A valuable construct that I deem important is that of Foucault's biopower. In his book titled *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, Michel Foucault expresses that biopower in its many forms "also acted as factors of segregation and social hierarchization, exerting their influence on the respective forces of both these movements, guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony" (141). When we talk about a regime, there exists a clear hegemony and a social hierarchization in

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<sup>4</sup> Through Janice Raymond's construct *Gyn/affection* - "synonym of female friendship" (20), Rodríguez Salas assigns the maids from the novel an important role in the creation of female friendship even though through a first and superficial reading it may look as if they do not have any agency.

place. Some people are in control and dominate over the rest. In the fourth chapter of the aforementioned book, Foucault explains the development of biopower and its effects in society. Society experienced a change from the sovereign power, which decided over life and death, towards a different power over life. This change was mainly directed into two main poles: first, the body as a machine and second, the body as a procreator of life. When this change surged, “there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of ‘biopower’” (Foucault 140). In other words, biopower may be referred to as the power over bodies to control populations. For instance, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, because of the environmental disasters, the regime controls women’s bodies to repopulate the country. In this novel, for example, biopower takes the form of The Rachael and Leah Center, referred to by the Handmaids as the Red Center, where the Handmaids are trained to fulfill their duty towards society. One cannot talk about bodies without talking about power and its influence. Donna Haraway in her book titled *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* expresses it well when she writes: “bodies are maps of power and identity” (180). We cannot ignore the fact that power will be reflected on bodies, but more importantly, on women’s bodies, which are the focus of study in this research. For this reason, let us now enter a problematic but extremely necessary discussion: ‘women’ and ‘women’s bodies’ as constructs of analysis.

In feminist research, when the construct ‘women’ is used, it is important to position the investigation’s context well. Because of this, I would like to clarify that, for the present research, the construct ‘women’ is going to be used to specifically refer to the female characters from Atwood’s novel. I do not intend to generalize these experiences to all women residing in Western countries, nor I intend other women to identify with them. It is up to the reader to decide whether there exists a possible identification with the situations described here. Just as Marion Iris Young expresses in her book *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*, talking from experiences “is politics, not autobiography, and I speak from my own experience, which I claim resonates with that of other women,” she continues, “the only way we can know our similarities and differences is by each of us expressing our particular experience” (69). Through time, the use of these common experiences has been useful to unify the feminist fight. This unison helped different groups to identify with the same cause; but now, we understand that there is not just one ‘woman/women’ prototype nor a so-called Feminism, in singular. In her book *Gender*

*Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler remarks that “for feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women” (2), but we must not forget that even the term in its plural form confines women into a narrow category. Although the use of this language has helped to accomplish social change, it has also brought up several issues, such as White middle-class feminists talking for every other woman in the globe. After reading Judith Butler, Monique Wittig, Simone de Beauvoir, and Donna Haraway, I have not been able to come up with an alternative construct to use for this research. On the one hand, to use the construct ‘women’ means to work around the men/women and sex/gender dichotomies. Even Butler acknowledges that the simple separation of sex as natural and gender as cultural is not enough because sex is also predetermined by gender (*Gender* 9-10). Plus, these dichotomies are mostly coherent in a heterosexual hegemony which does not consider spaces outside the binary, excluding many other individuals. On the other hand, Haraway proposes the use of cyborg as an alternative to this binary. Nonetheless, she also mentions that “binaries, rather suspect for the feminists I know, can turn out to be nice little tools from time to time” (Haraway 111). The main reason why I have decided not to use the cyborg construct is that, in the novel, the construct ‘women’ is used as a naming category, so I have used it for the analysis as well. Following Haraway, I also support that this is one of the times in which ‘women’ and ‘women’s bodies’ as constructs are the most appropriate tools for analysis. Besides, after reading several feminist scholars who deal with this topic, I have come to realize that the best way to go ahead and use these constructs is by clearly defining them.

The ‘women’ and ‘women’s bodies’ constructs are used to refer to the female characters in Atwood’s novel. They are identified as women both by the author and by the role they play in society. For example, ‘women’ in Atwood’s plot refers to the Wives who are married to the Commanders; the Aunts who instruct the Handmaids; the Marthas who prepare and serve food; the Handmaids who repopulate the country; the Sex Workers who please the Commanders and guests; the Econowives who work closely with their husbands; the Widows who are barely seen; and the Unwomen who clean toxic waste. Following this short description, we may infer that women are mostly relegated to closed spaces<sup>5</sup> and are assigned to care giving roles. In contrast, men are Commanders who hold the power, doctors, guards, or drivers. Men stand in a privileged position in society whereas women are positioned as the “Other.” In her article titled “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?”, Monique Wittig

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough analysis on different spaces in which women are confined in Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* please refer to Ana Ruano Tirado master’s thesis.

expresses it nicely when she states that “there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general” (64). I start out the theoretical framework in Chapter I with Simone de Beauvoir’s and Monique Wittig’s idea as a base: that the masculine is universal and the feminine is just compared to it. Moreover, I have decided to use the construct of ‘women,’ which I do not use with quotation marks in the analysis, taking into consideration the malleability of the concept and the readers’ own interpretation and identification. “If there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler *Gender* 45). I aim at participating in the no-ending construction of concepts such as ‘women’ and ‘women’s bodies’ through the development of this research. Notwithstanding, as many other feminist scholars, I must take into consideration a well-known and discussed construct in Gender Studies: intersectionality.

To effectively contribute to the common feminist knowledge, intersectionality is a construct that must be given great importance. It has been widely used in feminist, and also not feminist, theory and research. The term was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and it has been extensively used since then. In her article titled “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” Crenshaw refers to intersectionality as a solution to “the elision [of intragroup differences, which] is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class” (1242). During the development of the present analysis, I also take into consideration age and sexual orientation in addition to gender, race, class, and ableism, whenever possible. Just as Susan Bordo expresses in her book titled *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body, Tenth Anniversary Edition*, “gender forms only one axis of a complex, heterogeneous construction, constantly interpenetrating, in historically specific ways, with multiple other axes of identity” (222). There are other aspects of women’s lives that could be taken into consideration, such as religion, but because the master’s thesis is a finite space, I focus on the ones previously mentioned. Nonetheless, I encourage peer researchers to explore this area if it is of their interest. Although Atwood’s novel does not explicitly talk about race, I bring race into the discussion because it is a fundamental aspect when creating feminist knowledge. “If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is . . . because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic,

sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (Butler *Gender* 4-5). I am aware that it is impossible to tackle all of the intersecting points that an individual has, but my intention is to relate intersectionality to the ‘women’ construct to validate its use throughout the analysis of the novel.

As a methodology, I have chosen Literary Criticism, focusing on Women’s and Gender Studies theories with a sociological approach. According to Alice Templeton in her article “Sociology and Literature: Theories for Cultural Criticism,” Literary Criticism values “literature’s disruptive, critical powers more than its capacity to reinforce customary modes of thought and action” (20). In other words, through this methodology we may highlight literature’s emancipatory powers for our own benefit. In this specific case, Literary Criticism is used to analyze both the societal dichotomies that subordinate women and the survival strategies that grant them agency. I have come up with the construct societal dichotomies as an umbrella term, which refers to the following categories of analysis: 1) the mind/body dualism, 2) women’s body as the lacking Other, 3) hierarchy of bodies, 4) loss of subjectivity, and 5) the abject. Although I later explain them in Chapter I, I want to highlight that these dichotomies are understood from a binary perspective. I have analyzed one side of the binary, the feminine, while the masculine side is assumed to be universal, as mentioned before by de Beauvoir and Wittig. Besides, most philosophers who have theorized on the body do not “seem prepared to admit that his researches, if they make sense of the body, do so with reference to the male body. None seems aware that the specificities of the female body remain unexplained” (Grosz xiii), which is why I want to focus here on the female body. Furthermore, I have also identified different survival strategies that the characters use to strive in a society where they are supposed to be submissive. As a self-identified feminist, I feel the commitment to the female characters to counter-pose their position as victims to a more subversive one. It is widely known that Literary Criticism opens the space for dialoguing and interpreting one same work from different perspectives and in different ways, which will greatly contribute to the creation of knowledge in general.

For the organization of the present thesis, Chapter I is structured in a way that the reader has access to varied Feminist Theory on the construct of the body. The first part of the chapter offers a brief summary of the three theoretical currents, which are: egalitarian feminism, social constructionism, and sexual difference. Then, I provide the reader with the umbrella term previously mentioned called societal dichotomies with an explanation of each subcategory of analysis. The last part of the first chapter is dedicated to theory on survival

strategies that women use to maintain their subjectivity and regain agency. Subsequently, Chapters II and III are the analytical chapters. In these chapters, I analyze the instrumentalization of women's bodies and their survival strategies. I study the seven groups of female characters in Atwood's novel: the Wives, the Aunts, the Marthas, the Handmaids, the Sex Workers, the Econowives, and the Unwomen. Because of the scarce information provided by the narrative voice about the Widows, I have not analyzed them in depth, but they are mentioned under the Unwomen group whenever the information has allowed it. The organization of the analysis is based on the hierarchy of bodies. For Judith Butler, in her book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* this hierarchy of bodies is clear since "if man is at the top of an ontological hierarchy, and woman is a poor or debased copy of man, and beast is a poor or debased copy of both woman and of man, then there is still a *resemblance* between these three beings, even as that resemblance is hierarchically distributed" (43), and even if the institutionalized power does not want to explicitly acknowledge it. For Chapter II, I study the three female groups at the top of the hierarchy: the Wives, the Aunts and the Marthas; whereas, for Chapter III, I go over the four groups at the bottom of the hierarchy: the Handmaids, the Sex Workers and the Econowives who hold a similar position, and the Unwomen. To conclude, the final chapter takes the reader through a recapitulation of the whole analysis. To allow the reading some fluidity and avoid pure repetition, I have divided the concluding chapter by societal dichotomies instead of groups of characters. Therefore, in the Conclusions there is a summary of each societal dichotomy with the main points of each female group, citing a couple of real-life examples to accentuate the importance of the topic today.

Finally, an important aspect that needs to be highlighted in every Feminist work is the subjectivity of the research itself. For years, we have been taught about objectivity: one must separate oneself from the object/subject of study for the validity and reliability of the research. Even today, many researchers are taught this same way, but we now know that "feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledge*" (Haraway 188), and situated knowledge means to explicitly position oneself as the developer of the research to acknowledge possible biases. This does not invalidate the research itself; on the contrary, it allows for an open dialogue among readers and researchers to avoid talking over those who have been silenced. In other words, research should not be generalized to all contexts and to all peoples. One must acknowledge that what is true in one place may not be true in many other places. Donna Haraway remarks that she argues "for politics and epistemologies of



location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (195). By locating ourselves, we are accepting the partiality of our research and understanding and debunking its universality. For this reason, although I am not part of the object/subject of this study, I acknowledge that I write here as a Hispanic, professional, feminist, middle-class woman in her thirties, who is concluding a master’s degree in Women’s and Gender Studies. These and many other intersectionalities may and will affect my work, and I am conscious about it. Finally, I want to cite Gloria Anzaldúa from an interview conducted by Ann E. Reuman when she says that “the writer a lot of times in using the ‘I’ is using the ‘we’ because there are other women who identify so strongly with her experiences. And then when she uses the ‘we,’ the generic term of ‘we Chicanas’ or ‘we black women,’ it’s actually a more particularized ‘we’” (22). As a political stance, I have decided to use both pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we.’ Let the ‘we’ serve as an identificatory pronoun for those individuals, not only women, who self-identify with what I am writing about; and let the ‘I’ serve as a space where I identify myself but may lead to others’ identifications as well.



## **Chapter I. Feminist Theories on the Body: The Body as a Construct of Analysis through Societal Dichotomies**

If bodies are inscribed in particular ways, if these inscriptions have thus far served to constitute women’s bodies as a lack relative to men’s fullness, a mode of incapacity in terms of men’s skills and abilities, a mode of women’s naturalness and immanence compared with men’s transcendence, then these kinds of inscription are capable of reinscription, of transformation, are capable of being lived and represented in quite different terms, terms that may grant women the capacity for independence and autonomy which thus far have been attributed only to men.

(Elizabeth Grosz xiii)

The first chapter of the present thesis proposes a stimulating academic journey through the works of varied authors who have developed theory around the construct of the body. As presented in the introduction, this corpus’s main ideas are used to analyze the instrumentalization of females’ bodies by the regime in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The*

*Handmaid's Tale*. This instrumentalization is studied through the analysis of different societal dichotomies in the novel. The reason why I have chosen the aforementioned categories of analysis is because women's bodies have been represented in juxtaposition to men's, and these representations have stemmed into many different misconceptions about women. Moreover, I dedicate some space to highlight women's survival strategies in the novel to move women away from victimization and to recognize their subjectivity. But, just as Elizabeth Grosz notes in her book titled *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, these representations are capable of transformation, and this process has already started through the development of feminist analyses. Feminism has challenged the traditional knowledge on the body, and it has allowed for the creation of new knowledges lived and experienced through the body. The inscription of bodies, so popularly attributed to Grosz, has allowed for new understandings of the subordination suffered by women. Now we know that bodies are inscribed differently according to cultural demands, but more importantly, we know that these inscriptions may be challenged; and to do so concedes women a new earned autonomy, which is already been reclaimed.

In Western philosophy, the body is not deemed important, and it is considered a dreadful object we carry around. For instance, there are "misogynist models like Plato's or Aristotle's who considered that there was less reason in women" (Rodríguez Salas "E.G.E." 93). On the one hand, Plato suggests that "the body, with its deceptive senses, keeps us from real knowledge" (qtd. by Spelman 34). On the other hand, Aristotle regarded the female body as an empty vase that creates life through male's sperm; while Descartes theorized the broadly used mind and body dualism, which places the body at a disadvantaged position (Grosz 5-6). Regardless of these previous conceptions, feminist scholars have turned the focus back to the body and major perspectives have been developed. Krystal Cleary points out in her essay titled "Feminist Theories of the Body" that "although not academic in nature, the Women's Health Movement of the 1970s and onward marks an important moment in the history of feminist discourse about the body" (2).<sup>6</sup> This movement mainly took place in the United States and it encouraged women to learn about their own bodies and to fight for better health care but, more importantly, it allowed for the resurgence of a conversation on the body. Even

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<sup>6</sup> Although women's health was a main issue in the 70s movement, it is important to highlight that there had been discussions around these topics since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Due to war and the imposition of new diseases, health and the vulnerability of the body became important to society. Also, many of the doctors, nurses and caregivers were women, who treated both men and women. Plus, not to mention the Victorian dress reform movement, which was mainly led by women, who fought for more comfortable clothing which did not damage the body. For further reading on both issues please refer to Birkle and Tally Introduction of Part II; Montague 91-112; and Blanchard 21-50.

so, the Women's Studies field is divided around this topic, but fortunately, this division has allowed for vast knowledge to be created and discussed. Moreover, this separation has opened the discussion between three main currents: egalitarian feminism, social constructionism and sexual difference. As a starting point, I will first explore egalitarian feminism in which some scholars separate themselves from the essentialist perspectives and have considered the body a heavy burden for women.

The abovementioned feminist currents that theorize about bodies are well organized and clearly explained by Elizabeth Grosz, who I will use as my point of departure in conjunction with other feminist theorists to develop the theoretical framework. For egalitarian feminists, the body is considered negatively because it is highly related to women's subordination. For instance, giving birth is seen as the main reason to limited access to the public sphere (Grosz 16). Following this idea, Nancy Chodorow analyzes the construct of mothering in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* and comments that "ideology about women and treatment of them in this society, particularly in the labor force, tend to derive from this familial location and the assumptions that it is or should be both exclusive and primary for women, and that this exclusivity and primacy come from biological sex differences" (Chodorow 178). Through time, women have mostly been relegated to the private space while "men's location in the public sphere, then, defines society itself as masculine" (Chodorow 9). Because of this arguable separation, women have not been present in the political sphere as much, and when present, they have been strictly criticized and ostracized, though this has slightly changed in past decades. For Western philosophers, such as Plato, the body is just a heavy load that drags the mind down and prevents it from fulfilling its maximum potential. Common images in Western philosophy are: "the body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its projects" (Bordo *Unbearable* 3); no wonder why in order to accomplish a more just "equal" status compared to men, some feminist scholars have pushed the body aside. Nonetheless, the body is a fundamental part of the living; so, instead of pushing it to the margins, we might as well contemplate its benefits and potentials.

Contrary to egalitarian feminism, for the social constructionism group, the body is not an obstacle because "it is not biology per se but the ways in which the social system organizes and gives meaning to biology that is oppressive to women" (Grosz 17), plus, there is a distinction made between body and mind. In other words, through culture, the body, especially women's bodies, have been assigned negative meanings which have resulted in

their subordination. What needs to be transformed are the cultural perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and values that exist around the construct of the body. Nonetheless, a negative side to this statement is that since “it is not biology but rather the ways in which that body has been imbued with meaning that is oppressive to women, the body becomes fixed, naturalized, and ahistorical” (Cleary 1). Bodies change constantly and not two bodily experiences are exactly the same, which is why we must be careful when stating the assumed fixation of bodies. Moreover, these thinkers use the mind/body dualism, which will be explained later in this chapter, and they acknowledge that one needs the other in order to exist. Also, this current is relatable to the cultural determinist arguments that “claim in their most extreme form that ‘woman’ is, strictly speaking, entirely a social construct upon which patriarchy necessarily depends for its self-perpetuation” (Cooley 20). This statement should also be dealt with carefully because social constructionism, for the most part, assumes that human beings are empty containers in which culture acts upon. I agree with the fact that culture and socialization are part of women’s subordination; however, social constructionism should be analyzed jointly with the other two currents to avoid biases.

Finally, for the sexual difference group, the body is crucial to understand woman’s psychical and social current existence. The body is no longer ahistorical, biologically given, nor an acultural object. As per Grosz, “for them, the body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation,” she continues, “the body is regarded as the political, social, and cultural object par excellence, not a product of a raw, passive nature that is civilized, overlaid, polished by culture” (18). For this group of theorists, the body codes the meanings projected onto it in sexually determinate ways. In contrast to the social constructionism group, these scholars consider the body as more active, which is why I think that it is important to join the three currents for a better analysis. In this sense, according to Bordo, poststructuralism has contributed two additional elements to the construct of body as active. Firstly, the “prevailing configurations of power;” and secondly, the idea that body is “mediated by language: by metaphors . . . and semantical grids . . . that organize and animate our perception and experience” (*Unbearable* 288-9). Following this, both power and language are fundamental to the analysis of Atwood’s novel. It is clear how the regime’s power assigns subjectivities among the female characters for its own benefit, on the one hand; and the novel itself is created and analyzed through language, on the other hand. Therefore, it is a blend of the three currents what will allow for a more

complete and holistic analysis since the body as a burden, social and cultural influences, and power and language will be taken into consideration.

Whichever current the reader is more leaned towards, it is important to remember that the Feminist Theory field is interdisciplinary, and it presents a broad scope of study. So, as Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick reveal in the introduction of the book titled *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, “if there is a unifying theme, it is simply that the body matters – and not just to women, though gender is a persistent theme, but to all forms of theory” (2). The past and recent study of the body has helped scholars and people in general to understand women’s and other minority groups’ subordinations. It would be naïve to think that there exists one theory that might answer all the questions, especially since the body is so complex that “one could reasonably answer that the female body is *both* construction *and* resource” (Bordo *Unbearable* 36). We still have many unanswered questions until this day, but theories on the bodies have helped us get closer to our research goals. It would be unfair for the holistic aspect of the research to focus only on one side because “whereas essentialist err on the side of reducing identity to sexual difference, cultural determinists err by reducing identity to an oversimplification of cultural construction” (Cooley 29). Just as I use intersectionality to analyze different aspects of the novel’s characters, I feel committed to use different feminist points of view to tackle as many oppressions as possible. By bringing all these different aspects to the research, the analysis allows for a better understanding of the instrumentalization of women’s bodies. As previously stated at the beginning of this chapter, this instrumentalization present in the novel will be studied through the analysis of societal dichotomies in which women are positioned vis-à-vis men.

### **Analysis through societal dichotomies**

In this section, I delineate and explain the main categories of analysis that I use to analyze the female characters in Atwood’s novel. These categories of analysis are positioned under the umbrella term societal dichotomies and they refer to: the mind/body dualism, the women’s body as the lacking Other, the hierarchy of bodies, the loss of subjectivity, and the abject.

#### *The mind/body dualism*

Different Western philosophers have scripts in which they debate about the mind/body dualism, but the philosopher who this concept has been attributed to is René Descartes. This debate over the mind and the body has come to be known as the Cartesian dualism and it has

had great impact in Western theories. The Cartesian dualism has been used to rule and understand most of the constructs that surround us today. Descartes posits this dilemma in his second and sixth meditations in his well-known work titled *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*. This philosopher states:

Now, first of all, I observe here that there is a great difference between the mind and the body, in this respect, that the body of its nature is endlessly divisible, but the mind completely indivisible: for certainly, when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am purely a thinking thing, I can distinguish no parts in myself but understand myself to be a thing that is entirely one and complete. And although the whole mind appears to be united with the whole body, if the foot is cut off, or the arm, or any other part of the body, I know [*cognosco*] that nothing is therefore subtracted from the mind . . . On the other hand, however, no bodily or extended thing can be thought by me that I cannot mentally divide into parts, without any difficulty; and I therefore understand it is divisible. This point alone would suffice to show me that the mind is altogether distinct from the body, if I did not yet sufficiently know [*scirem*] this for other reasons. (60-1)

This extract from Descartes' work considers the mind to be whole and complete in contrast to the body. This differentiation presents a problem because due to our bodily experiences, such as menstruation, pregnancy, menopause, and others, women have been associated to the body and men to the mind. This association has resulted in a burden for women. For example, from the egalitarian feminist current, the well-known feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir declares women's bodily experiences "as a burden, how the hormonal and physiological changes the body undergoes at puberty, during menstruation and pregnancy, are felt to be fearful and mysterious, and she claims that these phenomena weigh down the woman's existence by tying her to nature, immanence, and the requirements of the species at the expense of her own individuality" (qtd. in Young 29). Because women's bodies have not been on the focus of study, the lack of knowledge on the topic has created marginalization and anxiety around them. In order to explain female bodies, the solution has been to compare them to male bodies, which, as mentioned before, are considered to be universal. Most of the time, women are identified by their bodies first; and then, if lucky, they are taken into consideration as individuals. "Women in our society are primarily defined as wives and mothers, thus in particularistic relation to someone else, whereas men are defined primarily in

universalistic occupational terms” (Chodorow 178). Even nowadays, a woman’s success is measured by the children she has borne or by her looks. And even if she successfully accomplishes these requirements, she is not contemplated positively. “For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity” (Bordo *Unbearable* 5). This negative connotation about women and their bodies have weighed heavily on their societal development mainly because this connection of women to the body and men to the mind has resulted in the creation of the construct of man as complete and what is considered the norm in contrast to women as the lacking Other.

### *The women’s body as the lacking Other*

Women are portrayed as the lacking Other, therefore, envious of men, who are depicted by most Western philosophers as the whole. Chodorow explains this concept well when she cites Freud and his analysis of “Little Han,” whose father taught him “beliefs about the inferiority of female genitalia, denial of the feminine role in gestation and parturition, views that men have something and women have nothing, rather than having something different” (182-3). Here, my intention is not to enter too deep into psychoanalysis due to the vast universe that this field represents; nevertheless, I want to point out how this idea of women as lacking has been widely used to explain theories about humans. Just as Moira Gatens posits in her article “Power, Bodies, and Difference,” “the account of female sexuality offered by Lacanian psychoanalysis constructs female bodies as lacking or castrated and male bodies as full or phallic” (231). This dichotomy results in the subordination of women since, supposedly, we may never achieve completeness, resulting in a positionality beneath the complete male. For instance, Judith Butler highlights how “the feminine position is constituted as the figural enactment of that punishment [castration], the very figuration of that threat and, hence, is produced as a lack only in relation to the masculine subject” (*Bodies* 102). Unfortunately, this lacking Other does not only represent the lack of the penis, but it also exposes the lack of rational thinking. “In short, women just are their bodies in a way that men are not, biologically destined to inferior status in all spheres that privilege rationality” (Price and Shildrick 3). This imposed otherness has allowed inequality to be present on a daily basis because women are seen as unrelatable to the norm. Women have been relegated to society’s margins without a saying. They have not been allowed to actively participate in society because of their representation as the lacking Other, which has invalidated them; but this

same representation has given more power and a better status to the one: man. This injustice is well expressed by Simone De Beauvoir who remarks that “the difference, or ‘otherness’ that women embody is necessary to uphold the prestige of the ‘one’ of the male sex as the sole possessor of subjectivity meant as the entitlement to active participation in all fields” (qtd. in Braidotti 236). This universal subjectivity authorizes men to be active in society while women are negated their participation in education, politics, religion, and many other areas of influential knowledge. Therefore, creating a vicious cycle of illiteracy and subordination. Braidotti remarks that the “patriarchal culture as a system has seen fit to code embodied subjects in sexual-specific terms according to the oldest of all dichotomies: male/female . . . [therefore] the sexual dichotomy that marks our culture has systematically situated women in the pole of difference in the sense of *inferiority* to men” (238). Here, Braidotti refers to a structural subordination and a symbolic disqualification that stems, first, in the rejection of women’s bodies and second, in a clear hierarchy of bodies that mostly subordinate women.

### *The hierarchy of bodies*

Women’s bodily experiences are considered insignificant, and it has resulted, once again, in the position of the white and heterosexual male as the most important and knowledgeable being, which produces an undeniable hierarchy of bodies. This category of analysis refers to the placement of the white male at the top of the hierarchy while other bodies are positioned below. Within the oppositional positions of the masculine and the feminine, “they are and replicate themselves through what they exclude, through not being the animal, not being the woman, not being the slave” (Butler *Bodies* 52). There exists a perpetuation of this hierarchy that allows some bodies to matter more than others, which in turn, permits institutions to use bodies for their own capitalist and social purposes. Throughout history, this hierarchy of bodies has been explicit, such as in the times of slavery. Nonetheless, nowadays, bodies are also positioned in an implicit, although obvious, hierarchy. One might find men positioned on top of women and other subordinated groups, but there is a varied distribution of the same sex group members due to different variables such as class, race, gender, ableism, ageism, and others; which means that women might be positioned higher than men. As Judith Butler states:

After all, Plato’s scenography of intelligibility depends on the exclusion of women, slaves, children, and animals, where slaves are characterized as those who do not speak his language, and who, in not speaking his language, are considered diminished



in their capacity for reason. This xenophobic exclusion operates through the production of racialized Others, and those whose “natures” are considered less rational by virtue of their appointed task in the process of laboring to reproduce the conditions of private life. (*Bodies* 48)

The use of gender, race, class and other bodily characteristics as an excuse to decide which bodies matter more has long existed in Western societies’ rulings. This instance has created the Others, represented by women and other minority groups since they are marked as irrational, uncontrollable, and unknown. From this abuse of power, I would like to highlight that the hierarchy of bodies presented by Butler is fundamental for the analysis of Atwood’s novel. As previously explained in the methodology, there is a clear hierarchal organization of female bodies in the novel used to sustain the regimes’ stability. In this case, powerful men are at the top of the hierarchy and women, and other men, are distributed below them, depending on their tasks. Because of this hierarchization of bodies, it is not a surprise that women are also negated their subjectivity, originating the belief that women need instruction and assigned positions to fulfill their duty in society.

#### *The loss of subjectivity*

Before stating what I mean by this category of analysis, I would like to briefly go over some perspectives on the construct of subjectivity itself. To illustrate, on the one hand, Young points out that “the unique contribution of Straus, along with Merleau-Ponty and certain other existential phenomenologists, to the Western philosophical tradition has consisted in locating consciousness and subjectivity in the body itself” (47-8). According to this quote, subjectivity is located in the living body, which denies the dualistic metaphysics (subject/object, inner/outer, I/world). So, one would imagine that because subjectivity is related to the body and because the body is related to the feminine, women’s enjoyment of subjectivity is fulfilled; nonetheless, this idea of subjectivity is more related to men than to women. On the other hand, for other scholars, subjectivity is separated from the body. In this sense, “what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the *construction* of body as something apart from the true self . . . and as undermining the best efforts of that self” (Bordo *Unbearable* 5). This latter conception of subjectivity has been analyzed by feminist scholars as the reason why women and other minority groups are unjustly subordinated. We should not forget that the first perspective on subjectivity offered by white male philosophers does not take into consideration women’s realities. They are just assumed to undergo the same

experiences as the ontological subject. “These legal, psychoanalytic and social understandings of the female body have been articulated from the perspective of male writers, who take it upon themselves to represent women, femaleness and femininity. From this perspective, it is not surprising that women are represented as pale shadows and incomplete complements to the more excellent type: ‘man’” (Gatens 232). Because of this assumed representation, feminist scholars such as Paula Cooley, Marion Iris Young, and Rosi Braidotti, agree on the fact that women have been denied their subjectivity. In this sense, subjectivity as a construct is understood as women’s identity in their own right and the possibility of making their own decisions. For the analysis, I will take into consideration the deconstruction of subjectivity, which “challenges all conceptions of self as thoroughly fictive, heteronomous in origin, and deceived in any claims of the subject to self-determination” (Cooley 67). If we take into consideration this idea, we must consider the subject being influenced by its culture, prompting a tendency that more aptly adapts to Atwood’s characters. “Woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity that are definitive of being human and that in patriarchal society are accorded the man” (Young 31). In a patriarchal society, women are believed to belong to the margins, causing their inevitable subordination. “This is the traditional representation of Woman as being irrational, oversensitive, destined to be a wife and mother . . . This representation of Woman is the denial of the subjectivity of women; it results in their exclusion from political and intellectual life” (Braidotti 235). All the different societal dichotomies that I have mentioned above result in the negation of subjectivity. Its outcome is seen as women’s bodies being one of the main reasons why their voices are not heard because, according to the phallogocentric logic, they are insignificant, positioning them as the abject in society.

### *The abject*

An important aspect to take into consideration is that individuals construct their subjectivity by comparing their experiences to others. In this stance, we are presented with a category of analysis that is constructed by the subject/object dichotomy and the construct of the abject. Subjectivity requires the repudiation of the abject so that the subject may emerge. Two of the main feminist scholars who have worked with the construct of abjection are Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva. For Butler, “the abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (*Bodies* 3). For Butler, these zones of

social life may be represented by the people, in this case women, positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy of bodies and who are needed to mirror the subject, that is men. For Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the abject “means that there are lives not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*” (6). The more excluded people live, the more associated to the construct of abjection people are. Although most women are denied their subjectivity, this does not mean that they are denied subjectivity in equal proportions. Not all women are equally positioned as the abject. It is fundamental to point out that the construct of abjection has a broad definition, and “abjection is above all ambiguity” (Kristeva 9), which allows its use for varied situations and peoples. For instance, “socio-historical considerations can be brought . . . They will allow us to understand why that demarcating imperative, which is subjectively experienced as abjection, varies according to time and space, even though it is universal” (Kristeva 68). Kristeva explains that the abject can be found anywhere at any time because it is universal and ambiguous. We just have to pay attention to the social context and understand the differences lived by the people, or in this case, the women. Following Ruano Tirado’s analysis of the novel and her proposition that “women are the abjects restricted to live confined in unlivable spaces” (18), I take the idea of abjection to an extreme and argue that in Atwood’s novel all the women, in different degrees, are the abject of the Gileadean society. Although the societal dichotomies presented in this theoretical framework contribute to understand women’s and other groups’ subordinations, I must say that the fight for equality is not lost. Over time, women have managed to come up with strategies to regain their subjectivity and agency even when the structural power has been against their deeds. I do not want to rip women off from their well-deserved accomplishments. Hence, one of the objectives for this thesis is to portray women not only as victims but as active individuals who also strategize to survive in the patriarchal society they live in.

### **Women’s strategies for survival at a social and a personal level**

Although it is extremely beneficial to posit the analysis of the use of the body as an instrument for the regime’s own benefit, it is also necessary to bring into the discussion the different strategies for survival that individuals come up with even in times of suffering. If not, an analysis based on only one side of the story would be incomplete. As per Susan Bordo, “resistance and transformation are indeed continual and creative, and subversive responses are possible under even the most oppressive circumstances” (*Unbearable* 295). There has existed a tendency to victimize women and other minority groups; but regardless of their situations,

feminist scholars brought the attention to the fact that, even in difficult circumstances, people have undeniable agency that needs not to be forgotten. Although structural power and abusive regimes want to delete individuals' subjectivity, as I will show in the context of Atwood's novel, gaps exist that individuals take advantage of to strive. Even if what they do does not improve their immediate living situations, it is still an action they take into their own hands and act upon it. Even so, just as Bordo expresses in the abovementioned quote, even in the most oppressive circumstances there is space for resistance and transformation, and Atwood's novel is not the exception. I have analyzed this space of resistance through the strategies that the female characters use at a social and a personal level even though this separation might not always be so clear

When I refer to a social level, I take into consideration the characters and those around them. In other words, when there is more than one person involved in the action. Situations of fear or conflict cannot be generalized because the context and the people change. People adjust differently towards a similar situation. Nonetheless, when people fear the regime, they may follow to avoid punishment. For instance, Judith Butler exemplifies it well when she states that "the presumption is that the law will constitute sexed subjects along the heterosexual divide to the extent that its threat of punishment effectively instills fear, where the object of fear is figured by homosexualized abjection" (*Bodies* 110). In this example, homosexualized abjection is not desired because of the consequences that people may face. Similarly, the abject in Atwood's novel is not desired because it means death and punishment, which produces submissive subjects. Nonetheless, although "submissive," these subjects also fight back, creating sites of resistance. Jana Sawicki in her article "Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies" points out that "at the same time that these new [reproductive] technologies create new subjects – that is, fit mothers, unfit mothers, infertile women, and so forth – they create the possibility of new sites of resistance" (194). The hegemonic power does create new subjects, whether submissive or not, some of them adapt easily to the new demands and some others do not, but even when creating these new subjects there is opportunity for confrontation. "Foucault also emphasized, later in his life, that power relations are never seamless, but always spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity, new openings for potential resistance to emerge. Where there is power, he came to see, there is also resistance" (qtd. by Bordo "Feminism" 254). One force cannot exist without the other. It would be naïve to think that every person under a regime is a follower. For example, in Atwood's novel, strategies for survival at a social level consider the sorority

that female characters create among themselves to survive such a patriarchal regime, though they are not allowed to fraternize. Also, most of them bend the strict rules imposed, even the Wives, who are women who have contributed with the Gileadean society. These two just to mention a few; but I develop these strategies in depth later in the analysis. Even if subjects are too afraid to act at a social level, they might act at a more personal level, impacting mainly themselves but also society to some extent.

When I refer to a personal level, I pay attention to those survival strategies that the characters use for themselves. In this sense, subjectivity plays an important role. Just because a subject might seem submissive to the regime, it does not mean that she agrees blindly to the situation being lived. People tend to demonstrate certain subjectivity through making decisions and bending rules. “It is also true that our very ‘docility’ can have consequences that are personally liberating and/or culturally transforming” (Bordo “Feminism” 254). Sometimes, because of fear or death, tameness might seem as the only option, but as Bordo posits, this docility may be liberating. I would like to highlight that women have also been known to bear difficult situations. Through this statement, I want to focus the attention in the Women’s Liberation Movement and how it was clear that once women did not depend on men economically, they could achieve a lot more than expected. Thanks to this movement, women have identified themselves with adjectives such as independent and strong, which were terms assigned to men. In this account, Nancy Chodorow declares that:

. . . women have other resources and certain distance from their relationships to men. My account stresses that women have a richer, ongoing inner world to fall back on, and that the men in their lives do not represent the intensity and exclusivity that women represent to men. Externally, they also retain and develop more relationships. It seems that, developmentally, men do not become as emotionally important to women as women do to men. (198)

I personally find Chodorow’s statement very promising. Women’s rich inner world must not be ignored. For instance, one of the survival strategies that women in the novel have at a personal level is the positive self-talk to encourage themselves to strive, even in their subordinate positions. Plus, the decision of being part of one of these female groups may also be interpreted as a strategy to avoid death, at least until their bodies are useful for the regime and must be displaced.

To conclude the theoretical chapter, I would like to draw special attention to the importance of feminist research. It is true that through time women and other minority groups have experienced a hostile environment, and they still do. Although there have been some advancements in terms of social inequalities, many other aspects have not changed much or have gotten worse. Nonetheless, “the crisis of rational thought is nothing more than the forced realization, brought about by historical circumstances, that this highly phallogocentric mode of thought rests on a set of unspoken premises about thinking that are themselves nonrational” (Braidotti 197). Feminist scholars and philosophers have challenged hegemonic theories of knowledge, and they have proven that the phallogocentric sciences are also subjective. This discovery has created doubt around the hegemonic knowledge, and it has started a crisis that we must take advantage of. According to Butler, “th[e] figuration of masculine reason as disembodied body is one whose imaginary morphology is crafted through the exclusion of other possible bodies,” she continues, “yet this is a figure in crisis, for this body of reason is itself the phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity” (*Bodies* 48). The idealization of the masculine has reached such a point where its sustenance is not feasible anymore. It has a lot of gaps and uncertainties that many starts to doubt. This break down in masculinist theory is our cue to create new knowledges that can challenge the one already established. The goal is not to produce an omnipresent theory, but to create the union of different theories that address as many differences as possible. So, to use Butler’s own words: which bodies actually matter? I would say that all the characters in the novel are fundamental for the regime’s maintenance, and through the analysis of the societal dichotomies in the following chapters, I aim to illustrate the instrumentalization of women’s bodies and their own strategies for survival.



## **Chapter II. Instrumentalization of Women’s Bodies and their Strategies for Survival: Analysis of the Wives, the Aunts and the Marthas**

All readings are also mis-readings, re-readings, partial readings, imposed readings, and  
imagined readings of a text that is originally and finally never simply there.

(Haraway 124)

Literature is a great tool to understand the different subordinations that women and other minority groups have suffered and still suffer in society. Authors may decide to write about a

specific topic surrounding an issue somewhere at some time; but whenever that work is read, it is reinterpreted and reapplied to the readers surroundings, personal experiences, and cognitive knowledges. Haraway reminds us that these readings and reinterpretations are alterations of a text that is variable and alive. These interpretations are important to create a variety of theories that will help us understand our society a bit better, and which I hope this analysis may contribute to. As mentioned in the introduction, I have divided the analysis into two chapters, which I have organized following the hierarchy of bodies present in the novel. Therefore, for this chapter, I illustrate the instrumentalization of women's bodies through the analysis of the three groups of female characters positioned at the top of that hierarchy: the Wives, the Aunts, and the Marthas. It is important to highlight the protagonist's use of proper names when referring to the Commander's wife: Serena Joy (Pam), the Aunts: Aunt Elizabeth, Aunt Lydia, Aunt Helena and Aunt Sara, and the Marthas: Rita and Cora. The fact that they have recognized names already locates them at a higher position in contrast to the other groups, who have names, but who are referred to as a group and not as individuals. In the novel, women are divided depending on their societal tasks. "It has been argued that women ought to perform certain social functions and not others, indeed that women ought to be fully restricted to the reproductive domain" (Butler *Bodies* 33). This reproductive domain is ample, and it takes into consideration many different areas; so, whether they reproduce the population, the regime's ideals, or the traditional values, there is no doubt that they perform their assigned role. The three groups at the top of the hierarchy are differentiated from one another first, by their assigned roles and second, by the amount of power that they hold over other women. It is indeed because of the latter characteristic, that the Wives are positioned at the very top. They control everyone in their household and have the final word if a Handmaid or a Martha were to commit a transgression.

### **The Wives**

In the novel, the change from a democratic country to a totalitarian regime is achieved through small changes in the, soon to be, Gileadean society. People notice these small changes, some more than others, but they mainly do nothing because they are afraid for their lives. Nonetheless, there is a group, who is not talked about in the novel, that leads the coup. The men in charge become the Commanders of the new country, and by their side, they have their corresponding Wives, who are also part of the movement; but who, once the new regime gets installed, are sent to their new homes without a saying in any social nor political

endeavors. Because of the clear division of men as cultural and women as natural, the novel presents a mind and body dualism. The men are clearly associated to the mind whereas the women to the body. I want to recall here Chodorow's study on mothering to highlight how the author notes that women are wives and mothers first before anything else. In the novel, it is clear that the Wives' responsibility is to be there for their husbands. Nothing else. Even the narrative voice acknowledges how the knitting that the Wives do "it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose" (Atwood 13). Chodorow could not have described their role better. Even though they are not the ones bearing the children, they raise them, which awards them with the maternal role and not the Handmaids. The Wives are in control of the Marthas and the Handmaids, and even some of the Guardians; but because of their close association to their bodies, being barren becomes a burden. In a society where bearing children is considered so important, the Wives are judged harshly for not having children. For example, before the Ceremony, the Wife comes in with flowers on her dress and Offred thinks to herself: "No use for you, I think at her . . . you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants" (Atwood 82). Offred's thinking reflects the regime's judgements towards withered women. For most of them, their body has turned its back on them; and some of them were betrayed not only with infertility but also with disease. The Commander's Wife, for instance, uses a cane to move around the house and Offred sees her "sewing, in the sitting room, with her left foot on the footstool, because of her arthritis" (Atwood 13). Here, the body becomes a burden because it limits her. Because women are valued mostly for their bodies and not their minds, if their bodies fail them, they are left empty handed. They do not have anything to rely on. They fail society and themselves because they are incomplete, and this incompleteness positions them as the lacking Other.

In psychoanalysis, women have been considered incomplete. This incompleteness results in the male subject as the complete and omnipresent persona while the female subject is positioned as the lacking Other. This subordinate position of women as lacking and/or incomplete has stemmed in small or no participation of women in society. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women as the lacking Other are represented through the lack of knowledge, the lack of movement, the lack of freedom of speech and the lack of ability to bear children. It is true that the Aunts have access to important information because they have to prepare the Handmaids for the new regime, but the rest of the women are not permitted to read nor write, not even the Wives. Therefore, they all lack knowledge. The regime needs illiterate subjects to control them. Even in the stores "they put the picture in the window when they have something, take



it away when they don't. Sign language" (Atwood 164). Also, most of the women lack freedom of movement. Here, the amount of freedom that each group has varies. For instance, the Wives visit other Wives' houses, but that is about it. They do not go out much. When the Commander takes Offred to Jezebel, we as readers learn that there is a limit where "Wives aren't allowed" (Atwood 232). They may commute from one house to the other, but only inside the limits. Another aspect that women lack due to their subordinate position is the freedom of speech. There is a contraposition of the time before and the time under the regime. For example, when Offred's mother makes an appearance, she is portrayed as a strong-minded woman. She would say things like: "Look at him, slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?" (Atwood 121). This strong female attitude is counterposed to the weak-willed and half-hearted women that the regime has created. Although the Wives are mostly in control of their households; besides these bits of power, they are not to get involved in the regime's structuring even if, in the time before, they had the power of speech, such as Serena Joy, who gave "her speeches about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home" (Atwood 45). In regard to the women's lack of ability to have children, most of the Commanders' Wives cannot have children because "they are defeated women. They have been unable" (Atwood 46); and this is the reason why they have Handmaids. In the Gileadean regime, "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 61) because women are the ones lacking, not men. In the previous paragraph I mentioned that the Wives are judged harshly for, supposedly, being barren. Here, I use "supposedly" due to men being more likely to be the infertile ones, and as readers we learn this during Offred's visit to the doctor. He confirms that "most of those old guys can't make it anymore . . . Or they're sterile" (Atwood 61). Nonetheless, the ones to be blamed are the women, who are the ones "who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective" (Atwood 204). This positionality as the lacking Other places all the female groups under the Commanders in the hierarchy of bodies. However, the Wives hold the highest position in the female hierarchy.

The hierarchy of bodies reflects how in the Gileadean society some bodies matter more than others. For the regime, most bodies are easily dispensable, especially those of women. Thanks to Professor James Darcy Pieixoto's talk in the epilogue of the novel titled *Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale*, we know that during the Gileadean regime there are purges that not even some of the high Commanders escape. There is the mention of the

Great Purge, “which discredited and liquidated a number of the original architects of Gilead” (Atwood 306). So, even the powerful men are considered dispensable in such a regime; but more importantly, this hierarchization is one of the tactics that the regime uses to instrumentalize women’s bodies for its own benefit. “Social structures position individuals in relations of labor and production, power and subordination, desire and sexuality, prestige and status” (Young 20). In Atwood’s novel, women are hierarchized depending on their status and functions in society, and one of the visible ways of appreciating this hierarchization is through the clothing that the regime assigns to each group. For instance, the Wives wear blue; the Aunts wear khaki; the Marthas wear green; the Handmaids wear red; the Econowives wear stripes, which are an allusion to the Second World War; the Sex Workers wear costumes; Unwomen wear gray, and the Widows wear black. All of them wear long and heavy dresses, except for the Sex Workers who may use more provocative clothes. The Commander makes this hierarchy clear when he tells Offred: “Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some” (Atwood 211). Clearly, some women are more benefited than others, even though, in general, women’s situations are not ideal. At first, this hierarchization was not as clear cut as I thought. I found myself debating whether the Wives or the Aunts are higher up in the hierarchy. At last, I came to peace with the idea that the Wives are higher up because they have more subordinates below them. On the contrary, the Aunts are only in charge of the Handmaids. They are on top of the women’s hierarchy because they do have a saying and somehow possess more freedoms than the others. For instance, “usually Wives do not lower their voices” (Atwood 260) because they are not expected to do so. We also know that they hold power because nuns are not allowed to become Wives since “they’re considered, still, too dangerous for positions of such power” (Atwood 220). As mentioned before, the Wives wear blue, which, according to Jill Morton in her published multimedia CD titled *Color Voodoo #1 -A Guide to Color Symbolism*, means spirituality, trust, truth, cleanliness, tranquility, contentment, passivity, conservatism, to mention a few. The Wives are the examples to be followed in the Gileadean society. They represent passivity and orderliness. They are the good women who support their husbands and who stay at home to create a safe space for them. This subordination is a clear loss of subjectivity that is taken away by the regime.

The category of analysis titled loss of subjectivity refers to how women have been denied an identity to their own right and to make their own decisions. As previously cited in chapter one, Braidotti exposes that women have been excluded from political and intellectual

life mainly because they have been assigned a role they must fulfill. For instance, “women are constituted and self-constituting subjects, though the public status of full subjectivity has been denied them in some measure, in terms of political, economic, religious, verbal, and visual representation” (Cooley 38). In Atwood’s novel, the clearest example of how women have lost their subjectivity is by losing the power of the word. They cannot read nor write which transforms them into mere followers and believers of what they are told. Also, the women in the novel are available to please the regime and the men in charge and to fulfill their desires, leaving aside the women’s needs. In the case of the Wives, the regime keeps them busy through taking care of their garden and household and through knitting. “Many of the Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (Atwood 12). The Wives keep themselves busy taking care of their flowers. They do not have anything else to do. For example, Serena Joy knits scarves for the Angels, but Offred notices how she never finishes them. She even thinks that the Commander’s Wife starts a scarf and undo it when she is about to finish so she can start again. They have lost their sense of purpose because most cannot have children. Also, their husbands are always out, and they are not allowed to work. They do not prepare the food or keep the house organized either because the Marthas do it for them. It looks like for the regime knitting and gardening is enough. It is true that the Wives may punish the Handmaids and the Marthas, which provide them with some sort of power, because “the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone” (Atwood 162); but this little power does not grant them with a subjectivity of their own. They have been ripped off of anything that represents them as individuals. For instance, Serena Joy used to speak publicly about what she believed in, but “she doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless” (Atwood 46). Even the Wives, who at first supported their husbands to start the coup, have become submissive subjects of the ideals they defended. For this reason, they, and all the other women, have become the abject of society.

The abject as a category of analysis surged as a contradistinction to the subject, which possesses subjectivity and is autonomous. On the contrary, the abject is the social discard. The one that is looked down at and who the subject repudiates in order to construct its subject status. For this analysis, it is fundamental to understand that the “abjection assumes specific shapes and different codings according to the various ‘symbolic systems’” (Kristeva 68). The abject is malleable. Women are needed to mirror the subject, who is men, so they are placed in the abject position, especially those whose lives are excluded. One of the reasons why I

defend that all women are the abject in the novel is because, according to Kristeva, there is a close relationship between religion and the feminine body as the abject (93), and this relationship is clearly seen in the novel. Although I do not focus this analysis on religion, the Gileadean totalitarianism has “the story of Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, and their two handmaids” (Atwood xiv) as a biblical precedent. For instance, in the case of the Wives, the abjection is suffered at a lower degree since their position in the hierarchy of bodies is higher up. Nonetheless, they are less powerful than the Commanders and their situation is undesirable to men which turns them into their abject. This abjection is not understood as such by other female characters. Because of this, the narrative voice does not acknowledge this positionality. For Offred, the abject refers more to the women who hold a lower position than hers. Each group of women considers the other women lower in rank the abject. So, this abjection will depend on the perspective of each person. Nevertheless, I want to highlight that since men are at the top of the hierarchy, all the women, up to a certain extent, will hold the position of the abject for them. There are instances in the novel when the relationship between the feminine and the abject is clear. For example, in the time before, “there were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men” (Atwood 56). These instances are clear illustrations of the violence lived by women; and even though it is said to happen in the time before, the women in the Gileadean society are not exempt from it either. Yet, to somehow counteract this positionality as the abject, women have come up with different strategies that help them regain some of their lost subjectivity, both at a personal and social levels.

It is undeniable that the lives that women lead in Atwood’s novel are restraining and extremely demanding. Some, such as Minner and Stillman mentioned in the introduction, might even say that it is impossible to assign these women some sort of striving desire to survive, but I highly disagree with this statement. I personally interpret many of their actions and behaviors as strategies for survival, both at a social and a personal level. Just as Foucault remarks: where there is imposed power there is also resistance (qtd. in Bordo *Unbearable* 295). So, to say that the female characters in the novel are submissive followers would be to deny their subjectivity. The Wives, as a group, have several strategies at a social level that they come up with to endure their lonely and boring lives. In this case, we mainly have Offred’s perspective on what the Commander’s Wife does. For instance, we know that Serena Joy smokes cigarettes, which are hard, or almost impossible, to get; but “there’s always a

black market, there's always something that can be exchanged. She then was a woman who might bend the rules" (Atwood 14). She is part of the group of people who started the coup, but she is not a complete believer herself. She bends the rules several times, and the most important one is when she suggests Offred to get pregnant by a man other than the Commander. "She's ready for this, she's thought it through. 'I know you can't officially. But it's done. Women do it frequently. All the time'" (Atwood 205). I want to call attention to how Serena Joy refers here to other women, which means that it is something done by many Wives. Another strategy that the Wives have to get out of the house and socialize is to get sick. "They get sick a lot, these Wives of the commanders. It adds interest to their lives . . . They take turns. There is some sort of list, invisible, unspoken. Each is careful not to hog more than her share of the attention" (Atwood 154-5). When one gets sick, the other Wives visit her house with food, and they spend all of the afternoon together. This is a way of forgetting what is happening around them and just share with one another. Furthermore, when it comes to the survival strategies at a more personal level, Serena Joy, for example, listens to music that brings her memories from the time before. "Sometimes from the front sitting room there will be the thin sound of Serena's voice, from a disc made long ago and played now with the volume low, so she won't be caught listening as she sits in there knitting, remembering her own former and now amputated glory: *Hallelujah*" (Atwood 55). They are moments when they are on their own in moments of reflection. Moments when the feminine creativity flies free of restrictions and allows them to keep their hopes up for what might come in the future.

### **The Aunts**

The information about how the Aunts are assigned their role is not provided in the novel. As readers, we do not know who these women are or why they are chosen for this task. We do know that some of them are true believers and others follow this path as a survival strategy. "Some of the controlling Aunts are true believers, and think they are doing the Handmaids a favor: at least they haven't been sent to clean up toxic waste, and at least in this brave new world they won't get raped, not as such, not by strangers. Some of the Aunts are sadists. Some are opportunists" (Atwood xvi). They are in charge of educating the Handmaids in a strict and even violent way. Although the narrative voice does not provide us with a lot of information about the Aunts, it is fundamental to remember that the Aunts are the only group of women who are allowed to read and write albeit they cannot read from the Bible. This characteristic is important since they are placed differently in the mind and body dichotomy

because of this aspect. In contrast to the other female characters, the Aunts hold a closer relationship to the mind than to the body. They are the ones responsible for educating the Handmaids and imposing on them the new (or should I say old?) traditional values. Not even men are allowed at the Red Center. “The guards weren’t allowed inside the building except when called” (Atwood 4). Of course, called by the Aunts and not the Handmaids, so they clearly represent the authority and the knowledge. For instance, Aunt Lydia “stands at the front of the room, in her khaki dress, a pointer in her hand . . . a graph, showing the birthrate per thousand, for years and years: a slippery slope, down past the zero line of replacement, and down and down” (Atwood 113). The Aunts have the information that is taught to the Handmaids. They are the authority because they actually constrain the Handmaids mentally and physically through unreliable information and violence. The Handmaids could choose not to believe the information received, but the indoctrination is so heavily imparted that most of them accept this reality as theirs, which is understandable. On the contrary, little is there to say about the Aunts and their body acting as a burden for them because they are liberated of the burden of having children. Since they are older women, the Aunts are not measured by their bodily functions. We do not exactly know why, but they are associated more to the mind than to the body. Nonetheless, they are also instrumentalized by the regime for its own benefit: to indoctrinate the Handmaids. But, as mentioned before, the most important reason why they somehow escape the mind and body dualism is that they “are allowed to read and write” (Atwood 129). None of the other female characters are allowed to do so, at least not legally. Nonetheless, they also represent the lacking Other just because of being women.

There are four main subcategories that I analyze related to the societal dichotomy of the women’s body as the lacking Other. It is interesting enough that the first category, lack of knowledge, does not fully apply to the Aunts. They are the teachers of the Gileadean society, and as such, they have important information that they pass onto their students. Although they do not lack knowledge to the same extent as the other female characters, I want to draw attention to the fact that the information provided by the regime might not be trustworthy. When Offred watches the news, she ponders on the idea of this unreliability. “Who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked” (Atwood 82). This dubious thought lingers and makes me wonder if the Aunts also get altered information. They probably do. However, they still hold more information than the others. In the second category, the lack of movement, the Aunts also excel. They are allowed to move more freely; but because they are in charge of the Red Center, there is where they spend most of their time. When Moira

escapes the Center, she moves around without anybody questioning her because she is wearing an Aunt's khaki dress - "In that brown outfit I just walked right through" (Atwood 244); so, this proves that they move more freely. For the third category, freedom of speech, the Aunts possess more liberties than the other characters because they are the ones who decide which Handmaid stays and which goes; therefore, we may say that the regime trusts them. Also, they give several speeches at the Red Center and at Salvagings; and even if these speeches are probably written by the regime, they are the ones delivering them. Similar to the first category, the lack of ability to have children is present, but it does not affect the Aunts negatively. The Wives might be judged harshly if they are barren, but the Aunts are not expected to have children because of their role. Although they may always be lacking just because of the fact that they are women, they are the only ones who accomplish a professional life, to categorize somehow positively what they do. So, in this sense, they do not suffer as much as the other groups from this societal dichotomy. One of the main reasons why this might be is their position of power in the hierarchy of bodies.

Similar to the Wives, the Aunts hold power which they use to educate and instruct the Handmaids. The Aunts simulate prison guards at the Red Center. "Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts" (Atwood 4). They are the authority, and they are very severe. They physically harm the Handmaids, which creates an atmosphere of fear towards the Aunts, who treat the Handmaids as animals who must be tamed. "Aunt Elizabeth standing by the double doors, arms folded, cattle prod hung on her belt, while Aunt Lydia strides along the rows of kneeling nightgowned women, hitting our backs or feet or bums or arms lightly, just a flick, a tap, with her wooden pointer if we slouch or slacken" (Atwood 194). Moreover, they do not only harm them physically, but they also disempower the Handmaids mentally. They show them movies and give them constant speeches about the traditional regime's values. Offred confesses that "sitting in our rows, eyes down, we make her [the Aunt] salivate morally. We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives" (Atwood 114). The Handmaids are under the Aunts mercy and everything they do is judged and punished by their superiors. Because of this hierarchal positionality, most of the times, women are the ones who control other women and their bodies. To support this point, Professor Pieixoto mentions Commander B. Fredrick Judd, who believes that "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves. For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this

feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group” (Atwood 308). This strategy has long been used, especially because attitudes, such as empathy, may be applied; and it has also proved effective in the Gileadean society. Notwithstanding, even though the Aunts hold a high position in the hierarchy of female bodies, they have lost their individuality to fulfill all the many societal requirements demanded from them by the regime, which is why, as the other characters, they are not exempt of the loss of subjectivity.

When it comes to analyzing the Aunt’s loss of subjectivity, it is not as clear as with the other female characters. Nonetheless, even the Wives, who are at the top of the hierarchy, lose part of their subjectivity just because of being women, and the Aunt’s case is not the exception. Overall, the most important aspect is that the Aunts are also vulnerable women. When Moira escapes the Red Center by deceiving one of the Aunts, it is revealed that the Aunt’s “power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets” (Atwood 133). The Aunts may be tricked and fooled as any other person. Not even their power and knowledge can save them from being susceptible. Also, women in the Gileadean regime are not allowed to do as they please, neither the Aunts. They are denied the possibility of making a real choice. Like all the other groups of female characters, their choices are reduced to either death or salvation under the regime’s terms. I have mentioned how some of the Aunts might be fervent believers and some might only accept the responsibility of educating the Handmaids to escape the Colonies. There is not enough information in the novel to know exactly the reasons why the Aunts do what they do, but “insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified” (Young 42). All these inhibitions, confinements, positionings, and objectifications are some of the reason why I think that the Aunts also suffer loss of their subjectivity. At the end of the day, they dedicate their lives to the regime and forget about themselves. They make the regime’s interests their own. The regime creates an army where all of the Aunts look and think the same; and although some of them might be revolutionaries, before the eyes of the men in charge of the regime, they continue to hold the position of the abject.

The Aunts also become the abject for men for the simple reason of being women. Women are imposed many restrictions; and even though the Aunts do not have as many constraints as other female characters, they are not allowed to read from the Bible because it is forbidden, even for them. In the Red Center, the Handmaids are obliged to pray many times during the day for their indoctrination. “For lunch it was the Beatitudes. Blessed be this,



blessed be that. They played it from a tape, so not even an Aunt would be guilty of the sin of reading. The voice was a man's" (Atwood 89). The authority is represented by men, even in the tape, because they are the ones who hold the position of subject in society. They are the ones who must control the abject, meaning women in general, also the Aunts. Furthermore, for the Aunts, the Unwomen and the women from the time before are the abject in society. One of the Aunts recalls "the spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. *Things*, the word she used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips" (Atwood 55). "Things" here refer to what I have mentioned before: women being violently killed, raped, tortured, among other terrible doings. According to the Aunts, those *things* do not happen in the Gileadean regime because women are taken care of; but they live in a state of abjection and rejection that deprive them of a dignified life. Though, for the Aunts, the Unwomen and the women from the time before are the abject, they consider that the Handmaids hold a privileged position that should be highly respected. Notwithstanding, Offred and the rest are living the transition, which is the excuse the Aunts give them for their living situations. The Aunts assure them that in the future women will just be used to it. In the future, "women [will be] united for a common end. Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task. Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of the household? It isn't reasonable or humane" (Atwood 162-3). For the Aunts, the Handmaids are subjects and not the abject; yet, this categorization analyzed from the outside seems implausible because of the Handmaids' living situations. Some of the Aunts convince themselves that this is true to cope with their actions against the Handmaids, thinking that they are supporting a greater good. I consider this positive self-talk a strategy for surviving the Gileadean regime.

The Aunts also have some survival strategies of their own. As a social strategy, they have the power of the word. The spoken word. Offred narrates the many speeches that the Aunts give them as part of their indoctrination. These speeches would say things like: "The future is in your hands" (Atwood 47); or even: "The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (Atwood 23). Whether they are true believers or not, they have the duty to teach the regime's values to the Handmaids and follow them themselves. In order to survive, it is easier for them to support the regime and instruct its subordinates. To become an Aunt could be more of a strategic plan than anything else. As I

have previously mentioned, the novel does not specify how the process of becoming an Aunt is, but they know that once they become an Aunt, they can teach and be saved from the Colonies, even if they are older women. So, to become an Aunt is a survival strategy at a personal level that some of them take advantage of because “all power is relative, and in tough times any amount is seen as better than none” (Atwood xvi). In contrast to other female characters, the Aunts are one of the groups which hold the most power. They use this power to threaten the Handmaids and to make them submissive by saying things like: “Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (Atwood 91). Additionally, they do not depend on a man. It is true that they report to the regime, which is a patriarchal power, but inside the Red Center, they only answer to one another. Furthermore, some of them believe that what they are doing is for the best. For instance, Aunt Lydia would say: “I’m doing my best, she said. I’m trying to give you the best chance you can have” (Atwood 55). By believing that they are truly doing their best to offer the Handmaids a better life, the Aunts can live peacefully with themselves. This positive self-talk is somehow a way of fooling oneself to survive the strict regime that is in place. When choosing between life or death, most people might choose to live under whatever circumstances.

### **The Marthas**

This group of female characters fulfill the role of serving the house, the Commanders, their Wives and any possible children. The Marthas are mainly in charge of preparing the food and cleaning the house. Most of the food is made from scratch, such as bread, and they make ends meet with what is found in stores since there are food shortages. We only have information about the Marthas who live with Offred in the Commander’s house: Rita and Cora. Through their lives, as readers, we get to understand how other Marthas live. In terms of the mind and body dichotomy, apart from the Aunts, the other female characters are indeed more closely associated to the body. The body, as a general idea, is seen as “easily damaged, so easily disposed of, water and chemicals is all it is, hardly more to it than a jellyfish, drying on sand” (Atwood 105). The people who are valued because of their minds are mainly the men who hold the power. The ones who are assessed because of their body can be easily replaced and put through more sacrifices, though they are told differently. The Marthas, for instance, are responsible for chores which have been traditionally more related to women. They are mainly in the kitchen and they are not valued for their intelligence. Most of the times, they even go unnoticed, but this close association to their bodies also represents a burden. We know, by Offred’s description of Rita and Cora, that they do not have or cannot have children and their

hopes are on the Handmaids. When the Eyes are taking Offred to the black van outside, “Cora and Rita press through from the kitchen. Cora has begun to cry. I was her hope, I’ve failed her. Now she will always be childless” (Atwood 294-5). Cora mainly cries because this is also a reminder of her own impossibility to have children. Similar to Serena Joy’s description of her arthritis above, I want to call attention to the fragility of the body as a result of disease and aging. In this sense, the body is a burden because it is vulnerable and threatened. Both Handmaids and Marthas “avoid illness. The Marthas don’t want to be forced to retire, because who knows where they go? You don’t see that many old women around anymore” (Atwood 154). Their body becomes a burden when it is not serviceable anymore. Women are required for their bodily functions and if they cannot offer them, then they are disposed. In addition, race and literacy are important in the case of the Marthas. Both Rita and Cora are brown and/or black and/or uneducated women. In the novel, it is not specified, but we read that Rita has her “sleeves rolled to the elbow, showing her brown arms” (Atwood 9). Also, Cora talks with grammar mistakes, avoiding the verb to be or misusing the verb conjugation: “Nobody asking you, Cora said” (Atwood 10) and “What was you doing on the floor like that?” (Atwood 151). These quotes give us a hint about who these women are, and how their own bodies inscribe them socially to be placed under a specific categorization. This inscription on the body becomes an elemental factor to subordinate some women over others since they are lacking not only in comparison to men but also to other women.

All the women in the novel lack in different aspects, but there are some common characteristics that they share. For instance, the Marthas lack knowledge because they are most likely uneducated women. Their knowledge of what is going on mainly comes from the Wives, the Commanders, and the news they hear from the television which we know might not be reliable; nonetheless, they have their own ways of knowing things. “The Marthas know things, they talk among themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house” (Atwood 11). They have strategies of their own to survive this totalitarian society and get a benefit out of it. “There’s a network of the Marthas, then, with something in it for them. That’s nice to know” (Atwood 228). So, some of them might be uneducated, but they are definitely not ignorant. In addition, their freedom of movement is also restricted. They are mainly in the house. Some of them may do the shopping if the Handmaids cannot do it themselves. They may also go to events such as Prayvaganza or Salvagings, but it is not mandatory for them to assist. Although they do not go out much, if they do, they “put on the veil to go outside, but nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha” (Atwood 9). They

not only lack freedom of movement but also freedom of speech. I want to acknowledge that the Marthas hold certain freedom of opinion inside the house compared to the Handmaids, more specifically in the kitchen. For example, Rita likes to command Offred by peevishly instructing her to: “Tell them fresh, for the eggs... Not like last time. And a chicken, tell them, not a hen. Tell them who it’s for and then they won’t mess around” (Atwood 11). Rita likes to make herself heard, especially by Offred because Handmaids are below the Marthas in the hierarchy. Lastly, the Marthas, as the previous two groups, also lack the ability to bear children. Their only hope is that the Handmaid provides them with a child to care for and to upgrade the household’s status. Though the Marthas are positioned together with the top two groups of the hierarchy, they are located lower down because they lack power in society and are almost invisible to those around them.

One important aspect to recall here, as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, is that the Marthas and the previous two groups have proper names, which positions them higher up in the hierarchy of bodies. The Marthas are conscious that their position in the hierarchy is above the one of the Handmaids because when Cora and Rita are talking behind the protagonist’s back and she enters, they look “embarrassed, but also a little defiant, as if it were their right” (Atwood 10). Besides, by the unfriendly way that Rita treats Offred and how they both, Rita and Cora, ignore her, as readers it can be deduced that they do not really care about her, especially since the Handmaids come and go from house to house because they are replaced. It is interesting to point out that the Marthas are positioned higher in the hierarchy, taking into consideration their race and illiteracy. As mentioned before, because of their grammar when speaking and of Rita’s brown skin, their position might be one of servitude due to racialized poverty. Even so, they are only below the Wives and the Aunts, who are the two groups that hold the most power, and above the rest of the female groups. Their rank in the pyramid allows them to live a somehow tranquil life until they grow older and, most likely, are sent to the Colonies. The Marthas’ positionality proves that in Atwood’s novel race is not one of the main characteristics why women are subordinated but motherhood is. Even though their position in the hierarchy and the use of proper names designate them with more subjectivity than the one possessed by the Handmaids, they still use an “usual Martha’s dress, which is dull green, like a surgeon’s gown of the time before” (Atwood 9). Although green might be associated with health, fruitfulness and hope (Morton *Color*), the use of a standard type of dress for everyone and their unnoted personality steals some of their subjectivity back from them.

Although we do not know by the novel's plot how the Marthas are assigned their role, I assume that they do not have much of a choice either. Most of the times, the Marthas go unnoticed, which pushes them towards a loss of subjectivity. Similar to the Econowives, they are as ghosts that walk around the streets, but the Econowives at least get to go outside more freely than the Marthas. The Marthas are stuck in the house with their chores, including bathing the Handmaids. Even Offred acknowledges that "they're talking about me as though I can't hear. To them I'm a household chore, one among many" (Atwood 48). Also, they must be present during the first part of the Ceremony when the Commander reads to them. "We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read" (Atwood 87). Their role is focused on following instructions and pleasing the Wives of the house. Their desires and needs are ignored completely because they are only expected to fulfill the regime's needs with the work performed with their bodies. They are not even expected to go to Prayvaganza nor to Salvagings, especially if they have small children in the household. Because of this restriction, Rita envies Offred her walk to the supermarket. "She would rather do the shopping, get exactly what she wants; she envies me the walk. In this house we all envy each other something" (Atwood 47). Rita does not like Handmaids because of the role they play in society, and she believes that going to the Colonies would be better than doing what they do. These details that the narrative voice gives about Rita show how strong-minded woman she is, but sadly, because of her loss of subjectivity, now she has to be submissive or she would face a fatal end. Sometimes women get killed for no reason. "Last week they shot a woman, right about here. She was a Martha. She was fumbling in her robe, for her pass, and they thought she was hunting for a bomb" (Atwood 20). When there is such a strict regime on site, everybody becomes a threat and, in this case, especially women. They are not to be trusted because they are unruly and uncontrollable due to their close association to the body and only violence might mitigate this abject in society.

Contrary to the high position in which the Aunts place the Handmaids, some of the Marthas consider the Handmaids the abject of society while other women consider the Unwomen the abject. Again, the positionality of the abject in society is dependable on the women's perspectives and opinions about the others. The Marthas are the abject for the men because they are women. They are mere servants. Before the Ceremony, the Commander asks for a drink of water. "'Please,' he adds" (Atwood 87). He still shows some manners when addressing the Marthas; even though the rest of the time, he does not acknowledge them at all. Rita and Cora have different perspectives about the Handmaids. On the one hand, Rita does

not like Offred because of her role. Rita is always frowning at Offred, “but the frown isn’t personal: it’s the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for” (Atwood 10). For Rita, the Handmaids are the abject of society. What they do is wrong, and it should not be allowed. She thinks that they have other choices. Rita thinks that they should “go to the Colonies . . . They have the choice” (Atwood 10); but the Handmaids have just decided to do what they do. On the other hand, Cora has faith in Offred. Her hope is put on her Handmaid because she wants a child to care for. She even defends the Handmaids and thinks that it could have been her. Cora tells Rita: “Anyways, they’re doing it for us all, said Cora, or so they say. If I hadn’t of got my tubes tied, it could have been me, say I was ten years younger. It’s not that bad. It’s not what you’d call hard work” (Atwood 10). Cora, contrary to Rita, considers the Unwomen the abject in society. The Unwomen’s position is the worst that a woman may wish for, which is why she thinks that being complacent towards the regime is the best choice women, especially Handmaids, have. Although it is somehow difficult to illustrate the state of abjection of the Wives, the Aunts, and the Marthas, the other characters simplify the deed. Because the novel is told by Offred, the state of abjection is mainly considered for the female characters that are positioned below her in the hierarchy of bodies. Nonetheless, it has been proven that the characters at the top of the pyramid also hold the position of the abject as a consequence of their situations. Situations they somehow change by developing survival strategies of their own.

The Marthas are women who spend most of their time in the kitchen, and most of them do not go outside, but even so, they have some strategies of their own to survive. One of the strategies at a social level is that they gossip among themselves and talk a lot while they work. This is clear by Cora and Rita’s dialogues in the novel. Plus, Offred also acknowledges it. Offred thinks of gossips that could tell the Marthas just to feel part of something. “I’ll tell that to the Marthas: it’s the kind of thing they enjoy hearing about. They are very interested in how other households are run; such bits of petty gossip give them an opportunity for pride or discontent” (Atwood 27). They feel as if they were in a competition. They want to be the best household. These imaginary contests help them to get distracted from their reality in the regime. It is true that this is a negative stereotype that comes from the idea that housewives like to gossip, but I think that in this case, it could be more adeptly seen as a strategy that they use to strive. This is the network of the Marthas that I mentioned above, and which allows them to gain something out of their situation. At a more personal level, both Marthas, Rita and Cora, have their own different strategies of survival. On the one hand, Rita enjoys

mistreating Offred because she does not agree with her role. She always scowls at her and she speaks unkindly to her. In addition, when Rita wants to show Offred her bitterness, she does not cook her food well. “The thigh of a chicken, overcooked. It’s better than bloody, which is the other way she does it. Rita has ways of making her resentments felt” (Atwood 65). Although I do not approve of these behaviors, I deduce that it is a way of protecting herself and to hold some power against the next person in the hierarchy. On the other hand, Cora sees Offred as her hope for having a baby. So, in a way, she creates some sort of sorority with Offred through small actions. For instance, “Cora brings my supper, covered, on a tray. She knocks at the door before entering. I like her for that. It means she thinks I have some of what we used to call privacy left” (Atwood 65). Also, she is willing to lie for Offred when she is found on the floor. “That she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small thing, even for her own advantage. It was a link between us” (Atwood 152). Finally, these acts of respect show how Cora does not reject Offred, who appreciates her gestures; and for Cora, taking care of the Handmaid is a way of keeping herself busy. A way of adapting to this social requirement smoothly. In the following chapter, I analyze the other four groups of female characters that are next in the hierarchy of bodies: the Handmaids, the Sex Workers and the Econowives, and the Unwomen.



### **Chapter III. Instrumentalization of women’s bodies and their strategies for survival: Analysis of the Handmaids, the Sex Workers, the Econowives and the Unwomen**

Following the hierarchy of bodies, for the present chapter, I have analyzed the four groups of female characters that are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy: the Handmaids, the Sex Workers, the Econowives, and the Unwomen. For the analysis, I have used the same societal dichotomies as the ones used in the previous chapter, which I list here for the readers’ convenience: the mind/body dualism, the women’s body as the lacking Other, the hierarchy of bodies, the loss of subjectivity, and the abject. Plus, the closing paragraph for each group of characters is dedicated to the survival strategies that these women come up with to bear living in such a totalitarian regime. Because the novel is told by Offred, who is a Handmaid herself, most of the information provided by the narrative voice comes from her own experience and perspective. This means that, as readers, we have plenty of information about the Handmaids’ lives in the Gileadean society. Unfortunately, for the other three groups: the Sex Workers, the

Econowives, and the Unwomen, the information is somehow scarce and their point of view is absent. We know what happens to these groups of women through Offred's perspective and gossips that reach her ears. For this reason, I have grouped the Sex Workers and the Econowives together in the analysis. Although their living situations are different, I consider that they hold a similar position in the hierarchy. Nonetheless, even though there is not a wide array of information about these women, if analyzed in depth, what the narrative voice tells through her story serves as an indicator of these other women's lives. I want to remind the reader that these groups of female characters are not addressed by their proper names. They are considered groups of people who serve the regime with their assigned roles. They are not important as individuals and, similar to the other three groups analyzed previously, they can be easily disposed of and/or exchanged for another body that will perform the same functions. They serve Gilead through their bodies. For instance, the Handmaids' main role is to repopulate the country since most of the men and women are barren due to environmental pollution. The regime needs to create a stronger organization, and more followers is the way to accomplish this.

### **The Handmaids**

This group of female characters are women who may still get pregnant and who are not married, married a second time or married with a divorced man. As their name suggests, they serve as Handmaids to a Commander and his wife. The mind and body dualism category applied to the Handmaids is tricky because there are instances in which their intelligence is pointed out, but mainly by the Wives and the Aunts, not by the regime or other men. Nonetheless, this emphasis is also for the regime's own benefit and it does not show an honest accentuation. The Commander's Wife calls Offred to remark how she knows that she is not "stupid . . . I've read your file" (Atwood 15). Serena Joy knows that Offred is more than just a womb, and she uses Offred's intellect as an excuse to set boundaries. Later, the mind and body dichotomy is emphasized in the Handmaids training when the Aunts express how men "can't help it, she said, God made them that way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries" (Atwood 45). In this sense, it looks like the Aunts are positioning men on the body/uncontrollable side of the dichotomy while the Handmaids on the mind/boundary setting side of it, but this is only a distraction. Through the novel the only ones who have control over others are men and the ones who need to be controlled are the women. They are the ones who are considered "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 136). The Handmaids are only needed for



their reproductive system. This is why they get their feet destroyed with fried cables if they misbehave, or they get a hand cut off if they are found reading for a third time because the “feet and your hands are not essential” (Atwood 91). Once again, this close association to their bodies is translated into a burden. While for some female characters their infertility becomes a hardship, for the Handmaids it is exactly this fertility that becomes their misfortune. Since they are known to have children and to have some “good years” left, they are forced to bear children for the regime. Even though the Aunts celebrate motherhood as one of its most important pillars, the truth is that women are enslaved through this ideal. For the regime, Eve’s mistakes “shall be saved by childbearing” (Atwood 221). Sadly, as we know, most of the Commanders are the infertile ones, so the Handmaids suffer this burden even if it is not their fault. The Handmaids “each month watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (Atwood 73). Also, the babies may not be born or may die within the first months due to pollution, but again, the women are the ones to be blamed. As it happens with the Marthas, the Handmaids avoid illness because “any real illness, anything lingering, weakening, a loss of flesh or appetite, a fall of hair, a failure of the glands, would be terminal” (Atwood 154-5). This is why they are “taken to the doctor’s once a month, for tests: urine, hormones, cancer smear, blood test; the same as before, except that now it’s obligatory” (Atwood 59). The body is weak and powerless. As in the body and mind dichotomy, the body is seen as earthly and the mind as ethereal because the body goes back to dirt while the mind transcends, so for women to be closely associated to the body has stemmed in a relation of women to the lacking Other.

As the lacking Other, the Handmaids lack knowledge because they do not have access to information. Clearly, the Commander “has something we don’t have, he has the word” (Atwood 88). Knowledge may be used to start a revolution which is why the regime has taken it away from women. The only news that Offred has are the Marthas’ gossips and the few minutes of television that she sometimes gets before the Ceremony while they wait for the Commander; but, this information is doubtful. They also lack freedom of movement. Offred spends most of her time in the room assigned to her. She has so many hours to spare that as readers we may even feel bored while reading her story. Of course, I do think that this monotony is created on purpose and it is well accomplished. The Handmaids only go to do the shopping and to events organized by the regime, such as Prayvaganzas, Particutions and Salvagings. Also, they have their monthly visits to the doctor and if there is a childbirth, they

are taken to the place. To avoid getting bored when going shopping, “now and again we vary the route; there’s nothing against it, as long as we stay within the barriers. A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze” (Atwood 165). As per Offred, for the Handmaids, the most tedious part is to be imprisoned in their rooms. There is so much useless time with nowhere to go and nothing to do. They do not have responsibilities because their only task is to get pregnant. In addition, they also lack freedom of speech. Nonetheless, although the Handmaids are not supposed to talk or provide any input at all, Offred is asked her opinion by the Commander twice. Once during one of their playdates in his studio and the second time at Jezebel. Certainly, in this case the situation is different because he holds the power and she is his subject. He is just playing a game with her. In reality, she is not really taken seriously. In contrast to the other women, the Handmaids do not lack the possibility of having children, but still they lack subjectivity in general because they are not considered individuals in the regime. All they pray for is “emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies” (Atwood 194). They are empty containers and their corporeal ability to have children is the only aspiration they can hang on to, which is why they hold the fourth position from top to bottom in the hierarchy of bodies.

This group’s classification is difficult because they are important for the reproduction of the regime, but they are also easily disposable and exchangeable. Others “are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service” (Atwood 21); nonetheless, “things haven’t settled down, it’s too soon, everyone is unsure about our exact status” (Atwood 13). In the future, the regimes’ ideal is that the Handmaids become fundamental to society. They will be like daughters to the Wives. They will live under the same roof peacefully, but before that utopia is fulfilled, the Handmaids suffer greatly in the Gileadean society. Instead, they are rejected, not only by the Wives but also by the Marthas and Econowives, and when different groups of women are together they have a “rope [that] segregates us, marks us off, keeps the other from contamination by us, makes for us a corral or pen (Atwood 214). During the Ceremony, the Wives hold the Handmaids’ hands with their own and have the Handmaids’ heads supported onto their cervix. “This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product” (Atwood 94). The Handmaids are there only to provide a child. If they succeed at this, they will be saved from the Colonies, but after some months from the birth, they are transferred again to repeat the cycle. Not even during a birth are they rewarded. Although the Handmaids are fulfilling the heavier duty of giving birth, the Wives receive “a buffet: ham, cheese,

oranges – they have oranges! – and fresh baked breads and cakes. [While the Handmaids will] get milk and sandwiches, on a tray, later” (Atwood 116). The Wives even get a little bit drunk. The Handmaids are clearly not as important as the Wives; and their low status in the hierarchy of bodies affect them significantly. Furthermore, in association with the clothing, Young states that “the body as lived is always enculturated: by the phonemes a body learns to pronounce at a very early age, by the clothes the person wears that mark her nation, her age, her occupational status, and in what is culturally expected or required of women” (17). In the novel, the characters’ clothes clearly mark their occupational status and role in society. The Handmaids wear red, which may be associated with impulse, love, passion, rebellion, violence, sexuality, prostitution, among others (Morton *Color*). Also, as Offred mentions, “red is so visible” (Atwood 292), so if they try to escape, it would be easier to see them running. They also wear a veil and white wings around their heads so that nobody can see their face. Their bodies are constricted through their clothes and their minds through indoctrination, losing their subjectivity as individuals.

The Handmaids’ loss of subjectivity is pretty obvious. Again, they are given poor alternatives to choose from. When people have such degrading options, it is difficult to defend their free will. Besides, “we should not be surprised to learn that discourse on pregnancy omits subjectivity, for the specific experience of women has been absent from most of our culture’s discourse about human experience and history” (Young 46). In the Gileadean society, the Handmaids are only wanted to have children and their individual characteristics are null. Following Young, it is true that their subjectivity is omitted because their women’s experiences are completely erased. They are not even addressed by their proper names. They sometimes use these names among themselves, but the names that the regime has assigned them are names “composed of a man’s first name, Fred, and a prefix denoting ‘belonging to’” (Atwood xv), such as Offred, Ofglen, and Ofwarren. They are just someone’s property. They even have a tattoo on their ankle “a cattle brand. It means ownership” (Atwood 254). They are marked so that they may not escape. The Handmaids have many restrictions besides the ones that a woman in that society may usually have. They cannot eat sugar, “liquor and coffee, [because] they are forbidden” (Atwood 14), and they are only allowed long sleeves to keep them “from the temptations of our own flesh, to keep us from hugging ourselves, bare-armed” (Atwood 191). The Wives may hit them, “but not with any implement. Only with their hands” (Atwood 16). They have been completely wiped out as individuals. Throughout the novel, the narrative voice explains how she is treated like a child; and she recognizes this status due to

her confinement and loss of individuality. Before the Ceremony, Serena Joy turns the television on and Offred feels like “a child being allowed up late with the grown-ups” (Atwood 82).<sup>7</sup> There is only one instance in which the Handmaids are supposedly allowed to take control over their actions. This happens during Particicution. During this ceremony, the Handmaids are presented with a person who has allegedly wronged them. They are allowed, for a couple of minutes, to do whatever they want with this person, most likely a man. In the epilogue of the novel, Professor Pieixoto describes how these ceremonies were “not only a particularly horrifying and effective way of ridding yourself of subversive elements but that it would also act as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead . . . it must have been most gratifying for these Handmaids, so rigidly controlled at other times, to be able to tear a man apart with their bare hands every once in a while” (Atwood 307-8). Although it may look like through Particicution the Handmaids are provided with some subjectivity, at a deeper level, we know that this is not true. They are just tools of a regime which makes them believe that they have a choice by lying about what these men have or have not done. For the regime, the Handmaids hold the position of the abject even if they are tricked sometimes into believing the contrary.

From different perspectives the Handmaids and the other low-ranking female characters are the abject of society, but even inside the Handmaids’ group there are some who are more rejected than others. There is the case of Janine, who is the Aunts’ pet at the Red Center and who the other Handmaids despise because of her personality and behavior. At Testifying, Janine tells a story of how she was gang raped and had an abortion while the other Handmaids blame her for what happened. “She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her” (Atwood 72). This event proves how even in the same group of female characters the amount of rejection that one person suffers may vary from the rest. Janine is the abject for some of the Handmaids, but the Handmaids are the abject for the Wives. The Wives barely talk to them unless it is extremely necessary. Offred confirms how Serena Joy “doesn’t speak to me, unless she can’t avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity” (Atwood 13). They need the Handmaids to have children and to upgrade the household’s status, but they do not appreciate them and definitely

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<sup>7</sup> Other examples: “like a child who’s been summoned, at school, to the principal’s office. What have I done wrong?” (Atwood 136); “how much like a small, begging child she [Rita] makes me feel” (Atwood 207); “for lunch there was a cheese sandwich, on brown bread, a glass of milk, celery sticks, canned pears. A schoolchild’s lunch” (Atwood 282).

reject what they do. Also, “the Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with [them]” (Atwood 11). The abject in the Gileadean society does not deserve close relationships nor social interactions. No one talks to the Handmaids in the household, only the necessary, not even small talk. “How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts” (Atwood 11). They are completely left at the margins of cognitive and physical interaction. When Offred thinks that she is in danger of being discovered for her relationship with Ofglen, who is part of the Mayday group, she reflects about how:

Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I’ve resisted, comes flooding in. I don’t want pain. I don’t want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don’t want to be a doll hung up on the Wall, I don’t want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power. (Atwood 286)

This quote shows the first and only moment in the novel when the narrative voice explicitly refers to herself as the abject. She understands her real position in the Gileadean society, and she knows that she is a trapped subordinate. There is nothing that she, or any of the other women, can do. We as readers later discover that she is freed by the Mayday group, but it is not of her knowledge that this possible freedom is available to her. Undeniably, the Handmaids’ situation is a difficult one which is why they have to come up with different strategies to somehow deal with everything they go through.

As we already know, the Handmaids have many restrictions, and in the Center they are mainly taught to prepare for boredom among other tasks; notwithstanding, they have come up with strategies at social and personal levels to strive. For instance, at a social level, they have learned to use their wings in order to see the outside by bits. When they are walking back from the supermarket, “given our wings, our blinkers, it’s hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps” (Atwood 30). In addition, they also bend some of the rules to keep their hopes up. They are not allowed to use any type of lotion because the Wives do not want them to take care of their physique; even so, they use butter to soften their skin. “As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire. We have ceremonies of our own, private ones” (Atwood 96-7). These are strategies that most of

them do in the privacy of their rooms, but to move their wings from side to side and to butter their skin are social constructed strategies for them to survive. Still, the most important social strategy of all is the underground rebellion against the Gileadean regime. Ofglen tells Offred: “‘You can join us,’ she says. ‘Us?’ I say. There is an *us* then, there’s a *we*. I knew it” (Atwood 169). There is whole movement of people, not only Handmaids, that are joining forces to rebel against the regime and to save people in danger. This is the resistance that Foucault talks about in his writings. Whenever there exists abuse of power, there is also resistance. Even Offred “believe[s] in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light” (Atwood 105). When there is an imposed power, it is most likely that there is also a rebellion. On a more personal level, Offred and the other Handmaids also have their own strategies. For example, Offred moves her head upwards to look at a guard directly to his face. “It’s an event, a small defiance of rule, so small as to be undetectable, but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself, like the candy I hoarded, as a child, at the back of a drawer. Such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes” (Atwood 21). Also, even though the Handmaids are not referred to by their proper names, they call each other by their names of the time before. This is a way of acknowledging the Handmaids’ subjectivity and individuality. As readers, we do not know Offred’s real name, but she “keep[s] the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day” (Atwood 84). To repeat her name to herself gives her hope that someday she will be freed and will use it again. Furthermore, it is known that the Handmaids and other female characters are not allowed to read, but Offred reads the hidden message in the cupboard that says: “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*” (Atwood 52), and she “repeat[s] the words . . . They give me a small joy” (Atwood 52). She also reads the cushion that says “FAITH. It’s the only thing they’ve given me to read. If I were caught doing it, would it count? I didn’t put the cushion here myself” (Atwood 57). These little actions that she does are ways to rebel against the regime. These are actions that make her feel better with her life and that allow her to hold hope for a better future.

### **The Sex Workers and the Econowives**

For the Gileadean society, the Sex Workers are inexistent. Only men, some Aunts, and a few Handmaids, who are taken to the Club by their Commanders, know about these women. The men in charge of Gilead created a club where they could have women at their disposition because according to the Commander: “Nature demands variety, for men” (Atwood 237). In other words, because the Commanders get bored with their Wives and Handmaids, they have

the “natural need” to be sexually involved with women other than those from the household. Offred explains it well when she states: ““So now that we don’t have different clothes . . . you merely have different women”” (Atwood 237). These women are in the Club at all times and they have Aunts that control them, but not much because they have given up on them. These women are either Handmaids who could not get pregnant after three tries or just women who have misbehaved and are given the “opportunity” to become Sex Workers instead of going straight to the Colonies. This group of female characters does not have a proper name. Even the Club is called Jezebel by the Aunts, but these women are not referred to at all during the novel; or at least, Offred does not know how they are called. I have chosen the term Sex Workers because it specifically describes what they do. Although they are not workers per se because they do not get paid, none of the other groups of women do; so, I consider this term to be the most appropriate one. Furthermore, I analyze the Econowives jointly with the Sex Workers. The Econowives depend on their husbands, who do not hold an important rank in the Gileadean society. These women perform all types of chores, and it is expected that they will disappear as a social class. For these two groups of female characters, the mind and body dichotomy is very clear. Both of these groups are needed because of their bodies. The Sex Workers are basically responsible for providing physical pleasure to the high officers of the regime and their international guests; and the Econowives are cheap, not to say free, labor. At the Club, some of the customers might only want to talk. The Commander points “the one in green, she’s a sociologist. Or was. That one was a lawyer, that one was in business, an executive position; some sort of fast-food chain or maybe it was hotels. I’m told you can have quite a good conversation with her if all you feel like is talking” (Atwood 238). But, sadly, even though the Commander recognizes them for their professional careers, at the end of the day, they are needed to please the men. Similarly, the Econowives are mules for their husbands. They do any chore indistinctively. “These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can” (Atwood 24). They may have children if they are lucky and if the child survives the pregnancy, but they also perform physical work. For these women, their bodies become a burden mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the Sex Workers have undergone surgery so they cannot get pregnant, so their burden moves away from motherhood; nonetheless, they must take care of their physical appearance. If a woman is assigned to be a Sex Worker, they “‘have to watch [their] weight that’s for sure,’ he says. ‘They’re strict about that. Gain ten pounds and they put you in Solitary’” (Atwood 238). The Sex Workers have to take care of their bodies because they are only wanted for their looks. Contrary to the Handmaids, they do have mirrors around and lotion for their skin, but once

they are worn out they are sent “to the boneyard” (Atwood 249). Secondly, some of the Econowives may have children. So, their burden is not only related to all the physical work they do but also to the motherhood decree. Even so, Offred and Ofglen witness a burial of an Econowife’s baby, which reveals that they also are failing society by being the lacking Other, who cannot even procreate.

The same as with the other women in the Gileadean society, the Sex Workers and the Econowives are the lacking Other. Both of these groups lack knowledge. Not only because they cannot read nor write but also because, as far as we know, they do not have access to a television set, even for the possible fake news. They might have the stories that go around from one woman to another, such as when Moira tells her story to Offred, but this is not supported with information by the narrative voice. When it comes to the lack of movement, the Sex Workers definitely lack freedom of movement since they do not go out of the building, a former hotel, because they are inexistent to society. Why would they go out? They do not have a life beyond those walls. Also, they are restricted with time. The Sex Workers only have one fifteen-minutes break every hour. When Offred goes to the restroom, she hears an Aunt telling a woman: “‘You were just here’ . . . ‘Rest break once an hour,’ says the Aunt. ‘You know the rules’” (Atwood 241). They are not even allowed to use the restroom freely. On the contrary, the Econowives do hold a bit more of freedom of movement, as mentioned before, they are supposed to complete all tasks, and to accomplish this, they need to move around, of course, always staying within the limits. They are seen at the stores and at the events organized by the regime. Although they move around somehow freely, neither the Econowives nor the Sex Workers have freedom of speech. These groups are not taken into consideration at all. They are only somehow important for their bodies and the functions that they each perform, but they lack an opinion of their own. They are not heard in the novel, except for Moira and some words uttered by other two women, which represents their imposed silence. Although the Sex Workers lack the ability to have children, the Econowives may be lucky enough to bear one, but it is more likely that their babies die or are born Unbabies. The regime does not care about these women. Their living situations are precarious; and because of this precariousness and the disposability of their bodies, they are positioned low below in the hierarchy.

The Sex Workers and the Econowives are above the Unwomen because they are provided with an “opportunity.” They are not sentenced to die right away. While the Sex Workers are kind of a state secret, the Econowives are seen on the streets. “There are other



women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called" (Atwood 24). As I have previously mentioned, the Econowives do not have a specific role; for this reason, they are not important enough to be assigned a specific color. Due to the narrative's voice description, it looks like the Econowives are assigned dresses that are leftovers from other groups. I want to highlight here that some of the Econowives wear dresses with stripes on them. In the introduction, I describe how Margaret Atwood uses real life examples as inspiration for her novel, and the women wearing striped dresses is the most explicit example of Western history. These images allude to the Second World War when the Jewish people imprisoned in camps were obliged to wear uniforms with stripes on them. Also, it is common knowledge that they would use triangles with various colors to differentiate the reasons why they were there: homosexual person, political enemy, among others. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this separation through colors is also intended to mark these women. Their role in society is inscribed through their clothing. Similarly, the Sex Workers are inscribed by the costumes they must wear to entertain men. For example, when Offred sees Moira in the Club, she is "dressed absurdly, in a black outfit of once-shiny satins that looks the worse for wear. It's strapless, wired from the inside, pushing up the breasts, but it doesn't quite fit Moira, it's too large, so that one breast is plumped out and the other one isn't" (Atwood 238-9). They do not even wear regular clothes, though I do not want to call the dresses imposed by the regime "regular." So, in other words, none of the women can wear what they want; on the contrary, they wear what it is imposed. Offred "recognize[s] them as truants. The official creed denies them, denies their very existence, yet here they are. That is at least something" (Atwood 235). Both groups are positioned down in the hierarchy because their own existence is denied, but they do exist and as I will analyze later, they also have their own strategies for survival. Nonetheless, these strategies do not save them from losing their subjectivity against the regime in place.

Similar to the other groups of female characters, the Sex Workers and the Econowives lose their subjectivity because they are not considered individuals with needs. They are instrumentalized for the regime's benefit and their desires and aspirations are completely ignored. For example, at the Club, "it's like a masquerade party; they are like oversize children, dressed up in togs they've rummaged from trunks. Is there joy in this?" (Atwood 235). Here, similar to the Handmaids, there is a simile that compares the Sex Workers to children, proving the lack of authority that they possess. Although they are only valued for

their bodies, we know that some men might ask them to provide them with company and conversation. This has already been discussed under the mind and body dualism, but I would like to point out how, again, this slight offering of subjectivity to these women is only for the regime's own benefit. These men want to talk to the Sex Workers because of their own needs not because they want to listen to these women. Even though the Sex Workers are not allowed to go outside, it is true that in their confinement they do not have as many restrictions as the Handmaids. They smoke and drink in the Club, and they may engage in lesbian relationships. Moira calms Offred by saying: "Anyway, look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (Atwood 249). They have more liberties than the Handmaids and because the Aunts think that they are incorrigible, they leave them alone. Also, they have some sort of sorority, that will be later discussed under the strategies for survival section that other groups of women do not have. It is interesting how Moira detaches herself from the Handmaids. The roles are so clearly separated in the Gileadean society, and the groups so alienated from one another that she refers to the Handmaids as "your gang." Moira says: "*Your* gang are supposed to be such chaste vessels" (Atwood 243; my emphasis). Though at some point she was a Handmaid, she does not identify with their role. On the contrary, she identifies more with the role of the Sex Workers. So, to a certain extent, this separation shows how Moira's subjectivity has not been completely erased. She may still decide what to identify with. There is so much that the regime can accomplish; and this is why there are different nuances in this analysis. Not everything is black and white. In terms of the Econowives, there is insufficient information because the protagonist does not relate closely to this group. However, it may be assumed that they are denied the opportunity to be themselves and, like the rest of the characters, they must adapt to the regime's commands. In their case, this means to live under their husbands' shadows and being denied the subject position.

With the Sex Workers and the Econowives the situation of the abject is interesting because they consider both the group above of them, the Handmaids, and the one below, the Unwomen, to be the abject. They both reject the Handmaids in different ways. On the one hand, through Moira, we know that the Sex Workers separate themselves from the Handmaids. They have internalized their role and they differentiate themselves from "such chaste vessels" (Atwood 243). On the other hand, the Econowives clearly despise the Handmaids because when Offred and Ofglen walk by a baby's funeral preceded by Econowives, one of them "scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk.

The Econowives do not like us” (Atwood 44). As readers, we do not know exactly the reason why they do not accept the Handmaids, but we might assume that it is due to their position in society. “Their striped dresses are worn-looking, as are their faces. Some day, when times improve, says Aunt Lydia, no one will have to be an Econowife” (Atwood 44). The fact that the Aunts believe that this social class has to disappear suggests that it is a despised one. Although both of these groups reject the Handmaids, both of them are also considered the abject. The Econowives are the abject because of their poverty and social position and the Sex Workers are the abject because they are the misbehaved ones, the doomed ones. “Know what they call this place among themselves [the Aunts]? Jezebel’s. The Aunts figure we’re all damned anyway, they’ve given up on us, so it doesn’t matter what sort of vice we get up to, and the Commanders don’t give a piss what we do in our off time” (Atwood 249). They are not even worth indoctrinating because they are the abject of society. According to the online *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, the word Jezebel has a religious precedent, but used as a noun it refers to “an impudent, shameless, or morally unrestrained woman” (2<sup>nd</sup> entry), which is why the Aunts use this word to refer to the Club. In addition, Susan Bordo also talks about this “Jezebel imagery and other stereotypes,” but she relates it to a “racist ideology” (*Unbearable* 235). It is understood then that the term Jezebel is used as a derogatory noun to refer to women whether for their behavior or their race. The bottom line is that both groups represent the abject in society for their roles. Roles that ironically have been assigned by the regime; but even though the Gileadean regime tries to make them invisible and to destroy them as human beings, these women have their strategies to support one another and survive their situations.

The information about the survival strategies for the Sex Workers and the Econowives is less reliable because, on the one hand, Moira is the one who tells Offred about life at the Club and Offred retells her account; but, on the other hand, there is not an insight perspective on the strategies that the Econowives develop. Nonetheless, I refuse to think that they do not have any strategies, which is why, after a rigorous analysis, I have discovered some of them. According to Moira, being a Sex Worker is far better than being a Handmaid. She even suggests Offred to join them because she would have more freedom to do what she wants during the day. Plus, as a social survival strategy, there is a sense of sorority in the Club. Although at first the women in the restroom are suspicious of Offred, once they realize that Moira knows her, they smile at her. Then, Moira asks for a cigarette. “‘Here,’ she says to the woman next to her. ‘Lend me one, will you?’ / The woman hands over, ungrudging. Moira is

still a skillful borrower. I smile at that” (Atwood 243). This is an example of how they share what they have with one another. They do not consider each other enemies, unless they do not know them. They are together in this. At a more personal level, Moira accepts her fate in the Gileadean regime, and she decides to live fewer years as a Sex Worker, escaping the Center, than her whole life as a Handmaid. At one point, Offred is scandalized by how Moira talks of the place. Moira says: “They even give you face cream. You should figure out some way of getting in here. You’d have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard. The food’s not bad and there’s drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights” (Atwood 249). From my perspective, this is a political position that she takes against the regime. Throughout the novel, she is represented as a determined and firm person and she sustains these personality traits until the end. She fights back with the few resources that she has. When referring to the Econowives, as mentioned before, there is not so much information about their survival strategies. From the scant information provided by the narrative voice, I extract two strategies. First, at a social level, there is again a sense of sorority because they support each other, and whenever Offred talks about them, they are in a group. “Coming towards us there’s a small procession, a funeral: three women, each with a black transparent veil thrown over her headdress. An Econowife and two others, the mourners, also Econowives, her friends perhaps” (Atwood 44). Contrary to the Handmaids, the Econowives retain friendships, similar to the time before, whereas the Marthas cannot fraternize with the Handmaids; and among Handmaids, they “aren’t supposed to form friendships, loyalties, among one another” (Atwood 283). Second, at a more personal level, some of them dislike the Handmaids. Similar to Rita’s rejection of Offred, this exclusion is a way to protect themselves by ostracizing them. Offred is well aware of this rejection when one of the Econowives “spits on the sidewalk” (Atwood 44) when they are passing by. Again, although I do not assent to these behaviors, to reject others might be a sign of self-preservation and/or self-protection. In such a totalitarian regime as in the Gileadean one, the different female groups dislike and distrust one another. This repressive environment makes them distrust anyone they do not know, protecting themselves as a way of surviving.

### **The Unwomen**

Although the narrative voice has never seen the Unwomen in person, she knows about their existence through the videos that the Aunts show them at the Red Center and her conversation with Moira at the Club. Thanks to Moira, we know that the Unwomen are Handmaids who do not get pregnant after being posted at three different houses and women who are political

enemies or who do not share the regime's values, or as Moira says, "incorrigibles like me" (Atwood 248). These women, and male "Gender Traitors" (Atwood 248), are forced to clean toxic waste. The regime simply does not care about their health. In regard to the mind and body dualism, the Unwomen are not needed for their mind but neither for their bodies. They are the social despicable beings. They are not even worth killing. For this reason, they are sent to the Colonies where:

they spend their time cleaning up . . . So the women in the Colonies there do the burning [of dead bodies]. The other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before you nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves. They don't bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to. Anyway they're mostly people they want to get rid of. They say there's other Colonies, not so bad, where they do agriculture. (Atwood 248)

To be sent to the Colonies is the worst punishment because it is not a fast end as it is death, hanging from the Wall. The Unwomen are a societal burden in every sense. They are women who the regime cannot control, so it is easier to punish them than to fight against them. I like to think of them as strong women who did not give up, but who sadly endure an awful life and death for defending their ideals. For them, their bodies also become a burden. In this analysis, I have exemplified how in the Gileadean society the body becomes a burden for women because of motherhood or the lack of it, illness, heavy work and/or physical looks; but for the Unwomen, these bodily burdens are not influential. Their body becomes a burden because they have to live in such denigrating environments for their physical and mental health. They do not hold any hope because they know that death is just around the corner for being the troublesome lacking Others who do not want to obey.

The Unwomen become the lacking Other because they are not even considered women. They are the no women. In the novel, there are two different groups of Unwomen. For the Aunts, the Unwomen might be the women from the time before who did not live a respectful life. "Sometimes, though, the movie [at the Red Center] would be what Aunt Lydia called an Unwoman documentary. Imagine, said Aunt Lydia, wasting their time like that, when they should have been doing something useful. Back then, the Unwomen were always wasting time. They were encouraged to do it" (Atwood 118-9). The documentary refers to independent and self-sufficient women who live, or at least try, the life they want for

themselves; but for the rest of the female groups, the Unwomen are the women who work in the Colonies. For the present analysis, I have considered both groups because many of the Unwomen from the time before, women who speak their minds, end up being the Unwomen in the Colonies, punished undoubtedly for their attitude. The Unwomen lack knowledge of all kinds. They are the group that has zero access to information. They do not get news at all and they are not indoctrinated, though it is unknown if they pass information from one another like the other groups do. Needless to say, the Unwomen lack freedom of movement because they are imprisoned in the Colonies. The Sex Workers and the Unwomen are the two groups that lack the most mobility. Also, similar to the other groups, they lack freedom of speech. It is true that the other groups do not have freedom of speech, but at least, through Offred, we hear them speaking, some more often than others. Throughout the whole novel the Unwomen are silenced, even by the narrative voice. Offred does not speak to any Unwoman so we do not hear them. She sees them on the movies played by the Aunts at the Center but “they don’t play the soundtrack, in movies like these . . . they don’t want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying” (Atwood 119). They are considered dangerous and unimportant women at the same time, so whatever they have to say is censored. Lastly, they also lack the ability to bear children. They are in the Colonies precisely because they cannot get pregnant by the Commanders; or “they’re sterile, of course. If they aren’t that way to begin with, they are after they’ve been there for a while. When they’re unsure, they do a little operation” (Atwood 248). Some of the female characters lack in some respects, but they are whole in some others; however, the Unwomen are the only group that is the lacking Other in every sense. Although they are not strictly associated to their bodies, the Unwomen also hold a position in the hierarchy of bodies, which placed them at the very bottom.

The Unwomen are basically sentenced to die. Because of their low position in the hierarchy, their bodies are the most disposable ones. They can be easily replaced by other women or even men. The Unwomen also contemplate the older women who are not present in the Gileadean regime anymore. Offred perceives sometimes that “there is a woman all in black, a widow. There used to be more of them, but they seem to be diminishing” (Atwood 24). Although the Widows cannot be analyzed alone because the information about them in the novel is minimal, I consider them in the group of the Unwomen. I feel the obligation to mention them because whether the regime likes it or not, they are also a part of the societal structure. Not unexpectedly, the Unwomen hold the worst position in the hierarchy of bodies. They are assigned to the Colonies to die an awful death. They basically clean waste “and

starve to death and Lord knows what all?” (Atwood 10). From our point of view, this might seem as the worst of options, but we also know that some of the Unwomen are women who do not give up against the regime, and this rebellious attitude is the main reason why they end up where they are. Notwithstanding, the regime strips them of their subjectivity for its own benefit and agenda. For the Unwomen, the loss of subjectivity is greater as with all the other categories of analysis. They are not treated as humans anymore.; on the contrary, they are treated like human waste. Even Offred assumes the worst because of what she has heard. The Aunts at the Red Center show them videos and narrate the Unwomen’s lives to scare the Handmaids; and her other source of information is Moira, who is forced to watch more explicit videos when she is being punished for escaping the Center. In the videos that Moira watches, “all of them wear long dresses, like the ones at the Center, only gray. Women and the men too, judging from the group shots. I guess it’s supposed to demoralize the men, having to wear a dress. Shit, it would demoralize me enough” (Atwood 249). This is an example of how the demoralization and loss of subjectivity do not only happen towards women; nonetheless, I do not analyze the male characters because of the scant information given about them. In addition, the gray is related to the amount of old people that are sent to the Colonies. Gray symbolizes cold, retirement, indifference, sadness, decay and dreariness (Morton *Color*), which is why it is the color used to mark the Unwomen. They are the unwanted, they are the scraps of society, but more importantly, they hold a full state of abjection.

From all the female characters, the distinct abject in the novel is the Unwomen. They represent the ones that Judith Butler refers to as the “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life. Women with the Unwomen status cannot develop a life at all. Other female characters, inside their constraints, may try to live their lives as calmly as possible, trying not to misbehave and following orders; and although some may think that this is not a life worth living either, for the Unwomen the situation is even worse. Offred recognizes those who have nothing compared to the Handmaids. “I think of the others, those without. This is the heartland, here, I’m leading a pampered life, may the Lord make us truly grateful, said Aunt Lydia, or was it thankful, and I start to eat the food” (Atwood 65). They are pampered compared to the Unwomen, who are barely fed and are not provided with adequate clothing for their tasks. For instance, if someone tries to escape, “they just take you up to the Chemistry Lab and shoot you. Then they burn you up with the garbage, like an Unwoman” (Atwood 216). Here, the simile is clear. The Unwomen equal garbage; they are waste. In

addition, the Unwomen in the Colonies may be sent to clean waste or to do agriculture. These women are mainly “old women – I bet you’ve been wondering why you haven’t seen too many of those around anymore – and Handmaids who’ve screwed up their three chances, and incorrigibles like me [Moirra]. Discards, all of us. They’re sterile, of course” (Atwood 248). As I mentioned above, older women are sent to the colonies because they cannot bear babies and their bodies are not useful for being Marthas either. Offred sees her mother in one of the documentaries shown at the Red Center. She watches her mother “wearing the kind of outfit Aunt Lydia told us was typical of Unwomen in those days, overall jeans with a green and mauve plaid shirt underneath and sneakers on her feet” (Atwood 119). We know that Offred’s mother defends the women’s rights and is constantly speaking up her mind. Although the narrative voice does not refer to her as a feminist, I would agree with using this label on her. So, in that sense, according to the Aunts, the abject of society contemplates all the feminists who fight for their rights and who want to live freely, making their own decisions. As I mention in the previous chapter, I take the state of abjection to an extreme and defend that all the female characters hold this state because of their living situations and their position in regard to men. It is true that the Unwomen hold the worst positions of all, but I have also been able to associate some of their descriptions in the novel to survival strategies.

About the Unwomen we know that there are different reasons why they are sent to the Colonies: misbehavior, failure at pregnancy, relation to an older age, and the most important one, connection to political enemies. These political enemies refer to the women who do not accept the new regime and fight back. At a personal level, their strategy is never to give up. Some of these political enemies may be identified as feminists and allies who fight for women’s rights because during the marches there where “signs, and the camera notices them briefly: FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN’S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE?” (Atwood 120). There is a big movement of people fighting against the subordination of women. For example, Offred’s mother is one of these people. She takes Offred to the burning of pornographic magazines and she is always talking about how far the movement has come. We do not exactly know the social survival strategies that the Unwomen have in the Colonies because the narrative voice has never been there. There is not much to fight for anymore in those places because people are surrounded by death. But, “there can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances. This is something you can depend upon: there will always be alliances, of one kind or another” (Atwood 129). Here,



Offred is talking about the Red Center specifically; nonetheless, I sustain that even the Unwomen have strategies of their own. So, at a social level, I want to think that there is sorority by sharing the few objects they have or even food. I also imagine them supporting each other when one of them feels like they cannot do it anymore. These and more strategies are well known of people who live under a totalitarian regime or under conflict, and I would like to think that for the Unwomen in the Colonies it is not any different. They still have one another.



### **Conclusions. Should we Take Literature's Warning Seriously?**

From our very specific, non-innocent positions in the local/global and personal/political terrain of contemporary mappings of women's consciousness, each of these readings is a pedagogic practice, working through the naming of the power-charged differences, specificities, and affinities that structure the potent, world-changing artefacts called 'women's experience.'

(Haraway 124)

I tell, therefore you are.

(Atwood 268)

In the present thesis, I have used Literary Criticism with a Women's and Gender Studies perspective to analyze *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. I have chosen this novel because, in the past few years, women in different Western countries have used the novel's imagery to protest against governments, which want to deny women the right to choose over their own bodies. Countries such as the United States, Ireland, England, Poland, Costa Rica, Argentina, to mention a few, are some of the places where groups of women have been seen wearing red dresses and white wings just as the Handmaids in the novel. To read about these protests got me thinking about the instrumentalization of women's bodies for societies' own benefit. I have previously mentioned in the introduction that dystopias may warn us of fatal futures that could be prevented from happening. Atwood's dystopia is a reminder of events that have already developed in some countries, but which may be avoided in other places. Following Haraway, if we acknowledge our positionality, when we read literary works, we

might use these opportunities to extract learning outcomes that will be beneficial. For Haraway, to use the construct 'women's experiences' is advantageous when used from a conscious non-innocent perspective because it may create an extensive range of theory valuable for society itself. Because of this insight, I have used six categories of analysis with which I analyze women's experiences in the novel. Through the analysis of societal dichotomies, such as the mind/body dualism, the women's body as the lacking Other, the hierarchy of bodies, the loss of subjectivity, and the abject, I have come into contact with the various ways in which the Gileadean society instrumentalizes on women's bodies for its own benefit. Also, I have discovered how women in this regime have come up with different survival strategies to restore some of the subjectivity that has been denied to them, confirming the idea that whenever there is abuse of power there is also resistance. Another reason why I personally identify with this novel is because the narrative voice does not have a name. This means that this woman could be anyone: you, me, we, they; anyone. This is a powerful strategy so that readers internalize the protagonist's situations and feelings. She reminds us that through her story, we, as readers, exist. She tells; therefore, we are, which is also an allusion to Descartes' well-known quote "I think, therefore I am." Because she has warned us, we live to read her story. This direct communication makes it difficult to detach oneself from the novel, especially after seeing how current world's leaders root for the traditional values exposed in the Gileadean society. For the conclusions, I have grouped the findings of this research by categories of analysis instead of the female characters which is why I start by recapitulating the mind and body dualism.

Descartes emphasized that the mind is indivisible; therefore, powerful, whereas the body is divisible; therefore, powerless. The novel highlights this point by exemplifying how disposable women's bodies are. Because of this mind and body separation, the body becomes uncontrollable due, of course, to the lack of development of the mind. In Atwood's novel, all the female characters are controlled, some for their bodily tasks and others just for being women, but at the end, all are restricted. After analyzing the novel, the main bodily burdens that come to light are motherhood, heavy physical work, disease and beauty demands. Except for the Aunts, all the female characters in the novel are mainly needed for their bodily functions. The Aunts are allowed to read and write, and they are responsible for indoctrinating the Handmaids; but for the rest, their control is based on their bodies. The Wives' identity, for instance, circulates around the idea of being wives and mothers. Their body becomes a burden because most of them are barren and because of diseases such as arthritis. Their body fails

them, and they are left with nothing other than their gardens and the scarce power that they hold. Furthermore, the Marthas must perform physical work in the house. They are women who cannot have children, but more importantly, they cannot get sick. Once they get old or sick they are sent to the Colonies. Moreover, their bodies are also inscribed by race and illiteracy and this might be one of the reasons why they are placed in a service role. The Handmaids are the ones in charge of repopulating Gilead. They must serve the regime by offering their bodies to produce subjects. If they fail to do so, they are also sent to the Colonies because their bodies have proven useless. There are some instances in which their intelligence is “highlighted,” but it is a distraction since it happens in a clear power relationship. This accentuation is used to demarcate the rules of the game. For the other three groups, the Sex Workers’ role is to please the Commanders and their associates with their bodies; the Econowives must perform all types of heavy physical chores as long as their bodies endure; and the Unwomen’s bodies are disposable because if they die, the regime just brings in more people to fill in their roles. Except for the Wives, none of these women are allowed to get sick. They must be functioning bodies at all times. If they get old or sick they are placed in the Colonies to die. This mind/body dualism shows how dangerous it is to play by so strict dichotomies in society. We cannot place all women on one side of the dichotomy and all men on the other. There are many shades in between. As a society, we must learn to move in those spaces between dichotomies to avoid the subordination of populations. Bodies are not there for governments to use as they please. The time has come when the mind and the body reach a similar status in the development of human beings.

Resulting from the mind and body dualism that so strongly guide our society, women are considered the lacking Other. Their strong association to the body stems in a supposed void that, according to a patriarchal paradigm, may never be filled. In our own society, different stereotypes and women’s ideals exist to fill out this invisible completeness that we lack; for example, the invented women’s need for a partner or a child to feel complete. Due to the many aspects that women supposedly lack, I have decided to narrow this category of analysis down to four main aspects: the lack of knowledge, the lack of movement, the lack of freedom of speech and the lack of ability to bear children. Firstly, the women’s lack of knowledge in the Gileadean society is obvious. Except for the Aunts, none of them can read nor write. Also, their main source of information is the gossiping around them and the few news that they get which are probably fake. This results in subordinate followers because they lack knowledge to build a strong opposition. Nonetheless, even though there is a general lack

of knowledge, there is an underground revolution that wants to change the current totalitarian regime. Secondly, all of the female characters lack freedom of movement, though this aspect varies for each group. The Wives, for example, stay most of their time in the house, but sometimes they visit other Wives. The Handmaids only go outside for their daily walk, for a monthly doctor's appointment, the regime's events and for births; and the Econowives are seen outside more than other female characters because of the varied tasks that they perform. The rest of the characters are very restricted. The Sex Workers do not go out of the Club; the Marthas do not go out of the house, except to attend some events; and the Unwomen are restricted to the Colonies. Thirdly, they lack freedom of speech because what they have to say is not important to the regime. Some of them are actually silenced. For instance, the Unwomen are not heard once in the whole novel. The Sex Workers are heard through Moira, and the Handmaids and Econowives through Offred. Only the three groups at the top of the hierarchy are directly quoted by the narrative voice. Notwithstanding, to hear their testimonies through the protagonist is also a way of silencing them. The Aunts are the only ones who are heard giving speeches, but let's not forget that they are the regime's tools to impose its message. Lastly, the lack of ability to have children is unevenly distributed. On the one hand, the Aunts, the Marthas, the Sex Workers and the Unwomen are not expected to bear children. Some of them even undergo surgery to make sure they cannot get pregnant. On the other hand, the Wives, the Handmaids and the Econowives are expected to bear children; and if they fail to do so, they are judged harshly. Most of the times, the reason why the babies die is not the women's fault, but they are blamed anyway. In our society, this idea of the woman as the lacking Other has resulted in a marginality of women's experiences in the social, political and personal spheres of life. Because we are positioned as lacking, we are denied access to society's powerful domains. This inequality has to disappear if women are to become important players in society. Feminism has long tried to acquire this so desired equality, but we still have a long way to go. Although changes have happened, the degraded positionality of women as lacking and who need to be controlled is still a sad reality in many Western countries.

Because women are considered to be the lacking Others, in the Gileadean society, there exists a hierarchy of bodies that position them below the powerful men. People at the top of the pyramid are in charge of controlling and managing the others. For instance, the Commanders are at the very top, but the Wives and the Aunts hold a higher position than the other female characters. The female characters are positioned in this hierarchy depending on

the power they hold over other women and on how disposable their bodies are to the regime. All of them may be easily replaced, but for instance, the Wives hold the highest position of all because they are guarded by their husbands. Also, they are up high in the hierarchy because they control the people in the household. Even though the Aunts hold more knowledge than the Wives, they only control the Handmaids, whereas the Wives have more people under their command. Below the Wives and the Aunts are the Marthas, who are placed above the other groups because they live a relatively tranquil life. In this case, race and illiteracy are not the main intersectionalities that are used to subordinate women, but motherhood is. For this reason, the Handmaids are positioned below the Marthas. They are the ones who are mandated to bear children even if they do not develop the mothering role themselves. The last three groups hold the lowest positions in the hierarchy. The Sex Workers and the Econowives are in-existent to society. Even though their bodies are needed for the functioning social structure, these bodies may be easily replaced with new ones, so they are ignored. The Unwomen are at the very bottom because they are sent to the Colonies to die. Their bodies are not only easily replaceable but also they do not have a chance of surviving. This last group of women also refers to the women from the time before, who lived disrespectful lives, and the older women, who are no longer useful to society. I want to highlight that all the female characters are inscribed through their clothing. According to Cooley, “the female body in motion, clothed or unclothed, carries in addition reference to race or ethnic origin as well as signs of social role and class” (67). Cooley’s words are clearly exemplified by the women in Atwood’s novel. As I have previously mentioned, these women are assigned a type of dress and a color, depending on their role. They cannot escape this hierarchization because they are physically marked by it. In the capitalist world that we live in today, this hierarchization through clothing and skin color is also a reality. There are bodies that matter more than others. There are bodies that conduct dangerous tasks because they are considered unimportant. Some bodies are more easily replaced, and many factors enter the equation here. Not only sex and gender are important for this hierarchization, but intersectionalities such as race, class, ageism and ableism, are also substantial. In the novel this hierarchization is explicitly seen through the colors that these women wear, but in our social surroundings it is more implicit and concealed. Lives have a price, and some are more valuable. Until we acknowledge this hierarchy and start talking about it, little will be done to fix it.

When there is a hierarchization in which some bodies matter more than others, there is an inevitable loss of subjectivity by the groups that are positioned lower in the pyramid. For a

starter, the three female groups positioned higher up in the hierarchy are referred to by proper names. On the contrary, the other groups that hold a more precarious position are referred to only as a group and not as individuals. Well, the Sex Workers do not even have a name that refer to them as a group. I had to come up with a term myself for the analysis. They all are denied and identity of their own, and they are deprived of making their own decisions. They are used to please the men and to provide the regime with resources; and their individuality is not important to fulfill their roles. Although all the groups of female characters are exposed to a loss of subjectivity, they do not face this problem equally. There are different degrees in their loss. For example, the Wives, the Aunts and the Marthas are stripped off of their subjectivity but they are somehow heard and taken into consideration, at a very low degree of course. The Wives and the Aunts have a saying when a Handmaid misbehaves, and the Marthas may decide on daily chores. Nonetheless, the Wives are expected to knit and take care of their gardens; the Aunts are made to follow the regime's orders; and the Marthas are stuck in the house, following the Wives' orders. So, even if their loss of subjectivity is not as significant as with the other groups, they have left themselves aside to become subjects of the regime. Additionally, the other groups' loss of subjectivity is stronger because they are easily replaced. For example, the Handmaids are considered pure machines that create a product needed by the regime. Their bodies are under constant surveillance because they are not theirs anymore. They are the regime's property and they are marked with a tattoo to make it clear. Also, they are treated like children because their authority has disappeared completely. Similarly, the Sex Workers are denied their subjectivity through their inexistence. Furthermore, the Econowives are also socially ignored, plus, they live under their husbands' shadow. The regime is only waiting for them to disappear as a social class, which means that they are not fundamental. They all are easily replaceable, especially the Unwomen, since even men, who are Gender Traitors or political enemies, can perform their tasks. The regime just needs bodies to work in the Colonies regardless of who these bodies belong to. Even though some of the Unwomen are strong willed women, they are stripped off of their subjectivity for the regime's benefit. In our society, this women's loss of subjectivity is ignored by many because it is a hard reality to face; nonetheless, we must look at it in the eye if we want things to change. Women should not be considered empty vessels whose only purpose is to have and raise children for society's development, losing their subject status.

When individuals are denied the subject status, they are undoubtedly assigned with the abject one. The abject is the one that is looked down at and who the subject repudiates in

order to construct its subject status. Because the abject is so malleable and so dependable on each specific situation, I defend that in the novel all the women hold the position of the abject so that men may hold the subject position. Nonetheless, they all experience different levels of abjection because each group of women considers the other women lower in rank the abject. So, this abjection will depend on the perspective of each group. For instance, the Wives and the Aunts are abject to the men just for being women. They both are denied their subjectivity, if any. The Wives are not allowed to participate in society whereas the Aunts are not allowed to read from the Bible because they are not worth of the holy word. Both groups are the abject because they need to be controlled for their unruly nature. As just mentioned, the position of the abject depends on the perspective of people. For example, for all of the female characters, except for Rita, the abject is the Unwomen. They are the undesirable ones. The waste of society. They hold this position because they have the worst living conditions; but for the regime, they are the abject because most of them are women who speak their mind, so they are not desired in the Gileadean society. For Rita, on the contrary, the Handmaids are the abject because of what they do. She believes that being an Unwoman is more respectable than offering one's body to the system that way. Nevertheless, Cora disagrees with her; and she considers that the Handmaids do not have a better option for surviving. The Aunts consider the Handmaids important individuals in society. They defend that what they do should be respected and appreciated, but the perspective we get from the other characters are the contrary. They do not have social interactions with anyone, and they do not have friends. They are not allowed to fraternize. Even Offred calls herself an abject because she acknowledges that the regime may do with her body as it pleases. Finally, the Econowives are the abject because of their poverty and social position whereas the Sex Workers are the abject because they are the misbehaved ones. In the Gileadean society, all the women become the abject up to a certain extent. At first, I considered the abject to be a derogatory position to hold; but after much research, I have come to make peace with the term. If women hold the position of the abject because we are not the subject, so be it. Maybe we should not be the subject in a society that is ruled by a patriarchal paradigm. This paradigm needs to change altogether. In our society, the individual at the top of the hierarchy is a male, able, white, middle to high class, young, heterosexual individual; and I certainly do not want to be that person. I want a social surrounding in which there is not a hierarchy of bodies, but even if there is one, it should be one in which even the abject may be at the very top.

Even though the women in the novel are positioned as the abject in contrast to the subject, I argue that they all come up with different survival strategies that allow them to thrive in such a totalitarian regime. These survival strategies may be differentiated within a social and a personal level, considering the former when there are more people taking part of it than just the executor. On the one hand, at a social level, the Wives tend to get sick a lot so they can visit one another and spend the afternoon accompanied. Also, they bend the rules by using other men, different from the Commander, to get the Handmaids pregnant so they do not have to experience the Ceremony once a month. The Aunts use their power of the word to make speeches and reproduce the regime's values so they may survive the imposed society. Besides, the mere decision of becoming an Aunt may be considered a survival strategy itself because they know that they may have a life with more liberties than the other female groups. The Marthas have a network of their own through which they gossip and get things for their benefit. This network allows them to create some sort of support group that help them feel accompanied. The Handmaids have learned to see the world in grasps regardless of their wings. They also butter their skin to keep their hopes up that someday they will be liberated. Contrary to the Handmaids, the Sex Workers and the Econowives, from the little that we know, have a strong support network. The Sex Workers share with each other the few objects that they have and the Econowives support one another as friends when they experience a baby's death. Although it is not so clear with the Unwomen, we know that most of them are sent to the Colonies for speaking their minds and not following the regime's rules. This means that in a social level they do not give up as a group and accept the consequences of their supposed rebellion. On the other hand, at a personal level, the Wives have their own rituals to feel better. For example, Serena Joy listens to music of herself singing, longing for the past that she has helped change. The Aunts use positive self-talk to convince themselves that what they do is the best for society and especially for the Handmaids. When it comes to the Marthas, Rita and Cora have different strategies. Rita rejects Offred as a way to protect herself while Cora creates a bond with her. For the latter, to create a bond makes it easier to bear her every day. In terms of the Handmaids, Offred constantly repeats her name so she does not forget it. To survive her boring days, she even reads the cushion and the message from the cupboard over and over again. She takes advantage of any resource available to her. The Sex Workers' personal survival strategy is the decision of doing what they do, if they have it. Through Moira we know that they come to accept their destiny and prefer to live four years in the Club than in the Colonies. Although either choice means a deficient life, they prefer one over the other, similar to the Handmaids. Additionally, the Econowives, like Rita,



use their rejection towards the Handmaids as a personal self-protective strategy. Finally, there is not a lot of information available about the Unwomen's strategies at a personal level, but I would like to think that they support one another and create some kind of sorority among themselves.

To conclude, I would like to go back to the question that I put forward in the title of the present section: Should we take literature's warning seriously? I think we definitely should. Through the analysis of the societal dichotomies in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, I have offered several instances in which women's bodies are instrumentalized for society's own benefit. Although the analysis is done through fictional examples, Margaret Atwood herself has exposed how she has used real events as inspiration for her writing. By understanding how this instrumentalization has happened, we may avoid history to repeat itself. As mentioned before, dystopias are warnings that set situations in perspective so we as readers may somehow get past of these events. Another reason why we should take literature's warning seriously is because the Feminist fight is not close to be over. It may seem as if we have come a long way, but governments and leaders achieve to push back many of the gains that have been accomplished. To cite two examples, in the months when I was writing this thesis, a ban on abortion was passed in the state of Alabama and a Spanish politician openly expressed that women do not have a saying when it comes to their pregnant bodies. For the first example, *The New York Times* published on May 14<sup>th</sup> that "the legislation bans abortions at every stage of pregnancy and criminalizes the procedure for doctors, who could be charged with felonies and face up to 99 years in prison. It includes an exception for cases when the mother's life is at serious risk, but not for cases of rape or incest" (Williams and Blinder). This legislation was approved by a great majority and many of its supporters are also women. In such a catholic state, we see many of the Gileadean regime's values being defended in 2019. In the Gileadean society, women cannot have an abortion even if the baby has "a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet? . . . [women] can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term" (Atwood 112). In this case, I certainly do not see many differences between fiction and reality. For the second example, a far-right politician called Javier Ortega Smith openly expressed that "Una mujer puede decidir sobre su propio cuerpo, puede decidir si se corta el pelo o las uñas, comer más o comer menos, pero cuando has engendrado una vida ya

no es tu cuerpo, es un ser vivo independiente” (*Antena 3*).<sup>8</sup> Once again, we as women lose all of our subjectivity because of motherhood. Whether we want it or not, we are not allowed to choose over our own bodies because they belong to society. Our bodies are there for others to do with them as they please. These are just two of the many recent examples that circulate the media with an opposition to women’s right to decide over their bodies. There are so many fights that need to be fought. One of the oldest fights, and which has not yet been won, is the one regarding women’s bodies. As mentioned in the introduction, women have tried for many years to gain authority over their bodies and although they have accomplished some steps forward, patriarchy insists in pushing back those accomplishments. Even though it is scary, I think that we should reclaim the position of the abject and create new spaces in which we may be heard. In Atwood’s novel, the abject are those who do not give up and die fighting. If being the abject means to speak up my mind and fight for what I think is right, then I reclaim this term as mine to defend the ideals I believe in and reject the decisions that have been made over my body.

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<sup>8</sup> “A woman can decide about her own body, she can decide if she gets her hair or nails cut, if she eats more or less, but when she has generated a life, it is not her body anymore, it is an independent being.” My translation.

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