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Offred, a subaltern signifier in the patriarchal
Republic of Gilead

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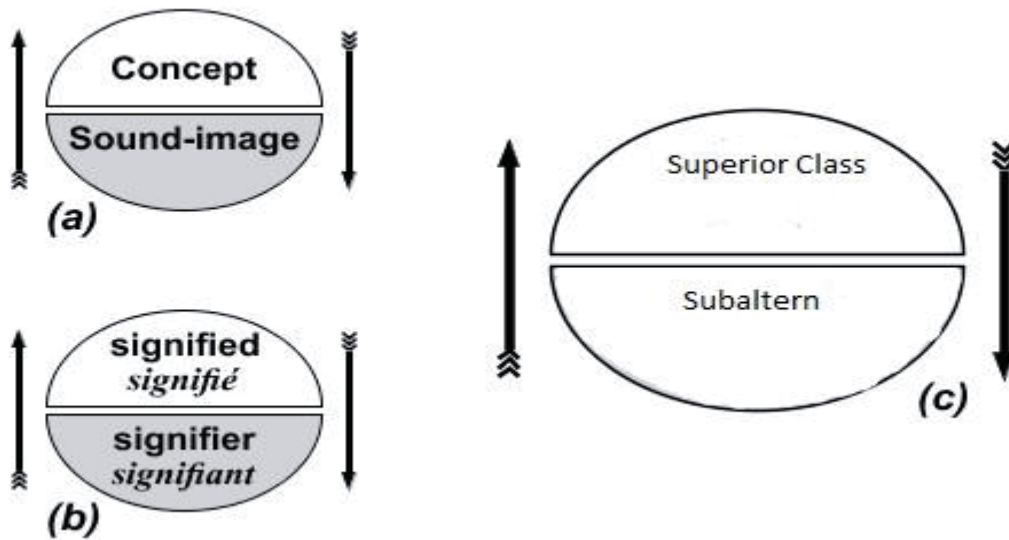
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1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a speculative science fiction novel set in America and written in 1985, has a dystopian context in which women are mainly subaltern characters whose essential purpose is to work as reproductive tools. In this novel Atwood deals with issues that are relevant at the moment of considering the participation of women through the time having as context a patriarchal society that turns them into a signifier entity in which male dominance has the role of signified. From that point it is possible to relate the position of Handmaids in the patriarchal Republic of Gilead to *Can the Subaltern Speak?* written by Gayatri Spivak a postcolonial literary theorist who basically focused her writings on people who are typically marginalized by dominant western intellectuals, by saying marginalized it includes the immigrants, the working class, women and other subaltern populations; on the other hand, the study carried out by Saussure *The Theory of Sign* in which he defined a sign as being made up of the matched pair of signifier and signified is also possible to connect with the role of Handmaids developed in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In order to understand in a deeper way the position of women inside a patriarchal society, the concept of semiotic coined by Saussure, in which there is a signified (meaning) and signifier (mental image), can help us to establish women as a signifier in the inscription of the social individual, a signifier who, as in the case of Sati and Handmaids show devotion to a master or superior by the self-immolation on another's pyre revealing the dominance who has the ability to talk for the ones who lack of power.



As we can see in the image above, Saussure offered two-part model of the sign. He defined a sign as being composed of:

- ➔ A 'signifier' (women/handmaids) - the form which the sign takes
- ➔ The 'signified' (patriarchal power) - the concept it represents.

According to this division of sign studied by Saussure, is possible to relate it to the concept of subaltern and their position and participation within society in which the hegemonic power, working as a signified concept, is the dominant voice; on the other hand, subaltern are the signifier, concept-image, of the society, the ones who lack of power at the moment to raise their own voice

Regarding the context, Atwood imagines a possible future for North America in which Christian forces have restated a theocracy in the United States, the Republic of Gilead. There, women are oppressed and subordinated to a mere reproductive role (handmaids), and the

general background feeling is lack of freedom evidenced primarily by the constant surveillance to the handmaids.

The novel describes the routine and underground scenes underscoring an environment in which the political game of status evidences hierarchical power in which members of that society become marginalized. As cited by Somacarrera, Atwood states her vision of politics:

Politics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom . . . It's not just elections and what people say they are – little labels they put on themselves . . . Politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power. A lot of power is ascription. People have power because we think they have power, and that's all politics is. And politics also has to do with what kind of conversations you have with people, and what you feel free to say to someone, what you don't feel free to say. (Somacarrera 44)

Gilead is a place where you do not have that freedom of speech, it is a place where you need to be authorized to speak, always keeping in mind that the language to be used is the one of the patriarchy. A woman speaks the language male power has shaped for her to use. To be a woman is to be “the other”, it means to be different.

2. Backgrounds

Having an idea of the historical context of which Atwood took elements for writing her novel, plus the notion of the patriarchal relationship between male and female roles in the novel, mostly represented by Fred (the Commander), Serena Joy (the Commander's wife) and Offred (the Handmaid), help us to understand the subaltern position of women and the male dominance within the novel.

The Commander and his wife made a contract with the Red Center in order to receive a Handmaid, whose main purpose was a reproductive, in which Offred was seen just as an approach to give birth to a child. When Serena Joy admits the presence of Offred in her house, she admits the fact that another woman is going to have sex with her husband, but the difference is their goal which is just for reproduction purposes; nevertheless, throughout the novel, the Commander and Offred slowly started to bridge the gap between them becoming closer due to the Commander's wants, something that was not allowed in the Republic of Gilead. Even though Serena Joy did not know that her husband and their handmaid were getting closer, the mere fact that another woman was intimating with her husband was reason to make her feel jealous of Offred. The closed relationship that Offred and the Commander started to have is explicitly identifiable in chapter 32, pages 271-274, in which Offred narrates the behaviors that the Commander started to acquire throughout the time toward her after spending time together at night, when Nick, a low-level officer who works in the Commander's house as a gardener and as a chauffeur, help them by sending hidden signals

(his hat's position) to Offred depending either the Commander wanted to see her at night or not, at this, Offred scape to his office or not. At the beginning when they started to meet at night, everything was awkward and weird for Offred, keeping her position as a servant; but through the time, he became closer and closer to her getting to the point of showing her real thought regarding the current affairs of Gilead:

The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore... There was nothing for them to do, he says... it was not enough, he says. It's too abstract. I mean there was nothing for them to do with women... I'm not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage. (272-273)

The Commander relationship with Offred make him passed out certain rules that were applicable during the reproductive act, in which both, Offred and the Commander have to stick to the ceremony: "He reached his hand up as if to touch my face"(209). Even though Serena Joy didn't notice this, Offred had already realized that Serena Joy wasn't comfortable with the idea of sharing her man. During the ceremonies she always tried to avoid any kind of romantic or passionate atmosphere "Serena Joy always avoided anything that would've created an aura of romance or eroticism"(207) it has just to be a reproductive act, with no other purpose rather than giving birth.

Atwood by developing the character of Offred, through her personal stories and her life as a Handmaid, create a context in which women is represented as a subaltern signifier, that have to stick to their role as a means to an end and to achieve goals that are imposed by the patriarchal society these ideas are comparable by considering the historical context in which Atwood based the novel.

When Atwood decided to write *The Handmaid's Tale*, she tried to resolve and to spotlight feminist issues by considering her personal experience as evidence of men dominance over women while she had to withhold her first name when signing early publications while she was at Victoria College because there was a discrimination environment against women's writers. Her imagination goes mainly through topics related to the relationships shared by men and women, dealing with women's suffering and agony, portraying female characters as victims of oppression due to the injustice done to them in a male-dominated society. Atwood puts women into unkind situations in which, most of the times, men are the oppressors.

An important point in Atwood's novel that allows to imagine the context of the plot is the fact that she based her novel under the concept of speculative fiction, that is a literary world where "What if" is given free reign. It includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also alternate history, supernatural, apocalypse, as well as many other genres. Under speculative fiction, a writer can explore what happens when things differ from our own known world in

some manner. Speculative fiction is a world that writers create, where anything can happen, it is a place beyond reality, a place that could have been, or might have been, if only the rules of the universe were altered just a bit. By making suggestion about something that could have been different Atwood place her novel beyond the pure science fiction and started to speculate about possible futures on the basis of historical and contemporary evidences, thinking about themes like “What if you wanted to take over the US and set up a totalitarian government, the lust for power being what it is?” (qtd in Howells 162). Atwood wrote this novel in the 80’s as a response to some contemporary situations based on cultural crisis and environmental issues, focusing on “The possible consequences of neo-conservative religious and political trends in the United States” (Howells 161), taking into consideration human rights abuses and the oppression of women, so what she did was to take a speculative thought about how United Stated would have been if some beliefs had been different:

To be sure, Atwood’s portrayal of Gilead is recognizable by readers aware of the “backlash” of the 1980s. With elements from the New Right and Christian fundamentalism conjoined with de-formed and distorted feminist formations, mass-mediated consumption, and the military-industrial complex, a variant of “friendly fascism” comes alive on the page” .(Moylan 163)

The backlash in the 80’s was the reaction against the advances that women achieved in the 60’s and 70’s regarding gender equality. Women made an important progress in terms of equal rights, putting on the table the feminism issue and the inequality between men and

women; however, as women have always been a subaltern group in which dominant groups have more voice than them, women started to lose power in their fight giving place to a backlash against feminism.

Women made up an increasing percentage of those in the lowest-paid occupations, and they made no gains or lost ground in the better-paid trades and professions. The number of elected and politically appointed women declined. One-third of all federal budget cuts under Reagan's presidency came from programs that served mainly women, even though these programs represented only 10 percent of federal budget... Pro-natalist bombed and set fire to abortion clinics and harassed their staff and patients ...The debate about freedom of choice for women flipped over into court rulings about their rights and freedom of the fetus. (qtd in Neuman 141)

It was during Reagan's presidency, ex California Gov. who was against abortion and reproduction rights among others that women started to lose power in their fight.

3. Analysis

The reasons why Atwood choose the United States were first; because, as in the previous quotation is mentioned, the context in which women was immersed during the 80's was the key for her novel, considering the low status and lack of rights in the time that Reagan was president; and second, because this country always goes beyond things: "The States are more extreme in everything... It's also true that everyone watches the States to see what the country is doing and might be doing ten or fifteen years from now"(as qtd in Ingersoll 223), and as the result, we have a totalitarian Republic of Gilead in which women are seen as subalterns of a patriarchal system, exposing it from the way that they dress, up to the point that they have to work as a tool of reproduction against their will.

Taking into consideration what a speculative fiction means, it is easier to go through the novel and imagine the whole context, being able to work with concepts such as feminism, subaltern, patriarchal societies, and dehumanization of women; these concepts are being juxtaposed by Atwood through Offred, the main character, who tells her story and lives in firsthand the oppression and marginalization of women's gender. Pondering on this we can make a connection with what Spivak wrote in his essay "Can the Subaltern speak?" in which she explains how Western intellectual acted by using their experience as a tool of power in order to silence and represent the subaltern's voice with the way that handmaids are presented in the novel by looking down their position inside society as entities who lack of voice, power

and decision. In that sense, the comparison between Sati and Handmaid's works as a support considering the oppression that both entities received.

Atwood is deeply interested in the relationship between the public and the personal words because there are concepts that are not well defined; personal words that are used in public relationship don't keep always the same meaning or intention, there is a variation between them and it depends on the intention or goal that the public speaker wants to achieve. "Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air..." (Atwood 7). In that sense, power is present, power is everywhere, we are not allowed to avoid it because it is part of every society.

According to Atwood, politics and power go hand in hand as "who gets to do what to whom", it is a hierarchical domain in which the powerful are the ones who dominate and generally speaking the ones who dominate are the ones who conform to the political side. Moreover, she is not really clear about what power is, because she says that power is not something real, it is something that people give to each other, and people tend to assume their role maintaining their position. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood struggles with a society in which women are forced to serve under a political and religious pressure by producing babies for the elite.

That the Republic of Gilead is run by a Christian Fundamentalist government is a telling device to show the reader another pervasive symbol of a male hegemony imposed on female identity. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is a central male image of divinity that bestows his male power

over male representatives on earth. Accordingly, the political map of Gilead has most of the commanders belonging to the higher class in society and having a “Handmaid” with viable ovaries for breeding purposes. It is stated and understood that they are authorized and envision this objectification as a sacred, heavily-sent right and duty to conceive. In characterizing power struggle in Gilead, Somacarrera gives us grounding to current politics as inspiration, but quoting Atwood, denies that these sinister men are the only holders of power:

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

The fact that men are the representation of God in a Christian Republic is a clear example of a Patriarchal society in which the subordination of women demonstrates that male dominance tends to obscure the position of women. This process does not take place by shutting women from existence, but by modelling them to a male blueprint. In other words women's maternal role in a patriarchal society is reinforced by the manner in which female sexuality is viewed. For instance, in Middle Eastern patriarchal societies, women's sexuality is defined and controlled by the “clan”. Women are taught since they are children, that their sexuality does not belong to them but to the clan, in the novel we can see this through the way that Offred

narrates the approach between men and women. Considering her routine and underground scenes, Atwood situates the reader into a possible future from the perspective of Gilead as an extreme society in which Offred, and handmaids in general, are subject of sexual matter; that means that through the novel reader are able to get into a dystopian context that emphasizes the position of women as a subaltern entity in all its aspects; from neglecting them the projection of a distinctly feminine image by using beauty products or even clothing patterns and the forbiddance to argue against what they believe it's wrong, up to the point of imposing them the role as viable ovaries taking advantage of it in order to give birth helping to increase the levels of birthdate, basically, one of the main purposes of the Republic of Gilead is the control of reproduction.

Gilead enforce its power by different systems; The Angels, who are the Army of Gilead; The Eyes, the invisible police who are in charge of the intensive surveillance of Gilead; and the Guardians. However, the most dominant entity are the Commanders who are part of the Elite society of the Republic of Gilead. All these extreme surveillances in Gilead generates a lack of freedom, in which the handmaids are constantly supervised and are the Aunts the ones in charge of them in a more strict sense by propagating the doctrine with the beliefs of the new society and make them accept their fates:

Certainly the level of surveillance to which they are all subject is equal, as Atwood demonstrates the extent to which the female subject and her body are contained and closely watched within a patriarchy that considers their very existence an attack or departure waiting to happen. (Davies 62)

Commanders, as the representation of men's power in the novel, are considered distinguished due to the importance and status; meanwhile Handmaids have no identity as females, being dominated and controlled by a patriarchal society in which the lack of power, voice and freedom make them deprived of free existence.

Atwood imagines a possible future for North America in which Christian forces have restated a theocracy in the United States, the Republic of Gilead. There, women are oppressed and subordinated to a mere reproductive role (handmaids), and the general background feeling is the lack freedom. Women have always been part of a society in which they are looked down, in comparison to men, women are the weakest gender that has to be protected by the strongest (male). What Atwood does with the female image in the novel is to portray her concern with the powerless position that women have been acquiring inside power structures, such as patriarchal governments that tend to hold them back as Handmaids in the novel, who are self-imposed silence due to their "muteness, secrecy and tonguelessness" (Davies 63)

Aunt Lydia, a character who is in charge of the Handmaids, establishes differences among the concept of freedom. There is freedom that it is developed in the presence of anarchy, in which people had the ability to find or achieve freedom; it was not imposed. "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (33). Freedom is imposed to them, they have a concept of freedom in advance so they are not seeking it, and they have to be grateful for that. In a patriarchal society as the Republic of Gilead, freedom is imposed within limits of action in which the possibility of having it is by having viable

ovaries and work as a reproductive entity, in which commanders and commanders' wives have the superiority and voice in order to represent handmaids, emphasizing their position as subaltern in a segregated society in which female subordination is permanent and the male privileges are predominant.

“Doubled, I walk the street. Though we are no longer in the Commander’s compound, there are large houses here also. In front of one of them a Guardian is mowing the lawn”(31). In the novel, Offred is a prisoner in the Commander’s house, even when she has to go out to get things for the house she is under constant vigilance because while she is shopping she has to be in company of another Handmaids, so then she is not allow to do anything against the laws.

Throughout the novel, different events denote the important role that women have in the Republic of Gilead; however, this is overshadowed by the imposition of male dominance in a patriarchal society. When Offred is passed into the hands to her commander, she immediately become part of his property, like an object belong to it owner. A way to demonstrate the power that the Commander had over Offred, she had to change her name after the name of her commander; Offred, was named after her Commander Fred, so her name ends up as “Offred”, the same happened to Of-Warren, Of-Glen and so on. The preposition “of” followed by their commander’s name reflects to the society that they have an owner and are controlled and supervised by an authority, even in her daily routine

situations: taking a bath, eating food, going to shop, oppressions ways that the Republic of Gilead manipulate in order to regulate and deprived handmaid's behavior.

In the novel, handmaids are subaltern entities who have no opportunities to get rid of the chains that bind them to their commanders due to their conditions as sexual or reproductive slaves. To the commander's eyes Offred is not a person who is able even to write because her only ability is to give birth, the commander have the image that handmaids are not more than handmaids and they lack of education; however, that was not true, handmaids were forbidden neither to read nor to write but that do not mean that they actually couldn't:

“I could spell it”, I said “Write it down”

He hesitates at the novel idea. Possibly he doesn't remember I can. I've never held a pen or a pencil in this room, not even to add up the scores. Women can't add, he once said. For them, one and one and one and one don't make four. (Atwood 240)

As subaltern refers to someone of an inferior status, handmaids fits with those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes, these groups include peasants workers and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic' power.

The reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in and by words’.
(qdt in Spivak 68)

That is how handmaids are not able to speak up, they are not able neither to read, nor to write, nor to walk freely, make them powerless and passive by the society, so they are easy to manage and to control.

The forbiddance of the Republic of Gilead regarding literate women, was because they knew that if women were able either to read or to write, they will have power, the power of words and by hanging people was also another way to control and scare women; through this “recreational landscape” women were aware of the possible consequences that the disobedience to the authorities could lead to, so they prefer to keep quiet and follow the rules, giving up their rights in the name of peace and harmony. If a woman wanted to seek for justice for herself, she is punished and segregated for infringing traditional norms of the patriarchal and totalitarian Republic of Gilead.

For the “figure” of woman, the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves; race and class differences are subsumed under that charge [...] within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is evidence. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (Spivak 28)

As the quotation states, women have been historically submitted by men, and what Atwood did in her novel was to demonstrate through a dystopian context what is to be under a patriarchal society in which Offred, as a representative character of subaltern woman, has to deal with. In order to go beyond the concept of dystopia in this context, it's also necessary to understand the concepts of utopia and anti-utopia:

Whereas anti-utopias “preserve something of utopian Hope” in the search for a via media between Nature and Technology”, dystopias abandon “all such hope”, for their question is “whether the definite realization of [U]topia is ‘avoidable’, on the understanding that [U]topia is synonymous with Hell. (qtd in Moylan 139)

In order to clarify, it's important to mention that a dystopian society is not the same as an utopian society in which the place, state or condition in terms of political issues, laws, customs and conditions are perfect: "An imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect"(Oxford Dictionary); on the other hand, a dystopian society is futuristic, is an imagined universe in which oppressive social control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral or totalitarian control; it is an exaggerated worst-case scenario, that makes criticism about a current trend, social norms or political system, just what Atwood did in *The Handmaids Tale* by contextualizing Gilead in a dystopian sense by portraying scenarios of oppression and totalitarian control.

Based on the previous description, Atwood worked by representing a dystopian society in the Republic of Gilead by controlling people's mind under a religious ideology enforced through the empowerment of men and the theocratic government. Atwood wrote about Offred as a dystopian main character, who often feels trapped, struggling to escape from the society that she is immersed, hoping that this reality would finally over: "Offred insists on remembering who she was and hopes to be again, treasuring her former name as her "secret talisman" or a kind of guarantee of her future -life after Gilead"(Howells 165). Offred is constantly questioning the political system, believing that there is something wrong with the society in which she lives: "...Just on her illicit visit to Jezebel's club with the commander she registers the hypocrisy and inauthenticity of the regime" (Howells 166). Offred knows that even though she is part of a totalitarian patriarchal society, there are some irregularities inside of Gilead but she, as a subaltern woman, is not allow to say a word about.

Offred's as a dystopian character, struggle during the novel in which her main purpose was to work as a reproductive "vessel"; she was not supposed to be worried for "banal" things such as the care of her hands; however, she could reach to some as simple as a hand lotion thanks to the relationship that she built with her Commander throughout the secret meeting that they have during the process of conceiving the baby. It was so unimportant the way that handmaids look under their clothing that it doesn't matter whether they were wearing lotions or not, whether they were wearing earring or not, whether their hair was combed or not; the vanity side was repressed because they were not supposed neither to see nor to be seen: "The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen..." (11). The way women look like was an important issue considering their purpose, even though they didn't have opinion the way that they dress was a way to identify them as a Handmaid. The subaltern and patriarchal context of the novel tend to systematize women's behavior, depriving them from personal decision such as the way that they get dress: "As a Handmaid deprived of her own name and identity, she (Offred) has not rights as an individual but instead has been conscripted into sexual service to state, reduced by its doctrine of biological essentialism to her female roles as a child breeder" (Howells 165).

From the beginning of the novel, handmaids are trained to be good in their performance of satisfying their commander and trained in order to get to know their commanders modes, (body) language, likes and dislikes, so then they are able to fit in the male world; not voice, not choice, only her body was important: "we are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred

vessels, ambulatory chalices” (176). The fact that handmaids have to please others without complaining, let us see how the gender inequality has been structured in a political, patriarchal and religious division as Commanders happen to be a powerful group, the Republic of Gilead acts in order to accomplish with their interests. In that sense, Offred was not able to say a word against society, or to express what she think it’s fair or not, she just has to stick to the rules and follow them, with no disagreements. Even if a Handmaid was victim of some sort of abuse, or rape, and after that she got pregnant and she lose or aborted the baby, she is considered as guilty; it is her fault to get pregnant and it is even worse if she get rid of the baby considering the conditions of Gilead.

Offred’s only hope center on her own body, whose femaleness has been reinscribed by Gilead’s biological discourse and its oppressively Old Testament sexual practices. Though she has no power to reject her Handmaid’s role and stay alive, she does have the power to defy patriarchal prescriptions by aligning herself differently through her private narrative about her body. (Howells 167)

Handmaids have to struggle as the unprivileged citizens, struggle and perpetuate as subalterns (relations of dominance and subordination) through discipline. The lack of voice that most of the handmaids have during the novel exemplify what is subaltern, subject in which the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominance “My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Bellow it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he is doing.” (121).

Offred was an employee hired in order to accomplish her role as a viable womb, losing the sense of “making love” and the feeling of it, they just fucked.

But, what would happen if a handmaid is not able to give birth? The contract that makes handmaids properties of a commander last for two years, in which they are given three postings, if they fail during the process they are immediately declared as “Unwomen” because they are not achieving their purpose in society that is to have children. If a handmaid is declared as an unwomen, they are sent to certain colonies to clean up the toxic waste that the nuclear bomb left, so basically they end up working as a slaves. Atwood states this dystopic issue of an unwomen due to the fact that it’s the worse situation in which a women in the Republic of Gilead can aspire to be because it is highly important for women to have fertile ovaries and if a handmaid is not able to be achieve it, she loses her purpose.

From Offred’s point of view, the definition that she has about the ceremony of reproduction in which she, the wife’s commander and the commander share in order to conceive a baby, is just the act of fucking, is not love, is not sex, it is just fucking, because make love implies enjoyment and participation and she is not into that. Neither is a rape because at the moment that she turned into a handmaid she was aware that her main purpose would be to give birth. The ceremony is formal, scripted and anonymous that none of the participants take pleasure in it. As everything is controlled by others, less emotional is the act of reproduction; Offred, the Commander, and the commander’s wife stick to the ceremony rituals and do not involve beyond the act itself.

The lack of voice and expression during the ceremony minimized Offred to an object, a vessel of fertility who not only has lost her family, but also her voice in Gilead. In chapter fifteen more specifically there is a narration of a ceremony carried out in the Commander's house in which he prays to God in order to get closer to the purpose of giving birth to a child:

The commander, as if reluctantly, begins to read. He isn't very good at it. Maybe he is merely bored. It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth... Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* (114)

Despite the fact that there are plenty of examples throughout the novel about subaltern, there is one particular event in which readers can see a symbol of rebellion and resistance; the story of Moira's escape highlights the point that she is the only woman in the novel who dares to resist Gilead oppression. Moira escapes from the Red Center after a clever plan, in which she stole Aunt's Elizabeth uniform given her a high status by wearing it. Moira was against Gilead attempting to define her identity; however, she ended up working as a prostitute at Jezebel's, a secret place in which commanders go in order to have time off and enjoy. As Moira was recaptured, her fighting spirit seems broken becoming resigned to her fate; this event emphasizes the power that the totalitarian Republic of Gilead had even over the most independent women.

Empowered tried to silent the subject by giving them a sort of representation, way of being heard through the voice of a dominant power, who's in a patriarchal society have the male image. For that, Spivak responds:

Yet even this does not encompass the heterogeneous Other. Outside (though not completely so) the circuit of the *international* division of labor, there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous Other referring only to our own place in the seat of the Same of the Self. Here are subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labor, the tribals and the communities of zero workers on the street or in the countryside. To confront them is not to represent (*vertreten*) them but to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves. (Spivak 84).

What Spivak is trying to say, and connected to the novel, is that it's a constant practice that subaltern classes, Handmaids in the case of the novel, tend to lack of voice or representation, because what they seem to have is a re-presentation of what the dominant power wants to project in favour of their beliefs, that means that the real representation of the Others voice is not achieved, it is just a manipulation of the power given by the subaltern class in order to be heard; so despite their real opinion, what is heard is actually what the "representatives" want to expose. That is how Mora, as mentioned before, is being immersed in a context that goes against their position inside male dominant society, she is not able to raise her real thoughts.

The Republic of Gilead took control over women despite their own beliefs, their own thoughts, their own bodies. Offred is aware of the importance of love at the moment to be happy and free, she mentions that a romance is the ultimate expression of the soul's liberty, the liberty to choose whom to love, and in under the context that she is immerse, it is not possible. Even though she is able to establish a sort of friendship with her Commander, she feels embarrassed about having sex with him during the Ceremony. Something similar happened when Offred started to develop a closer relationship with Nick, besides she feels attracted to him, she feels ashamed after sleeping with him, wondering if she would feel different if she knew Luke, her husband, was dead. It is not enough for Offred to enjoy from certain royalties due to her relation with her commander, she keeps thinking and behaving as a subaltern entity in the inside and the outside. Offred knew that she has just one purpose and it was to give birth a baby. She is aware of how things are and she know her role and she is follows the rules "What's is going on in this room, under Serena Joy's silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those others notions used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire"(122). Offred is conscious of what she is doing and facing that she behaves as an employee doing her work. Atwood's makes a clear point by presenting the behavior toward women and how they are considered in society, she admits that she didn't invent a lot in her writing, it is just a dystopian novel with a dystopian context in which the main woman is a dystopian character who keep under subjugation.

In order to elaborate the concept of Subaltern proposed by Spivak in her paper connected to the concept of Handmaids in the novel, first it's necessary to explain the Sati's term that Spivak used in order to exemplify the subalternism of Indian women within society. Sati is described as a Hindu custom in India in which the widow was burnt to ashes on her dead husband's pyre. Spivak talked about this praxis in section 4 in her paper, in which she started with the question "can the subaltern speak?" emphasizing the fact that if the subject is poor, black and female the oppression of the subaltern is even more. In that sense, females "as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow"(Spivak 82-83) considering this, Offred is not in a deeply shadow because she is aware of her past; however, the thought that the Aunt Lydia has in the novel, is that it will be a point in which Handmaids would not have any memories of her past, it would be natural for them to be a subaltern signifier in Gilead, and they would accept their role without hesitating.

In this context, it's highly important to know that there is a difference between oppressed and subaltern; an oppressed have access to a revision of her past, to the orthodoxy and they have some form of recognition as they have access to revisionist history they are able to make their cases heard; on the other hand, subaltern, according to Spivak, are the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society, a subaltern is a person rendered without human agency by his or her own status, so subaltern cannot access the established orthodoxy influencing and driving the hegemonic ideologies and therefore cannot seek the revisionist transformation of their history. Due to the previous definition, subaltern woman lacks of

consciousness about their history, in that sense hegemonic power has dominance over the subaltern women by neglecting them the notion of their past and believes invalidating their participation by using their own voice. “The voice of the female subaltern is in fact ventriloquized. Consequently, one can never directly encounter ‘the testimony of the women’s [own] voice-consciousness’ (Moore-Gilbert 452). In that sense, when Spivak asked the question Can the subaltern speak?, the answer to that question can it be yes, it can speak, but it is not their voice the one that is heard, the voice that is actually heard is the one that the dominant, the master, the power wants to say despite the position of the subaltern class.

In the case of women, Spivak gave the example of Hindu widows –sati- as a subaltern female subject. “Sati is the Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice.” (Spivak 93). This praxis was not done around the world, so it was not considered part of a class indeed; in this sense, British abolished this rite supporting it by saying that “White men saving brown women from brown men”. British believed that this rite was brutal for women so facing this situation, they decided, without asking to the widows, to abolish the rite, on the other hand, there is Indian nativist argument in which they mentioned that “The women actually wanted to die”(Spivak 93).

According to what Spivak wrote in her paper based on the *Sati* praxis and the abolition of the rite by the British government, is that neither Indian nativist argument nor British government actually represented what Indian women thought about this ritual: “The two sentences go a long way to legitimize each other. One never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice-

consciousness.”(Spivak 93). This quotation emphasized the two point of view about what was being done by Hindu widows, but it is important to highlight the fact that the widow’s did not say a word about what they thought about the praxis. They might have a different view on what they were doing, despite the common view and the common sense around the world, it’s a tradition and a personal event what they are carried on with specific purposes, even while I am writing this I am speculating in a sort of representation of their position about this issue. This a fact and a clear evidence of how Hindu widows are being *subalternized* by other who give opinions and make decision over them. It is also important to consider that since the very beginning, legislation upon Hindu laws were carried through without asking to an Indian nativist, the lack of internal voice and the power of hegemonic representation dismissed the real issues and thoughts among natives.

Going beyond the idea of subaltern as a lower-class who lack of voice and real representation in society, women, in that sense is even lower than the common subaltern class. This happens due to the fact that women are “represented” and “protected” either by men or by governments laws, and as Spivak said in her paper “Imperialism’s image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind”(Spivak 94). It is evident that in any patriarchal society women tend to be placed in an area of protection and dominance by a male-empowered authority which manifests in a detachment from any kind of decision-making possibility:

Throughout (post)modernity, between the twin poles of (neo-)colonialism and indigenous patriarchy, “the figure of the woman [forever] disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization. (qtd in Moore-Gilbert 454)

As mentioned before, women is by tradition an entity under protection and due this, they are exposed to face alterations of their real thoughts and beliefs by being represented and protected by a patriarchal society.

The example given by Spivak about the Sati praxis and the abolishment made by British and the response made by the Indian natives are placed apart from what Hindu widows wanted to achieve or thought in this rite. This is strongly connected to the ceremony already mentioned in page 21, in which it is mentioned the Commander praise in order to achieve the conception of a child, through these two points there is a feature in which both the male subjects are conscious of their role inside a patriarchal society and at that they have to act. The desire that the widow has at the moment that she dies in honor to her husband keep her under the concept of subaltern, furthermore, Satis, as object of a possessor had a praise as act of devotion to her husbands, an act of manipulation of female subject-constitution inside a patriarchal society: “In heaven she, being solely devoted to her husband, and praised by groups of apsaras [heavily dancers], sports with her husband as long as fourteen Indras rule.” (qtd in Spivak 98-99).

In the case of Handmaids, there is a personal praise that they have in order to achieve their goal, their purpose in the society as a reproductive tool: “Oh Go, King of the universe, that you for not creating me a man. Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled” (251). Sometime, Handmaids felt the pressure of their family and their surrounds for having a baby, actually, there were some wives that opt for alternatives ways after realizing that the idea of having a baby fertilized by their husbands and their handmaids was too far. In the case of Offred, Serena Joy realized that the pregnancy was taking too long and she knew that the cause may be the Commander’s capacity to have child, not because of Offred, so she decided to give her the option to do something different, but at the same time common, in order to accelerate the process of pregnancy.

From the end of the page 263 up to 267, Serena Joy and Offred have a conversation regarding this issue; Joy suggests that Offred should try another way in order to get pregnant, because it is taking too long the process and maybe the Commander can’t have children:

“Your time’s running out,” she says. Not a question, a matter of fact.

Yes, I say neutrally...

“Maybe he can’t,” she says... “Maybe you should try it another way”...

“Another man,” she says. “You know I can’t, I say, careful not to let my irritation show. “It’s against the law. You know the penalty”.

“Yes, she says. 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.”(264-265)

Through this conversation Offred remembers that actually she was facing a situation in which a doctor gave her the option to “help” her in order to advance in the process of conceiving a child; a clear example of what was mentioned before about the “hypocrisy and inauthenticity of the regime” (Howells 160). Despite the fact that laws in Gilead had to be followed by all the citizens, moreover handmaids who imperatively had to stick to the laws, the empowered ones, as the Commander’s wives, didn’t follow them because they were worried about the failure, wanting to keep their status within society.

Offred as the main-character is the fundamental image of the novel, acting as a subaltern signifier within the patriarchal Republic of Gilead. A point to consider is that during the novel Offred narrates the story from her point of view and through that way we, the reader, are able to connect to the story, nevertheless, the story indeed, the real context that Offred is dealing with, placed her in the status of subaltern, because if we consider the fact that she is narrating the story from her own point of view, she is actually having voice and getting rid of what she feels or believes considering the circumstances that she was facing, however, from an objective point of view, she inside the society lacks of opinion, just like it happened to Hindu widows and their praxis that I already mentioned.

Offred was obligated to be part of the handmaids class due to her condition as a fertile woman, she did not decide that she wanted to be part of this circle, she just had to because the society said so, the government said so, the rules said so; she just had to be part of it and do her best in order to achieve what the society was expecting from her. Handmaids did not

have the chance to make any choice whether they wanted to have a children or not .Considering the sexual act indeed, she neither had the choice to pick up the man that they wanted to intimate with, The Republic of Gilead was dictatorial even in that sense.

As nobody asked to Hindu women if they agreed with the Sati praxis; they did not have the chance to say what they actually felt about it. British culture abolished the praxis and Indian natives responded to that but nobody actually asked to the widows about their believes regarding the act whilst Handmaids, specifically Offred, faced the same situation when they were get into an unknown place, with unknown people in order to give birth to a child that they were not able to see after the childbirth.

From another side within the novel, there were women who saw this abuse and actually fought against it, they were aware of giving birth to a child who would be removed from their real mothers after childbirth was not a natural act of women: “Freedom to choose. Every baby a wanted baby. Recapture our bodies. Do you believe a woman’s place is on the kitchen table?”(154).After reading this quotation, the idea of a free choice came to our mind by releasing the awareness of free will. But the problem in this point is that as Handmaids are part of a patriarchal society, they are under the protection, moreover, the decisions made by male entities, the ones who show their power by keeping women under their shelter.

The main problem facing this situation, is that Offred, after all, started assuming her role as a subaltern subject in the patriarchal society considering that she doesn’t see any clue of

ending in the totalitarian Gilead against the dominance over the image of women as a reproductive tool.

It is idealistic for handmaids to believe that after a certain period of time they would be released in free will and they will become purely women and mothers as it used to be. It has no sense to fight against a society that sees them with no other purpose rather than giving birth to a child that they are not allowed to meet, whilst in the Hindu society widow's women die in honor to their husbands becoming a subaltern subject under the male power of the patriarchal society.

In both cases women do not have active and real influence in certain decisions made by the supremacy; decisions that sometimes involved the participation of women, however, their direct opinion is not considered, it is just assumed. There is one specific passage in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel in which women are explicitly put under the male dominance: "Women can't hold property anymore, she said. It's a new law... They'll transfer your number to him, or that's what they say. Husband or male next of kin"(231). Nowadays we can see that millions of families rely on the male financial solvency as mothers do not work because the only important thing that they can do is to take care of their children. In a totalitarian state, the role of employer, economic manager and welfare agent is assumed by the state who regulates the production, the financial and institutional aspects of families. Male and state work as a signifier, considering that women are kept under the patriarchies who tend

to obscure female voice, ignoring or re-presenting their thoughts in a way that do not represent effectively their position.

There is also important to consider as evidence of women as subaltern the Islam and Moslem patriarchal structures that are accountable for "neutralizing" women and their sexuality; Moslem traditions consider female sexuality to be in essence powerful, potent, and subversive to the Moslem social order.

Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great. (Quran 4:34).

Men as ruler and women as ruled is the, women have generally been marginalized from the male centers of Islamic interpretation, including both scripture and law, and leadership roles in public worship, as it is described in the quotation above, even the Quran put women under male dominance; good women have to be obedient, they have to obey men and aftermath Allah would be proud of them.

Margaret Atwood was not far away in her novel when she described women as a subject that have to neglect their essence in order to fit in a patriarchal state, she created the dystopian context of the novel based on what she saw around her, emphasizing the lack of participation of women reflecting it through the mental and physical abuse that Handmaids dealt with in order to follow the imposed laws. It is not far from our reality either, the fact that, in many western or eastern countries, women could not chose their husbands, and, widows were expected to mourn for their husbands until the end of their lives, something that is still practiced in some countries. So it is the indirect or structural violence of the system, through such institutions as the family, religion, and the state, that keeps women "in their place."

Final Thoughts

The dystopian context used by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to reflect the possible situation based on the historical context in the United States during the 80's portrays the female contrary viewpoint by emphasizing the fake representation carried out by the empowered, whose instead of supporting and reflecting women's position or attitudes toward certain issues, they reshaped them in order to project what is convenient to them as patriarchal society. Atwood describes females taking as background the catastrophic decline in the birthrate in which Handmaids have to put into practice their ability to procreate. In that sense, the analysis and studies related to the subaltern women in patriarchal societies, make identifiable points regarding the lack of voice and participation inside this totalitarian framework.

The Republic of Gilead controls the society, considering words as a powerful weapon that subaltern can have against the dominant group that is why handmaids are not allow neither to writer nor to read because by doing that, they would have the tools to come out and reject the laws, thoughts or beliefs that do not fit with them. In that sense, *The Handmaid's Tale* is mainly focused on political and social issues, presenting Atwood's concerns about human rights abuses, moreover in the way that women is being oppressed under a fundamentalist regime by Offred narrations who has been neglected of the political power.

The Republic of Gilead does not allow the personal discourse because it is considered dangerous against the totalitarian state, in that sense, women as signifier tend to rely on male dominance and protection, giving them the space and power to speak up for them, turning male into the signified that gather the meaning of the intention that women pursue in their fight for having equal rights than men and; however, and as mentioned before, this is not achievable due to the constant play between the dominant group and the subaltern.

Signifier and signified are basically represented in the novel through Offred, as the representation of the subaltern group, and the Republic of Gilead that work as the signified passing out the real concerns of the subalterns, displacing the correlation that conforms the sign. Offred as a subaltern signifier lacks authentic representation dealing with the oppressiveness by being part of a servant class. Offred is a victim of a patriarchal biblical history by putting her fertile body in order to achieve with the expectations that a Christian patriarchal society wants.

Margaret Atwood's novel is a window to the past in which her readers would be able to face situations that were and are current affairs in patriarchal societies, however, as people are used to this, they do not consider this as a threat to their lives.

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