

**Charles University in Prague**  
**Faculty of Education**  
**Department of English Language and Literature**

**DIPLOMA THESIS**

The role of women in the world of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale & The Testaments*

Role žen ve světě románů *Příběh služebnice* a *Svědectví* Margaret Atwoodové

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this diploma thesis, “The role of women in the world of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* & *The Testaments*,” is an original project individually conceived by the author of this thesis under the supervision of PhDr. Tereza Topolovská, PhD., using sources cited within the thesis, as well as on the page reserved for them. Furthermore, I declare that this thesis has not, and will not be used to gain any other academic decree.

Prague, 22<sup>th</sup> July 2020

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Signature: .....

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019), works of Margaret Atwood. The dystopian theocratic totalitarian regime featured in these novels invites a socio-historical and anthropological analysis and interpretation from the perspective of the subjugated female characters. The theoretical part, introduced by an overview of Atwood's work, provides the reader with crucial information regarding the historical parallels which inspired the narrative, as well as a delimitation of relevant anthropological concepts, such as *liminality* or *status reversal*. Subsequently, using both the knowledge gathered in the theoretical and in Atwood's works, the rise of the fundamentalist cult of the Sons of Jacob and their project, the Republic of Gilead, is explained, and their ideology is uncovered in the first section of the practical part. Second part of the interpretation focuses on the position of women within the system that subjugates and oppresses them. The analysis is performed by the means of comparing and contrasting the ideal models of the positions of women as designed by the architects of the system with the actual application on the example of selected characters. The ultimate aims of this thesis are to prove the innate sexism and misogyny of the Gileadean theocracy, to find explanations for its ascension, to ponder the designed place for women within it and, most importantly, to show how the demise of the system was caused by its underestimating the power of the oppressed, who would eventually strive to regain the basic human rights they were deprived of.

**Key words:** Margaret Atwood; *The Handmaid's Tale*; *The Testaments*; Theocracy; Totalitarianism; Liminality; Communitas; Status reversal; Status reversal; Religious fundamentalism; Ideology; Oppression; Female experience

## ABSTRAKT

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá světem, jež je předmětem *Příběhu služebnice* (1985) a *Svědectví* (2019) autorky Margaret Atwood. Dystopický theokraticko-totalitní režim dominující těmto novelám vybízí k socio-historické a antropologické analýze a interpretaci z perspektivy podmaněných ženských charakterů. Teoretická část, uvedená přehledem práce Margaret Atwood, poskytuje čtenáři zásadní informace týkající se historických paralel, které vyprávění inspirovaly, a zároveň obsahuje vymezení relevantních antropologických konceptů, jako například *liminalita*, či *převrácení statusu*. V první sekci části praktické vysvětluje tato práce, za využití informací

shromážděných v průběhu teoretické části a těch vyvozených z obou knih od Atwood, vzestup fundamentalistického kultu Synů Jákobových a úspěch jejich projektu, Republiky Gileád. Zároveň je prozkoumána jejich ideologie s ohledem na ženy. Následující část interpretace se zabývá pozicí žen uvnitř tohoto systému, který si je podmaňuje a utlačuje je. Tato analýza je vykonána využitím vybraných charakterů metodou srovnání a kontrastu ideálních modelů pozic žen v podobě, ve které je navrhli architekti systému, a jejich skutečné realizace. Tato práce má následující cíle; prokázat, že Gileádská theokracie je inherentně sexistická a misogynní, najít vysvětlení pro její vznik, uvážit pozici žen v ní, a, což je hlavní, ukázat jak byla zkáza tohoto systému způsobena tím, že podcenil sílu utlačovaných, kteří byli připraveni bojovat za svoje zcizená základní lidská práva.

**Klíčová slova:** Margaret Atwood; *Příběh služebnice*; *Svědectví*; Theokracie; Totalitarismus; Liminalita; Communitas; Převrácení statusu; Zvýšení statusu; Náboženský fundamentalismus; Ideologie; Útlak; Ženská zkušenost

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## 1. Introduction

As Margaret Atwood, the author of the two works analyzed in this thesis, has herself asserted, upon embarking on the journey of creating the dystopian theocratic Gilead, she vowed not to include any feature which does not (or did not) have a parallel in the real world's history and the present (TT 418). This axiom renders the fictional world in which *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its sequel *The Testaments* (2019) take place an amalgam of aspects of real-life historical occurrences. Focusing on this historical experience and how it relates to the treatment of the female element in the context of totalitarian and theocratic regimes, this thesis endeavors, among other aims, to prove that the inherently sexist ideology and techniques of degradation, subjugation and appropriation and their patriarchal ideological justifications are innate to the explored regimes (Gilead included), and that the ascension of the Republic of Gilead was similar (in terms of circumstances) to its real-world parallels. Women have been (historically) frequently put in the position of inferiors and subjects of patriarchal systems. Occupying the “private sphere” and taking care of the household (Eriksen 162), they would constitute the backbone of their communities. However, being a backbone grants women the status of indispensability which comes with some degree of power. Therefore, among others, the hypothesis this thesis aims to prove is that this power of the subjugated carries with itself the foreshadowing of Gilead's fall, achieved through the subversion of the intended order, turning it against itself. The opportunity to analyze and interpret this dystopian world is secured thanks to Atwood's giving voice to the silenced through writing their stories.

The particular course of this thesis surfaced during the pre-writing brainstorming sessions with my supervisor, which directed its subject matter to an analysis of Atwood's works and mainly the depiction of the totalitarian and theocratic regimes with an explicit focus on their treatment of women. This work is to some extent a continuation of my bachelor thesis which, similarly, explored the position of women in theocratic societies (namely those of Ancient Greece and the early colonial America) and their being exploited by the male authorities as conduits of political agendas. Several parts of this thesis, therefore, draw on the information gathered and interpreted in the previous work. A direct continuation suggests itself in the potential exploration of the position of Aunts within the social strata of the Republic of Gilead, as being used by the exclusively male authorities to maintain order among the female part of the population through education and supervision. This will be touched upon. Nevertheless, it does not constitute a crucial part of this thesis. This work would expose the inherent sexism of Gilead's ideology as a recurring motif of human history.

What truly inspired me to adopt Atwood's works as building blocks of my analysis was the fascinating and terrifying verisimilitude and the ease with which the Sons of Jacob managed to gain support for their vision, coupled with not only the crowd's, but also the surrounding world's relative acceptance and conformity. Atwood's books convince you of the horrifying truth that this can happen easily and at any moment, however advanced we may deem ourselves to be. The western postmodern paradigms of relativism, secularization (though the emphasis on reason and technology is also denied), pluralism, globality, decentralization and a universal basic human rights seem to have the unfortunate side effect of breeding ideologies that oppose these notions, such as the one of the Republic of Gilead ("Postmodernism") (*TT* 174).

This invites a short reflection as to why this analysis and interpretation of the origin of Gilead, its sexist ideology and methodology of social stratification and the misogynist techniques and practices used to secure the inferior and controlled position of women is relevant and useful. The Sons of Jacob utilized fear and frustrations of the American society to pave their way for their coup. Their method was the one of gradual, subtle curtailment of democratic rights "in everybody's interest" and to "maintain control" (only recently have we experienced a similar development during the COVID-19 epidemics). These themes will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis. Here, they serve as an illustration of how fear clouds judgment, and how anxiety and impending danger "breeds desire for simplicity" and makes masses susceptible to conformity. The underlying objective of this thesis is to vocalize the hope that if human beings can be conditioned to discern and critically analyze the fallacies, the illusoriness, the arbitrariness of the time bound and space dependent paradigms and ideologies of the past and the present, we might yet save ourselves from repeating the errors and cruelties of those that came before us. The fallacy of inherent female inferiority, having been legitimized by means of both science and religion, is only one of those. That being said, yet another objective of this thesis is to highlight Atwood's message of belief in the existence of, and the entitlement to basic human rights, such as inalienable freedom of thought and self-expression, and the right to demand equality, respect and dignity, regardless of sex or any other category. The characters of the Tale and the Testaments struggle to regain these rights.

In order to provide the reader with a sufficient presupposition pool, which will serve as a key for understanding the interpretations presented in the practical part of the thesis, the theoretical section will pay split attention to the analysis of relevant features of the historical parallels mentioned by Atwood herself as being the inspirations present on the onset of the construction of *The Handmaid's Tale* and to the theoretical delimitation of several anthropological phenomena, the traces of which may be discerned in the narrative. These sections are preceded by an overview of Margaret Atwood's work and the position of the two examined pieces within it with regards to the



topics central to her writing career. This opening chapter draws mostly on articles on Atwood's life and work, as well as interviews with the Canadian author, and Michaela Tomanová's bachelor thesis (2016) on the phenomenon of victimization in Atwood's *Blind Assassin* (2000). The subsequent section focuses on the identification and scrutiny of the selected historical parallels. The part dedicated to the early colonial Puritan America is based on Mary Beth Norton's works *Separated By Their Sex: Women In Public And Private In The Colonial Atlantic World* (2011) and *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (2002), Carol Berkin's *First Generations: Women in Colonial America* (1996), Carol F. Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (1987) and Tish Davidson's *Theocracy* (2013). The following section, focusing on totalitarianism and Ceausescu's dictatorship in Romania, draws on Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Carl Joachim Friedrich & Zbigniew K. Brzezinski's *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956), Stanislav Balík & Michal Kubát's *Teorie a praxe totalitních a autoritativních režimů* (2004), Kateřina Chytráčková's diploma thesis on totalitarianism (2012), Gail Kligman's *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (1998) and an article by Karen Breslau "Overplanned Parenthood: Ceausescu's Cruel Law" (1990). The anthropological theories concerning the relevant phenomena of liminality, communitas and the rituals of status reversal presented in the theoretical part are predominantly abstracted from Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1969) and Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (1909), the specifics of the Greek ritual of Thesmophoria taken from Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel's *Religion in the Ancient Greek City* (1989) and Başak Emir's article on the subject (2015).

The practical part is also divided in terms of focus. Initially, the circumstances which prepared the ground for the ascension of the Sons of Jacob and, consequently, the Republic of Gilead, and which were exploited by the neo-Puritan fundamentalist group to gain support will be examined and interpreted using the information gathered in the theoretical part as the point of reference. Subsequently, the practical part will be segmented into three parts corresponding to the basic female positions of Gileadean social stratification; the Aunts, the Handmaids and the Wives. Each of the parts shall be divided into a section dealing with the respective position as it was originally, theoretically intended by the architects of the system, and a section exemplifying the actual practice on selected characters from Atwood's narrative. This direct comparison will help the discrepancy between theory and practice to manifest, showing how the individual implementations eventually work to subvert the system, rather than reinforce it.

It might prove beneficial to address some of the unexplored capacities of this thesis and provide justifications for the decision to omit them. Fewer historical parallels have been explored in

order to provide a more detailed set of relevant background information. That being said, more in-depth analysis of other parallel real-world phenomena has a potential to constitute valid subject matter for future works.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, what needs to be addressed is my decision to concentrate on female roles in Atwood's works on Gileadean dystopia. Atwood's written production does not focus on female oppression exclusively. Rather, it explores oppression, victimization and the abuse of power in general. In Gilead, both men and women are being oppressed, and both men and women play their roles in either supporting or subverting the system. Therefore, to approach this subject matter using solely the perspective of gender studies would be limiting. However, as I have asserted above, one of the aims of this thesis is to illustrate the sexist and misogynistic bedrock characteristic of ideologies of the presented historical parallels, as well as of Gilead. Whether it be due to some cult of fertility or Christian ideology, these regimes base their social stratification on sexist theories. Therefore, I chose to adopt a socio-historical and anthropological approach with focus on women as the oppressed party. Employing this approach, I concentrate on women and their defiance with regards to a system which strives to strip them of their basic human rights and the rights to demand respect, equality, dignity and to have freedom of self-expression and not being seen as a possessable object. Gilead's oppressive measures are employed against them simply for being women.

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<sup>1</sup> On the possible continuations and expansions of this work, what was meant to be included in this thesis was a real-world parallel with the Boko Haram fundamentalist organization, using Edna O'Brien's *Girl*. What this book features are similarities with the Gileadean regime, such as the male authorities being called Commanders, the kidnapped women being brainwashed and supervised by other, already incorporated women, and these kidnapped women being tortured and humiliated at the onset of their initiation into the group. Such analysis would deserve its own thesis, however.

## 2. THEORETICAL PART

### 2.1 Central themes of Margaret Atwood's works

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its recently published sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), represent only a small, yet significant and (with regards to Atwood's recurring themes) relevant sample of Margaret Atwood's work. In this chapter, her writing carries shall be considered and her work will be selectively explored with regards to prevalent motifs. Furthermore, the place of the Gileadean dystopia in the context of her publications will be pondered. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the interpretations proposed by this thesis' author are in congruence with the motifs central to her writing portfolio. The information this chapter contains have been obtained using various articles and interviews, as well as Michaela Tomanová's bachelor thesis on the topic of victimization as it is explored in Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

Starting her writing career in the 60s, Margaret Atwood's earliest works entail mostly poetry collections such as *Double Persephone* (1961), *The Circle Game* (1964) or *The Animals in the Country* (1968). Already, the themes symptomatic of her works, such as ecological issues and female question, began to manifest ("Margaret Atwood"). The collocation "female question"<sup>2</sup> is used deliberately, as Atwood herself has reservations regarding the term "feminism" due to it being laden with too great a ballast of various, and often conflicting connotations ("O&A"). Therefore, it is important to realize that, although this thesis focuses on the oppression and struggle for freedom of female characters, Atwood's works concentrate on oppression and abuse of power as a universal phenomenon (that is, not restricted to women).

Novels have become an integral part of Atwood's writing production ever since the first, *The Edible Woman* (1969), came into existence. As a continuation of the course set by her poetry, this highly symbolic novel focuses on female experience, specifically objectification, alienation and detachment. Among other Atwood's works centered on female characters one can mention *Surfacing* (1972), *Life before Man* (1979) or *Bodily Harm* (1981). Most relevantly to this thesis, the motif of objectification and appropriation of women is explored in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), works of speculative fiction featuring a dystopian sovereign state in the territory of North America („Margaret Atwood“).

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2 As I am aware of the delimitation of the recognized term „woman question“, which refers to the sociological-political debate mostly focused on social, political and economic rights of women, I chose to use the term „female question“ to differentiate it from the former collocation and to indicate an overlap with anthropological-psychological areas of female experience.

Having made a promise to herself to refrain from employing anything but real-world inspirations (*TT* 418), Margaret Atwood has created a patchwork of historically relevant testimonies of human (or, specifically, male) need for control, violence and subjugation, as well as of human (in this case, female) capacity for maintaining their individuality, humanity, dignity and the ability to struggle for freedom, respect and equality until the very end. Atwood has conducted a thorough research regarding historical parallels, so that she could prove the eternal imminence of the possibility of such speculative fiction becoming our reality („Margaret Atwood on the real-life events”; “Margaret Atwood on How She Came to Write”).

As Atwood stated, the dystopian Republic of Gilead and its totalitarian-theocratic form of government and social stratification were inspired by diverse historical events, occurrences, organizations and phenomena. The Puritan America of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the socialist Romania under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu were two of the most influential sources, and for that reason they shall be explored to a greater depth within the bounds of the theoretical part of this thesis. Besides those, Nazi Germany during the World War II., the Iranian revolution in the late 1970s with its theocratic constitution and the cult of personality built around Ruhollah Khomeini, American Mormons or the People of Hope – a fundamentalist catholic sect founded in the mid-1970s in New Jersey, within the structure of which particular women were called Handmaidens – served as crucial inspirations („9 nightmarish things”).

Female question, however, is not the sole focus of the Gileadean chronicles. Other themes symptomatic of Atwood’s work are prominent within the narrative. The ascendance of the Republic of Gilead and its obsession with fertility is linked to a largely unspecified, yet omnipresent environmental catastrophe which affected birthrates in the country. Coupled with the spread and normalization of contraceptive methods and abortions, the Sons of Jacob make it their ideological imperative to secure and oversee growth of the population. An ecological focus, conveying a warning message concerning the humankind’s treatment of the planet to the world, appears in Atwood’s post-apocalyptic trilogy *Oryx and Crake* (2003) – yet another piece of speculative fiction dealing with genetic experimentation and engineering – and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013) („Margaret Atwood“).

The inspiration for the use of the motif of low birthrates and the cult of fertility employed in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and its sequel, however, arose not only from the demographic conditions of the early colonial America and the socialist Romania, but also from the circumstances Atwood’s homeland found itself in. Canada’s birthrate has been dropping since 1971 („Fertility: Fewer children, Older Moms.“). Part of the public argued that various toxins, genetically modified food and pollution in general may be responsible (“17 Moments”). Generally, contemporary and

historical position of Canada has also represented a central figure in Atwood's writing portfolio. In the *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) Atwood ponders the (non)existence of not merely Canadian literature, but Canadian national identity itself. What seems to be the central motif of this work is the phenomenon of victimization and the possible stances one might take with respect to being a victim. The experience of a victim and the possible attitudes of denial, submission or acceptance are to a great extent explored in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* as well. The Gileadean society being structured as a pyramid, most men and women find themselves in the position of victims of the theocratic totalitarianism, the benefits of power being reserved only for the highest rank (which happen to be men, a fact that is in accordance with the misogynistic nature of their ideology) – the Commanders (despite the fact that Aunts also exercised a great deal of power). This pattern is also present, among others, in Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

While having briefly summarized prevalent themes explored in Atwood's poetry collections and novels, placing the two novels central to this thesis into the overall context of her work, what has been elaborated on were the historical parallels presented by Atwood as the primary inspirations for the world of Gileadean dystopia. Two of those shall be scrutinized in the following chapters, serving as a key for understanding the interpretations suggested in the practical part of this thesis.

## **2.2 Historical & Contemporary parallels of Handmaid's Tale and Testaments**

The content of this chapter represents the focal point of historical parallelism adopted by this segment of the theoretical part of this thesis. As has been asserted in the previous section dealing with Atwood's explicitly mentioned historical and contemporary sources of inspiration, adopting rather an intensive as opposed to extensive analysis, the thesis will focus mainly on the analogies discernible in the Puritan theocracy of early colonial America, followed by allusions to the relevant aspects of Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule over Romania (namely the 1966 *Decree 770*). Scrutinizing these two parallels is important in the context of the practical part, because it will help us understand the circumstances and sentiments surrounding the rise of the Republic of Gilead. Furthermore, it will provide a key for identifying the reasons behind the attitudes towards and the treatment of women within the system. However, what shall precede the respective analyses of the system will be subchapters focused on theoretical delimitation of theocracy and totalitarianism as phenomena. The reason behind this is that the Republic of Gilead is identified as a totalitarian theocracy and, to understand its form and to comprehend what the system derives its power from, we must understand the concepts.

### 2.2.1 Theoretical delimitation of theocracy

This theoretical introduction to theocracy draws on Tish Davidson's *Theocracy* (2013), a book published as a part of the *Major Forms of World Government* anthology. Besides the reason given in the last paragraph of the previous chapter, the purpose of this account of theocracy is to acquaint the reader with the theoretical basis I work with throughout the piece in case there should arise some confusion with regards to which definition of this system of government is employed.

Theocracy as a form of government places crucial emphasis on the law prescribed by their religious texts or interpreted by prophets or other representatives of the respective deity (or deities), merging it with their legal framework (Davidson, chapter 1). This is apparent from the word itself, being composed of the Greek words *theo* (meaning "god") and *kratein* (translated as "to rule") (Davidson, chapter 1). For a form of government to be classified as a theocracy, it must adhere to either or more of the following features; the positions governing the state are occupied by clergy, civil law is fused with religious law, it is demanded of the citizens to behave in accordance with the religious law of the respective state, those governing the country are considered to be incarnations or emissaries of the respective deity, and/or the representatives of the state are believed to be communicating or they claim to be instructed by the corresponding deity (Davidson chapter 1). In the case of Gilead, the Sons of Jacob claim to be fulfilling God's plan, constructing "the city upon a hill" (*TT* 174). They enforce general adherence to the demands of the Holy Scripture (as interpreted by the Sons of Jacob), and they incorporate its behavioral demands into Gilead's legal system (*TT* 175).

That being said, theocracy does not automatically equal religious totalitarianism. Joseph Smith, the infamous founder of Mormonism, claimed to have been establishing a "theodemocracy" (Davidson chapter 4), a vision later pursued and to some extent realized by Brigham Young (one of his close associates) when democratic elections were practiced under his leadership in Utah (Davidson chapter 4). In its essence, theocratic societies consider their deity (or deities) to be the true leader(s) of the state, the government (often consisting either of clergy, prophets or those thought to be emissaries or incarnations of the respective deity/ies) being their representatives. Through them and other institutions, religious and moral values, regulations and requirements are imposed on the citizens, controlling most aspects of their everyday lives (a feature common with totalitarianism). Davidson postulates that theocracies have two requirements necessary for their formation to begin; the population of the respective region is highly and homogeneously religious *and* there is a general belief that the deity or deities are involving themselves in the worldly affairs through various interventions, such as judgments (Davidson chapter 1).

As Davidson states, once established, theocracies have a tendency to employ some means of making sure that the religious authority over the lives of its citizens is not challenged. This is a feature characteristic of both theocratic and totalitarian forms of government. In both cases, this task is usually carried out by an institution responsible for surveillance, such as secret police (in totalitarian regimes) or “morality” police (in theocracies) (Davidson chapter 1). In Gilead, the Eyes were tasked with this job. As a real-world parallel, one might mention the Taliban “morality police”, *mutaween*, that monitors observance of Sharia. Among others, Sharia in Taliban forbade women to get education, job or be seen outside without having their head covered (Davidson chapter 1). Similarly, Gileadean Handmaids had to cover their heads (*THT* 72) and women (besides Marthas) were not to be employed (*THT* 185). Furthermore, education of women was restricted to promotion of Gileadean ideology and preparation for marriage (in the case of Wives). Reading and writing was strictly reserved for men and Aunts (*THT* 98). Regardless, there are other forms of ensuring religious homogeneity, such as restricted contact with outsiders (also practiced in Gilead) or expulsion and liquidation of religious opposition and dissent (practiced in Gilead and the Puritan American colonies).

On the topic of reading, writing and education, it is relevant to comment on the matter of the Holy Scripture and the attitude of the Catholic church towards the Bible being read by the lay public. Until the emergence of various Protestant denominations in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, various Catholic edicts discouraged from allowing the public to read and interpret the Scripture on their own. The Bible being written in Latin, and any attempts at translations being forbidden by the said edicts, the public was discouraged easily. Therefore, the absolute authority over the interpretation of the Bible for the masses belonged to the official representatives of the church (“Why Christians Were Denied Access“). In the context of Gilead’s doctrine, this feature is clearly mirrored in the fact, that the access to the Scripture was limited to the Commanders and Aunts. This marked them as the only authorities over the interpretation (*THT* 98).

Now that I have roughly demarcated theocracy, highlighting the features adopted by Gilead, we may move forward towards the definition of the position of women within the Puritan theocracy. The specific position of women in the early colonial America’s society, which to some extent influenced Atwood’s works, was determined by diverse factors, not all of them stemming solely from the religious discourse the Puritans brought with them when fleeing Europe. Demographic peculiarities of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century American colonial communities invite a more layered interpretation of the established social order.

### 2.2.2 Position of women in the Puritan theocracy of the early colonial America

This section concentrates on the position of women in the early colonial America's Puritan society with respect to the contemporary demographic, as well as legal, economic and religious idiosyncrasies. Based on this subchapter, the practical part will subsequently explore the origin of the Republic of Gilead, specifically the motives and ideological aspects gaining its ascension the necessary support. Furthermore, the theocratic features stemming from the Puritan religious female-focused paradigms as reflected in Atwood's works will be examined. The content of this subchapter is largely based on Mary Beth Norton's works *Separated By Their Sex: Women In Public And Private In The Colonial Atlantic world* (2011) and *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (2002), Carol Berkin's *First Generations: Women in Colonial America* (1996) and Carol F. Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (1987).

Crudely speaking, the demographic situation in Puritan colonies enticed an appeal to reproduction economy. Throughout the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, majority of America's newcomers were men, women constituting only one sixth or fourth (the numbers varying) of the newly arriving settlers. The explanation of this discrepancy is simple. The American tobacco producers needed (the literal) manpower for their plantations, preferring able-bodied young males. The balance of this ration improved by the 1680s, when the arrival of three men was counterbalanced by one female (Berkin 19, 41).

Women have become, ineptly put, a scarce and rare commodity. Moreover, the life expectancy of both males and females fell between the age of 39 and mid-forties, women being more susceptible to early death due to hard work (omnipresent in the life of a 17<sup>th</sup> century colonist) coupled with weaker immune system during and after pregnancy. The child mortality was, as opposed to the low adult life expectancy, very high. In Chesapeake, one quarter of the colonists' children would not survive their first year, and roughly 40 – 50% of offspring died before reaching the age of twenty (Berkin 20). One might argue that the position of a scarce commodity would come with an improved social status, because of the (as the notorious anthropological saying goes) “metabolically expensive ova and (...) metabolically cheap sperms” (Wildman 146), this analogy being amplified by the then situation. However, the deep-rooted, religion and law based social order imported by the European colonists seems to have prevailed.

Contrary to popular belief regarding women within the Puritan society, in the early years of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, women in the colonies enjoyed relatively greater legal freedoms. Norton argues that it was the social standing of the individual rather than their sex that



determined their position within the society (*Separated* 21). This, however, applied to those who were not married. Husband-less woman had right to “sue and be sued, make contracts, earn and pay wages, own and sell property in her lifetime, and will it to her chosen heirs upon her death.” (Berkin 28). However, marriage - the ritual connected with a girl’s transition into adulthood – placed the wife under the legal and economic “protection” of her husband (Berkin 28). Suddenly, all public affairs (whether legal or economic) were to be conducted by their spouses. Henceforward, their legal identity being reduced to that of a “child, idiot or a criminal” (Berkin 28), it was not possible for them to participate in court affairs or make judgments regarding the family’s wealth and property. Any children the couple would produce belonged legally to the father (Berkin 28 – 29; Karlsen chapter 3)<sup>3</sup>.

Public affairs being handled by their respective husbands, the only sphere in which women could exercise some amount of power was the private sphere. Although Eriksen warns against making such ethnocentric generalizations, male dominion over public matters and female dominion over private affairs have proven to be borderline cultural universals (Eriksen 162). As Berkin asserts, in the context of Puritan American society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this division was apparent, almost metaphorically, in agriculture. Cultivation of the family’s field and the tobacco plantation work (as was mentioned earlier in the chapter) was reserved for men, women and children helping only in the times of greatest need (Berkin 26 - 27). Consequently, the “cultivation” of the household was under the jurisdiction of women. This included gardening, managing the cattle and poultry, household chores and taking care of potential progeny. Gardening and stock management involved transformation of “raw material into usable domestic products” (Berkin 26), including various forms of dairy processing, stock butchering and food preparation and preservation. Oftentimes, women would be given a chance to sell their products on local markets (Berkin 26 - 27). Other aspects of the private sphere managed by women was the transmission of private intelligence from one household to another but also, more importantly, the maintenance of social, informal contact with others and socialization of the members of their households in general (*Separated* 246 - 247). Therefore, it is absolutely crucial to realize that the management of the private sphere carried out by women was indispensable with regards to the survival of the household and the community, and with regards to cultural transmission and reproduction.

This has great relevance due to the fact that, for a young woman, not being married was largely considered to be a deviation from the norm. Among other reasons, it suggested that the particular woman has no intention to fulfill her received “biological destiny”; to utilize her fertility

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3 Due to the electronic edition of the book being paginated individually in each chapter, I shall provide in the text the number of the nearest higher identification number, in this case the number of the corresponding chapter.

in order to bring about procreation (Karlsen, 1987). The cult of fertility was strong among the Puritans (Berkin 69). The reasons for this, mentioned above, were the scarcity of women and the high mother and child mortality. However, as it is expected in the context of a theocratic society, there was also an overlap with the religious beliefs of the colonists. Women who either chose or were forced to be childless were significantly more likely to be accused of witchcraft, which may be why, as authors such as Berkin, Norton and Karlsen argue, a great number of women in the process of or after menopause were targets of witchcraft accusations (Berkin 69; Karlsen chapter 2; *Devil's snare* 8).

The notion of females being much more susceptible to “devil’s power” was largely derived from their position within the Christian mythology. Traditionally, Eve’s transgression against God’s will as well as her persuading Adam to join her enterprise was understood to have fallen on all humankind as the Original sin (Karlsen chapter 5). Karlsen gives an account of the claim of a Spanish Franciscan friar Martín de Castañega suggesting that Eve was frustrated because of being inferior in almost every way to Adam and how it made her thirsty for knowledge and has driven her into Satan’s arms (Karlsen chapter 5). Witchcraft was perceived not only as “subversion of the sexual order”, but also as a subversion of the “order of Creation”, and since discontent of a woman with her position within the society was often translated as a discontent with God’s laws, it often led to her being suspected of having made an alliance with satanic forces. In this context, Karlsen makes a reference to De Castañega’s other assertion that women, being denied the legal power to channel their dissatisfaction and frustration, often resolve to seeking aid elsewhere (Karlsen chapter 5).

A woman not adhering to the imperative of reproduction, therefore, seems to have placed herself into a dangerous position. However, those who did follow obediently the societal expectations appeared to have been caught in an inescapable “cycle of pregnancy, birth, nursing, and weaning”, a circle of constantly being reminded that they cannot escape the natural processes of their bodies (through the already mentioned stages as well as through menstruation and physical weaknesses stemming from the respective conditions) and their supposed stronger connection to nature, as well as being tied to their husbands, children and homes (Berkin 52 - 53). The notion of women being tied to the imperatives of nature to the point of being considered half animals that need taming and cultivation has served its purpose of legitimizing socially imposed female inferiority (Ortner 73 – 75).

To some extent, these biological implications seem to have projected into religious ones by making a link between female connection to nature, susceptibility to demonic possession and having stronger libido than men. Arguably, though these beliefs were more symptomatic of the

traditional conception of womanhood as defined by European Christian authorities of the earlier centuries, the colonizers in early days of the European settlement of America still partially held the notion that the above discussed connection with nature, coupled with the susceptibility to demonic forces, made women inherently more lustful and otherwise overly sexually driven (Karlsen chapter 5). This was placing males into great danger of being seduced by said unconstrained and uncontrolled women (that is, women not bound to their homes and the care for their children), being “forced” to abandon reason and cultural appropriateness and subsequently being changed into “beasts” (Karlsen chapter 5). This notion suggests a reversal of the movement from nature to culture, in which males cultivate females, the resulting transformation being women “forcing” man to answer to their carnal needs (Karlsen chapter 5).<sup>4</sup> This is an example of men victimizing themselves, another instance of which appears in Gilead’s ideology, claiming that the position of men in the world where females are emancipated was debilitating them.

In the course of this chapter, the particularities of the early colonial Puritan American society have been explored with regards to the position of women and the attitudes towards them. The features explored in this chapter, namely the demographic implications, economic and legal rights, religious views regarding women and the division of spheres into public and private have been incorporated by Atwood into the motives and the ideology of the Sons of Jacob. That being said, the Republic of Gilead being identified as a “totalitarian theocracy”, the concept of totalitarianism should be defined, so that the totalitarian features adopted by the Sons of Jacob when constructing Gilead can be discerned

### **2.2.2 Theoretical delimitation of totalitarianism**

The features of totalitarianism present in Gilead mainly relate to the methods used to both mentally and physically subjugate its citizens to the absolute power and the doctrine of the ruling class of Commanders, the Sons of Jacob. To achieve this end, Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), Carl Joachim Friedrich & Zbigniew K. Brzezinski’s *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1965) or Stanislav Balík & Michal Kubát’s *Teorie a praxe totalitních a autoritativních režimů* (2004) shall be employed, while also drawing inspiration from Kateřina Chytráčková’s diploma thesis on totalitarianism (2012).

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4 The implications pointing to the phenomenon of victim-blaming and its treatment in the narrative of *The Handmaid’s Tale* deserve individual treatment which will remain largely unexplored within the bounds of this thesis. However, it may constitute potential subject matter of a different work.

Totalitarianism as a phenomenon has been already defined in so many ways that finding its idiosyncrasies is substantially less difficult than compiling these theoretical delimitations into a coherent, yet brief summary. Among others, the essence of totalitarianism rests on features such as the rule of either a single party or/and single glorified leader, personality cultism, enforcement of the party's ideology and overall control over every aspect of citizens' lives. With regards to the latter, totalitarianism is differentiated from authoritarianism in a way that it does not focus solely on political power stemming from the ruling minority, but it perpetrates all levels of state bureaucracy and all social institutions, creating a homogeneous system of control over each persons' reality. The ideologically indoctrinated people or mere survivors are consequently legitimizing the totalitarian rule in return, by conforming to it. Tight control over the economy of the country often constitutes one of the major foci of the authorities, as it to a great extent influences most aspects of the citizens' lives. Ideology and its power are used to legitimize totalitarian rule in general (Chytráčková 9 - 14).

The executive power within the totalitarian form of government is traditionally carried out through the employment of various types of secret police, justice not being independent and impartial, but rather adhering to the needs of the ruling ideology and the demands of the governing party or political leader. The members of the secret police often play the roles of judges, juries and executioners simultaneously (Arendt chapter 12).

One of the aspects theoretically differentiating totalitarianism from theocracy is totalitarianism having inherently negative attitude towards religion, as it fundamentally subverts the notion of the party or the leader being the sole authority. The notion of answering to yet another "divine power" is non-congruent with the cultist hue the totalitarian authorities struggle to exude.

Elaborating on the topic of cultism, totalitarian regimes (just as any organized religion) place great emphasis on public participation in political life through the channel of various rituals which express conformity with the system. The ideology and ritual behavior may perhaps compensate for feelings of lost sense and purpose in life and the feeling of dissociation and alienation coupled with the emphasis on individuality (Arendt chapter 11).

### **2.2.3 Women in Romania under the rule of Nicolae Ceausescu**

The illustrative example suggested by Atwood will be the socialist Romania under the rule of Nicolae Ceausescu, focusing on his ideology of the female body being the property of the state and on the politicization of reproduction. This narrative draws on Gail Kligman's work *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (1998) and an article by Karen Breslau "Overplanned Parenthood: Ceausescu's Cruel Law" (1990). The purpose of this

chapter is to illustrate how Ceausescu's reproduction policy transformed female body into a state owned commodity, a feature reflected in the discourse of the Sons of Jacob.

As a member of the Romanian Communist Party, in the aftermath of the 1967 Party Conference Nicolae Ceausescu has successfully pushed through a legislature change that allowed him, as the leader of the party, to simultaneously gain the position of the head of the state. Upon achieving this goal, Ceausescu commenced to centralize the power by fusing several political and bureaucratic positions to "avoid duplication". Numerous positions within the Party's Central Committee were assigned to his trusted followers. Slowly, the new leader of Romania began to create a personality cult around himself („Ceausescu Era.”).

Though Ceausescu's political programme claimed to have de-Stalinization of Romania as its aim, the reality proved to be somewhat layered, as Ceausescu tightened the socialist grip on Romania. Ceausescu enforced the notion of the political and ideological activity being fully within the competences of the Central Committee and suggested establishment of an ideological commission which would create a program dealing with political education, spreading the ideology and the notion of conformity with the Party's ideology. In other words, the process of ideology solidification and indoctrination started to accelerate („Ceausescu Era.”).

Ceausescu supported the system of planned economics, typical of the socialist totalitarian rules. However, the phenomenon of planning affected (on the institutional level) an unlikely aspect of life as well. What seems to be the topic most relevant to the subject matter of this thesis is Ceausescu's plan to increase Romania's population by more or less direct control over the bodies and reproduction powers of the female citizens of Romania. The specifics of this agenda were carried out through the implementation of the Decree 770 („Overplanned Parenthood”).

Romania, having a low standard of living at the time, as well as enjoying quite liberal abortion policy, was experiencing few decades of decreasing birthrate. To tackle this, Ceausescu enforced several legislature modifications in 1966 which were to hinder and reverse this downfall. Among the most prominent features of these changes, abortion and any form of contraception were made (with few exceptions regarding, for example, age or a threat to mother's life) illegal. However, the economic state of the country and, consequently, its people could by no means allow such rapid growth of population, as many struggled to keep themselves (let alone their offspring) fed. Many women began to seek out other, frequently life-threatening ways to save the potential being within their bodies from the unwelcoming conditions of the then Romania, while others were forced to watch their malnourished children die within few days, weeks or months after giving birth to them. Malnutrition was an extremely common condition of the newborn babies, undernourishment being diagnosed in one out of 10 cases. Severely malnourished, underweight or

preterm infants were often classified as not worth saving by the employees of the respective medical facilities, and discarded as miscarriages (Kligman 1) („Overplanned Parenthood”).

In spite of all this, Ceausescu persisted in his efforts, forcing all women under 45 to undergo regular gynecological examinations which focused on monitoring their menstruation cycles and potential pregnancies. Women registered as pregnant were watched closely to prevent illegal abortions, and women under 45 were being taxed for not not having children (in other words, for refusing to serve their country). Besides that, the process of monitoring pregnant women was in the interest of each district's medical institution, as any miscarriages would negatively affect the wages of its employees („Overplanned Parenthood”).

Although Ceausescu’s regime promoted reproduction as a form of civic duty, sex education and any works and lectures dealing with the specific peculiarities of human reproduction or sexuality were forbidden for the lay public, obscuring any information regarding contraceptive methods which could inspire resourceful, more or less potential mothers. While trying to avoid unwanted pregnancies or being forced by circumstances to undergo abortions, women were not educated enough to seek harmless or, at least, less life-threatening methods, and men were uneducated with regards to techniques that would prevent potential conception („Ceausescu Era.”).

The reason why so many women chose to undergo makeshift, yet usually very expensive abortions was the low standard of living people of Romania were experiencing at that time. Though between the years 1950 and 1975 Romania’s economy seemed to grow, it was mostly due to foreign loans and investments into heavy industry. Romania’s agricultural sector became neglected and food distribution suffered for it. Being forced to pay foreign debts with increasing interest rates, Ceausescu had the country adopt austerity policy, food and energy being rationed. Needless to say, families hardly had food for themselves and bringing new life into these conditions would be borderline cruel. This exposes the paradox of Ceausescu’s measures, which demanded growth of birth rates but could not supply sufficient subsistence (“Austerity Measures”).

In conclusion, what has been examined was the specific understanding of the phenomenon of totalitarianism as it is treated in this thesis. The theoretical concept was exemplified using the instance of Nicolae Ceausescu’s dictatorship in the socialist Romania, with the specific focus on the politicization of reproduction and the notion of state ownership of the female body. This chapter will provide a key for understanding the Gileadean totalitarian theocracy, as well as the interpretation of the position of women (most evidently the Handmaids) within the Republic as they will be examined in the practical part of the thesis.

## 2.3. Relevant anthropological theories

The following chapter will provide an outline of concepts of liminality, *communitas*, and the phenomenon of the rituals of *status elevation* and *status reversal* as elaborated on by Victor Turner in his study *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1977). The content matter of the subchapters will pay split attention to these respective phenomena. The information these sections contain will be applied on the study of Aunts and Handmaids within the Gileadean society.

### 2.3.1 The concept of liminality and *communitas* as elaborated on by Victor Turner

The term “liminality” being derived from the Latin word *limen* (meaning “threshold”) , it is widely understood that this anthropological category coined by Arnold van Gennep and explored later by Turner deals with the phenomenon of being on a threshold between the anterior and the posterior state of existence within some social, spatial or temporal category (the various categories being social status, age, place, time, and other relevant dimensions). The definition of an individual’s identity changes from the preceding to the succeeding one, a movement which usually entails a shift within the hierarchy of the respective culture. This movement, as van Gennep and Turner assert, contains an intermediate stage, a threshold, which has specific attributes and features (Turner 94).

Within the moment of transition from one state to another, the liminal stage comes after an individual is separated from the previous social category, the liminal person is stripped of all attributes associated with the previous phase, but they do not yet receive the attributes of the target stage. In this moment, the person in transition is perceived as dangerous by the community, since they defy any traditional classification, having no attributes of any of the socially acceptable stages. For this reason, the initiates are often physically separated from the rest of the community (becoming virtually untouchable) for representing chaos. Liminality, for similar reasons, is often associated with invisibility (Turner 95).

Provided one accepts (for the sake of the argument) that the target stage will generally be perceived as hierarchically higher than the previous one, Victor Turner proposes that the liminal stage also serves the purpose of humbling an individual before making them more privileged. A liminal person is not only stripped of all previous attributes, but they are also separated from their worldly possessions. All initiates within the liminal stage (provided there are more) are equals in being degraded to the lowest level of the respective social hierarchy and in being absolutely subordinate to the authority of those supervising their transition. Turner specifies that the initiates

are obliged to passively and humbly accept every punishment and carry out every instruction coming from their superiors. The position of a liminal person is an inferior one. For its socially destructive potential, it has to be controlled, and the initiates are obliged to obediently cooperate in meek silence (Turner 96 - 97).

What is also relevant with regards to the arguments presented in the practical part of this thesis is the relationship between the individual initiates, or inhabitants of the threshold stage, which Turner termed *communitas*. While the outside reality has a clear hierarchical structure with each individual knowing their respective position within it, what is symptomatic for the state of *communitas* is equality, non-structural and undifferentiated net of relationships between the initiates. Solidarity and camaraderie are meant to be emphasized within this stage of transition, all members being subordinated to the guiding authority (Turner 96).

An interesting point made by Victor Turner is the visual side of the liminal stage. Having examined many traditional, pre-industrial cultures, Turner noticed that the liminal part of the rites of passage often resembles the environment of a womb or a grave. This corresponds with the two main rites of passage in the life of every individual, namely birth and death, both of which are symbolically reconstructed in the course of every ritual which includes a threshold stage. The identity associated with the position from which an individual is being separated “dies”, and a new individuality is “born” along with the stage of reincorporation (Turner 95 - 96).

### **2.3.2 On the phenomenon of rites of status reversal with a practical exemplification on the Greek ritual of Thesmophoria**

The second phenomenon that shall be focused on will be the rituals of *status reversal* as explored by Victor Turner, appending a practical demonstration of this concept using the ritual of *Thesmophoria* which directly relates to the position of women within a patriarchal society. The section dealing with this ritual of the Ancient Greece will largely draw on Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel’s *Religion in the Ancient Greek City* (2008) and Başak Emir’s academic article on *Thesmophoria* (2015). The subject matter included in this subchapter will prove useful when interpreting the position of Aunts and when exploring the frustrations stemming from the social status of the Handmaids within the Republic of Gilead.

In the previous subchapter dedicated to liminality, what has been focused on was the threshold stage within the so-called rituals of *status elevation*, meaning that the target stage achieved after the moment of reincorporation is hierarchically higher vis-à-vis the former one. The rituals of status reversal, on the other hand, do not alter the social position of the participants. Their



essence resides in the temporal disruption of the rigid social structure and hierarchy. These rites are often related to the socially received cyclicity of time (the instances of which may be the celebrations of the New Year or the festivals connected with harvest). In the course of these festivities, traditional authorities voluntarily suspend their universally recognized power over the lower levels of social stratification.

This sacral moment of liminality is marked by stripping away secular distinctions, creating a sort of global *communitas* where individuals of higher and lower statuses are, respectively, demeaned or elevated to the same level. Among others, the purpose is to remind the authorities of the arbitrariness and evanescence of their status, making them humbler, while those of lower status are given an opportunity to ease the accumulated frustration with their less privileged position. This marks the rites of status reversal as excellent mechanisms of social depressurization. However, one must realize that the other crucial purpose of the rituals of status reversal is the acknowledgment and confirmation of the social hierarchy and stratification existing outside of this liminal stage. The rites often re-enact the creation of the contemporary social situation, taking the shape of a movement from chaos to cosmos (order). The reversal rituals, therefore, serve as a tool of reproduction of the stratified social reality (Turner 166 - 178).

Taking traditionally patriarchal communities into consideration, some of the rituals of status reversal concern women assuming temporarily the position otherwise attributed to men, or women experiencing status elevation in a similar manner. This may encompass gaining political rights or autonomy of other kind, becoming violent or aggressive (those being traits traditionally associated with men), being given authority to organize, lead or/and make decisions in crucial matters or, quite literally, putting on male clothes. According to Turner and other authors referenced by him, such rituals are often associated with harvest, natural calamities or moments when traditional patriarchal authorities happen to enrage the deities, rendering themselves in need of advocacy obtained from those of lower social standing. In the case of Zulu communities in South Africa, when the structurally superior patriarchs, who represent traditional hierarchy outside the liminal stage, cause disbalance, the Zulu women, who represent *communitas* (fellowship without hierarchy), put on the costumes of men to lull the gods and spirits (Turner 166 - 178).

To exemplify the above explored phenomenon, the reversal ritual of *Thesmophoria* shall be examined. To elaborate on this ritual seems relevant with respect to the interpretation of the position of the Aunts within the Gileadean society. The Ancient Greek *poleis* being patriarchal, an officially recognized and space bound, temporal establishment of a ritual institution administrated solely by women was a clear instance of a ritual of status reversal. Similarly, in Gilead, Aunts were (on Lydia's request) given a place and tasks to preside over, without any intervention of men.

However, both in the case of Thesmophoria and Ardua Hall, the purpose of these institutions was to strengthen the traditional order of the respective societies (by pointing out the contrast) and to enforce the doctrines desired by the patriarchy (through religious education).

Thesmophoria, a female ritual celebrated in the name of the goddess Demeter, was celebrated in most poleis of the Ancient Greek world, the preserved testimonies relating mostly to Athens. The time of celebration (as the rite being dedicated to Demeter, goddess of agriculture, suggests) corresponded directly with the period of autumnal harvest and the beginning of yet another annual harvest cycle, making Thesmophoria a ritual of showing gratitude for the reaped crops, as well as a rite of pleading for another fruitful year. From the perspective of Ancient Greek mythology, this period marks the moment of the beginning of Persephone's - Demeter's daughter - periodical descent to the Underworld to join her husband Hades, with whom she will reside until the return of spring. Therefore, Thesmophoria (besides relating to harvest) is a ritual celebrating fertility in general and the institution of marriage as well (Zaidman & Pantel 188; Emir).

Nevertheless, despite emphasizing fertility and the union of women and men, Thesmophoria is strictly and exclusively a female ritual. This fact has to be highlighted, as this specification had practical implications. Men were forbidden to participate, as well as to interfere with the ritual in any way with their presence under the threat of castration or other severe legal persecution. This was only one of the features due to which Thesmophoria could be identified as a ritual of status reversal. The most striking one was the formation of a pseudo, female-only society with its own social stratification and government, a sort of a polis within polis. This was done either at the respective temple or at a campsite chosen specifically for the purposes of this ritual. The duration of the festivity for the period of which this self-governing body existed was 10 days on average (the number of days varying from polis to polis) (Emir 4).

Led by two "matriarchs" (traditionally the most respected married women in the corresponding polis) women of all ages left their households carrying sustenance for the group and offerings for the sacrifices. The time spent in this liminal stage of Thesmophoria was a time of abstinence, fasting and various sacrificial rites. On the last day of Thesmophoria, Kalligenea (meaning "beautiful birth"), the participants would perform rituals to celebrate and plead for healthy and plentiful childbirths and harvest (Emir 4). What can be concluded from this is that the religious responsibility for fertility and procreation of the community was to a great extent attributed to women. This is also a feature mirrored in Gilead, the ideology of which demanded that women do everything in their power to fulfill their duty to the state and have children. Praying for the opportunity to procreate was a part of the indoctrination process.

As has been already asserted, Thesmophoria, and rituals of status reversal in general, did by no means bring about any subversion of the established system. The reality was the exact opposite of such claim. Theoretically, Thesmophoria was a ritual, within the bounds of which women were tasked to do what was expected of them; ensure support of the deities with regards to fertility of the community. The matriarchate formed as a part of the ritual may have been a reversal of the patriarchate outside of it, but, in reality, it served both the pragmatic reason of organization and to acknowledge the traditional patriarchate as the legitimate rule. Analogously, the institution of Aunts was not constructed to subvert the patriarchal, totalitarian rule, but to indoctrinate women who were not yet incorporated into the system with its ideology and, consequently, to subjugate them to it (*THT* 320 - 321).

Furthermore, it may have helped, as rituals of status reversal usually do, depressurize the frustration of the otherwise legally constrained women. Analogously, the ritual of Patricution served the purpose of providing the system with a valve for the frustration of the oppressed and abused Handmaids. Letting them employ unrestrained violence against a random male criminal (often an enemy of the regime), the Handmaids linked the victim with the system that was usurping them. Their conformity to the system was restored as they had their substitute revenge.

Impending is the practical part, which utilizes the information presented in the theoretical section, some of these information being ones concerning the above explored ritual of Thesmophoria. This ritual, despite being a status reversing one, served the purpose of strengthening the system and promoting the received ideology. However, as will be addressed, the analogous Ardua Hall was also a place of dissent.

### 3. PRACTICAL PART

The primary objective of this section is to interpret the selected features of Atwood's narrative, which consist of the summary of *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel *The Testaments*. The points of view from which the storylines are presented shift from the one of a Handmaid to those of an Aunt, a Wife-to-be and an outsider (the last, not being particularly relevant to the subject matter and aims of this thesis, will not be included in the analysis). Therefore, what can one see here is not only a shift of points of view but also the multiplication of narrators in *The Testaments* as opposed to *The Handmaid's Tale* being narrated solely by Offred. This greatly expands the narrow view of the Gileadean society the readers were forced to adopt in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Characters and their motives, social positions and various features of the dystopian theocracy which were obscured in the first book were made more transparent in the second. Yet another difference between the two works is the nature of the respective endings. While *The Handmaid's Tale* ends, though hopefully, in a frustratingly ambiguous way (the ending being open), *The Testaments* have an explicitly happy ending with all the traditional features, such as family reunification and commemoration of fallen heroes. Both of the endings, however, mark some (or final) victory over the oppressive system. One might notice, when reading the practical part, that I include more information from *The Testaments* than the original book. This is due to the fact that, having more narrators of diverse origin, the second book is richer information-wise. Furthermore, *Testaments* uncover many things that were obscure in the first book.

Metaphorically speaking, the impending practical part has a shape of a pyramid (which, ironically, corresponds to the Gileadean hierarchy). Initially, the ascension of the Republic of Gilead and the contemporary situation exploited by the Christian fundamentalist group of Sons of Jacob which allowed its birth will be explored. The purpose of the opening chapter is to provide an opportunity to analyze the motives and justifications employed by the theocratic Puritan cult, and its innately sexist doctrine. Furthermore, the chapter explains the ideological legitimization of the subjugation of women. Last but not least, this chapter also deals with the position of Gilead in the global context.

Subsequently, highlighting the discrepancy between theoretical definitions and practical application, individual levels of female social stratification – the Aunts, the Handmaids and the Wives – will be scrutinized with regards to the abstract delimitation and the original intentions concerning their position as proposed by the Sons of Jacob in the onset of the Republic of Gilead, while contrasting it with the actual interpretation and implementation carried out by the selected characters. This process will expose how (un)successful the intended social order was vis-à-vis the

particularization executed by the selected characters as they struggle for the right to self-definition, freedom, individuality, equality and humanity and for the chance to realize their respective agendas in the face of the system attempting to destroy basic human rights.

### **3.1. Origin of Gilead: the ascension, solidification of power, ideological justifications of female subjugation and international relationships**

Why did I think it would be nonetheless business as usual? Because we'd been hearing these things for so long, I suppose. You don't believe the sky is falling until a chunk of it falls on you. (*TT* 66)

Stupid, stupid, stupid: I'd believed all that claptrap about life, liberty, democracy, and the rights of an individual I'd soaked up at law school. These were eternal verities and we would always defend them. I'd depend on that, as if on a magic charm. (*TT* 116)

That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on. (*THT* 183)

As advertised in the introduction to the practical part above, this subchapter will concentrate on the particularities surrounding the moment of the Sons' of Jacob and their totalitarian-theocratic project's gaining support, while also exploring the various techniques of justification and legitimization of the distinctly sexist order designed and established by the said fundamentalists. Moreover, as no such occurrence could come to be without provoking diverse reactions within the global context, the international attitude towards the Republic of Gilead shall be scrutinized. However, one may only take into consideration the data provided in the two books, all of it being rather skewed due to the fact that it is processed through the respective characters' reflecting on the past. There is also a substantial time lag between the Tale and the Testaments. Offred reflects on the circumstances of the coup quite shortly after the establishment of the republic. Lydian, in *The Testaments*, gives us another account of what happened quite a few years later. Each of them has experienced the overthrow from different perspective and it is the goal of this chapter to make the necessary fusion.

The situation preceding the formation of the Republic of Gilead was ideal for the coup intended by the Sons of Jacob, a group of Christian patriarchal fundamentalists, the success of

which was all but inevitable. What the fundamentalists exploited were not merely the obvious opportunities for usurping the public's support, but also the much more subtle sentiments present within the contemporary American society.

At the onset of the takeover there was a plethora of natural disasters and calamities coupled with man-induced catastrophes such as radiation leaks (*TT* 66). Whether or not these occurrences were actually responsible, the birthrate in the United States was at an all time low. While in the early colonial Puritan America women were scarce and the child mortality was high, in the States there was a sufficient amount of women but only a certain percentage was fertile and willing to procreate. What can be argued is that the natural conditions in combination with the lifestyle stemming from the process of female emancipation, coupled with normalization of abortion and wide use of contraceptive methods, with addition of what could be termed as a global process of individual isolation and physical alienation led to a drop of enthusiasm with regards to childbearing (*THT* 316).

This myriad of converging phenomena served as a principal fuel for the spread of the Sons' of Jacob ideology which (being already deducible from their name) made reproduction the central point of their doctrine, Romania under Ceausescu being a similar case of this. According to their belief, women (in the process of emancipation) have forgotten about their biological destinies preset for them by the divine authority – being mothers – (a feature common with Greek beliefs materialized in the form of Thesmophoria) and, having trespassed on God's law, they must be disciplined in order to secure the reproduction of the chosen people of faith (*THT* 231). In accordance with the tradition of the colonial American Puritans, those people, the Sons of Jacob, are destined to build a “city upon a hill”, a sovereign state led by the Divine law.

To help women return to the right path, the Sons of Jacob, after having successfully executed the coup by disposing of the president and the Congress under the pretense of the real offenders being an Islamic terrorist organization (playing on the society-wide racist and terrorist-fearing sentiments), have suspended women's freedoms such as the right to have a job or hold any property (including money) (*TT* 66 - 67). The argument is that the gradual process (so gradual, in fact, that for some it was almost imperceptible until it was too late) of suspension of human rights and civic freedoms had such a smooth course due to the fact that people were simply overwhelmed by fear. The above mentioned natural calamities and pollution, the threat of terrorist attacks and other undefinable, invisible enemies paralyzed the citizens of the United states, making them susceptible to believing that democratic freedoms and constitutionally guaranteed rights should be exchanged for simplicity of command and security. These sentiments are illustrated by the following quote, as well as those at the onset of this chapter.

*Reign of terror*; they used to say, but terror does not exactly reign. Instead it paralyzes. Hence the unnatural quiet. (*TT* 277)

Globally, the Sons of Jacob would attack the postmodern society (as it was presented in the introduction of this thesis) and capitalism, sensibly noting that people need structures (as opposed to the postmodern feature of deconstruction and decentralization) and purpose to feel secure, and populistically vowing to tackle poverty as a symptom of American capitalist society (*TT* 174, 314). To justify their treatment of women, they would proclaim that their actions are in women's interest. They would attempt to impose their interpretations of the female condition (such as finding a suitable partner, reconciling work with motherhood or being forced by the society to adhere to conventional images of beauty and success) on women to gain their support, claiming that they merely help them fulfill their biological destinies in peace (*THT* 231). The Sons of Jacob, therefore, victimized women, claiming that they are saving them.

Surprisingly, regarding men, the Sons of Jacob also employed rhetoric of victimization. Their understanding of male condition before the ascension of the Republic of Gilead was that it was a condition of a victim of female emancipation and (already mentioned) physical alienation. This justification gains the patriarchal-theocratic movement immense support from men, who see themselves as victims because their needs are not satisfied in a way they feel entitled to simply for their being men. The coup, therefore, serves as a convenient valve for their accumulated frustration. The Sons of Jacob promise availability and allotment of women to all men (not necessarily in a monogamous fashion), which (for many of the male supporters) is a reversion to the "natural" state. This provides the feeling of legitimization and justification, especially in the combination with the imperative of reproduction, which (similarly to Ceausescu's doctrine) becomes a way of patriotically serving the country. The frustration of men is illustrated by the following quote;

The problem wasn't only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore.

(...)

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. (*THT* 221)

The Sons of Jacob, therefore, gained strong position within the country by lulling its people to obedience with talks of restoring order and converting large part of the male population to their way of thinking by providing them with an opportunity to vent their frustration with lack of power. Nevertheless, what is truly disconcerting is the fact that without international compliance and conformity, the regime would not hold its position for so long. With most of other states being fearful of Gilead's retribution (not even receiving any refugees) and many of them explicitly cooperating with the theocracy (for example, by providing them with embassies and recognizing underground operations such as Mayday as terrorist ones as it was the case with Canada<sup>5</sup>), Gilead (besides some quarrels with California and Texas) faced no resistance with regards to its growth and stabilization. The overall numbness to catastrophes (illustrated by the quote at the onset of this chapter) and to the suffering of others and closing one's eyes to it, coupled with comfortableness (features symptomatic of the contemporary discourse) did not only make the citizens of the United States more susceptible to subjugation and brainwashing, but also left it without support from the outside world, however proud some of the states (especially those in central and western Europe) may be of their adherence to democratic values.

Once the Republic of Gilead was established, the next step was to categorize the citizens with regards to the ideology and the needs of the ruling party. This is a feature typical of the totalitarian form of government. Compartmentalization simplifies the chain of command and bureaucracy, Commander's being the heads of their respective institutions. Commander Judd, for example, presided over the female institution of Aunts and the all-male secret police – the Eyes (*THT* 63). As the theoretical part mentions, secret police is a traditional characteristic of totalitarian regimes. Its function is to monitor potential non-adherence to the doctrine and the law. Officially, though, the order on the streets was maintained by Angels, military group also employed as soldiers in Gilead's quarrels with neighboring countries. Body-guarding of the Commanders and their families, occasional works around the house and chauffeuring was done by male servants and guards, the Guardians (*THT* 30). Therefore, though this thesis focuses on the ranks occupied by women, the pyramid structure of Gilead segmented the male group as well, their rights diminishing with the lower prominence of the individual positions. The Guardians, for example, were not allowed to “touch women” (*THT* 32) and they could marry or apply for a Handmaid only after being promoted to the rank of Angels (*THT* 32 – 33).

The Sons of Jacob, therefore, carried out a military coup, solidified the rule of a single party and created a repressive apparatus to ensure compliance of the public. Those were some of the

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5 *TT* 193, 195 – 196, 199, 270



totalitarian features Gilead manifested. Furthermore, claiming to be the people chosen to realize the Divine plan and build a city upon a hill and basing the female roles within the society on biblical mythology marked Gilead as a theocracy.

### **3.2. Women of Gilead**

We colored the clothing of people too – blue for the Wives, stripes for the Econowives, red for the Handmaids. Becka once got in trouble with Aunt Vidala for coloring a Handmaid purple. (*TT* 107)

The Aunts, the Marthas, the Wives: despite the fact that they were frequently envious and resentful, and might even hate one another, news flowed among them as if along invisible spiderweb threads. (*TT* 232)

This opening chapter serves the purpose of generally, yet closely scrutinizing the female condition within the context of the Republic of Gilead as an already functioning and established sovereign state. What shall be elaborated on will be the rights given to Gileadean women by the male authorities, as well as the individual ranks assigned to them. Furthermore, the Gileadean doctrine and expectations regarding women, together with the designs and motives of the architects of Gilead, shall be pondered. The subject matter of this chapter serves as a contextual grid, into which the following part focusing on the individual characters is incorporated.

Despite being divided into numerous ranks separated by their “specializations”, part of the experience of being a woman in Gilead was shared by all of them. Upon the establishment of the republic, the rights of women to own possessions of any kind were suspended in favor of a male next of kin. This copies the conditions experienced by married women in Puritan America of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ceausescu’s Decree 770 inspired the prohibition of abortions and any contraceptive methods, with the innovative feature of having retroactive power. Such measures were in direct accordance with the perception of womanhood as adopted by the Sons of Jacob and the fertility cult (characteristic of both early colonial Puritan America and Ceausescu’s socialist Romania) dominating it. The subject of biological destinies has already been discussed above, the idea being that women should be grateful for the honor of being able to give birth to children (*TT* 147). Non-adherence to this religious and biological imperative did not only mark a woman as ungrateful and trespassing on God’s laws, but it also left her stripped of any value and usefulness in the eyes of the Sons of Jacob. In other words, women’s only value rested in the potential motherhood.

Every woman wanted a baby, said Aunt Estée. Every woman who wasn't an Aunt or a Martha. Because if you weren't an Aunt or a Martha, said Aunt Vidala, what earthly use were you if you didn't have a baby? (*TT* 81)

Wives are not included in this statement because (if infertile) the children born of the union of their husband and their respective Handmaid belong both legally and conventionally to the Wife, that is, the Wife was the official mother. This is legitimized in the eyes of the Sons of Jacob, and, therefore, should be legitimate in the eyes of the whole of the Republic of Gilead using the biblical story of Rachel, Jacob and Rachel's maid Bilhah. Rachel, Jacob's second wife, could not conceive a child and so she asked Jacob to lay with her maid Bilhah. The child born from this union would, nevertheless, be Rachel's (*THT* 99 - 101). Analogically, as both the Commanders and Jacob were automatically considered fertile, the infertile Wives corresponded to Rachel's character and the Handmaids had the maid Bilhah as their "patron saint". Basing the organization of society on mythology is a clear trait of theocratic regimes.

This story would be read by the faithful Commanders to their families to remind them of their duties (*THT* 99 - 101). As has been mentioned earlier, Commanders and the Aunts were the only positions within Gileadean hierarchy given the right to read and write (*TT* 156). Arguably, each Commander had the Bible at home. This was in congruence with the theocratic nature of the society. However, the fact that only the very top of Gilead's hierarchy could read and interpret it to the masses, a feature typical of the Catholic church until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was totalitarian. Becka reflects on the Bible being interpreted by the authorities to support their doctrines (*THT* 294 – 295).

Only Commanders and superior Aunts had access to all preserved books (*TT* 290). The Aunts were allowed to read and write for several reasons; they were believed to be loyal to the system (and so they would propagate only the approved teaching and gather intelligence for the benefit of the system), they were not married (and, therefore, they could not influence their husbands with regards to their actions in the public sphere) and they were mostly confined to Ardua Hall. Whether all male members of the society were allowed to read is unclear, but one could induce that they indeed were from the phrase "pen is envy" (*THT* 196)<sup>6</sup>.

The rank of Marthas also has a biblical background. Technically, they are mostly either infertile or post-menopausal women employed as servants in the houses of higher-class citizens. Though their position shall not be dealt with in this thesis, their communication network serves the purpose of spreading sensitive information among women, who would otherwise have no access to any knowledge outside their respective households. This corresponds with one of the aspects of the

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6 This would suggest that anyone with a penis was considered worthy of being given the right to read and write.

private sphere women of the 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial America were tasked to deal with – socializing. The Aunts, however, represent the most controversial and potentially system-threatening position held by unmarried women. This rank shall be examined in detail later in the practical part.

Taking this division into consideration, the interpretation of the motives of the system's designers would be that they chose the traditional strategy of the “divide and conquer” type. Considering that women were subjugated as a whole, the logical way of avoiding organized defiance was to stratify the oppressed group and provoke antagonistic feelings among them. Wives are pitted against the Handmaids on the ground of fertility, Marthas are desperately clinging to their territories within which they exercise some degree of power, and Aunts are envied for their extended rights and freedoms (such as the freedom and right to read and write, otherwise forbidden for women). Furthermore, the process of classification and compartmentalization, coupled with renaming and the withholding of personal information and records, serve the purpose of elimination of individuality. This technique helps suffocate any personal resistance (as opposed to organized defiance). The importance of a name with regards to a person's individuality is addressed by Offred and illustrated by the quote below. Her name was changed so that it would reflect how she is viewed by the establishment; as a property “of Fred”<sup>7</sup>.

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. (*THT* 94)

Now that the “possibilities” (the word being used ironically, as women were being categorized independently of their personal preferences or choices) given to women with regards to their integration into the social strata of Gilead have been demarkated, and since the religious, ideological and legal aspects of the system have been examined, we are prepared to make a thorough probe into the three selected ranks – the Aunts, the Handmaids and the Wives – and ponder the theoretical intentions connected with the positions vis-à-vis the actual application interpreted through the selected characters. The position of the Aunts will be presented from the

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<sup>7</sup> In the Czech translation by Veronika Lásková, this is skillfully and astutely reflected in the use of the traditional Czech suffix *-ova* in „Fredova“.

perspective of Aunt Lydia's character, the Handmaids shall be examined from Offred's point of view, and the rank of Wives will be analyzed using the characters of Agnes, Becka and Serena.

### 3.2.1. The Aunts

This was what the Aunts did, I was learning. They recorded. They waited. They used information to achieve goals known only to themselves. Their weapons were powerful but contaminating secrets, as the Marthas had always said. Secrets, lies, cunning, deceit – but secrets, the lies, the cunning, and the deceit of others as well as their own. (*TT* 309)

In the course of the unfolding subchapter, what shall be focused on is the interpretation of the position of Aunts within Gilead's system as it was intended by its designers from the ranks of the Sons of Jacob (specifically, Commander Judd) and as it was executed by Aunt Lydia, the character responsible for Gilead's eventual demise. This section, with regards to the proposed interpretations, will draw on the anthropological phenomena defined in the theoretical part.

One may argue that the rationale behind the creation of the rank of Aunts, which already posed a threat to the patriarchal stability of the Republic of Gilead, was the need of the Sons of Jacob to dispose of female intellectual elite (*TT* 116) in a fashion that would potentially gain them some allies from within the female part of the population of the United States. Intelligent women, conforming to the system, would have the greatest possible influence on other, ideologically lukewarm or dissenting women. Historically, this has been a common practice at the onset of various coups and takeovers and totalitarian regimes in general. In Stalinist Russia, it was common for uncooperative intellectuals to be sent to gulags ("Great Purge").

The potential Aunts had a lot in common with both unmarried women and women traditionally suspected of witchcraft in the early colonial Puritan American society. Similarly to the 17<sup>th</sup> century American women without a husband, the Aunts would exercise a greater amount of power over their lives and also over information of various kinds (as one can see in the quote at the onset of this subchapter). They were allowed to read and write and gather intelligence. They were to oversee the incorporation of new Handmaids, Wives and Aunts into the system through education. Practically, they were given power over the process of shaping Gilead's women in general. That being said, their position of intellectually competent, unmarried, and mostly post-menopausal, childless women resembles the one of women associated with potential witchcraft practices in the Puritan American society. This marked them as dangerous. Naturally, their unique qualities and

extended rights had to be confined to specified areas (similarly to the ritual of Thesmophoria), so that they would not contaminate those still capable of “fulfilling their biological destinies”.

Commander Judd’s intention, when allowing this independent organization within the system, was obviously to create a pool of women loyal to the system (not to some particular male authority as in the case of the Wives) that would make other women compliant with the doctrine of Gilead (*THT* 320), nipping any resistance in the bud. Similarly to the case of Greek Thesmophoria, the Aunts were to create a permanent state of this ritual of status reversal to ease the frustration of the women in the process of incorporation, with no men interfering. This marked the place assigned to the Aunts as a place of perpetual liminality within the patriarchally stratified society. Labeling Ardua Hall as a place of status reversal, however, only makes sense with regards to the institution being administrated solely by women, as opposed to the rest of the society ruled by the patriarchs. Otherwise, Ardua Hall had its hierarchy and its purpose was to ensure conformity with the established, patriarchal system among other women through education. This education was ideological and followed the doctrine of Gilead. Therefore, though being a sovereign matriarchal institution, the Aunts were to strengthen the patriarchal rule. That being said, when Lydia asked Judd to allow her to construct Ardua Hall as a female-only independent institution, she was already preparing the fall of Gilead. This is obviously not apparent from *The Handmaid’s tale*, where the Aunts are predominantly portrayed as collaborators, who misuse their privileges to bully structurally impotent Handmaids. However, even in the first book, Lydia’s character stands out as different, which will be addressed later in the thesis.

However, to ensure the loyalty of these selected women, various techniques had to be employed. Before entering the stage of liminality controlled and accepted by the patriarchal chain of command, the potential Aunts had to go through a series of temporary liminal stages, in which they were nivellated with their co-initiates and reduced to animal stage (*TT* 143), only their most basic needs being tended to. As we have explored in the part dealing with the rituals of status elevation, one must be humbled to be allowed to ascend. After being thoroughly physically and mentally tortured over a long period of time, they were given a choice of either cooperating with the system (and surviving) or being eliminated. The cooperation with the system, however, included the imperative of participating actively on a public execution of those who chose death over collaboration (*TT* 172 - 173). This is an ingenious means of gaining loyalty; turning a victim into an accomplice. However, for some people, like the prototypical and ideal Aunt, Vidala, the promise of power over other was enough to ensure loyalty.

Now that the theoretical introduction to the position of the Aunts has been explored, I shall employ Aunt Lydia’s character to provide the reader with the particularized probe into the

actual practice of being one. Through the lens of her character, the power of an individual to dissolve, with cunning and patience, a system from within will be witnessed.

“If it is to be a separate female sphere,” I said, “it must be truly separate. Within it, women must command. Except in extreme need, men must not pass the threshold of our allotted premises, nor shall our methods be questioned. We shall be judged solely by our results. Though we will of course report to the authorities if and when it’s necessary.” (*TT* 176)

Lydia is arguably the most controversial of all characters in Atwood’s Gileadean dystopia. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, she is mostly indirectly alluded to by Offred, yet she is omnipresent. She plays the role of Offred’s inner voice of self-regulation and oftentimes she helps her to compose herself and carry on with her struggle. However, the reader does not know what to make of her character and motives until *The Testaments*. This is an explicit prove of Lydia’s ingenuity, which allowed her to patiently dismantle the pillars of Gilead’s stability. That being said, cunning characters like Lydia and their actions are seldom unambiguous morality-wise.

One might consider Lydia to be an unreliable narrator. She makes a habit of addressing her reader, justifying her choices and motives.

Keep your nose out of my digestion, I want to snap at them; but they mean well, I remind myself. Is that ever a convincing excuse when there’s blood on the carpet? I mean well too, I sometimes mumble silently. I meant it for the best, or for the best available, which is not the same thing. Still, think how much worse it could have been if not for me. (*TT* 111)

Having said that, she explicitly reflects on this tendency of hers, being quite honest about herself identifying her own actions as somewhat Machiavellian. While being tortured during her initiation to the rank of Aunts, she vows to keep her life and get her hands dirty in order to dissolve Gilead from within (*TT* 149). What is quite evident is that she is aware of the fact that she will eventually be forced to pay the ultimate price for her decision. Despite that, however, she promises to dedicate the rest of her life to keeping as many women within Gilead alive and sane as she can, while gathering useful and lethal intelligence about her superiors. It is arguable whether or not she succeeds in this. The quote above illustrates how Lydia defends herself by saying that it would have been worse if not for her. However, as Agnes concedes, “it’s difficult to be grateful for the absence

of an unknown quantity.” (TT 288). Many Handmaids and Wives would choose suicide over the notion of trying to endure and wait for better future. As Becka says, “no one wants to die, but some people don’t want to live in any of the ways that are allowed.” (TT 294). Lydia was one of the most privileged citizens of Gilead, so one might argue that endurance for her was not much of a sacrifice.

Regardless of what has been said, the importance of Lydia and other Aunts having the right to read and write has to be accounted for not only for its practical implications of being allowed to do so, but for the psychological effect these activities have. Unlike Wives and Handmaids, Aunts could exercise their critical thinking, seeing (for example) the discrepancies between the interpretation of the Bible as opposed to the actual text. Moreover, they could engage in writing, one of the most crucial means of expressing oneself. This shielded the Aunts from losing their identities to the system.

Lydia, however, went even further to gain independence for the Aunts. Attached above is a quote that marks the moment when Lydia placed all her faith on a single card. Asking Commander Judd to let women create a sovereign institution led and administrated exclusively by women within his patriarchal theocratic totalitarian state was a high risk, and Judd’s allowing it in fact marked Gilead’s fall. Furthermore, Lydia managed to establish her own rank of (mostly unwitting) agents (somewhat comparable to Judd’s Eyes), the Pearls, who mediated the contact with the outside world. Lydia, therefore, took an immediate advantage of being considered a loyal ally due to her becoming Judd’s accomplice. Knowing she would not survive Gilead’s end, she had nothing to lose.

Lydia’s greatest power lied in her meticulous accumulation of incriminating intelligence. As we have already asserted, only Aunts and Commanders (and, arguably, other men) were allowed to read and write. Arguably, the Aunts were given this exclusive right to collect this information for the benefit of their male superiors (mostly, Commander Judd). Conceivably, since Ardua Hall was not to be visited by men, the Aunts might have been the only ones with unrestricted access to these information. Having access to all those more or less sensitive documents, the Aunts gathered an immense amount of records of other people’s sins, and as Lydia herself asserts, “knowledge is power” (TT 35). She knew that if the ship starts sinking, she will go with it, but she will take everybody with her.

While slowly and patiently concocting Gilead’s destruction, Lydia (as she is presented in *The Handmaid’s Tale*) was striving to strengthen the minds of her wards. Analyzing various advise she was giving the Handmaids-to-be, one could abstract a common underlying message; as long as you live, you must persist. These subtle quotes include comparing the life of Handmaids to being in the army (THT 17), which requires endurance and discipline, telling them that, though they may feel

like prisoners, they must value the fact that they are still alive (*THT* 18), or trying to strengthen feelings of camaraderie among them (*THT* 234).

Taking everything into consideration, Lydia exploited the whole of the intended concept of the position of an Aunt to deliver righteous retribution, however morally ambiguous her methods may have been. She subverted the intention of women ruling over women in the name of the Gileadean doctrine by creating a state within a state, untouchable for men, and by preparing her wards for battle and solidifying them against the attempts to destroy their individuality. She subverted the intention of the Aunts loyal to the system gathering knowledge to strengthen it by accumulating incriminating evidence against the patriarchs of Gilead. And last but not least, she subverted the intention of the system to destroy her spirit and meekly succumb to the doctrine to save her life by selling it for a chance to free the people of Gilead of its existence. However, having discussed this above, Lydia is an unreliable narrator, and her motives are still disputable.

### 3.2.2. The Handmaids

Give me children, or I'll die. (*New International Version*, Gen. 30.1)

Another rank allotted to women that shall be considered in the course of the following chapter is contestably the most oppressed and exploited one; the Handmaids. The establishment of this position was mandatory due to the cult of fertility that dominated the doctrine of the Sons of Jacob. Influencing the decisions of the architects of Gilead on almost every level, this cult (coupled with the religious implications) marks the system as necessarily sexist. Firstly, this thesis shall examine and interpret the position of Handmaids through the eyes of Gilead's designers. Secondly, the rank shall be interpreted employing the perspective of an actual Handmaid and the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, seeing whether or not the theory met with practical success.

At the onset of Gilead's existence, the Sons of Jacob had to ensure (considering their objective to tackle infertility and low birth rates) that they had enough fertile women at their disposal. Such a task was not difficult as soon as they introduced the retroactive legal codification which outlawed abortion, use of contraceptive methods, cohabitation and divorce. This act provided them with a legal tool to apprehend and confine all fertile female offenders for future distribution (*THT* 316). The fertile prisoners were reeducated by the Aunts and then allocated to those who needed them (their wives being infertile)<sup>8</sup> and could afford them (which was mostly the case of Commanders). In other words, the distribution was done in a very Marxist fashion; "to each

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<sup>8</sup> Once again, it is important to remind the reader that men were deemed fertile by default (*THT* 215).



according to his needs” (“Critique of the Gotha Programme.”) (*THT* 127). The Sons of Jacob, therefore, created a system of state-controlled prostitution or quasi-polygamy. Within the households, Handmaids were (just as Marthas) under the jurisdiction of the Wives, the rightful rulers of the private sphere (as opposed to the public sphere dominated by the Commanders).

What can be abstracted even from what little has been said so far, Handmaids were considered valuable and useful only as far as their fertility was concerned. Their bodies were defining them, while also being deemed mere “vessels” or “ambulatory chalices” (*THT* 146). Like Marthas (who would likewise become “useless”), they needed to be concerned with their health, lest they could lose the attribute which kept them alive (*THT* 162). In Gilead, being “useless” was a terminal transgression, which reminds us of the sentiments symptomatic of socialist regimes. This is illustrated by the quote at the beginning of this chapter, which (though attributed to Rachel, whose character corresponds to the rank of Wives) describes the cause of the existential dread of Handmaids. However, sometimes giving birth did not suffice. Similarly to the treatment of malnourished and underweight children in Romania under Ceausescu’s rule, Gileadean families would dispose of newborn children affected by the pollution and radiation, so called “unbabies”, without mercy. Even if they could discern the baby’s condition sooner, all pregnancies had to be “carried to term” (*THT* 122), analogically to the requirements of the Decree 770.

As in Ceausescu’s socialist Romania, the Handmaids were obliged to visit a gynecologist monthly to monitor their bodily functions and detect potential pregnancies. Upon either failing to deliver a baby or, conversely, giving birth to one, the Handmaids would (after an appropriate period of time) be redeployed, arguably for a similar reason Afro-American children were often separated from their mothers during America’s slave era („The Slave Experience”); to prevent them from forming any potentially disruptive ties. The Handmaids could become too attached to their children, which, officially and in accordance with the Gileadean religious doctrine, were not theirs. This would create a tension between the Handmaid and the Wife of the household and it could potentially lead to an escape attempt.

Once again, the beliefs regarding the children of Handmaids not being theirs had their grounding in the allusion to the already explained biblical story of Jacob, Rachel and Bilhah. However, besides being vessels to be filled, Handmaids were also sinners, and their redemption was only possible through childbirth (*TT* 33). Handmaids were expected to be grateful for being fertile, as it was their only means to salvation. As in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan American colonies, women of Gilead were believed to be tainted by Eve’s actions and they were expected to be repentant. The ultimate sacrifice of a Handmaid for the Republic of Gilead and the Divine plan was an honorable death at childbirth (*TT* 104). Furthermore (again, in accordance with the Puritan view of women),

Handmaids (more than other women) were considered to be driven by their lasciviousness, dangerous enough to turn a righteous man mad (a phenomenon that has been explored when dealing with the Puritan perception of women in the theoretical part), which made it necessary to both keep a close eye on them as well as to keep one's distance.

Meticulous surveillance and methods of repeated forcing into subjugation (as the architects of Gilead surely realized) would make the Handmaids the most frustrated and abused of all female ranks. To avoid any possibility of retribution, the Sons of Jacob had to implement various precautionary techniques. Besides being reeducated by the Aunts, Handmaids were discouraged from engaging in any kind of contact (besides the necessary interactions) with other ranks (*THT* 21) to avoid the possibility of them getting any aid out of sympathy. Other ranks were similarly taught to keep respectful distance from the Handmaids. Furthermore, the real names of Handmaids were replaced by labels which marked them as possessions of their respective Commanders – an attempt to destroy their identity and to nivellate them with others of their kind.

However, it was imperative to find a way to ease their frustration. This was achieved (most evidently) through two rituals; the Birth and the Patricicution. The ritual of birth (again, just like Thesmophoria, exclusively female) was employed to create a strong, temporary liminary moment of *communitas*, within which all women were feeling as one and contaminated each other with joy at the moment of birth. The violent component of the process coupled with collective (almost tribal) chanting served the purpose of easing some of the accumulated frustration with the impotence of the Handmaids' position. The ritual of Patricicution, nevertheless, provided a much more effective means of depressurizing the Handmaids. Being a ritual of status reversal, within which Handmaids were given power over a man's life (while their own lives, within the structure of Gilead, belonged to their patriarchal authorities), the liminal stage of this rite was represented by the Handmaids' taking a collective revenge on a male scapegoat. For the Handmaids, this man stood for all male usurpers and abusers they wished to get their own backs on.<sup>9</sup>

This comprehensive interpretation of the position of Handmaids should serve as a blueprint of what it was intended to be. The following paragraphs will provide a concrete prism through which we will be given tools to decide, whether the theory was translated into practice to the full.

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<sup>9</sup> A parallel with George Orwell's concept of „Two Minutes Hate“ presented in his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a form of social depressurization was suggested to me by Bernadette Higgins, M.A.

The Handmaid's all went for a walk every day two by two; you could see them on the side-walks. Nobody bothered them or spoke to them or touched them, because they were – in a sense – untouchable. (TT 91)

Before delving into Offred's mind, what should be addressed is the liminality of Handmaids as a whole. Presumably, it is this liminality that granted them the opportunity to fight against the system. While the liminality of Aunts is based on them being (technically) women with male rights, the liminality of Handmaids lies in their being both revered for their fertility and condemned for their sinfulness<sup>10</sup>. They were saints or saviors of the country, yet, at the same time, they were dangerous, lustful criminals. Any person in a liminal stage is potentially dangerous for the community, as they represent chaos and toxicity. Therefore, what can be argued is that the liminality of Handmaids made them (as one can see explicitly asserted in the quote above) untouchable. Coupled with the other ranks being pitted against them by the system, Handmaids (though isolated) had, at least among each other, some space to design such projects as Mayday or the Underground Femaleroad, without having to concern themselves with outside interference. What also granted them safety from intrusions was the authorities' presumption that the process of nivellation and identity destruction left the Handmaids unable to form any kind of resistance. This supposition was erroneous, as Offred's character shows.

Offred is the sole narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, as opposed to the multiple narration in *The Testaments*. While Lydia is considered an unreliable narrator because of her tendency to justify her morally ambiguous actions and decisions to the reader, Offred might be classified as such because of her unreliable memory. She apologizes to the reader for the fragmentariness and painfulness of her story and for her being often hesitant and distracted (THT 279). Maybe due to some form of PTSD or maybe because of the horrors of the system weighing on her, she is often unsure of what used to be. Like Lydia, Offred communicates with the reader, and the faith in the existence of the reader also gives her reassurance of her own being. This communication is mediated through writing, the right to write and, therefore, the right to self-expression being taken away from her in Gilead. When Offred found the quote scratched by her predecessor in her room (THT 62), she discovered that writing can be used as a form of dissent precisely for its power of

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10 This quality resembles the phenomenon of the „Madonna-whore complex“ coined by Sigmund Freud as a form of male sexual disorder; “Where such men love, they have no desire and where they desire, they cannot love.” - “What Is the Madonna-Whore complex?” *The Latch*, 13 Mar. 2020, <https://thelatch.com.au/what-is-the-madonna-whore-complex/>. Accessed 17 July 2020.

self-expression. By scratching the quote down, the previous Handmaid left a mark of her individual existence and, quite literally, proved that the bastards would not grind her down.

Offred, despite being hesitant and outwardly inactive, manages to maintain her identity, while the system struggles to destroy it. Her name is taken away to be replaced by a label of possession, yet, in her reflections, she realizes the value of one's name in the context of one's identity<sup>11</sup>. This is also exemplified by the importance of her telling her name to Nick (*THT* 282), strengthening her perception of her own existence. Stripped of everything and any right to have personal possessions (possessing something being, though superficial, an outward manifestation of one's singular identity), she finds things (such as her room or the night) she can appropriate to maintain a sense of individuality (*THT* 47, 59). Offred even ponders stealing something from the household, to prove her existence (*THT* 108 - 109). Furthermore, her body being objectified and separated from her psyche by the system and its humiliating and degrading practices, she ultimately manages to appropriate her body when risking her life with Nick.

Offred struggles to keep her identity by reflecting on the past. However, she also manages to exploit her position of a Handmaid. As an invisible character (this invisibility being granted to Handmaids by their liminality) she tempts other characters to unveil their secrets to her. This is probably due to the fact that these other characters (mostly Commander Waterford) are well aware that words of Handmaids have no value within the Gileadean society. The "affair" Offred has with Commander Waterford and, more strikingly, the visiting of Jezebel's (or its very existence) is a clear evidence of the historically proven impossibility to fully transform theory to practice. Offred's identity and individuality being suffocated is an unpleasant sight even for the Commander. The comfortableness he adopts with Offred makes him careless, and upon giving away the story of the Handmaid preceding Offred and upon asking her for various favors (such as a kiss or an extra-Ceremonial sexual intercourse) Offred gains an upper hand (similarly to Lydia with respect to the majority of the patriarchal command). These acts of collaboration, however, seem to be rooting her deeper into the system, succumbing to its way of thinking and making her borderline forget about the possibility of escape.

To some extent, Offred may also exercise power over Serena, the Wife of the Waterford household. Being infertile, Serena was (rather reluctantly) dependent on Offred with regards to the possibility of having children. Motherhood represented an instant raise in status in the Gileadean

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11 Here, I would like to point out a parallel with Hayao Miyazaki's animated movie *Spirited Away* (in original: *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*). The word *kamikakushi* represents a phenomenon of someone being abducted by the gods and, upon being "spirited away", losing one's memories of the past. In the movie, the name of the main protagonist is changed and she begins to forget her real name together with the world she was taken from.

society (*TT* 96), the baby being a token of the Wife's (not the Handmaid's) success. Unlike Aunt Vidala (an ideal of an Aunt loyal to both the system and the doctrine), Serena was not an ideal Wife. Her operations on the black market and the means she employed to secure Offred's pregnancy marked her as a lukewarm believer, but also as a traditional representative of totalitarian elite, which seldom adheres to its own doctrine. To Offred, they also represented incriminating secrets of her direct superior to be accumulated.

In conclusion, Gileadean Handmaids have found a way to exploit the liminal position the system has allotted to them; position detested, yet revered, aptly labeled by Offred as "outside woman" (*THT* 172). Theoretically, this liminality, the body-psyche separation and the process of nivellation was meant to isolate them and destroy their individual capacities for resistance. In reality, the resulting invisibility allowed the Handmaids to create various subversive projects. The perceived impotence of the Handmaids made them largely irrelevant to the rest of the society, save their abilities of giving birth. This preoccupation with their bodies left the rest of Gilead's population unconcerned with the resistance accumulating in the minds of those such as Offred, who ultimately chose to take agency over herself and was prepared to use her power over her superiors, gained thanks to the position of a structurally secluded character. The "power of the weak" (Turner 108 – 109) is symptomatic of the liminal stage.

### **3.2.3. The Wives**

Briefly, the structural position of the Wives should be considered. The condition of being a Wife in Gilead is not explored to such an extent as the ones of the Handmaids and the Aunts in the novel. However, we are given the opportunity to witness the rank both from the perspective of established Wives (such as Serena or Paula), and from the perspective of children raised to become ones (the cases of which being Agnes and Becka). In the following paragraph, we shall attempt to concisely capture their experience, and whether the theoretical design of their rank stands the test of reality.

Firstly, there is a dilemma to be addressed. At the onset of Gilead's existence, fertile women that were retroactively accused of trespassing the law (by, say, undergoing an abortion) were made into Handmaids. However, every new child of female sex born in Gilead was a potentially fertile women that did not commit any crime. This would classify her as a potential Wife, not a Handmaid. The question arises, how would the system manage to replenish the rank of Handmaids? Occasional transgressions of the Wives and sex-trafficking would hardly suffice. Therefore, the hypothesis the patriarchs probably adopted was that, gradually, all women would

become fertile again and no Handmaids would be needed. All women would be pure and peacefully fulfilling their biological destinies as legitimate Wives.

What withstands negation is the fact that many Wives were instrumental in the construction of Gilead. Whether fundamentalists (like their husbands), power addicts, women unsuccessful in the liberal-capitalist postmodern world, or those struck by infertility and wanting a child, many Wives decided to support the doctrine which placed them in a position of a housewife of the post-World War II. period (mostly since the 1950s), with the benefit of being in charge of the household's private sphere (Handmaids and Marthas included). Within these bounds, they exercised some amount of control in a world ruled by the patriarchal elite (*THT* 22 - 23). Otherwise, just as the Handmaids, Wives were not given the right to read or write, and their influence was largely limited to the household. It is interesting and paradoxical that a regime that relies so much on religion would not let the highest and purest rank of the Wives read (at least) the Bible. However, as we have discussed earlier, having an absolute authority over the interpretation of the Scripture was probably too alluring. Besides, Wives were still just women, and therefore susceptible to deception, like Eve. Reading and writing, as has been discussed above, promote critical thinking and development of independent minds, which is something no totalitarian system wants. Regardless, making an analogy between the Gileadean Wives and the wives in the early colonial Puritan American communities, the private sphere included gardening, upbringing of potential children and socializing with other Wives. The Econowives not having Marthas, they had to tend to all possible household chores and cooking as well.

Considering the journey of a young girl aspiring to be a Wife (which was supposed to be the principal drive of her life), the education consisted solely of subjects useful for their respective position (such as flower arrangement) (*TT* 161). Moreover, they were being indoctrinated by the Aunts to internalize the notion of being inferior to men, and the notion of being responsible for provoking their sexual urges (*TT* 9). Such promotions of victim-blaming were symptomatic of both Puritan American colonies of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and of the ideology of the Republic of Gilead. Wives were taught to avoid excessive emotions and dismiss the urges of their bodies, tabooing female sexuality.

Disregarding and rejecting female sexuality was probably in accordance with the phenomenon of arranged marriages (*TT* 224; *THT* 233), symptomatic of the process of becoming a Wife in Gilead. If sexual activity is seen as nothing more than a duty, then arranged marriages are to be accepted with more ease. Women will not seek sexual fulfillment, which will make them resigned with regards to sexual activities, seeing their bodies as mere objects sacrificed to male needs. Their true fulfillment rested in motherhood. Children born of Handmaids had only one, both

legal and conventional, mother; the corresponding Wife. This child was a token of social success and raise in status.

Moving on to the actual implementation of these values, what can be seen is how badly these designs translate. Already established Wives, as one can see them in *The Handmaids Tale*, fall victim to the same mechanisms of coping with their circumspect rights and freedoms and with being confined in their houses as their real-world counterparts did. Having Marthas, the Wives had little to do around the house without a child to take care of, and the frustration stemming from this absence of a chance to find purpose made them susceptible to either barbiturate or alcohol-based drug abuse (*TT* 213) („Take Some Pills “). Finding no other way, young Wives would often take control of their lives by disposing themselves of it (such as in Becka’s case), gaining freedom in death (*TT* 166). Agnes, as a child, took comfort in gaining symbolical power over the male usurpers by making and eating exclusively male cookies (*TT* 20).<sup>12</sup> A specific type of control and power came with the existence of the black market, a phenomenon characteristic of totalitarian regimes.

Gileadean system of education did not just make the future Wives internalize their inferiority to men, though. The doctrines taught by the Aunts (for example, through the biblical story of a Concubine cut into twelve pieces<sup>13</sup>) had unintentional side effects. Together with the dismissal of the female body (regarding it a sinful object) and the rejection of female sexuality and female sexual needs, young Wives developed either terrified, rejecting or numb attitude towards intimate relationships and marriage. These sentiments were induced by occasional sexual harassments, which the girls knew better than to report due to Gileadean tradition of victim-blaming (*TT* 96 - 97). This was the actual effect of the system’s endeavor to make them more susceptible to being complacent about arranged marriage. Eventually, more and more girls would resort to various types of escapist methods, such as suicide or becoming an Aunt.

Furthermore, while the doctrine dictated that the true mother of the children born of a Handmaid was the Wife, general sentiments did not reflect it as such. Agnes, being Handmaid-born, would, therefore, be referred to as a “daughter of a slut” (*TT* 86), with all the social implications it would entail in any period of the real-world history. Agnes’ position got even more liminal after her brother was born. She was perceived as blessed (because her family had a healthy baby) but also cursed, because the Handmaid had died at the birth of the child (*TT* 107). Agnes’ liminality is similar to the one of Handmaids.

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12 This seems to be an allusion to Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Women*, and its corresponding moment of eating a cake shaped like a woman.

13 *TT* 78 – 79.

To conclude this chapter, the existence of the Wives was a very tragic one (especially for the infertile ones). They were made to internalize thankfulness for their privileged status, having no control over who they will be forced to spend rest of their lives with. For the “privileges” they had, they were envied and feared by other ranks. Moreover, unlike the Handmaids and the Aunts, Wives had no ritual that would provide a valve for their frustration. Their only outlet was within the bounds of the household and among other Wives. Because of the frequently occurring emotional distance between the Commanders and their Wives (caused, among others, by the marriages being arranged), Wives would often end up being emotionally frustrated.

This paragraph marks the end of the practical part as well. Through the lens of the theoretical design of the Gileadean doctrine and through the prism of the individual selected characters, what has been uncovered is the sexism and misogyny characteristic of the regime, as well as the traditional inability of any totalitarian ideology to translate into practice to the full. The systemic faults uncovered by the individual characters foreshadowed, and eventually brought about the fall of the Republic of Gilead which failed to destroy the human need for self-definition, freedom, dignity and respect, equality and self-appropriation. I employ the term “self-appropriation” in the way that I understand it<sup>14</sup>; a state of not being perceived as anyone’s property but one’s own, being the ultimate arbiter of one’s actions, emotions and decisions. Neither one’s body, nor one’s mind can ever be regarded as a property of anyone else but themselves. That term encompasses many of the basic human rights as defined by the United Nations, such as rights to the freedom of thought, expression and education, right to own things, right to demand equality and others.

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14 As opposed to how it is defined by Lonergan (“Self-Appropriation, Values, and Ethics in Contemporary Educational Leadership: Getting Past What Gets in the Way.”).



#### 4. CONCLUSION

This thesis' overall aim had several layers. Firstly, the sexist and misogynistic ideology of the Republic of Gilead was scrutinized along with the interpretation of the circumstances leading to its establishment. The following layer focused on analysis of the positions allotted to women, taking their rights and the attitudes the Gileadean society adopted towards them into consideration. Lastly, the individual ranks were explored both with regards to their theoretical designs as intended by Gilead's architects, and regarding the practical realization carried out by the selected characters. This layered aim was reached employing the historical and anthropological concepts explored in the theoretical part of this thesis and by accumulating relevant data from the two works written by Margaret Atwood in question; *The Handmaid's Tale* and its recently published sequel *The Testaments*. The main focus of the thesis was on the position of female characters within the theocratic-totalitarian regime of the fictional, dystopian Republic of Gilead, and their disruption and subversion of the system. They achieved this through reinterpretation of the roles that were given to them by the abusive patriarchal society, exploiting the weaknesses found in the system to maintain their individualities (which the system strove to destroy) and disrupt the regime from within. One of the principal means of emancipation and defiance denied to some of the selected characters, but eventually adopted by all of them, proved to be self-expression through writing.

The purpose of the theoretical part lies in the accumulation of relevant socio-historical and anthropological data which serve as a key for understanding the interpretations presented in the practical part. Divided into three thematically homogeneous sections, the theoretical part initially provided the reader with a concise introduction into Margaret Atwood's work, the predominant motifs explored within it and it placed the two analyzed books into the context of her writing portfolio. It has been concluded that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* include some of the themes frequently explored by the Canadian author, such as the concept of female experience, ecological concerns and the phenomenon of victimization.

Secondly, two of the many historical parallels which inspired Atwood when writing the books were scrutinized from socio-historical perspective. The conditions the Puritan colonists were forced to deal with in the 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial America (specifically, the demographic difficulties), the legal and economic position of women within the Puritan society and the specific beliefs connected with womanhood were presented in a way that has shown the correspondence with the idiosyncrasies of the Republic of Gilead. This part was introduced by a short delimitation of the theoretical concept of theocracy, both the early colonial Puritan American society and the Republic of Gilead being classified as such, because both their doctrines and legal frameworks were inspired

by a followed the Scripture in every aspect of life. The primary sources employed in this chapter were various works on both theocracy and the position of women in the colonial American society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century such as Norton's works, *First Generations* by Berkin, Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* and Davidson's book on theocracy. The second historical parallel explored with respect to the characteristics of the Republic of Gilead was Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship over the socialist Romania. What has been found were the aspects that inspired Atwood with regards to the concepts of politicization and state ownership of the female body stemming from the cult of fertility incorporated into the socialist (and Gileadean) doctrine, the act of banning abortions and contraceptive methods, and the totalitarian surveillance of female reproductive functions. This section employed information gathered from articles written on the topic of Ceausescu's rule and the Decree 770 (such as Breslau's "Overplanned Parenthood"), as well as from Kligman's book *The Politics of Duplicity*. The Republic of Gilead being a totalitarian regime, the concept of totalitarianism was explored at the onset of this section using Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Stanislav Balík & Michal Kubát's *Teorie a praxe totalitních a autoritativních režimů* and Kateřina Chytráčková's diploma thesis on the subject. Totalitarianism is present in Gilead in features such as the rule of a single party, cult of personality (though, in the case of Gilead, rather personalities), presence of a secret police and the practice of thorough surveillance, ideological control over every aspect of citizens' lives, or brainwashing.

The third, and the last part of the theoretical part, predominantly based on Turner's treatise on the topic of liminality, *communitas* and rituals of status elevation and status reversal – *The Ritual Process*, provided theoretical base for the interpretation of the positions of female characters in Gilead. The hypothesis being that the positions of Aunts and Handmaids were liminal in nature (and, therefore, corrupting and dangerous with regards to the system), and that the female rituals presented in the narrative were important for the process of social depressurization, it was imperative to present the reader with relevant theoretical background. In the course of this subchapter, a conclusion was made that liminality is disruptive for the system within which it appears by nature, that rituals of elevation require humiliation (which was exemplified by the initiation to the rank of Aunts at the onset of Gilead's existence) and that rituals of status reversal indeed serve as convenient valves for the frustration of oppressed groups (in this case, the Handmaids).

The aims of the subsequent practical part were the following; to use the data gathered from both primary and secondary sources to interpret the motives and social sentiments at the onset of the Republic of Gilead, to analyze the beliefs of the Sons of Jacob regarding womanhood (those beliefs being instrumental in the creation of Gilead's sexist and patriarchal, fundamentalistic

ideology and the social stratification stemming from it), and to inspect the theoretical designs of the positions allotted to women as they were intended by the architects of the system vis-à-vis the interpretation and practical transformation of these designs by the selected characters which either challenged or downright exploited these designs to subvert the system.

Initially, what has been gathered is that the Sons of Jacob have exploited contemporary social and global issues and sentiments, such as low birth rate and infertility, natural disasters, fear of terrorism, anti-capitalist and anti-liberal attitudes, feelings of lack of values, and the frustration of men with female emancipation, to gain support for their theocratic-totalitarian project. Moreover, the international situation was instrumental in the process of Gilead's position stabilization, because of its inaction and complacency. Adding the findings from the following subchapter, which focused on the general position of women in the Republic of Gilead, it was proved that due to the central position of the cult of fertility in the ideology of the Sons of Jacob and due to the religious attitudes towards women (both of these factors being identical to the ones of the American Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the former being characteristic of Ceausescu's regime), the Gileadean design was necessarily sexist and misogynistic.

However, in the subsequent three subchapters, a conclusion has been arrived at that, though the regime strove to fully subjugate women and destroy their individualities, some women took agencies over their existence and turned their position within the system against it. The Aunts, as has been identified, found themselves in a liminal position of women with male attributes, and their Thesmophorian project (within which they were untouchable) proved lethal to the system. Aunt Lydia utilized her position of the intelligence-gatherer to gain the power to destroy Gilead's patriarchal authorities. Subsequently, the Handmaids have been labeled as liminal (and, therefore, untouchable, invisible and dangerous) creatures due to their position of being both revered and abhorred. Their frustration with being the most abused of all ranks was to be vented through the rituals of status reversal such as Patricicution. Despite the attempt of the system to suffocate any resistance within them by making them fully isolated, Handmaids managed to subvert the system by taking advantage of this isolation, making projects such as Mayday. Offred, moreover, succeeded in appropriating her own identity and body. Last but not least, the inability of the system to translate theoretical designs into practice manifested as the rank of Wives was explored. Though being groomed for marriage, the doctrine presented in their education made them discouraged with regards to marriages, forcing them to resort to such methods of escape such as committing suicide or joining the ranks of Aunts, rejecting the system and its values. All in all, these three sections were testaments of the strength and perseverance of the human spirit in the face of oppression and abuse, and they verified the indispensability of the power of the oppressed.

What has also been explored was the crucial role of writing and reading with regards to self-expression and assertion of one's existence, those being vital means of defiance when pitted against totalitarian techniques of nivellation and destruction of individuality. The suspension of the right to read prevents the Wives and Handmaids from developing the ability of creative and critical thinking and the denial of the right to write takes away one of the primary means of self-expression, as well as of the corroboration of one's existence. Offred, the sole narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, discovers a testimony of her predecessor's dissent against the system's attempt to take away her freedom of self-expression; the quote which says "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (*THT* 197). The multiple narrators of *The Testaments* also strive to leave a mark of their existence; to prove that they were here. The readers also play their role. By reading the story, the reader acknowledges the existence of the characters just as their own, and acknowledges the characters' right to self-assertion, self-expression and self-appropriation as well. These are, after all, basic human rights.

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