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Master's Thesis

**COLONIZATION OF WOMAN IN MARGARET
ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND
CHRISTINA DALCHER'S *VOX***

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**MARGARET ATWOOD'UN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*
VE CHRISTINA DALCHER'IN VOX ADLI
ROMANLARINDA KADININ
SÖMÜRGELEŞTİRİLMESİ**

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ETHICS DECLARATION

I hereby confirm that I am the sole author of this MA thesis entitled **“Colonization of Woman in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Christina Dalcher’s *Vox*”**, which I have prepared in accordance with Dicle University Institute of Social Sciences Thesis Writing Directive, and I have diligently cited all sources to which I have made references in my thesis. I hereby acknowledge that my thesis and its electronic copies will be stored in the archives of Dicle University Institute of Social Sciences.

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This work represents not only an academic endeavour but also a personal act of resistance, a reminder that women's voices, no matter how silenced, will always find a way to be heard.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines two contemporary dystopian novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Vox* by Christina Dalcher, from a feminist perspective, focusing on the systemic strategies that patriarchal ideologies employ to reinforce dominance and suppress female autonomy. Both novels depict societies in which oppressive regimes strengthen institutionalized patriarchal ideology through education, religion, language control, constructed gender roles, distinguished spheres, and panoptic surveillance to maintain the dominant ideology. Furthermore, this study investigates how these means are used to objectify, commodify, silence, control, and confine women to the private sphere, aligning with Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women as the 'second sex'. It also examines how female identity is defined and constructed by patriarchal structures that reshape gender roles, positioning women as silent, obedient, and submissive figures. Women's autonomy is systematically erased and undermined through political and theological strategies of subjugation, with both texts illustrating how such oppression is normalized under ideological extremism. Subjected to the political and religious control of patriarchy, women struggle to retain their autonomy. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox* reveal the colonization of women's bodies, identities, and voices under oppressive patriarchal authorities. The theme of resistance, explicitly or subtly, is also portrayed throughout this thesis, as the novels under discussion serve as cautionary tales that underscore the dangers of patriarchal control and the silencing of women. Ultimately, this thesis highlights the importance of awareness of women's suppression and calls attention to the need to question and resist dominant ideologies that reduce women to subordinate identities, advocating for the recognition of women as autonomous and equal individuals.

Keywords

Feminism, Woman, Female Autonomy, Resistance, Control, Silence, Patriarchy, Oppression, Gender Roles

ÖZET

Bu tez, Margaret Atwood'un *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü* ve Christina Dalcher'in *Vox* adlı çağdaş distopik romanlarını feminist bir bakış açısıyla ele alarak, ataerkil ideolojilerin, hâkimiyetini pekiştirmek ve kadın özerkliğini bastırmak için kullandığı sistematik stratejileri incelemektedir. Her iki roman da, baskıcı rejimlerin kurumsallaşmış ataerkil ideolojiyi eğitim, din, dil kontrolü, kurgulanmış toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri, ayrıştırılmış yaşam alanları ve panoptik gözetim yoluyla pekiştiren toplumları tasvir eder. Bu çalışma, başvuru araçların kadınları nesneleştirmek, metalaştırmak, susturmak ve özel alana hapsedmek için nasıl kullanıldığını, Simone de Beauvoir'ın kadını "ikinci cinsiyet" olarak tanımlayan kavramıyla uyumlu bir şekilde incelemektedir. Ayrıca, kadın kimliğinin ataerkil yapılar tarafından nasıl tanımlandığını ve inşa edildiğini; toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin yeniden şekillendirilerek kadınların sessiz, itaatkâr ve boyun eğen figürlere dönüştürüldüğünü irdelemektedir. Kadınların özerkliği, siyasal ve teolojik boyunduruk stratejileriyle sistematik olarak silinmekte ve zayıflatılmaktadır; her iki metin de bu tür baskının ideolojik aşırılıklar altında nasıl normalleştirildiğini göstermektedir. Ataerkil düzenin politik ve dinsel denetimine maruz kalan kadınlar, özerkliklerini korumakta güçlük çekmektedir. *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü* ve *Vox*, kadın bedenlerinin, kimliklerinin ve seslerinin baskıcı ataerkil otoriteler altında sömürgeleştirildiğini gözler önüne serer. Direniş teması da bu tez boyunca açık ya da örtük biçimde ele alınmış; incelenen romanlar, ataerkil kontrolün ve kadınların susturulmasının tehlikelerini vurgulayan birer uyarı niteliğinde değerlendirilmiştir. Nihayetinde bu tez, kadınların baskılanmasına yönelik farkındalığın önemine dikkat çekmekte ve kadınları ikincil kimliklere indirgemeye çalışan baskın ideolojilerin sorgulanması ve bunlara direnilmesi gerektiğini ortaya koyarak kadınların özerk ve eşit bireyler olarak tanınmasını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Feminizm, Kadın, Kadın Özerkliği, Direniş, Kontrol, Sessizlik, Ataerkillik, Baskı, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Roller.

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INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a theory seeking equality between men and women in social, political, and economic rights. The social situation of women has been a central concern in feminism, which aims to understand and challenge inequality, societal structure, patriarchal ideology, and traditional norms that reinforce gender inequality. Accordingly, feminism seeks to examine gender roles, women's rights, and status in various contexts such as politics, work, and family to deconstruct oppressive systems and secure equality between genders.

Throughout history, women have been seen as inferior to men, which led to several movements aiming to put women as equal to men. Taking Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* as a premise, women's rights activists have taken part in different phases of feminism with the aim of social and economic gender equality. With the development of feminism as waves, it is seen that women are not only marginalized for their gender but also their race and class as well. So, the suppression over women is multiplied by both male and colonist ideologies. Just as they see the right to colonize a territory, they also think that they can colonize women in order to exercise their power, take them under their control, and make use of them without taking their consent for their own sake.

This study aims to examine how *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Vox* by Christina Dalcher portray patriarchal colonization, suppression, and exploitation of women through control of women's bodies and social institutions as political tools. These two dystopian novels are chosen for their focus on reproductive and linguistic oppression, revealing how bodily autonomy and expression are weaponized to serve patriarchal interests, challenging dominant gender ideologies from a feminist perspective.

In both novels, women are being denied the rights they have achieved, including the right to work, access to education, freedom of speech, personal identities, and bank accounts, by extremely oppressive regimes. Therefore, it can be argued that patriarchal powers take away the rights women have already had. This systematic denial of rights serves to reinforce control and suppress any form of resistance, ensuring women remain subordinate within these societies, which is central to

understanding the oppressive dynamics explored in both texts. Ultimately, this reveals how power structures maintain dominance by depriving women of their hard-earned rights.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the female body, particularly its reproductive function, is exploited as a political instrument alongside various other restrictions imposed on them. Fertile women are commodified by the ruling class to bear children for them as they are seen as handmaids. They do not have any claim on their lives and do not have names. Instead, they are given the names of their commander; in this way, the erasure of women identity through deleting their original names is demonstrated. Moreover, they cannot communicate freely since it is forbidden by the system to prevent any possible solidarity and spread of information. Thus, the denial of women's individuality in this dystopian society is the main tool used to colonize, control, and oppress them.

Similarly, in *Vox*, language and speech, through the control of mouth and voice, are embodied as primary sites of patriarchal domination, stripping women of almost all rights. After the severe control by the regime, women are not allowed to maintain the lives they used to. They do not have freedom of speech; they are allowed to speak only 100 words a day, controlled by the counters they have to wear, and if this limit is exceeded, they are punished with electric shock. Alongside spoken language, sign language is also prohibited for their use, highlighting the reshaping and redefining characteristics of women as silent, obedient figures. In other words, language, as a colonization tool, is weaponized against women to silence them.

In both novels, institutions such as education, religion, marriage institutions, and societal expectations are used as oppressive tools to subordinate women. Moreover, both novels display the patriarchal societies in which women are reduced to a secondary position. So, within the context of the situation, women have been portrayed as victims of male-dominated societies; the control and oppression that the colonialist ideology imposes on them will be analysed in this study.

This thesis proposes that women, within patriarchal structures, experience a comparable yet micro-scale form of colonization, similar to the historical colonization, marginalization, and subjugation of black people. Accordingly, the two selected novels

are analyzed through this lens of gendered and symbolic colonization. The first chapter of this thesis presents the feminist theoretical framework within its historical context, highlighting pioneering feminists who significantly influenced feminism. The second chapter explores the historical background while also providing insight into the dystopian genre and feminist analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, focusing on women's individuality, particularly the commodification of their bodies, language, religion, education and the limitations and suppression of their lives, along with the threats to female agency. The third chapter analyzes the historical background and feminist perspective of Christina Dalcher's *Vox*, concentrating on the oppression of language and the colonization of women's identities through social institutions, along with the significance of feminist resistance. The final chapter presents a comparative conclusion on the issues of suppression and colonization of women in both Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Christina Dalcher's *Vox*.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 FEMINIST THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

The words *feminism* and *feminist* connote the emancipation of women and the individuals working to achieve the goals of this theory. The word *feminine* in English, meaning "of the female sex," was first used around the mid-14th century. It originates from the Old French word *femenin*, which in turn derives from the Latin word *femininus*, meaning "feminine" or "female." Additionally, the suffix *-ism* comes from French *-isme* or directly from the Latin *-isma* or *-ismus*, functioning as a word-forming element used to create nouns that imply a system, doctrine, or practice (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2017). The word feminism was first coined and used by French thinker Charles Froier in 1837 (as *féminisme*) (Offen, 1988, p. 45).

Feminism is the struggle of women to highlight the existing inequality between men and women and to eliminate this inequality, to seize and secure their rights in the context of women's liberation, and not to accept the roles determined by society under the pressure of traditional, ideological, and cultural factors. There are many definitions of feminism provided by scholars or critics. However, in the most general sense, as Bell Hooks states, feminism is "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (2000, p. 1). Similarly, Chinn and Wheeler describe feminism as a perspective that challenges systematic gender-based injustices and prioritizes the value of women (1985, p. 74). As a critical theory, feminism gained momentum in the 19th century in England, France, and the United States of America. Women demanded equality in politics, education, and social life; however, this demand emerged in the 18th century with the book of Mary Wollstonecraft, which is *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). When the book was written, women were expected to satisfy their husbands, to meet their needs, so they were confined to houses and not able to make their own decisions, but were only expected to do the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal society. Wollstonecraft argues that since women cannot receive the same education as men do, they cannot improve their reason (2017, pp. 12-16). Therefore, if they are given equal opportunities, they will be able to become unique individuals rather than being a husband's wife or a father's daughter. Because of the absence of education, women cannot find a place in the public sphere, such as politics, commerce, and intellectual life, and contribute to these domains since they are

constructed as a male place by society and therefore dominated by men. Bell Hooks also shares a similar perspective to Wollstonecraft in her definition of feminism, which she defines as:

...a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (1984, p. 24)

In her seminal book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan, another significant figure in feminism, criticizes the constructed roles that women should obey and claims that although a woman who is expected to be in the domestic sphere, the home, fulfills her traditionally assigned responsibilities, she feels something missing and calls it the problem with no name. Based on her own experiences, she was dissatisfied even though she had a husband, which is seen as the ultimate goal of a woman, children, financial security, and a comfortable home. There was still a strong feeling that her life was lacking something important. In other words, Friedan felt that something significant was missing from her life. Having done some research to name this problem, the sense of missing, she discovered that not only illiterate women from suburban areas felt this way, but also educated women experienced the same incompleteness, emptiness, and fatigue. Friedan contends that this problem with no name is not about femininity, excessive education, or domestic demands; rather, it goes beyond the surface; the unnamed problem holds the key to both old and new obstacles influencing women, their families, and society (pp. 15-32). Thus, Friedan's ideas emphasize the significance of accepting women's internal desire for more than just fulfilling the assigned traditional roles in their homes and families.

The book created a huge awareness among women who were imprisoned in the domestic sphere. As a result of its impact, women started to discover their potential and aimed to build a female identity that had been denied by the patriarchal ideology, which serves only men. With this awareness, the general feminist definition provided by Rosalind Delmar finds its place. Delmar provides that:

Many people agree that a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs that remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social economic and political order. But beyond that, things immediately become more complicated. (2011, p. 5)

The patriarchal society distinguishes men from women, giving superior features to men and inferior traits to women, claiming that it is by nature. However, norms, traditions, and gender roles are all constructed units by culture, which is not a product but a process that is shaped through the reciprocal relationship between individuals and culture. Additionally, since male-dominated societies believe in the superiority of men, which creates binaries, they evaluate gender issues on their own behalf. In this sense, life order is divided into two: the domestic sphere, which is claimed to be the zone of women, and the public sphere, which is of men. Being confined to the domestic sphere, women are given certain roles: taking care of their house and husbands, nurturing their children, and fulfilling the roles given to them. In that respect, it can be said that women are symbolically imprisoned by being deprived of the public sphere where they can gain knowledge, speak their minds, and take part in the workplace. That is the reason why Wollstonecraft focuses particularly on the equal right to access education. Because of the lack of education, women cannot improve their reasoning or think critically, and therefore, their taking part in the public sphere becomes an unnatural behavior in society. As a result, societal norms evolved in ways that reinforced the idea that a woman's place is in the private sphere while a man's place is in the public sphere. Basing their cause on traditions and religion, the patriarchal society chooses to give the kind of education to women that is about how to run a house, feed and nurture children, cook, or sew, that aims to make women internalize their responsibility in the world.

Furthermore, Virginia Woolf (1929), one of the pioneers of feminist theory, also stresses the importance of physical space and financial independence of women to take part in the public sphere, particularly in academic and creative domains, in her work *A Room of One's Own*: "...[A] woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (p. 1). She states that women writers usually had masculine

pseudonyms, using a masculine pen name to be taken seriously, as the society of the time was against female authors and did not recognize their works as artistic pieces. Woolf claims that if women have money and physical space of their own, they will be able to create their own artistic work independently without the need to meet male-dominated literary expectations or depend on male pen names. Women of the time used to be subjected to men. However, Woolf contends that economic freedom is essential for women if they support themselves through any economic means, so if they have their own financial freedom, they will not have to be bound to men. Thus, they will be able to create their own autonomy, liberating themselves from dependence on the male mindset. With self-sufficiency and satisfaction being enough for themselves, women will start to express their voices and thoughts.

The lack of formal education, in addition to the deeply rooted gender roles, supported the belief that women's involvement in public areas was both unnatural and inappropriate. This mentality became so normal among men and women, who were shaped by societal expectations, that they internalized and accepted these norms as part of the natural order. In that respect, it can be seen how the patriarchal society shaped the minds of people to be able to exercise their power.

Furthermore, women have always been marginalized and objectified where the patriarchy exercises its power. The binary logic attains the positive features to masculinity and the negative ones to femininity. So, women are being defined by what men are not. Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* expresses that men have been seen as the superior human being throughout history, whereas women have been considered the “Other”: the inferior, the negative, and the lacking, the one that is not a man. Their individuality has been denied, and they have been treated as objects served to the use of men. The very well-known saying of de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (2009, p. 330) implies that it is not the biology of women that defines their gender but rather society that assigns woman identity to women. Therefore, according to de Beauvoir, sex and gender are not interchangeable; whereas sex is innate, gender is constructed, and this construction is developed in a particular way by the male-dominated society for the sake of exercising male power over women. Similar to Simone de Beauvoir’s views, numerous critics highlight the difference between sex and gender, that is while sex is typically understood as a

biological categorization, gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviours, and specific characteristics. This understanding challenges the conventional definition of identity by emphasizing that many aspects of what society considers “natural” are, in fact, formed by cultural and social factors.

Kate Millett (2000), in her seminal work *Sexual Politics*, focuses on the difference between sex, which refers to biological characteristics, and gender, which refers to culturally acquired identity as well. Millett also argues that patriarchal ideology is the main cause of the oppression over women. The male-based ideology treating women as inferior is in every part of life, and the subordination of women is both in public and private life. What Millett refers to as 'Sexual Politics' concerns the dynamics of dominance and subordination present in all relationships between men and women (pp. 23-24). Though it may not be a physical power, the patriarchal discourse exercises its power in every aspect of life, be it social life, educational institutions, armies, or state offices. The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1995) shares similar thoughts in his book *Discipline and Punish*, arguing that the dominant ideology wields power not as something acquired but as something exercised through government, law, individuals, bodies, gestures, behaviours, or various forms of relationships (p. 27). Accordingly, the patriarchal ideology, which is the dominant one, exerts its power over women across all spheres of life. Literature is one of the fields in which Millett claims that the narratives of literary works are mainly shaped by male ideology, with men-oriented purposes and perspectives dominating the literary canon (Carter, 2006, pp. 94-95).

Similar to Millett, Elaine Showalter (2012), one of the leading feminist writers, shares a focus on literary works. However, she diverges in her approach from Millett by analyzing women writers and their literary works. In her notable work *Towards A Feminist Poetics*, first published in 1979, she develops the concept of gynocriticism, which examines women as writers according to their modes of writing (pp. 25-26). In her work, she outlines a literary history of female writers who have been hidden from history and whose contributions to literature and works have been neglected by male critics. Showalter claims that although female imagination and sexuality are not fixed and innate, there are distinct differences between men's and women's writing (Selden, 2005, p. 127). She highlights an entire tradition of women's literature that has been

overlooked by male critics. Showalter categorizes this tradition into three phases: the feminine phase (1840-1880), which includes the writers who internalized male perspectives and beliefs in female nature. Moreover, in an attempt to achieve intellectual recognition equal to that of male culture and to gain acceptance in a patriarchal literary domain, these writers often used male pen names. The feminist phase (1880-1920) includes the writers who stood against male values and standards. Instead of complete imitation, these writers advocated for women's social, political, and personal autonomy. The final phase, known as the female phase (1920-present), includes writers who rejected both the imitative characteristics of the first phase and the protest associated with the second phase. Instead, they turn to female experiences as the foundation of creative expression to have a unique female voice and literature (Bheemappa, 2023, pp. 2052-2053). This framework illustrates how women's writing has evolved, transitioning from adhering to or opposing male norms to establishing their own unique and independent literary traditions. Ultimately, by focusing on women's personal and collective experiences, these writers challenge the long-standing marginalization of female perspectives in literature. Their work both redefines the literary canon and contributes to broader feminist discourses by emphasizing authenticity and subjectivity.

1.2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

1.2.1. First-Wave Feminism

The first-wave feminism, which began in the US and UK, dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Taking Wollstonecraft's thoughts from her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) as the foundation of the wave, women struggled for legal rights from which they were excluded, such as women's suffrage, equal opportunity in education, property rights, and the right to practice birth control. Thus, first-wave feminism primarily focused on equal rights for women in a patriarchal society and securing legal recognition of women as human beings, stressing that they should not be treated as property (Guerin et al., 2011, p. 254).

Feminist women, who thought that women were deprived of equal rights with men, sought to gain legal rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the prominent suffragists and early leaders of the first wave of feminism, organized the Seneca Falls

Convention in 1848 to address women's social, civil, and religious status and rights. The Declaration of Sentiments which is also known as the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments included decisions addressing the inequalities between men and women. These were: women being denied the right to vote, having no voice in the laws they were required to follow, and losing property rights after marriage. Children were considered men's property since divorce and custody laws favored men. Career opportunities for women, if any, were extremely scarce, and they were barred from legal or medical professions; furthermore, higher education institutions refused to admit women (Stanton, 1848, pp. 1-4).

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton established the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869. Following its formation, first-wave feminism shifted its primary concern to securing women's right to vote. This goal was ultimately achieved in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Block, 2010, p. 2). Not only were women the defenders of feminism, but also male thinkers supported the ideology of the movement. John Stuart Mill, elected to the British parliament, was a significant defender of women's suffrage. However, his proposal to include women's right to vote in the Reform Act was rejected by the all-male parliament. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was founded in 1897, and as a branch of NUWSS, the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed in 1903 in England by Emmeline Pankhurst, a key suffragette leader. The union adopted violent tactics to draw attention to their campaigns. Suffragettes, putting their lives at risk, fought for their fundamental rights (Cowman, 2007, pp. 5-6). Consequently, women over thirty were given the right to vote in 1918; furthermore, all women were granted the right to vote with the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act in 1928 (UK Parliament, 2025).

In addition, based on her professional experiences, Margaret Sanger, a public health nurse, observed how women felt relief after a stillbirth, as they could not afford to have more children. Acknowledging that women already faced numerous miseries, she started the birth control movement in the USA in the early 1900s (Mundt, 2017, pp. 124-125). Although the attempt to gain the right to control over women's own bodies began during first-wave feminism, this goal was achieved during the second-wave feminism. As Guerin et al. (2011) state, it wasn't until 1965 that married couples

in the United States were legally allowed to access birth control methods (p. 254). Additionally, women in the UK took control of their fertility for the first time with the Act of the National Health Service (Family Planning) in 1967 (UK Parliament, 2025).

1.2.2. Second-Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism started in the 1960s and lasted until the 1990s. Apart from legal rights as of the first-wave goals, second-wave feminism focused on additional inequalities in terms of the workplace, lower incomes, education, rights to decide, gender roles in family and society, and sexuality. Thus, second-wave feminists focused on raising awareness about the shared inequalities they faced.

WWII, after which second-wave feminism started, enabled women to participate in the workplace. Having seen their contribution to the national economy and participation in the public sphere, women expected to be full citizens like men, as was stated in the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) (Guerin et al., 2011, p. 255). ERA, which was first proposed in 1923, guarantees that all persons, regardless of their sex, are equal under the law, and it was approved in 1972 (Equal Rights Amendment, 2018). However, during this period, women had to struggle to be treated equally without sex-based discrimination. Women were paid less than men in the workplace, not because they were seen as inferior to men, but because men were seen as superior. With the systemic discrimination, patriarchal powerholders make women believe in false equality traps, by which Hillary Barker (1986) means that women sharing common ill-treatment as a group makes that issue seem unimportant (p. 83). Dominelli (2002) also explains that false equality traps are created by women that they believe that all women share similar patriarchal oppression and that they all have equal access to opportunities, knowledge, and ways of being. These kinds of traps may be unintentionally created by women, and they can happen both inside or outside of work. So, they highlight often-overlooked power imbalances among women and the mistaken belief in equality (p. 78).

Second-wave feminism is also known by its motto, “The Personal is the Political”. In that respect, Betty Friedan (1963) in her very effective work, *The Feminine Mystique*, comes up with the idea of how women are exposed to systemic sexism within the boundaries of the home. The book summarizes the situation of

women who were exposed to male-dominated values in their houses, and their private personal areas, and who feel internal and identity conflicts. The issues women complain about, like sex, appearance, and abortion, and their demands on sharing housework and childcare with men were deemed personal problems between women and their mates; however, what Carol Hanisch (1969) recognized through the meetings she attended was that the discovery of those problems defined as personal were political problems instead. So those meetings being called first therapy actually would not come up with a cure, a solution for them, since, as she names, it was a political therapy for which women should stop blaming themselves (pp. 1-5).

Sharing a similar point of view with Hanish, Heidi Hartmann (1979) also claims that contrary to the arguments made, women's discontent is not the irrational lament of the maladjusted, but rather a response to the social system that dominates, exploits, and oppresses women (p. 10). The patriarchal society organizes its system on such a cunning basis that it prevents women from questioning the position they are in, which is indeed a strategy of the male-dominated society. Therefore, it can be said that the problems women face, which seem personal, are indeed political issues.

Moreover, second-wave movement feminists examined how literary works are used as agents of power by the patriarchy. In literary works, a female "self" is constructed by male authors. Women who are identified as the Other, as de Beauvoir defines, are categorized according to their loyalty to the deeply rooted gender roles. As Louis Tyson (2006) argues, male-dominated societies assert their dominance over women by describing them with certain roles that reflect patriarchal ideals. Patriarchy identifies women who conform to the traditional gender roles and obey their roles as "good girls," whereas those who do not conform and obey are deemed "bad girls" (p. 89). In other words, women who internalize the male-dominated values and who fulfill the patriarchal roles imposed upon them are referred to as "madonnas" or "angels," symbolizing the idealized caregivers of their homes. In contrast, women who look for their freedom and struggle to break the chains of patriarchal roles are referred to as "whores", "bitches", or "fallen women". While the good, the positive, and the desirable characteristics are linked with those who adhere to patriarchal expectations, the bad, the negative, and the undesirable behaviors are linked with those who try to stand on their own feet and gain their autonomy. Rather than being defined according

to their relations to the men around them, these so-called fallen women aspire to create their own independent identities. That is the reason why the second-wave feminists focused on female identification not only in literary work but also in social life as well.

The female self, traditionally constructed by male authors, has prompted feminists to produce and create their own identities. In that respect, Helene Cixous's essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) examines the voice of women and the power of women's expression. She believes that women should embrace their bodies, voices, experiences, and desires. Writing, in Cixous's view, is a powerful tool for women to reject the limitations imposed on them by patriarchal norms. This allows women to recognize their potential to liberate themselves from the restrictions of male narratives. The mythological figure Medusa, which is traditionally a monster, is reinterpreted by Cixous, who suggests that this new image symbolizes women's strength, power, liberation, and defiance against patriarchal dominance. Furthermore, the laugh itself symbolizes the expression of women's power. Cixous suggests that women should subvert and challenge the conventional male-based literary tradition through their language, writing, and solidarity. With mutual empowerment, women's solidarity is also emphasized by Cixous (pp. 875-893).

Women empowerment, solidarity, and sisterhood were very dominant concepts for second-wave feminism. In the 1960s, radical feminists planned to organize Women's Liberation Groups to put an end to all kinds of discrimination based on sex. The groups that held actions to get to the root of the problems in society decided to hold a consciousness-raising group in which the search for who benefits from the oppression of women would be the main question of the groups' studies (Sarachild, 1973, pp. 144-145). Through consciousness-raising groups, women began to internalize other women's problems as theirs. Additionally, thanks to these experiences, it became once more clear that those mutual problems were the strategies of a patriarchal mindset.

Some of the accomplishments of second-wave feminism were the improvements in legislation. By the Civil Rights Act of 1964, people would not face discrimination based on sex and race in employment, job application, promotion, and firing. Moreover, the act forbade discrimination in public accommodations and

programs receiving federal funding. In addition, the act reinforced school desegregation and the enforcement of voting rights (National Archive, 2022). Another product of the liberationist movement was the establishment of the National Organisation for Women (NOW) by Friedan in 1966 to ensure women's equal rights. The use of birth control pills was approved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) in 1960, which liberated women from the limitations of pregnancy and childbearing. The approval of the pill played a significant role in advancing reproductive freedom by giving women greater control over their own autonomy, bodies, and health. It allowed them to delay childbearing, plan their families, and pursue personal, educational, and career goals without the constant concern of unintended pregnancies (National Women's Law Center, 2025). Thus, it can be said that the pills marked an important change in societal norms, and this change also supported the movement for gender equality and women's rights.

1.2.3. Third-Wave Feminism

Third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990s and continued until the early 2010s. Although it is based on second-wave feminism, it criticizes the dominant understanding of second-wave feminism, which believes in a universal definition of feminism. Third-wave feminism rejects the essentialist ideology of second-wave feminism, which focuses on the oppression of white women while ignoring discrimination based on race, ethnicity, class, and age (Lorde, 1984, p. 116). In this context, an effort was made to redefine the concept of being a feminist. With this aim, third-wave supporters focused on the multiple-dimensional oppressions women come across and how these factors affect their identities. In that respect, the term intersectionality, which examines how the diverse and multi-layered identities of women contribute to their oppression, emerged as a core element of third-wave feminism and is considered an essential term in its definition, as noted by Elizabeth Evans in her book *The Politics of Third Wave Feminism* (2015, p. 23).

Intersectionality, one of the significant contributions of the third wave, was coined by American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw. She argues that, in addition to gender, other dimensions such as race and class also shape the violence experienced by Black women. The concern on race and gender intersections emphasizes the

importance of considering multiple aspects of identity when analyzing how the social world is structured (1991, pp. 1242-1245). Furthermore, Crenshaw (1989) analyses the cases in the article named *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*. In her paper, she points out that in race discrimination cases, the focus is on Black individuals who are sex and class-privileged. Similarly, in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on women privileged by race and social class. Since the focus is on the most privileged groups, the discrimination faced by people who are not privileged, in the context of class, race, and gender, is marginalized and ignored (pp. 139-140).

The term "third wave" was first used by Rebecca Walker, a prominent third-wave feminist, in *Ms. Magazine* in 1992. Similar to other women, she was greatly influenced by the Thomas-Hill hearings and the silencing of women by those in power on issues of harassment. Sharing one of her experiences, Walker (2001) asserts in her article, *Becoming the 3rd Wave*, that the integration of equality and empowerment should be fundamental elements of a feminist's life. Furthermore, being a feminist involves seeking personal understanding amidst systemic destruction, fostering sisterhood with women despite divisions, and analyzing power structures in order to challenge them. These are, according to Walker, the core aspects of third-wave feminism (pp. 78-80).

Apart from that, Walker also believes that there is a need for a new wave of feminism, as she thinks the second wave is seen by many young women as rigid, judgmental, and divisive. These young women lack knowledge of women's history, and because of the alienating portrayal of feminists in the mass media, which presents them in a negative light, they believe that being a feminist often requires strictly adhering to certain ideals, such as living modestly, constantly critiquing society, rejecting traditional roles, and prioritizing women's empowerment. A feminist is expected to never compromise on her values, especially for money or love. However, there is concern that deviating from these strict expectations might result in being seen as "not truly feminist" (1995, p. xxxii). Therefore, it can be said that, in contrast to the more uniform concerns of the second wave, third-wave feminism emphasizes the importance of intersectionality and individuality, rather than the collective focus of the previous wave. It embraces diverse experiences of gender and sexuality, acknowledging the complexity and uniqueness of individual identities. This change

allows for a broader and more adaptable understanding of feminism that can adapt to the diverse realities of women. Consequently, third-wave feminism rejects the idea of a singular feminist identity and instead promotes empowerment through individual choice and self-definition.

Despite being criticized for its lack of a unified agenda and often regarded as a continuation of second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism notably impacted academic fields like women's studies and interdisciplinary areas such as psychoanalysis, post-colonialism, Marxism, poststructuralism, and ecological studies. It brought these perspectives into its theoretical framework, which explores topics like language, writing, sexuality, alternative sexualities, and the portrayal of women from diverse backgrounds in the media. As Mann and Huffman (2005) noted, the third-wave discourse, which embraces more diverse and polyvocal feminism, appealed to those women who felt marginalized or limited within the second wave. The third wave of feminism deconstructs and decenters the ideas of the second wave by introducing new ways of understanding and framing gender relations. Influenced by postmodernism and post-structuralism, it rejects universal truths and highlights the constructed nature of identities, the significance of differences, and multiplicity. Freedom, within this framework, involves embracing identity as a source of strength and empowerment and resisting fixed identities to challenge restrictive labels (pp. 58, 87).

Judith Butler (1999), whose postmodernist ideas were highly influential on the third-wave discourse, states that gender is not something one is, but something one does, continually shaped and reshaped through performative acts compelled by societal norms. She means that gender is structured by repeated actions, behaviors, and norms, and that there is no identity behind gendered acts, instead, the acts themselves constitute the identity. Thus, gender is not a stable being but an ongoing process of doing and becoming (p. 33). Additionally, she contends that by disrupting and challenging naturalized gender roles, it is possible to weaken the power structures that sustain them (p. 44). Butler also suggests that our understanding and construction of identity are closely connected to politics, and if we change the way we think about identity, then the political systems based on fixed categories will be challenged (p. 189). Therefore, it can be expressed that by subverting, challenging, and redefining fixed identity categories, true freedom can be achieved by allowing more fluid and

inclusive identities. This understanding led to a more dynamic approach to identities, linking them to other categories such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, social status, age, and belief. As a result, instead of being a static and predetermined condition, identity becomes a site of ongoing negotiation and transformation.

It is crucial to understand that third-wave feminism does not seek to emphasize the superiority of women; rather, it advocates for equality, respects individual choices, and rejects double standards. Everyone has the right to sexual freedom and the autonomy to make decisions about their own sexual life. Therefore, societal norms and biases must be challenged, as they contribute to gender inequality. At the same time, it is important to promote equal opportunities and freedom for all, regardless of gender.

1.2.4. Fourth-Wave Feminism

Fourth-wave feminism, which emerged in the 2010s, addresses issues such as sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture, alongside the concerns of previous waves. While it has not yet been fully integrated into scholarly discourse, its influence is undeniable. This wave is marked by the use of social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, along with technology, as powerful tools for amplifying women's voices (Burkett & Brunell, 2025). These platforms provide women with a space to share their personal experiences, raise awareness, and advocate for gender equality, as seen in the #MeToo campaign, which has had a profound impact. Thanks to online activism, feminism has reached a wider and more diverse audience, becoming more inclusive, accessible, and visible than ever before.

As stressed by Nicola Rivers (2017), one of the key impacts attributed to the fourth wave is the growing awareness of the social, political, and cultural inequalities that continue to affect many women (p. 135). This new wave of feminism is strongly linked to technological improvement, leading to digital feminism. Social media has provided a platform for silenced women, who may have been unable to express their ideas or experiences in traditional spaces. Moreover, it offers them an opportunity to find their voice, allowing them to organize, speak out, and raise awareness about issues such as sexism and misogyny. These forms of inequality exist not just in one specific area, but across various spheres of life, including at home, in the workplace, in mass media, and fashion. Key issues such as the objectification of women in the media,

particularly on television, sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence, workplace discrimination, racism, sexism, and classism have been central topics of discussion. Through the digital possibilities of tools of today, women have been able to launch campaigns to raise awareness, which has also contributed to the formation of a global community of women united in their efforts for social justice. Thus, the digital platforms enable marginalized groups to build solidarity across cultural and geographical boundaries.

Hashtags and social media campaigns have played a crucial role in amplifying movements for change. In the early 2000s, platforms like Twitter became key spaces for activists to gain support for causes such as #BringBackOurGirls, #BlackLivesMatter, and #YesAllWomen. In 2006, Tarana Burke founded the #MeToo movement to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low-income communities. The movement's impact increased significantly in 2017, when the #MeToo hashtag went viral, inspiring survivors across the globe to share their stories (Global Fund for Women, 2025).

Therefore, it can be said that digital feminism has a significant influence on women's liberation by being inclusive and acknowledging that all forms of systemic oppression are interconnected. In this way, the fight to end gender discrimination is closely linked with efforts to fight against racism, classism, body shaming, homophobia, and discrimination against individuals with disabilities.

CHAPTER TWO

DEHUMANIZATION AND ASSIMILATION OF WOMEN IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

2.1. MARGARET ATWOOD AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Margaret Atwood, born in 1939 in Canada, is a well-known writer, poet, critic, essayist, feminist, and environmental activist. She has more than fifty works translated into more than forty languages. *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* are Atwood's most well-known works. As an observer of both Canadian and global events, she has become a significant cultural figure and public spokesperson addressing critical issues such as environmentalism, human rights, and the rights of women (Howells, 2006, pp. 1-3; York, 2006, pp. 28-29). As a literary celebrity, she has won several prizes for her works that have contributed to the literary field. *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and *The Testaments* (2019), which is a sequel dystopian work of *The Handmaid's Tale*, garnered Atwood the Booker Prize, *Alias Grace* won her the Giller Prize (1996), *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was nominated for the Nebula Award to be the best novel of 1986, won the 1985 Governor General's Award and the first Arthur C. Clarke in 1987 (Economic Times, 2019; Atwood, 2024; Nebula Awards, 2024).

Atwood, supported by her parents unlike the traditional ones, was not expected to fulfill conventional gender-based roles and societal expectations imposed on women. Furthermore, her parents backed Atwood up using her intellectual growth and creative pursuits, encouraging her by valuing her intelligence, independence, and abilities rather than urging her to conform to marriage or domestic roles. She started writing at a very early age and recognized that Canadian literature was not known enough. Moreover, many Canadian authors published their works in the United States mostly, making Atwood feel that she too could become an author. Her strong desire to become a writer led her to register for the English Language and Literature program at Victoria College, Toronto University. She discovered Canadian literature thanks to her mentors, Jay Macpherson and Northrop Frye. With her master's degree from Harvard University, where she studied the literature of American Puritans, she began to consider Canada as having its own culture and identity (Staines, 2006, pp. 12-15).

The early literary pieces of Atwood provide her with significant recognition in Canadian Literature. The Governor-General's award that she won for her poetry, *The Circle Game*, helped her to be known and called for her further publications. Atwood is deeply fascinated by the largely unexplored history of Canada, and additionally, she is the first author to reimagine a historical figure, Susanna Moodie, giving her a significant role in new artistic creation. The themes she focuses on are feminism, victimization, and Canadian identity. Furthermore, Atwood's literary criticism, *Survival* (1972), played an important role in defining and making Canadian literature accessible to a broader audience (Staines, 2006, pp. 15-19).

Staines (2006) divides Atwood's writing career into three general phases. In the early years, she focused on establishing herself as a Canadian writer and exploring Canadian-related subjects. In the middle phase, she became an internationally recognized author, using her literary work to reflect on social challenges and imagine alternative futures. In the latter stage, she addressed more general global concerns while continuing to explore Canadian history and identity (pp. 23-25). Throughout these phases, Atwood remained deeply engaged with issues of power, gender, and environmental sustainability, which helped her become one of the most influential literary voices of her generation.

Atwood aims to demonstrate and criticize the reflections of the oppressive system prevailing worldwide. She has expressed that during her visit to West Berlin, she observed the claustrophobic atmosphere experienced by individuals in the city enclosed by the Berlin Wall. Additionally, her observations of other places that were governed by so-called 'utopian' regimes, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, were indeed totalitarian, while even some supposedly democratic regions, as Tuscaloosa, Alabama, had restrictive traditions and understandings (Atwood, 2011). Atwood has seen the confinement of individuals, which can be interpreted as a form of imprisonment. Furthermore, her experiences during the writing process also exemplify the idea that there is bad hidden in good, just as good can conceal in bad.

Moreover, after encountering these experiences that promised no peaceful future, and realizing that every 'good' system contains some form of oppression, Atwood began to think that liberal women must be on edge in such a situation. Since

there are earned rights of the citizens of those so-called democratic countries, which were violated by the system through naturalizing or justifying. Similarly, Atwood, who has been influenced by second-wave feminism, began to think of similar situations for women who have struggled for fundamental rights and achieved them at the end of big challenges.

Susan Faludi (2006), an influential journalist and author of *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, first published in 1991, points out how mass media, newspapers, movies, and advertisements are used as ideological tools in order to affect and shape the identity of women. The powerholders at the time used mass media as a key tool to prompt the idea that women had achieved full equality with men and had secured their aimed rights, and therefore, the notion that feminist movements are no longer necessary began to spread. She states that anti-feminist powerholders blame feminism on the unnamed problems women face. According to the newspapers at the time, professional women experience "burnout" and face what is being called an "infertility crisis." Single women struggle with a "shortage of men." According to *The New York Times*, childless women feel "depressed and confused," and their numbers are growing. *Newsweek* describes unmarried women as "hysterical" and overwhelmed by a "profound crisis of confidence". Health guides suggest that high-powered career women are suffering from "stress-related illnesses," including hair loss, anxiety, alcoholism, and even heart problems. Psychology books claim that the loneliness of independent women has become "a major mental health issue." (Faludi, 2006, pp. 1-2). In that respect, anti-feminists claim, there is nothing more to struggle with. The well-known newspapers at the time indirectly conveyed that the reason behind the so-called problems women were facing were indeed consequences of the achievements of feminist ideology. Thus, it can be argued that to gain significant power, maintain dominance over women, and push them back into the traditional roles they used to have and struggled to overcome, all the challenges women encounter are linked to ideals of feminism, which is represented as the enemy of women. In other words, it is presented by the mass media that the problems women come across are the consequences of the feminist movement. If women were not free, they wouldn't be unhappy. Moreover, the newspapers suggest that the liberation of women indeed enslaved them, freedom of reproductive rights harmed their fertility, the intellectual

improvement purpose caused them to lose the ultimate dream of women. Therefore, it is propagated that the problematic issues women face are the results of the feminist movement, so equality between genders leads to all the pain women feel.

Concerning Faludi's arguments, Atwood's concerns about the future of women in an oppressive system can be understood. According to this, women will be reduced to their traditional roles to be decided by patriarchal ideology for the sake of male benefits, and the achievements of the feminist movement will be ignored. Moreover, it will restrict women from having their agency, allowing gendered power dynamics to prevail and marginalize them, as has happened throughout history. The analysis of Faludi about the demonstration of mass media on the achieved equality corresponds to Atwood's concerns about the possible situation of women in an oppressive regime, both emphasizing the ignorance of women's progress, which makes it easier to go back to the previous traditional norms. Consequently, setbacks are inevitable, as the idea of traditional roles is used to support old beliefs that ultimately slow down societal development.

Margaret Atwood, in an interview made in 2019 with *The Penguin*, points out that *The Handmaid's Tale* is an answer to "what if" questions. She discusses the horrible events taking place in the novel are real-world events and, indeed, she has proof showing them with the newspaper clippings, which were mostly about the birth policies by the oppressive system to control reproductive freedom. Atwood references real-world events that inspired her novels, for instance, in response to the question about newspaper clippings, Atwood mentions the harsh policies on reproductive policies under the Communist regime of Romania. President Nicolae Ceaușescu passed a law that required all women in Romania to have at least four children, for which women were expected to have pregnancy tests once a month. If the results were negative, women were to explain why they could not manage. She also criticises fertility, which is only attributed to women, while no attention is given to male fertility. Additionally, the belief that increasing the birth rate would make the country richer resulted in the rise of orphanages. Women being forced to have babies were likely unable to take care of them due to the lack of resources and support, and abandoned their children in orphanages, however, the system could not manage to care for them and therefore, the belief in enriching the country via increasing the birth rate resulted

in an inhuman condition (Atwood, 2019). Thus, the political attack on contraception, stripping women of bodily autonomy, led to unintended, disastrous consequences, revealing the dangers of state interference in personal bodily autonomy.

Atwood adds that some religious communities, such as People of Hope, have led to some concerns among Catholics who think that the cult opposes birth control and sterilization. Additionally, according to Catholics, the cult aims to undermine the progress of the women's movement, influencing the subordination of women and restricting them from having connections with people outside the community, and arranging marriages for them. Thus, brainwashing is used by the cult to subordinate them. Similarly, in response to the question about the way of intense research, Atwood gives an example from a newspaper clipping of a conservative suggestion by a parliament member, which shows similar policies on increasing the birth rate in Canada. Davee Nickerson, the conservative parliament member of Canada, proposed encouraging families to have more children as a public policy because of the country's low fertility rate. He suggested the process could take place, particularly over the holidays, in a way that would not be difficult and unpleasant. The clippings about the policies aimed at boosting birth rates that Atwood collected stand as proof for the events taking place in the novel, as well as demonstrating the reflections of the background of the world she has created. Thus, it can be argued that women are seen as reproductive tools controlled by male-dominated ideology and reduced to means of production for maintaining a social order that is male-constructed and aims to sustain the dominance organized by men. So, via denying female autonomy and agency, the state power exploits women's bodies for its ideological and political agenda.

Apart from her observations and research on the attack on reproductive rights, Atwood states her concerns about subjugating and imprisoning women through totalitarian regimes. In a conversation with Time Magazine, Atwood discusses the harsh conditions faced by prisoners of Iran with Narges Mohammadi, who is a women's rights activist and journalist, imprisoned because of her resilience against the suppression of the religious regime of the country. In the conversation, Atwood and Mohammadi discuss how these regimes, despite claiming to protect women and secure their chastity, actually trap them in a never-ending cycle of oppression and control. In the name of the protection of chastity, clothing is used as a means of control over

women. The mandatory way of clothing symbolizes the dominance of the regime's power and silences the opposition voices (Time, 2024).

The use of religion as a tool to oppress and control people dominated in the 1980s, responding to the Reagan Era. Religion became influential in politics, and in response, fundamentalists attempted to gain a stronger position in public affairs. Most of them adopted the religious leader Reverend Jerry Falwell's ideas and saw the Moral Majority, an organization founded by Falwell aiming to promote conservative values, as their guide and leader. This group believed that moral degeneracy existed in society, and therefore, they wanted to restore the decline in ethical standards and values. According to the explanation of Falwell, it was seen that more and more people began to support the fundamentalist ideas of the church, which can be observed through registration numbers. This group aimed to re-elect Ronald Reagan as president, as they believed him to be the instrument of God. Besides, campaigns for senatorial and congressional candidates were run by the Moral Majority for those who rejected abortion and advocated for a strong national identity. The Ronald Reagan era helped the Christian Right gain a prominent position, with Reagan's support backing prayer in schools. As a result, it can be said that there was an effort to impose religious purposes in educational institutions. However, although the 1980s were a time of rising influence for conservative Christians, a split emerged among them due to empty rhetoric on abortion and prayer in schools. To Ronald Reagan, the Christian Right was not as important as he was to them. He gave them recognition and legitimacy in the public sphere while, in turn, they gave him their votes and treated him like a saint. Although he campaigned on supporting school prayers and opposing abortion, he did not take action regarding these issues. Instead, he organized prayer breakfasts, declared 1983 the Year of the Bible, and hoped these symbolic actions would satisfy his supporters. As a result of this frustration, Pat Robertson thought that not holding their own office meant you're not in a sufficiently influential position in politics, which is essential for becoming truly effective, and thus, he ran in the presidential election and formed a coalition with Bush (Thompson, 1986, p. 18; Marley, 2006, pp. 851-852, 866). In other words, it can be expressed that religion and people's religious expectations were used as political tools to get support and exercise power. In that respect, the Reagan Era was characterized as the era of denying women from having

their abortion rights and secular education, a return to traditional norms, and abuse of religion for the so-called restoration of a degenerated society.

In *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011), Atwood explores the possibility of the United States shifting toward an authoritarian government, highlighting that history is repetitive. She emphasizes this by giving examples such as the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. However, many people believed in the victory of democracy after the Cold War. Yet, following events such as policy changes and financial crises gave a possibility for previously unthinkable situations to occur. At this point, Atwood suggests that Puritanism, the foundation of America, could resurface, raising the possibility that *The Handmaid's Tale* might become a reality (p. 90).

The background information given was aimed at supporting the understanding of the context of the novel thoroughly and helping to establish the plausibility of the novel. In the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the oppressive regime is called Gilead, where people, especially women, are subjected to strict control, deprived of their rights, reduced to breeding machines, and forced into subjugation. Thus, women are deprived of their agency through the constant control and oppression exposed by the regime. The Republic of Gilead maintains its dominance by suppression, religious dictates, and re-education centers.

The Handmaid's Tale is the story of the character Offred, the narrator, one of the Handmaids in a regime named Gilead set in near-future America. This theocratic regime that forces fertile women to bear children for upper-class members who cannot have children aims to restore the society that they believe has been corrupted. Moreover, they believe that social improvement and restoration are possible through reproduction, as birth rates have diminished.

The novel encompasses both Offred's past life and her present life under the regime. It is understood from Offred's flashbacks that she was the daughter of a feminist mother and that she attended university. Moreover, she was married to Luke and had a daughter. One day, women woke up to the Gilead Regime's rigid order, and they learned that they could not attend universities, have bank accounts, or take part in the workplace. After Offred's unsuccessful attempt to flee from the Gilead regime with

her elementary family, they were apprehended by the regime and she was sent to the re-education centers where women were taught the doctrines of the regime and prepared to become a Handmaid.

Women characters in the novel can be divided into various categories: Handmaids, Wives, Aunts, Marthas, Econowives, and Jezebels. Handmaids are fertile women mandated to bear children for the elite class. They are reduced to mere reproductive objects by the regime. Furthermore, having been stripped of their identities, they are named after the commanders to whom they belong. For instance, the name of Offred's Commander is Fred, so she is called 'of'Fred, highlighting possessiveness. Wives are married to the Commanders; compared to the other women groups, wives have more power to exercise, however, limited in the houses. Serena Joy is the wife of Commander Fred, as she cannot have children, Offred is assigned this role to fulfill for her through the ceremonies, which is a monthly taking place ritual where Offred, Serena Joy, and the Commander participate in an act designed solely to make Offred pregnant. While she is more powerful than other women, she, too, is oppressed by societal expectations and restricted to domestic roles. Aunts are the instructors of the Handmaids at the training centers, teaching them how to behave and fulfill their sublime roles. They collaborate with the regime, indoctrinating the rules of the Gilead and making handmaids accept their assigned roles. Aunt Lydia is the most well-known one in the novel. Marthas are infertile women who keep housework but are not exposed to similar oppression as handmaids are. Though lower than the status of wives, they are still important in maintaining the household and contributing to the patriarchal society. Econowives representing the lower class are the ones who are both the wives and Marthas of their houses. They are more responsible for various duties than higher-class women. Jezebels are the women who are forced to work in brothels serving the sexual desires of the high-ranking Gilead Commanders. They are categorized as fallen, disobedient, or former prostitutes who are not seen as desirable enough to attain the status of wives or handmaids.

The uniforms of the women characters also vary according to their class. Most female characters, regardless of class, are forced to adhere to specific dress codes that cover their bodies. Handmaids wear ankle-length red dresses with large white wings, limiting their vision and preventing interaction. Wives wear blue clothing, while aunts

are dressed in brown. In contrast, Jezebels wear more body-conscious clothing. However, this type of garment has been prohibited to all other women by the new regime, as it is viewed as body-revealing and therefore sinful, except for the Jezebels.

The daily routines of the Handmaids, including what to eat, what to wear, when to have a shower, and what to speak and do, are all predetermined by the regime. Offred goes grocery shopping with the neighboring handmaid, Ofglen. On their way back, they see the executed prisoners' bodies presented on a wall as a warning to those who oppose the norms of the regime. One day, Offred comes across the phrase "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," which means "Don't let the bastards grind you down" written on her closet floor, from which she figures out that before she was assigned to her third role, another handmaid was in her position and hanged herself.

Handmaids need to visit the doctors monthly, as the regime pays attention to their health since they are the hope of the nation. During her appointment, Offred is offered to be impregnated by the doctor himself, who implies that her failure to conceive might be due to Commander Fred's sterility. However, Offred refuses the suggestion, suspecting that it could be a loyalty check by the regime.

Offred and Commander Fred have secret meetings in his office, where he provides her with lotion and magazines, and they play word games, all of which are forbidden acts. Because of the personal relationship shaped through these nighttime meetings, Offred feels uneasy at the monthly ceremonies. Moreover, Fred takes Offred, dressed in body-conscious clothes he provided, to a brothel, where she sees her friend Moira as a prostitute. Moira used to be an opposing character to the traditional roles when they were at university. Additionally, she demonstrates acts of resistance against the mandated roles in the re-education centers to challenge the ideology, and she collaborates with the underground resistance network named Mayday. However, due to the rigid regulations of the regime, she seems resigned to her fate.

Offred learns from her neighboring handmaid about the existence of an underground resistance movement, Mayday, aiming to bring down the regime. After that, she realizes the connection between this and the carved phrase, meaning do not let them grind you down, making it more meaningful to Offred. Apart from that,

Serena Joy organizes a meeting between Offred and Nick, the chauffeur of the Commander, hoping that Offred will provide a baby after which an affair develops between them.

Furthermore, there are public executions held, and women are expected to attend the executions. Giving power to the Handmaids to punish non-conformists makes the executions savagous. At one such execution, Offred learns from the neighbor handmaid that the one killed was a member of the resistance organization. Following the incident, Offred learns that her accompanying handmaid has hung herself as she could be arrested from the new Ofglen. After Serena Joy discovers the costume Offred has worn at the sex club, a van of the Eyes comes to arrest her. However, Nick explains to her that they are resistance fighters.

Offred, not being sure whether they are truly the Eyes or the resistance fighters, leaves with them. The novel then ends with a *Historical Notes* chapter, which explains that the story of the novel is based on the tape recordings of Offred, analyzed at a symposium on Gileadean Studies taking place at the University of Denay, Nunavit in 2195. Thus, although the acts of the underground resistance network have not been portrayed in the novel explicitly, it can be a hint to the readers that the regime was ultimately challenged, and a more equitable society has emerged after the theocratic Gilead regime.

2.2. UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA AND USTOPIA

The term *utopia* was coined by Thomas More (1478–1535) as the title of his book *Utopia* (1516), which depicts an imaginary country. It derives from the Greek word ‘topos’, which means ‘place’ or ‘where’, and from the prefix ‘ou’, the letter ‘u’ means ‘no’ or ‘not’. So, the word utopia implies no place or nowhere, referring to a non-existent, imaginary good world. Although the term was first coined by More, it is based on a deep history that existed before he invented it. Most of the utopias ask the question whether a better world is possible, comparing life in utopia to the one in the present, through which they try to identify what is lacking in the present life and what is needed to improve it (Sargent, 2010, pp. 21-23).

New words have been attributed to utopias to describe different versions. So, the term dystopia, meaning a bad place, was first used by Henry Lewis Younger in

1747. The dissatisfaction of people with life conditions led them to look for a better and longer life. Alongside the quest for an improved life, the possibility of a worse world also emerged (Sargent, 2010, pp. 22-23). World Wars, epidemics, and depression, like life-affecting catastrophic events in the 20th century, made dystopian a dominant genre. John Stuart Mill (1806-73) used the term in one of his speeches in the parliament in 1868. It wasn't until the 20th century that the word and its meaning became common. With the word 'eugenic' introduced by Francis Galton (1822-1911), the selective breeding of superior offspring affected the idea of improving human stocks through either promoting positive eugenics or preventing negative eugenics. Utopians written in response to this movement believed that to reach the desired results, it was crucial to pay attention to the social conditions in which children would be raised. Other works written on selective breeding highlight the avoidance of undesirable traits by either prohibiting them from having children or requiring people with certain characteristics to have children with each other. Both of these approaches produced dystopias either by the conflicts over which traits to choose or concerns about potential power abuse over controlling reproduction (Sargent, 2010, pp. 42-43).

In addition to the explanations previously discussed, Abrams and Harpham (2013) define utopia as a genre of fictional writing that represents an idealized, imaginary political and social system, one that does not exist in reality. Following this perspective, the term dystopia is depicted as a bad place, representing a very unpleasant imaginary world. The stories are used to describe works of fiction that project current social, political, and technological trends into a future that leads to catastrophic outcomes. This genre stands apart from other fictional depictions of imaginary worlds by primarily serving as vehicles for satire, whether through extreme idealization or exaggerated critique of societal flaws (pp. 413-414). Similarly, Atwood designed her literary works as both predictions and satires of the contemporary issues she has observed. Unlike other science fiction works, the events in her books are not only probable but may have already occurred in some form (Atwood, 2011). In other words, Atwood reflects events that have happened around the world, events marked by oppression, inequality, and the imprisonment of human beings, and those non-happening events are likely to occur in the future, that is, not too far. However, although her works have reflections of her personal experiences, Atwood claims them

to be artistic creations (York, 2006, p. 28). Thus, it can be stated that Atwood creates her works by combining past events and possible occurrences with her imaginative and productive skills.

As a writer who often explores these contexts in her works, Atwood (2005) expresses that utopias are satirical, as they exhibit superior arrangements of the present, helping to highlight the flaws in the current reality. Additionally, dystopias, more than being satirical, function as a dire warning to society, demonstrating what will happen if no precautions are taken. Moreover, on the topic of utopia and dystopia, Atwood states that as utopias are imagined, dystopias are easier to believe in since dystopias are influenced by the events that have happened, are happening, and are possible to happen (pp. 94-95).

Dystopia is generally defined as an evil place in which chaos and ruin prevail. Gregory Claeys (2017) points out that dystopia is defined as a failed utopia of totalitarianism of the twentieth century. The identification of Claeys signifies a regime that enforces extreme control over its people. A key characteristic of such a regime is extreme coercion, which involves the use of force, rigid restrictions, and threats to suppress freedom and maintain dominance. Additionally, inequality plays a significant role, as certain groups hold privileged power and rights over others. Imprisonment is also a common tool of control, used to detain and confine individuals. Furthermore, totalitarian regimes often enslave people, forcing them into labor and exploitation without their consent or freedom (p. 5). In this context, it can be stated that to maintain their supreme ideology, totalitarian regimes wield every tool of power to dominate, subjugate, and suppress individuals. Through these oppressive mechanisms, they seek not only to control behaviour but also to eradicate any possibility of resistance or alternative ways of thinking.

Furthermore, Atwood (2005) describes the characteristics of the dystopian genre in *The Handmaid's Tale*. She expresses that in dystopias, extreme tyrannies prevail, which corresponds to the Gilead Regime in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Additionally, sexual intercourse is presented as a way of slavery that can be seen through the Handmaids in the book. Moreover, Atwood states that, as happened in the past as well, dictatorship comes and takes control in bad times when people are more

inclined to give up some of their rights and freedom in exchange for the promise that things will be better. Religion is also used as a means of control by the dictatorships, which can also be observed throughout the novel, particularly by the justification story of the Old Testament by the Puritan-derived Gileadian patriarch (pp. 96-99).

In literary terms, although *The Handmaid's Tale* is classified as a dystopian novel, Atwood herself describes it as a ustopia. Atwood coined this term through the combination of utopia and dystopia since she believes each one has a hidden aspect of the other. On this vision, Atwood expresses that "Every dystopia contains a little utopia, and every utopia a little dystopia" (Hedges, 2019). Since *The Handmaid's Tale* contains elements of hope, Atwood prefers it to be categorized as an ustopia. This hope is evident in two key ways. First, the novel's past, the time it was written, represents a present where freedom still exists, serving as a contrast to the oppressive regime of Gilead. Second, the novel's ending suggests that Gilead has ultimately fallen. The existence of academic conferences, in which the story of the novel is discussed as a historical academic topic by the professors at the end of the book, implies that the totalitarian regime has ended (Atwood, 2011). Thus, it supports Atwood's vision of ustopia, including both bad and good in one piece of work.

2.3. DEHUMANIZATION OF WOMEN

The female body is conceived as a battlefield by colonialist patriarchal ideology, which claims the right to control it. As females are thought to be inferior to males, this ideology justifies their exploitation. Madeleine Davies (2006) states that Atwood's writing about the female body parallels the culture that defines, shapes, and controls it. In that respect, the female characters in Atwood's works demonstrate gender roles, societal expectations, and the power dynamics behind them. Thus, it can be expressed that female bodies are not neutral entities but rather products of the dynamics surrounding them (p. 60). In other words, it can be argued that the female body reflects the political discourse that shapes and controls it, restricting it through power dynamics.

Elizabeth Grosz (1987), in line with the concept of corporeal feminism, discusses that subjectivity cannot be separated from the body and mind. Grosz, rejecting the binary between mind and body, states that the body is an entity shaped

by cultural, historical, and psychological forces. She further argues that patriarchal systems portray women as more connected to their biological traits than men, which justifies women's oppression as more natural and less cultural. Therefore, women are defined more as objects than as subjects by the patriarchy to justify female subjugation. This framing confines women to being described primarily by their reproductive functions, which is reflected in medicine through gynecologists and obstetricians. Grosz argues that the body becomes an instrument over which the patriarchy exercises and imposes its discourse, so the body cannot be separated from power, as it shapes and defines what bodies mean. Consequently, power is not only exerted through ideology and force but also by shaping how women conceive and understand their bodies (pp. 1-15).

Like the general definition of the female body by the patriarchy, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Gilead Regime derives its power from the body, devaluing it for patriarchal goals. Fertile female characters are exploited in terms of their bodies to bear children for the sake of the nation. Therefore, they are reduced to reproduction objects as Offred states, "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (*THT*^{*}, pp. 68-69). She further states, "I am a national resource" (*THT*, p. 71), reinforcing her commodification as a breeding object on which the power generates its ideology, tying women's identity to their reproductive function as explained by Grosz as well. Moreover, Offred expresses this notion as follows: "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (*THT*, p. 103). Through the descriptions of Offred, it becomes evident that fertile women are considered commodities of the dominant ideology, which controls and colonizes the female body, justifying it in the name of national purposes. On the issue of women, Mario Klarer (1995) also argues that the Handmaids are treated as tools for reproduction in a patriarchal society (p. 131). Furthermore, Offred adds, "We are for breeding purposes...We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (*THT*, p. 142). This quote emphasizes how female autonomy is reduced to their reproductive ability in Gilead's oppressive patriarchal society.

^{*} Atwood, M. (1996). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage.

All the future references will be to the abbreviated title *THT* and the numbers of page.

Stripped of their identities, women are defined solely by their ability to bear children, reinforcing their status as mere commodities within this patriarchally constructed social order. Consequently, aligning with corporal feminism, the female body is used as a site of political control by patriarchy.

The Gilead Regime, in pursuit of patriarchal goals, denies women's access to contraceptive rights because contraceptive empowerment can lead women to control their bodies and lives, which patriarchal societies avoid as the empowerment may violate the patriarchal system. In general, contraceptive empowerment emphasizes the importance of access to and control over contraception, which is vital for women's freedom, autonomy, and equality. This concept centers on bodily autonomy, reproductive justice, and gender equality. It affirms that women have the right to make decisions about their bodies, control them, including choosing whether, when, and how to have children, and to avoid unintended pregnancies, so that they can pursue education, careers, and participation in society. As Ross and Solinger (2017) explain, reproduction is not just biological; rather, it is deeply political. Governments, religions, and social groups seek to control who can engage in sex, give birth, or become a parent. As a result, motherhood becomes a highly political issue, serving as a means of exerting power over women and a way for women to regain control of their lives (p. 168). Thus, it can be inferred that contraceptive empowerment is a vital tool that allows women to control their bodies and plan their futures. It helps them resist control, strengthen their agency, and overcome inequality. However, the Gilead Regime, by removing contraceptive empowerment, enforces strict control over women's autonomy and freedom through state-controlled reproduction, reducing women to their fertility. Depriving women of their individuality, this regime turns female bodies into instruments of political power where the sole purpose becomes fulfilling the regime's reproductive demands, which ultimately erases women's sense of self.

Women who chose not to have children before the rise of the Gilead Regime are condemned as "sluts" and "Jezebels" for exercising control over their reproductive rights. Methods such as taking medicine, using birth control pills, undergoing procedures like having their tubes tied, or using chemical treatments to prevent pregnancy are viewed as sinful in Gilead's newly constructed society, where childbirth is seen as God's will. Regarding women's bodily autonomy, Aunt Lydia condemning

women in brothels as "Jezebels! Scorning God's gifts!... They said there was no sense in breeding. Aunt Lydia's nostrils narrow: such wickedness. They were lazy women, she says. They were sluts" (*THT*, pp. 118-119). This quote illustrates how women who previously chose not to have children are demonized by the propagandist Aunts, reinforcing Gilead's oppressive control over female autonomy.

Women are defined only through their fertility; no other characteristics are allowed to contribute to their identity. They are categorized as either fertile women "who are fruitful" or infertile women "who are barren" (*THT*, p. 67). The infertility of males is completely dismissed. The law of the regime dictates explicitly that only women can be deemed infertile, reinforcing the patriarchal system's control over their bodies and identities. Thus, it can be argued that the inability to become pregnant, in other words, not being able to fulfill the ultimate duty of a fertile woman in the regime, is considered as the guilt of the woman. The patriarchal society of Gilead denies women who are biologically incapable of giving birth and classifies them as Unwomen, a group consisting of women considered worthless because of their incapability or rebelliousness, as they do not conform to and challenge the system. These women are being sent to colonies where they are forced to do hard, toxic work. Therefore, it is seen that the powerholders control the body of women; additionally, if they do not contribute to patriarchy, they are deemed useless and punished with a deathly environment. In that respect, women who are seen as bare reproductive objects of the system are once again dehumanized by the oppressive system. This shows how Gilead, through fear and violence, reduces women's value solely tied to reproductive functions, erasing their humanity and enforcing total submission.

Kate Millett (2000) argues that women have always been forced to seek male approval to survive or improve their status (p. 54). Regarding Millett's arguments, Atwood's *Handmaids* need to breed for the elite members as breeding objects to survive. This imposed reliance on male-dominated roles restricts women with limited choices, trapping them in a cycle of submission and endurance. Concerning this, a woman as an independent identity is bound to the definitions and limitations of the patriarchal ideology on the continuation of their life. Thus, the individuality of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* is systematically erased, leaving no space for autonomous identity under the totalitarian regime.

Lois Tyson (2006) describes women who internalize and contribute to the patriarchal ideology as patriarchal women, who are socially conditioned to confirm the norms, beliefs, and values of a male-dominated society, often unaware of the limitations of their gender (pp. 85-86). In this sense, Aunts are patriarchal women who reinforce the commodification idea of the system on the Handmaids, as they impose the notion of women as reproduction vessels, stating “You must be a worthy vessel” (*THT*, p. 71). This further emphasizes that women’s autonomy is so confined to their reproductive capabilities that they are reduced to nothing more than reproductive tools. Additionally, the Aunts’ internalization of this women-humiliating ideology and their contribution ensures the subjugation of women, making it appear natural and unchangeable.

Patriarchal ideology as a colonizing force functions to seek control over women through the system they have constructed. The Aunts behave patriarchally due to the little power given to them. They internalize the patriarchal ideology so much that they contribute to the system that is constructed on the dehumanization of women, accepting them as less individuals and resources for national reproduction tools. Tyson (2006) calls people who accept and believe in the guidance and protection of their conqueror, in this context, it is the Gilead regime, as having a colonized consciousness. In the context of the novel, it corresponds to the Aunts as they internalize and embrace the values and notions of the regime, accepting male superiority over women (p. 63). To secure their position and gain a sense of control, aunts uphold the system and adopt the doctrines of the oppressive system. Somacarrera (2006) asserts that the Aunts, wielding a form of matriarchal power masked by a spirit of camaraderie, resemble the military in their structure and control (p. 53). Despite this matriarchal illusion, they ultimately uphold a patriarchal mentality, using the limited power granted to them by the regime to dominate the Handmaids. In *Two Solicitudes*, Atwood (1998) states that, similar to the imperialist strategies made in India, such as forming an Indian-included army to control other Indians, she has created the Aunts to control other women by granting a tiny bit more power (p. 78). Furthermore, the title ‘Aunt’ is conceived with familial warmth, guidance, and sincerity; however, it is used consciously to mask the true role of the Aunt characters who, in contrast to the word's connotation, enforce violence, surveillance, and psychological oppression. Therefore, through

manipulation, the internalized misogyny conditioned by patriarchal ideology in the Aunts plays a significant role in reinforcing the norms of the system, as they genuinely believe they are helping society. Mark Evans (1994) states that “The 'Aunts' of the novel are given a title that appears to be reassuringly familiar, but here too can be shown an inheritance of centuries of domination and oppression” (p. 185). Regarding Evans's thoughts, it can be stated that the Gilead regime chose the title Aunt on purpose by manipulating language to create a sense of comfort and candor. Thus, the linguistic choice of the title *Aunt* by the regime demonstrates how power structures in oppressive systems function and how the system weaponizes language.

Apart from using women against women as a strategy to exploit and manipulate them, fashion also plays an important role in the novel on this issue. Fashion, as another instrument used to control and lead women, determines the way women should get dressed, such as high heels and tight skirts, typically considered feminine. Tyson (2006) argues that such clothing, being thought to lead to a feminine walk, causes restricted physical movement of women, and the way that this type of attire enables men access to women's bodies. In essence, clothing norms limit women's freedom and reinforce male dominance (p. 91). Throughout the novel, it is seen that the Handmaids have a specific predetermined way of clothing. Offred describes the particular regime-mandated clothes for the Handmaids as red, they also have flat-heeled shoes meant for practicality rather than beauty or dancing. Moreover, the Handmaids wear red gloves that Offred carefully pulls on, which suggests the routine and restraint over the Handmaids. She further continues as “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full (*THT*, p. 14).

Regarding the particular clothes of the Handmaids, it is clear that women, considered significant for the regime for their reproductive ability, are restricted in their autonomy over their own bodies. As the fertile women are accepted as sacred, they are confined to conservative dresses enforced by the religious oppressive regime. These particular clothes symbolize that the Handmaids are seen only as reproductive tools in society. In addition to the decrease of women in public spaces like vehicles, their clothing functions as a powerful sign of the limitation on women's autonomy over their bodies, the restriction of freedom, and the reinforcement of gender inequality.

The white wings also play a crucial role in the regime's norms. They are not given to the Handmaids until they graduate from the training schools. Offred recalls that they used to wear veils instead of the white wings during their time at the re-education centers. Compared to the wings, the veils allowed for limited communication, as long as they spoke quietly and avoided any signs of communication, such as turning their heads or body movements. So that the Aunts would not be able to notice. (*THT*, p. 77). On the subject of the wings, Offred adds, "Given our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view...." (*THT*, p. 36). Looking at this quotation, the white wings prevent the Handmaids from seeing and being seen, which is the ultimate goal to make women remain unseen. Thus, through the white wings, women are being silenced and denied their social and sexual identities, diminishing them to mere reproductive objects. The erasure of women's identity by making them unseen shows that they are passivized, marginalized, and viewed as instruments. Moreover, the clothes provided to the Handmaids for the summer also reflect the sexist ideology of the regime. They are given long-sleeved nightgowns, even in the hot weather, which are designed to prevent them from any possible temptation, even from the Handmaids themselves (*THT*, p. 197). The separation between women and their bodies is reinforced as the regime reminds them every time that the bodies do not belong to the Handmaids but to the state. Thus, the Handmaids are constantly reminded, both physically and psychologically, that they are under strict control and reduced to mere property of the regime, totally deprived of individuality.

Furthermore, the clothes provided for Jezebels, women forced to work at brothels, demonstrate the male gaze of the regime. These women are made to wear revealing clothes in contrast to the modest dress codes of the Handmaids, Aunts, Wives, and Marthas. Before the Gilead regime, women could wear whatever clothes they wanted; however, since the regime believed this was a sign of corruption, they collected and destroyed all of the garments that they considered 'provocative'. Regarding the destruction of the women's clothing, Offred says that kind of clothing was meant to be destroyed "...silk and nylon and fake fur, lime-green, red, violet; black satin, gold lamé, glittering silver; bikini underpants, see-through brassieres with pink satin hearts sewn on to cover the nipples" (*THT*, p. 238).

In addition to other rights, women were deprived of the clothes they enjoyed wearing. This act symbolizes the erasure of their identity and the enforcement of the regime's strict gender roles. Each piece of clothing represents a different personality, emphasizing that Gilead aimed to suppress individuality. Therefore, the burning of these garments reflects the shift from personal freedom to enforced uniformity, as the regime categorizes women strictly according to their function in society with rigid dress codes. In that respect, clothing is a powerful metaphor for the former identities of women.

The clothing worn by the Jezebels further illustrates the hypocrisy of the Gilead regime and its exploitation of women. Although the regime claims to be against body-conscious clothing, it is seen that Jezebels are forced to wear it. This stands in direct contrast to the modesty enforced on other women in Gilead, as the Jezebels' clothing is designed to please the high-ranking male commanders. The representatives of the regime violate the very rules they are expected to follow, which they claim are to provide moral purity. This double standard reveals that, rather than true morality, the regime's restrictions are more about power. Tyson (2006) argues that in a male-dominated society, men are the ones who look, while women are the ones who are looked at. Since men have the power to define things, explain, and govern the world by setting the rules, those who look hold the power, whereas women are viewed and diminished to mere objects to be observed. According to this ideology, women are symbols and commodities in a patriarchal society. For instance, a patriarchal man, feeling that he must have a beautiful woman with him, aims to impress other males since their approval matters most (p. 102). Thus, it can be concluded that women are considered and treated as accessories to be displayed by males serving their prestige in a world whose rules are set by men, where women's worth is determined by their ability to meet male expectations and demands, resulting in a loss of agency and individuality.

Furthermore, the name used to refer to Offred when she is taken to the brothel by the Commander secretly mirrors the devaluation of women once more. Offred is first offered clothes that are colorful and unusual in Gilead's society, as such garments were considered provocative and were destroyed. During her experience of spending a night at the brothel, she is given a tag to show other men who might stop her. The

Commander reassures Offred that by showing the tag, worn like a bracelet, she will avoid problems, as the tag signifies that she belongs to another high-ranking man. (*THT*, p. 248). Offred herself likens the tag to those "*for airport luggage*" (*THT*, p. 241), highlighting her awareness of being reduced to a commodity. The Commander further adds, "If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental" (*THT*, p. 241). The references to being "*taken*" and "*an evening rental*" clearly illustrate that women in Gilead have no identity beyond being objects for male use and control.

Apart from the way of clothing in the brothel, forbidden activities and goods such as smoking, make-up, mirrors, and colorful garments are also allowed to Jezebels in brothels. In the context of the Handmaids, they are not allowed to have those possessions for the precautions taken by the regime to protect their fertility from any kind of harm and to deny their control over their bodies. On this subject, Offred describes how she uses butter on her face and hands, as the Handmaids are no longer allowed to have skin care products, which are considered vanities by the patriarchal regime. She further highlights the regime's dehumanizing perspective by referring to the Handmaids as "containers," emphasizing that only the internal aspects of their bodies are significant. The regime claims the external body ages and deteriorates, focusing solely on the inside of the body. Offred also explains that this restriction on skin care is the demand of the Wives, as they do not want the Handmaids to appear attractive; for them, the current situation is already difficult enough (*THT*, p. 103). Supporting this, Offred adds, "Hand lotion, I said. Or face lotion. Our skin gets very dry... I would have liked to ask also for some bath oil..." (*THT*, p. 163). This suggests that the regime deprives women of basic care for their bodies, treating them as national resources. Additionally, by limiting personal care, the regime reflects its belief in the importance of inner beauty over outer beauty, based on its religious values, which discourage women from focusing on their physical appearance, thinking it vain.

Ceremonies are the most revealing parts, showing the exploitation of the female body and the dehumanization of women. Once a month, the ceremony is conducted after a religious ritual with all the house members, Serena Joy, Offred, the Commander, Cora, Rita, and Nick (*THT*, p. 100). The Commander takes the Bible from the locked box and reads God to Adam, God to Noah, and the story of Rachel and Jacob. "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (*THT*, p. 95). The

quotation stresses fertility, which again reinforces the value granted to women as mere reproductive ability. Atwood (2018) emphasizes the power dynamics in the novel, highlighting the reproductive role of women as a commodity in Gilead's hierarchy. With the statement from the Bible once more, the ultimate goal of the regime is repeated and reminded. The ritual continues with the story of Rachel and Jacob from the Bible to strengthen the ideology of the regime, founded on the dehumanization of women through religion. After the religious rituals are conducted and witnessed by all members of the household, the act intended to impregnate Offred takes place in the bedroom with Offred, Serena Joy, and the Commander. Offred, describing the position of the usual ceremony, says that she lies between Serena Joy's legs, her head rests on Serena Joy's stomach, and at the same time Serena Joy holds each of Offred's hands. Although she is fully clothed, this intimate yet controlled posture is intended to symbolize unity that they "...are one flesh, one being", but Offred interprets it differently, perceiving this position not as connection sign but as the control of Serena Joy over the process and the potential outcome, if there is one (*THT*, p. 100).

The description of the ceremony involving three people demonstrates its dehumanizing mechanized nature. It highlights how this act, which used to be associated with intimacy, has been emptied of its emotional significance and reduced to a mere tool for the patriarchal system. Offred, reduced to a reproductive vessel, is stripped of her bodily autonomy and control, experiencing a dual oppression from both the Commander and Serena Joy. Serena Joy, the Wife, holds power over Offred, and it can be inferred from the quotation as well that she is the one who controls the process and the product, which refers to Offred (Somacarrera, 2006, p. 53). Not only does Serena Joy exercise her power over Offred as the commodity of the household, but the Commander does as well. She is physically victimized and exploited by the Commander through the mechanical movements that are likened to military practice "...with a regular two-four marching stroke, on and on..." (*THT*, p. 101). Additionally, she is emotionally violated by Serena Joy, leading her to feel deprived of privacy and constantly watched. Gayret (2019) also argues that the Gilead regime reduces women to reproductive tools. The subordination and objectification of women are led by a regime that is based on strict gender roles, which are imposed on women, denying their identity. Gayret follows that apart from physical oppression,

psychological oppression is also used as a tool by that patriarchal regime to control and confine women (pp. 103-121).

Additionally, in reaction to the subjugation of Offred during the ceremony, she tries to separate her identity from her body to escape from the humiliation of her identity in dehumanized vessels. During the ceremony, she feels so colonized that she says, “I would steel myself. I would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh” (*THT*, p. 165). Thus, it can be shown as a psychological response to the treatment of Offred as a mere object that she experiences. Such a reaction demonstrates how the patriarchal regime forces women to strip away their identities to endure the dehumanizing process. “As the female body is shattered into sexual functions and degraded into the commoditized vagina, womb, and ovaries, the system bulldozes into the female self-conception, thereby aggravating bleeding in her soul” (Gayret, 2019, p. 111). Gayret also argues that during the Ceremony, the Handmaids are degraded into mere reproductive organs. Women are forced to internalize the role they have been assigned, leading to emotional fragmentation. So, the objectification and the dehumanization of women under the Gilead regime is more than the physical control; it includes the erasure of the individuality of women and additionally reduces them to their biological abilities, besides devaluing them and dismissing their autonomy. This systematic stripping of identity assists the regime in keeping women obedient and powerless.

In addition to Offred being exploited, it is clear that the wife, Serena Joy, is also subordinated by the same regime, even though she seems superior to Offred as a Handmaid. While Serena Joy’s privilege is shown by the fact that she has an “outsized colonial-style four-poster bed” (*THT*, p. 100), it is crucial to recognize that this privilege provided to her exists in the same oppressive system that subordinates not only Offred but Serena Joy as well. She is expected to conform to the notions of the regime, especially during the ritual before the ceremony and the ceremony itself. However, it is seen that Serena Joy feels humiliated by the practice enforced by the regime, as she has to obey the rules and suppress the humiliation she feels. Offred points out that Serena Joy usually cries at the ceremony nights, although she tries to be silent and not be heard, the households hear her, but pretend not to notice (*THT*, p. 97). Thus, it can be expressed that all of the female characters, regardless of the limited power granted to some of them, are exploited either physically, psychologically, or

both, as they are the victims of the same patriarchal regime. Moreover, Serena Joy's crying is intentionally ignored by the households gathered to practice the ritual, by which her erasure is emphasized through making the situation invisible and empty. Offred states 'The tension between her lack of control and her attempt to suppress it is horrible...The smell of her crying spreads over us and we pretend to ignore it' (*THT*, p. 97). It is understood that Serena Joy, like the other women, is also diminished to mere objects by the oppressive system for the sake of holding power.

2.4. THE USE OF RELIGION AND EDUCATION AS MEANS OF EXPLOITATION

Colonizer ideology enforces its rule by rewriting history, which is not a real one, and by imposing its standards, which they believe to be superior, reinforcing their domination and power over those they consider inferior (Fanon, 1963, p. 51; 1967, p. 18). Similar to the colonial ideology, the Gilead regime imposes its own norms through social institutions on women to exploit them. This oppressive regime bases its foundation on religious norms from the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, however, it is used as a tool to indoctrinate norms, reinforce social control, and exploit individuals' thoughts and beliefs. The regime chooses only the useful sayings for them, ignoring the parts emphasizing justice and humanity. During the rituals conducted before the ceremony, the Story of Rachel and Jacob is read to demonstrate and justify the practice, which they claim is justified through the religion itself. In doing so, the regime manipulates religion to legitimize its oppressive practices, which they claim to be sacred. The story read by the Commander follows as "Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her (*THT*, p. 95). He continues the story by narrating Leah's perspective of her action as a divine reward, claiming that she is rewarded for giving her maidservant to her husband by God (*THT*, p. 97). By the time the narration of the story ends, the commander orders a silent prayer, seeking a blessing and achievement for all the endeavours they go through (*THT*, p. 97). Supporting it with another scripture from the Bible, "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to know himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him" (*THT*, p. 99).

As seen from the scripture, the regime has chosen to read before the ceremonies, it is clear that the oppression and exploitation of the female body are justified through religion. Atwood (2018) expresses how the regime in the novel uses a deliberate interpretation of the Bible, highlighting Old Testament passages to justify the regime's actions by oppressive control, particularly over fertility. As a result, the female body is reduced to breeding tools with the control of the religious regime for the sake of maintaining the power they have. Gilead chooses Bible verses that support their perspective on marriage and reproduction, even changing some of them to align with their goals. They use the Bible to legitimize their cruel actions (Hawk, 2016). Thus, it is evident that the regime twists the story into a state policy and therefore manipulates religion as a strategic tool to justify its practices. Not only are female bodies exploited, but sacred texts are also manipulated by the regime. The Gilead regime presents itself as morally purified by involving religion and religious images, despite its practices that exploit women. So, the irony within the regime is undeniable. While the regime presents itself as religious, it commits immoral acts using religion itself, and it supports Tyson's (2006) analysis of how religion is used to subordinate people. Tyson, regarding Karl Marx's definition of religion as 'the opiate of the masses', argues that people exploit religion to justify and promote inhumane conditions (p. 59). Regarding this, Reynold (2024) states that "Gilead extrapolates this story into a state-sanctioned practice, where Handmaids are used as surrogates to overcome widespread infertility" (p. 2). So, it will be significant to state that women are only recognized as vehicles for the religious-based regime. Reynold further argues that religious texts are manipulated by males to strengthen their dominance, and by using selective interpretations, they justify and reinforce the oppression of women (p. 2).

Furthermore, scriptures from the Bible are reminded and repeated by the Handmaids before each meal. At lunch, the Handmaids read "Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent...Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted" (*THT*, p. 96). While Offred recognizes that these scriptures are constructed by those in power, she also knows that the Handmaids cannot verify them, as they are prohibited from accessing any written materials, including the Bible. Selected parts of

religious texts are being routinized to ensure that they are internalized, causing women to accept and conform, thus turning their oppression into a regular practice. In other words, religious teachings are used to indoctrinate the Handmaids, establishing total control and ensuring their obedience. Atwood claims that religion is “used by those who want more power for themselves” (WPSU, 2015). Therefore, regarding Atwood’s perspective on her own novel, it is clear that the Gilead regime uses religion as an instrument to extend its power.

Religious doctrines of the totalitarian regime are taught to the Handmaids by the Aunts. The stories, the roles and duties, and the sacredness of the ceremony are all imposed upon them by the Aunts. This process creates a psychological obstacle, making it difficult for Handmaids to challenge or oppose the regime’s dominance. Aunt Lydia states that “The Republic of Gilead...knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” (*THT*, p. 29). The power exercise of the regime over women is not just physical; it also extends to the state of mind. This means that the regime’s control is in every aspect of women’s lives. It becomes a society where the people themselves are compelled to contribute to maintaining the regime's power. Thus, the routinized readings of the selected scriptures, as a strategy, help the regime to sustain its oppressive power over women by the manipulation of religion.

Aunts appear to be helpful to the Handmaids, encouraging obedience by suggesting that, by tolerating the unique desire of men, they can manipulate the men to get what they want. However, this supposed help serves to reinforce the control and oppression exerted over the Handmaids. Regarding the encouragements made by the Aunts, Aunt Lydia expresses that:

Men are sex machines, said Aunt Lydia, and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is a metaphor. It’s nature’s way. It’s God’s device. It’s the way things are. (*THT*, 149)

As seen in the quote by Aunt Lydia, the patriarchal system encourages women to be submissive, obedient. Furthermore, in order to naturalize the intended message, she supports it with both nature and religion. By framing it as a rule of nature and religion, she tries to legitimize the values of the regime.

Apart from religion being used as a tool to exploit, oppress, and take individuals, particularly women, under control, educational institutions are also employed by the regime to exercise its power. Regarding social institutions, Antonio Gramsci (1999) offers the concept of hegemony, which is divided into force and consent, reinforcing the ideology of the dominant class in every aspect of life in the name of people's consent (p. 248). Moreover, Foucault (1972) claims that "Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it" (p. 227). Throughout the novel, the use of the educational institution, the Red Centre, as a political means is demonstrated several times, where different types of oppression and exploitation are observed to legitimize the regime's prevailing political ideology.

In the patriarchal Gilead regime, women are denied literacy; they are not allowed to read, and therefore are prevented from thinking intellectually. In the educational centers, rather than receiving formal education, the Handmaids are indoctrinated into their newly assigned roles, namely, breeding for the elites to serve the nation. Offred expresses, "From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs. We recited that, three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said" (*THT*, p. 123). It becomes evident that the Red Centre focuses solely on the functions, benefits, and uses of the Handmaids for the powerholders. Klarer (1995) writes that the oppressive Gilead Regime designs the system to give men control through advanced text-based knowledge, while women are restricted to spoken communication (p. 131). So, as it is forbidden for the Handmaids to speak even among themselves, and with the repeated recitation of the same statements multiple times a day unconsciously internalization may be targeted since they are constantly exposed to repeated statements, as a cognitive bias, the illusory truth effect likely to occur, which is likely the regime's intent:

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed. (*THT*, p. 10)

The fact that the Handmaids have to communicate secretly and develop particular ways of sharing information and ideas stresses the regime's fear of knowledge and its anxiety about the subversion of authority. For this reason, the regime tries to prevent any possibility of intellectual development, guaranteeing that people do not question their situation or look for liberation. Regarding getting knowledge, Offred expresses what Aunt Lydia used to state as "Knowing was a temptation. What you don't know won't tempt you (*THT*, p. 201). This shows that gaining knowledge is consciously restricted, with the regime reflecting it as risky, especially for women. The fear imposed by the regime strategically allows it to perpetuate the power it holds.

Colonizer ideology has constantly aimed to keep the enslaved nations away from developed intellectual thought, and thereby, any possible resistance is prevented. Similarly, women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are prohibited from reading and writing as tools of silencing them. Atwood's phrase "Pen Is Envy..." (*THT*, p. 142), is interpreted as a wordplay to Freud's concept of 'Penis Envy', which suggests that women envy men because of their biological differences. However, in this oppressive regime, women do not desire male physical features; instead, they long for objects by which they can express themselves freely and improve their intellectual ability.

Pamela Cooper (1997) claims that in Gilead, power is directly tied to the biological organ and that the one who holds the pen has the power over language, authority, law, and every other field (p. 110). Regarding the language theme, the Handmaids' greeting phrases are too predetermined by the dominant ideology. Offred states the recited and must-be-uttered phrases as "Blessed be the fruit," and the acceptance of it as "May the Lord open," (*THT*, p. 25). These quotes, emphasizing the discourse of the regime that deems women as bare breeding objects, illustrate how the regime controls women and their language as a suppression tool. Overall, it can be expressed that patriarchal authority weaponizes education and tools for intellectual development, including language, to suppress, silence, and keep women under control, thereby maintaining gender inequality by prohibiting women's access to power, literacy, and resources, which helps the regime uphold its dominance and the continuation of established power dynamics.

Karl Marx (2022) asserts that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (p. 35). This perspective is reflected in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the regime not only controls the means of production and ideological apparatuses but also dominates the distribution of knowledge to reinforce its power. As a result, any materials that involve reading are banned for women, including books, magazines, games such as Scrabble, shop signs, and even the Bible.

Atwood illustrates this restriction when Offred tells her observation of the Commander's room. She describes the room, noting the abundance of books in bookcases lining the walls. They are accessible, however forbidden. The books having no boundaries to reach, like locks or boxes, reinforce the “an oasis of the forbidden” metaphorical idea in Offred, symbolizing the strict control of the regime, as Handmaids cannot enter these rooms freely (*THT*, p. 145). She further emphasizes the regime's control by describing Scrabble as something different. “Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent” (*THT*, p. 145). Through these details, Atwood possibly highlights how the regime manipulates knowledge to maintain dominance strategically. On the scene of a Scrabble game, Offred describes the difficulty in trying to recall and use a language she once knew, however, now she struggles to remember, so nearly to be forgotten. The effort of spelling words feels heavy, like trying to use an old, forgotten custom that no longer exists in the world she now lives in (*THT*, p. 160). Not using language seems to deteriorate the ability to communicate, in turn weakening the autonomy that language provides. Thus, knowledge, communication, and literacy as tools are consciously restricted to the Handmaids by the regime to silence women.

Patriarchal societies attribute superior traits to men while assigning inferior traits to women. Women are traditionally defined as emotional, unreasonable, sensitive, and weak, whereas men are seen as rational, clever, and strong. As a result, genders are constructed and shaped by the identifications assigned by the male-dominated society. Barbara F. Prince (2022), in her research conducted on *The Handmaid's Tale*, concludes that the novel stresses gender stereotyping, presenting women as mothers and homemakers and men as leaders and protectors. Framed as a “return to traditional values,” this structure strips women of their careers and reduces

the Handmaids to their reproductive roles, reinforcing a belief that society can only be saved by removing women's power and pushing them to the traditional roles and authority (p. 343). In this framework, two distinct spheres are formed: the domestic sphere, designated for women, and the public sphere, dominated by men. While women are expected to fulfill domestic roles, men are encouraged to participate in social, political, and intellectual domains. This rigid division is echoed in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred states, "He has something we don't have, he has the word" (*THT*, p. 95), highlighting men's access to language, knowledge, and power. This division is further stressed when Offred thinks about what the men in the van do and states, "Play cards, most likely, or read; some masculine pursuit" (*THT*, p. 120). These examples underscore how the regime reinforces traditional gender roles, restricting women from any means that enhance critical thinking.

While women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are restricted from literacy, Aunts are allowed by the regime to enforce the indoctrination of the system. This privilege is an important aspect of control over women by the regime. The Aunts, responsible for training the Handmaids, have privileges compared to other women, as stated by Offred: "She was writing something. For every rule there is always an exception: this too can be depended upon. The Aunts are allowed to read and write" (*THT*, p. 135). Nonetheless, this exception for the Aunts to access literacy is not granted for intellectual development but instead provided to fulfill their responsibility in the indoctrination of the Handmaids. This reflects the power dynamics within the society, where the Aunts hold a privileged, however, limited position. The Aunts are given privileged but limited power, which is access to read and write. This power is functional, allowing them to act as key vehicles of the regime and impose its ideology as part of the regime. On the teaching ways of the Aunts, Aunt Lydia says, "Modesty is invisibility... Never forget it. To be seen – to be seen – is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" (*THT*, pp. 34-35). This teaching, as an example of the Aunts using their privilege, serves only to enforce the inferior status, subjugation, submission, and gender roles. Thus, the quote shows that teachings, namely the education system, are to force women to accept their subjugation, submission, and gender roles. Barbara Hill Rigney (1987) also states that "the control agency in this novel is not the commanders, but the 'Aunts', who run their

re-education centres with cattle prods, torture techniques, and brain washing slogans” (p. 118). Therefore, it can be understood that the Aunts, who head the education center, are likely to have greater influence over the Handmaids, as this is where their way of thinking is shaped and that the education system is used as an indoctrination instrument through unethical strategies and weaponized against women by the patriarchal Gilead Regime to maintain its dominance in every domain including knowledge.

Norman Fairclough (1989) argues that a "hidden agenda" prevails in educational institutions, alongside other social foundations that reinforce the dominant ideology and class relations (p. 40). In the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the attitudes and teaching style of the Aunts reveal that this agenda is not hidden; rather, it is exercised overtly. At a basic level, the existence of a political agenda can be discussed. This direct reinforcement of social hierarchy, norms, values, and dominant ideologies highlights the regime's intention to control and condition individuals. Within this framework, the Red Centres, with the Aunts acting as the regime's instruments, play a significant role in maintaining existing power dynamics.

The Gilead Regime embodies panoptic strategies to maintain its patriarchal agenda, leading the Handmaids to regulate their behaviour. The Panopticon, a conceptual prison designed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1791), is based on his brother's studies of an inspection house. Bentham's goal was to design a building suitable for various establishments, where people would be under constant observation. Bentham proposed a circular structure with a tower in the centre, allowing the inspector to observe the prisoners. Cells around the outer ring would have windows to let light in, making the prisoners visible from the tower. However, the prisoners could not see the guard because the blinds and walls blocked their view. Consequently, the prisoners would never know if they were being watched; however, they would be aware that they could be watched at any moment. This uncertainty would cause them to behave as if they were always under surveillance, fostering self-control (pp. 1-12).

Based on Bentham's concept, Foucault (1995) explains the power of the panopticon concept because it encourages prisoners to avoid committing crimes; the prisoners would begin to control themselves without the need for chains or force. The possibility and threat of being watched would be enough to regulate their behaviour. Moreover, it illustrates that power does not depend on a specific guard; anyone in the

tower can be the observer. As a result, prisons become mechanisms of control, leading prisoners to discipline themselves. This model can also be applied beyond prisons to any setting where observation occurs, such as schools, hospitals, and factories. Therefore, Foucault, developing the panoptic theory, views it as a societal control tool and a symbol of modern power. Due to the psychological pressure of the system, individuals internalize surveillance, monitor themselves, and act properly, ultimately conforming to societal norms. That is why Foucault describes it as a machine that creates power relations automatically, encouraging obedience to the system (pp. 195-215)

Similarly, the regime seeks to create a sense of self-surveillance through the education system. Aunt Lydia states that ‘The Republic of Gilead...knows no bounds. Gilead is within you’ (*THT*, p. 29). This reflects the purpose of the regime through the education centers: to indoctrinate the system's ideology and make people internalize it, self-policing their thoughts and actions, aligning with the Panopticon concept, like the prisoners under constant watch, controlling their actions; a similar mechanism is aimed at the Handmaids. They are constantly being watched by the Aunts, but more specifically by the Eyes, who are responsible for enforcing the regime's system and monitoring whether the strict rules and regulations are obeyed. As one of the key instruments of the regime's oppressive control, the Eyes take people under constant watch, so particularly the Handmaids are scared of acting or not complying with the oppressive norm. This constant fear forces the Handmaids to regulate their behavior and be careful of everyone, as anyone could be a possible Eye. This consciously constructed fear instilled by the regime prevents any possible resistance attempt, as the Eyes can be disguised, so they cannot trust anyone.

Although religion is used as a powerful instrument by the regime to subjugate the Handmaids in the education centers through stories and scriptures, it is seen that the Handmaids are not allowed to access the Bible itself. ‘The Bible is kept locked up...’ (*THT*, p. 94). Following this, Offred states, ‘I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking’ (*THT*, p. 96). In this context, it is clear that the regime manipulates the beliefs of the Handmaids and aims to make them ignorant. Although Offred knows that the regime has altered the Bible's content to fit its norms, she has no way to challenge it since she

is forbidden from reading. Furthermore, because the regime itself made these changes, they also intended to keep the Bible away from the Handmaids. Therefore, it can be argued that the Handmaids are doubly subjugated: on one hand, they are deceived by the regime's changed and manipulated stories, and on the other hand, they are restricted from reading and questioning abilities.

2.5. LOST IDENTITIES: ALIENATION AND ASSIMILATION OF WOMEN

Colonialist ideology believes in the superiority of the colonizers' culture, which they consider to be advanced and civilized. They accept native peoples as inferior, savage, and undeveloped, disregarding their cultures. This ideology positions itself at the center while the colonized are at the margins (Tyson, 2006, pp. 419-420). Similarly, regarding *The Handmaid's Tale*, the patriarchal ideology of the oppressive Gilead regime positions itself as virtuous while women are seen as corrupt and need to be restored for the use of the nation, much like the colonized. So, the regime that controls female identity and agency enforces assimilation, alienation, and estrangement over women through its systemic oppressive structures, thereby marginalizing women in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The regime enforces strict gender roles that shape women's identity, assimilating them through systemic control and indoctrination. It is seen that women, particularly the Handmaids, are renamed and denied their former names, and the others are assigned new names according to their functions in society, such as Wife, Aunts, or Marta. Offred says, "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden" (*THT*, p. 90). This quote shows how the regime erases women's identity, reinforcing assimilation. Moreover, she follows with "I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others" (*THT*, p. 90), highlighting how women are named only for the use of other people rather than their autonomy. The Handmaids are called according to the Commander to whom they belong, with the prefix 'of' added before the name of the Commander, such as Of-Fred, or Of-Glen. Malak (2001) illustrates the cancellation of the former names and the labelling of the Handmaids according to their Commander, aligning this with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that man defines

woman not as an autonomous being, but simply as dependent on himself (p. 6). So, women, apart from being reduced to commodities of the elite members, are also stripped of their former identities through the redefining strategies of the regime to assimilate them.

Furthermore, the internalization of the regime's norms also demonstrates assimilation strategies applied to women. Aunts and Wives play a significant role in the internalization of oppression. Offred states, "Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (*THT*, p. 62). Moreover, Aunt Lydia claims that even though the current situation might appear unusual, it will become ordinary after a while (*THT*, p. 39). Thus, women are forced to forget their previous lives and identities in this context. Moreover, the regime's values are naturalized, and the conditions are normalized, making them appear ordinary. With the help of the Aunts and Wives, assisting in the continuation of the ideology as instruments, these values are internalized, further aiding the process of assimilation. In this context, the concept of the 'colonial subject' can be applied to the Aunts and Wives, as they do not resist the subjugation imposed by the regime, but instead, they fully internalize the regime's norms and reinforce the structure of oppression. By deeply integrating its values and norms into those selected women, the regime ensures a broad complicity. Not only does the regime select certain women to play an instrumental role in enforcing its ideology, but it also uses other tools of communication, such as the media, to gain further dominance.

The mass media plays a significant role in normalizing the situation the Handmaids come across. So, the power over the media is also used against women as an instrument to serve the assimilating purposes. The traditional gender roles assigned to women and the ideology of the regime are propagated through the media as a means of internalization. Offred tells, "They show us only victories, never defeats" (*THT*, p. 89). The regime creates stories to be displayed and watched by women and thereby detaches them from the truth. By constantly shaping reality, the media becomes a powerful political tool for reinforcing obedience and erasing different perspectives. So, an alienating process on people's critical thoughts takes place. This media manipulation by the powerholders causes isolation, which estranges people from their thoughts and objective truths.

Alienation is used as a colonization tool by the colonial ideology with this systemic process in which the colonized is aimed to be disconnected from their identity, culture, land, and even their sense of self. In the context of the patriarchal Gilead regime, women are disconnected, namely alienated from their own selves, identity, and culture by the patriarchal ideology. The Handmaids, reduced to their ability to breed, are alienated from their body as seen in the statement “My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated” (*THT*, p. 68). In addition to this, Offred follows “Not mine, but my body’s, if there is a difference” (*THT*, p. 87). This demonstrates how women are estranged from their bodies due to the functions imposed on them. This mirrors the alienation theory of Marx (1977), who argues that in a capitalist system, labor becomes an object separated from them as producers. Additionally, this object as a product may be used as a tool to oppress them. Therefore, he concludes that this object is no longer under the control of the worker, being turned into something alien to them (pp. 68-69). When it is applied to the novel, it can be expressed that women whose bodies are objectified are similarly alienated from their own body parts through the political strategies of the regime, which are, in turn, used as a means to oppress them. As a result, their physical selves become something alien, separated entities, and unfamiliar beyond their control. This alienation both dehumanizes women and reinforces the systemic power imbalance via estranging their identity from their own bodies.

Furthermore, Offred’s emotional alienation from her past is stressed throughout the novel. Offred is isolated from her past, and the painfully conveyed relationship between Offred, Luke, and her daughter emphasizes how the regime aims to sever the emotional connection to her family and memories. This emotional alienation is significant to see the exertion of power by the regime to control people’s bodies and their sense of self as subjects. On the photograph of the daughter, Atwood follows “Is this her, is this what she’s like?” (*THT*, p. 236). Offred’s disability to remember and have an idea about her daughter can be a symbol of her alienation from her previous life. The disconnection of her past further follows “Live in the present, make the most of it, it’s all you’ve got...I have trouble remembering what I used to look like” (*THT*, p. 149). Thus, it can be argued that the loss of the past is highlighted by Offred, who becomes an alien, stripped of memories and an estranged identity.

In addition to being estranged from their previous lives, the Handmaids are separated from their former way of dressing as well. The clothing culture, which was once the usual and normal way of living, appears to be abnormal due to the alienation strategies of the regime. On the scene of a tourist tour, Offred expresses her view. She tells the skirts of the tourists fall just below their knees, revealing their legs that are nearly naked beneath their thin stockings. Additionally, she describes the high-heeled shoes as instruments of discomfort that female tourists struggle to walk steadily on their high heels as if they're walking on stilts; this posture created by the high-heels causes their backs to bend at the waist, pushing their hips outward. Offred further describes their head as uncovered, and that their hair is visible, showing its darkness and sexual nature (*THT*, p. 34).

Regarding the particular mandated way of clothing, the Gilead Regime, with its strict dress codes, changing the way women express themselves freely and their control over their own bodies, alienates women from their own identities. Laflen (2007) argues that Offred's description of women stresses how her consciousness is colonized. The brainwashing and manipulation of the regime are reflected through the perspective of Offred, as she uses phrases such as "naked," "blatant," and "exposed" which are repeated by the Aunts in the re-education centers. So, this internalization shows how the ideological perspective of the regime is adopted (p. 94). Offred continues, "I used to dress like that. That was freedom" (*THT*, p. 34). This suggests a double consciousness of Offred, as she interprets the world through the regime's viewpoint while also recalling the former way of dressing as a symbol of freedom. Through the inner conflict of Offred, it can be inferred that the sense of identity is manipulated, and women are deliberately alienated from their way of thinking by the regime.

Estrangement strategies are applied to women to isolate them from intellectuality and suppress their intellectual freedom. As mentioned before, rigid restriction methods are applied to the act of reading and writing. Due to this oppression, it is seen that women are estranged from the abilities that they once could perform freely. On the scene of playing Scrabble, Offred explains, "My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten (*THT*, p. 160). This scene highlights how the regime's oppressive

tactics over women estranged them from their very fundamental right to speak, express themselves, and think critically, which breaks off the relation with intellectual identity. Furthermore, in this context, women are deprived of taking part in the public sphere, including the workforce. They are subjected to strategies that encourage them to internalize the assigned gender roles defined by the patriarchal Gilead regime. As a result, once normal aspects of life appear to be strange to them. This is obvious when Offred notes, “It’s strange, now, to think about having a job. Job. It’s a funny word. It’s a job for a man” (*THT*, p. 178). This quote highlights how the regime alienates women from their previous identity and controls their intellectual thinking. By the constant indoctrinations and the imposed strict roles, women seem to have lost independence and become estranged from the equal roles that they once had.

The regime not only alienates individuals from their previous lives but also consciously erases essential skills and knowledge, leaving people helpless. The regime has systematically eradicated any fields of creation or self-sufficiency. Jezebels, for instance, who are the women in brothels, are to wear the clothes chosen by the regime. Additionally, they cannot repair them in case the clothes are shredded. Atwood highlights this erasure of creation when Moira expresses her wish for someone who still remembers how to make or repair clothes (*THT*, p. 250). This statement reveals the extent of the regime’s control; not only has it restricted women’s autonomy, but it has also ensured that the knowledge to maintain or create things is lost, forcing people to be entirely dependent on the state. So, the complete erasure of individual agency and alienation from self-sufficiency under the regime's oppressive rule is emphasized.

Serena Joy, the Wife, is too estranged and alienated from her previous life. She used to be a public figure in her former life; however, like the other oppressed women, she is among the women stripped of their identity and isolated from their previous lives. About Serena Joy, Offred recalls as “...the Growing Souls Gospel Hour, where they would tell Bible stories for children and sing hymns. One of the women was called Serena Joy. She was the lead soprano” (*THT*, p. 22). In contrast to her previous position, she is now confined to the house, fulfilling the traditional roles assigned by the regime. Moreover, the regime seeks to keep her busy with tasks such as sewing scarves, which are said to be for the Angels. In a scene where Offred thinks about Serena Joy, she states that Serena might be in the sitting room, sewing or probably

knitting scarves for the front Angels, who are the soldiers fighting for Gilead. She has doubts about whether the Angels would have any use for such scarves, though (*THT*, p. 19). Thus, this reveals that assigning women to meaningless tasks to keep their minds engaged is another means used by the regime to isolate and manipulate them under the illusion that they are assisting the regime in their roles. These sewn materials are not genuinely valuable for the regime; however, they are consciously entrusted tasks to the Wives to keep them psychologically valuable and beneficial to the regime, which helps the prevailing ideology to maintain its dominance while preventing women from finding true agency. Ultimately, these scarves may symbolize the psychological control and suspension of the regime over the Wives.

Similar to Serena Joy, Moira's alienation exemplifies the regime's subjugation. Before Gilead, Moira was a supporter of the feminist movement, reflecting her nonconformist character by resisting the regime's control and refusing to comply during the indoctrination at the re-education center. She initially tries to escape and challenge the system multiple times. During these attempts, she cooperates with the underground resistance network called Mayday, whose full extent remains unclear throughout the novel; however, Offred learns of its existence through whispered conversations with Ofglen. Despite her struggle with the help of the resistance group, Moira is eventually captured, and without any alternatives for resistance, she is forced to choose between becoming a Jezebel or being sent to the Colonies, and as a result, she is forced to work at Jezebel's. This shift reveals how even one of the strongest resistances can be reduced through the regime's use of fear and coercion. Offred states, "She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something – what? – that used to be so central to her?" (*THT*, p. 257). While Moira's physical resistance is no longer present, her emotional detachment can be seen as a new form of subjugation. Moira's indifference to the situation she is in reveals the regime's power over alienation, reinforcing the sense of isolation and stripping women of their former identity and will.

CHAPTER THREE

SILENCING AND CONTROLLING WOMEN IN VOX

3.1. CHRISTINA DALCHER AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Christina Dalcher, born in New Jersey, is an American writer, professor, and accomplished researcher in linguistics. She is primarily known for her dystopian novel *Vox*, published in 2018. On her website, she said she attended the University of Virginia to get a bachelor's degree, where she studied drama. In 2000, she enrolled at George Mason University to pursue a master's degree in Linguistics. After the master's programme, she completed her doctoral program at Georgetown University in 2006, studying Phonology, Phonetics, Lenition, Sociolinguistic Variation, and Italian. Her dissertation specifically examined phonetic sound changes. She examined the consonant weakening phenomenon known as *Gorgia Toscana* in the Florentine dialect of Italian. Her study proposed that the patterns observed in this linguistic process arise from the sophisticated interplay of several independent factors. Dalcher has taught at several universities, as she has shared with her CV on her website, she worked at City University London, where she was a researcher and worked on the acquisition, production, and perception of the sound rhotics in Southern British English. Additionally, she has taught linguistics, phonetics, phonology, and Italian courses at George Mason University. Besides these institutions, she has also taught articulatory and acoustic phonetics at Queen Mary University of London. Moreover, at the University of Westminster, she has instructed on phonology; at Khalifa University of Science, Technology, and Research (KUSTAR) in Abu Dhabi, Dalcher has taught academic writing and rhetorical courses. Thanks to her career in linguistics and her work experience at international universities, Dalcher paid much more attention to freedom of speech. As she declares during the interview as well, she believes that for the best writing, one should focus on what they know best both academically and experientially (Dalcher, 2018; Gentry, 2018).

Christina Dalcher has been into reading, writing, and linguistics since she was a child. She read a lot of Stephen King when she was thirteen. Being a fan of King, she expresses that she was influenced by him, which is probably the reason she wanted to write scary, shocking, and provocative pieces that lead people to think about issues

like extremism (The Gloss Book Club, 2020). Moreover, Dalcher states that spending a lot of time in the Butler Public Library in New Jersey and the small Library of the Grammar School she attended at a very young age hinted at her interest in linguistics. As there was no easy access to books in the 1970s, and they did not have enough books at home, she applied to libraries. Dalcher expresses that she used to read three particular books when she was six; those were *Fun with French*, *Fun with Italian*, and *Fun with Spanish*. So being engaged with languages at an early age hinted at her future career, as Dalcher states. Moreover, Dalcher was a writer of flash fiction, works of under 1000 words (Prhlibrary, 2018).

Christina Dalcher has written four novels: *Vox* (2018) which is a dystopian novel in which women are limited to speak 100 words per day, *Masterclass* (2020) which is also known as *Q* exploring a society in which the Q scores of children determine their future, *Femlandia* (2021) centering on a female-only colony founded after a societal collapse, and *The Sentence* (2023) that is a speculative thriller which explores justice and language themes. In addition to these novels, Dalcher has authored numerous short stories and flash fiction. “Candy Girls”, “Dressage”, “Unspeakable”, “The Memory of Elephants”, “The Barker”, “Silents Sex”, “Dog Eat Dog”, “Aut Dormi, Aut Lacte” are some of them granted her prizes and recognition in the literary field, including the Bath Flash Fiction Award, the Pushcart Prize, and nominations for Best Small Fictions (Dalcher, 2020).

Vox, the novel that will be under discussion, was awarded the Goldsboro Books Glass Bell Award to Dalcher in 2019 and became a Sunday Times best-selling dystopian novel. Originally, “Wernicke 27X”, the flash fiction written for the Molotov contest, is the story that evolved into *Vox* (Dalcher, 2019). The story, reflecting the author's background as a linguist, involves a plot where people suddenly lose their ability to speak and begin uttering meaningless sounds. Inspired by feedback from readers, Dalcher decided to further develop the story, at the end of which *Vox* emerges. Dalcher expresses that she was indeed inspired by a story that she read when she was young however, she cannot remember the name of it. In that children's story, a group of people limit their spoken words daily, intending to focus more on listening to the world around them. In this narrative, the use of knots in a rope belt is used as a way to count the words by the characters (Ellor, 2020). Similarly, in *Vox*, a counter worn by

women counts their words up to 100, and if this limit is exceeded, they are shocked. Although the purpose of this word-counting device is different, the author ultimately drew inspiration from this story she had read in terms of counting words.

Along with that children's book as an inspiration, the Women's March (2017), taking place after Donald Trump's inauguration due to the new administration's policies on human rights, influenced Dalcher as well. The Women's March organisation aimed to support gender equality and civil rights, which they estimated would face challenges with the new administration. Although the march, the largest single-day demonstration of U.S. history, was organised to be in Washington, with the sister marches evoked in other cities and countries, it turned into a global demonstration. Republicans gained control of Congress in the 2016 presidential elections by defeating their Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. The conservative ideas and provocative sayings of Trump, some of which were about women, gained more support from the right-wing ideology supporters. Furthermore, a video of Trump's sexist approach to women went viral, leading women to take action. With a call made on Facebook proposing a march in Washington, thousands of women supported the event. While the march is often recognized as a protest against Trump, its main aim was to advocate for gender and wage equality, LGBTQ+ and civil rights, accessible healthcare, environmental protection, and reproductive rights, concerns that many believed received insufficient attention by the incoming administration (Rafferty, 2018). Regarding the march, Dalcher shares her thoughts as "In 2017 I watched the women marching on Washington and I remember thinking 'I bet there are people out there watching this who wish those women would just shut up' (Ellor, 2020). So, Dalcher believed that those who did not attend the march likely hoped women would stop and silence their voices. Dalcher connects her present thought to a historic standpoint on the culture of domesticity. She claims that during the time of WWII, women had a chance to take part in work workforce; however, when the need was completed after the war, the culture of domesticity was once more promoted. Thus, she argues that there have been pushbacks against feminist achievement and that, through this culture, women are expected to be submissive to their husbands. That is the relation she makes between the historical facts and the Washington March (The Gloss Book Club, 2020).

Furthermore, Trump's campaign to outlaw abortion during the 2016 Presidential election sparked significant controversy. He advocated for punishing those who undergo the procedure and later attempted to clarify that it should be the providers of the procedure who are punished, not the women. He further stated that in such situations, the women undergoing the operation would be considered victims (BBC, 2016). Abortion has been legal in the US since 1973 (Planned Parenthood Action Fund, 2025); however, DeBonis and Johnson (2017) report that the Trump administration and its conservative supporters support attempts to withdraw this constitutional right. Not only did he endorse this idea during his 2016 campaign, but he also sought to pass a bill to outlaw abortion after taking office. In fact, Sam Myers, a fictional president in *Vox*, is portrayed as a Trump-like figure. Dalcher expressed regret over this resemblance, noting that she aimed to write a timeless novel and now believes a less specific character would have better served that goal. Nonetheless, she adds that it is somehow difficult not to be influenced by the events and individuals we encounter in real life (The Gloss Book Club, 2020). The interplay between the real world and the novel offers a more relatable demonstration of current societal challenges. Merriam-Webster (2025) defines the concept of 'backlash' as strong reactions to previously gained rights. In this context, it can be argued that backlash manifests in the new government's attempts to push women back into traditional roles.

Vox was published in August 2018. The term 'Vox' means 'voice' in Latin. Dalcher wrote the novel in just two months, starting on the 23rd of May and finishing on the 23rd of July, and it has been translated into twenty languages. Many publishers often describe *Vox* as a novel of the #MeToo movement, through which women had a chance to be heard and speak up, due to its main point: silencing women (The Gloss Book Club, 2020). Although the novel was indeed written before the movement, in an interview with France 24 (2019), Dalcher states that witnessing the stronger growing voice of women, protesting, and raising their voice inspired her to create the novel's background world.

Christina Dalcher states that *Vox* is a combination of women's fiction, dystopia, feminist and political work, and a commercial thriller. In all, it is a story of Jean, a woman, who has to navigate through the new rules set by an extremist theological system, which she had not seen coming. Dalcher expresses that the female protagonist,

Jean, has a role in the newly established rules restricting women, as she did not speak while she could. So, the author expresses it as an irony that the main character, who is an expert in linguistics and working on a cure for an illness called aphasia related to speaking ability, is not allowed to talk and forced to stay in the house with the newly arriving patriarchal authority. Therefore, in this context, the author calls *Vox* a cautionary work as a wake-up call to speak up for the oppressed others regardless of their political ideologies (Prhlibrary, 2018).

Although Dalcher doesn't present her novel as a realistic scenario, she hopes it will prompt readers to reflect on the unique human ability to use language and to recognize the power of their voices, and so, they will start thinking and questioning, especially in the context of civic action like voting. She emphasizes that language is the most important feature that distinguishes human beings from other species. She further argues that though people use the language in all domains, they have little information about it, hoping people will be aware of it after reading *Vox* (Dalcher, 2018; Prhlibrary, 2018). In this framework, Dalcher in response to the question on getting into writing and inspiration for the novel expresses that she wanted to write a piece of work concerning the importance of language to human beings, and on this issue, she began asking herself "what might happen if we took that faculty away" in an interview conducted by The Gloss Book Club (2025).

Patriarchal ideologies exert their power in all domains of life, including literature as well, by deciding the language to be used or the feature of female characters to be submissive, naive, weak objects serving the male world. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argues that "In patriarchal Western culture...the text's author is a father, a progenitor, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis" (p. 6). That can be the reason behind the pseudonyms used by the female authors to keep their names secret in order to take part in the literary field. Particularly because of the oppression women face in patriarchal societies and since they still need to struggle in the 21st century, female writers have begun to gain attention as seen through the best-selling books since 2010 (Temple, 2019). Regarding the fear and hope of women, Cavalcanti (2003) states that feminist dystopian literature became a major expression of gender oppression as a source of conflict, which can be presented at similar degrees. She further adds that feminist dystopias reflect modern patriarchal

culture as well (pp. 47-48). Gilbert (2018) claims that with the new Trump administration, readers, affected by the past societal fears, sought literary works reflecting the turbulence, racism, and the alternative facts that could spread during his presidency. Following this quest, feminist dystopias of female writers began to be the primarily read ones focusing on women's issues, particularly reproduction when it is legislated, climate change, and the collapse of humanity's progress. Abortion limitation proposal by Oklahoma lawmaker, who claims that husband permission must be mandatory for the process to take place, children separation from the family policy that is justified by the religion by Trump administration, and the other policies about losing rights, have made the readers to connect the real events to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is thought to have an enormous inspiration over the modern feminist dystopias. The striking similarities between these policies and the regulations of the oppressive Gilead regime in Atwood's novel have led many to view her work as a reflection of real-world concerns rather than mere fiction.

Vox is also compared to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* due to its focus on the suppression of women by patriarchal ideology. Dalcher has been asked several times about this comparison. In an interview conducted by Melissa Firman (2018), Dalcher states that dystopian literature shares a common foundation: the oppression of a totalitarian system. Vox is often compared to other authors' works, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Regarding this similarity comparison, Dalcher reveals that her primary aim was to explore the faculty of speaking. Moreover, during the Zoom conference hosted by the Gloss Book Club (2020), in response to a similar question, Dalcher mentions that she read *The Handmaid's Tale* upon its publication, long before Vox was released. She further emphasizes that, as noted earlier, the short story that later evolved into Vox was written even before the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Dalcher acknowledges that it is difficult to avoid influence from other works, which she exemplifies with the story mentioned before that she read when she was a child. Although she cannot remember the name of that story, however, remembers the main theme, which was about a community limiting themselves to speaking 10 words a day, counting them through knots tied to a rope, to hear the sound of nature better. As Dalcher expresses during the interview with Gentry (2018), she has come up with the idea of combining a story

focusing on language with her field. So, Dalcher declares that her goal was not to produce a work similar to Atwood's; however, influence from the other works is possible, as she explains. Furthermore, she asserts that while Atwood produces significant literary works, she herself writes commercial thrillers. She expresses that she wants her books to be accessible and easily read. Additionally, during her meeting with PrhlLibrary and the interview with Gently, Dalcher mentions that the paychecks for flash fiction are really small, which is another reason she has begun writing longer works that offer more generous payments (2018).

Vox is a novel about a woman named Jean, the protagonist, who struggles against the oppression of a religious patriarchal system based on the Pure movement as an extension of the 'Bible Belt' that aims for women to be pure, chaste, and submissive in the new system. The story takes place in a future United States. Jean McClellan, a mother of three sons and a daughter, is an expert cognitive linguist. She is uninterested in politics and therefore does not fulfill her duty as a citizen, such as voting. However, a government supported by a religious movement led by Reverend Carl, whose backing in the election facilitates the new patriarchal system, takes control of the country. With the new regime, women are denied the rights they once had and are stripped of their workforce, formal education, and passports. The most striking change comes with the ban on speaking. Women, regardless of age or position, are not allowed to speak more than 100 words per day and must wear electronic counters that count the words each woman utters. Furthermore, if this limit is exceeded, women receive electrical shocks as a punishment. Jean, feeling angry and regretful for not taking action when she could, shows anger with herself. Given the terrible situation women face, Jean remembers her friend, Jackie Juarez, a women's rights activist who used to call her for feminist rights marches and protests. She thinks it is too late to change the new world they are expected to bear. Patrick, Jean's husband, is President Myers' science advisor. Jean perceives him as weak, believing he could use the privileges of his position to change the current situation, which turns out to be true, as Patrick indeed cooperates with the resistance group to challenge the dominant ideology. Steven, Jean's eldest son, supports the Pure Movement, considering males superior to females and viewing a woman's place as solely in the home, fully internalizing the ideology of the religious movement. Sonia, Jean's six-year-old

daughter, is confined to speaking like all other female characters and must attend the gender-roles-based religious school established by the new regime to instill its ideology, where one day she is awarded for speaking the fewest words.

One day, President Myers, along with his team, visits Jean to ask her to return to the laboratory as his brother, Bobby Myers, is reported to have had a skiing accident that has affected his ability to speak, scientifically known as Wernicke's aphasia, the inability to produce meaningful speech. Although this is Jean's area of expertise and research before the Pure Movement, she initially declines the offer. However, after seeing her daughter's joy from receiving a prize for speaking the fewest words, Jean agrees, negotiating with the government in exchange for the removal of both her own and her daughter Sonia's counters. Jean collaborates with two linguistic experts, Lin and Lorenzo, at the laboratory, which is full of very expensive technological devices and guarded by strict security staff. Furthermore, Lorenzo is Jean's lover, and they are expecting a baby because of their extramarital affair. However, Jean expresses that she does not want that baby to be born, especially if it is a girl, due to the severe conditions of females in their present world. In contrast to Patrick, Jean perceives Lorenzo as stronger and more proactive regarding the current situation.

On a day, facetimeing with her mother who lives in Italy from Patrick's office, Jean notices important notes named 'Project Wernicke' written 'top secret' under the title. She suspects the government's main purpose is not actually to find a cure for aphasia, but instead to improve a soluble serum in water supplies. So, this way, there will be no need to silence women through the counters. By the other secretly organized team, the serum developed by Jean's team will be reversed, and the women, as well as all others bearing potential to resist, will somehow consume it, leading to a permanent silence.

Jean's son, Steven, has a relationship with the neighbour's daughter, Julia King. Steven, a complete supporter of the movement, reports Julia for the premarital relationship they had. Consequently, she is taken away by the regime's police and punished to speak zero words a day. Students are forced to watch the televised punishment of Julia and are expected to write letters condemning Julia for the shameful crime she has committed. In reaction to it, although Steven did write a letter

condemning Julia because he had to do so in the oppressive state's institution, he implies that he no longer supports the movement after witnessing what Julia has been put through.

In the novel, it is narrated that there is a resistance operation against the movement in which Patrick, lab security, and Del, the mailman, have active roles. Unaware of the operation, Jean leaves her daughter at Del's farm, who is the son of a previous stroke patient of Jean. She sees that Del has generated a fake counter for his wife and daughters, so they are free to speak. Sharon, who is black, believes the next step of the government will be against Blacks, so they take action and organize the resistance to fight against the movement. After learning that Patrick is actually clean and works against the movement, they cooperate, and the scientists work to improve a serum that will poison President Myers, Reverend Carl, and the other officials with the help of Patrick on a meeting day. After successfully completing the serum the government asked for, the team is excluded from the laboratory. However, due to their achievement, they are called back this time to improve a serum that causes aphasia itself, which proves Jean's suspicion about the other secret team's aim, whose laboratory is much more functional and providing. They are threatened with the execution of their friends Lin and Jackie if they do not agree to complete the new mission assigned to them. This duty needs to be done until the meeting that will be held in the following days, in which Patrick is going to poison the highly ranking members.

Jean talks to Petroski, a security member, about his baby girl and the difficult future awaiting her. Influenced by Jean's speech, Petroski agrees to help them instill the aphasia-inducing serum into Morgan, the group leader. Lin, freed with Petroski's help, plans to first test the serum on a chimp and later on the incapacitated Morgan. However, he wakes up earlier than estimated, so Jean kills him. Following it, the team members leave the laboratory safely thanks to Petroski, who turns out to be a member of the resistance operation. Patrick, who is still believed to be a loyal official of the movement, manages to drop the deadly serum into the drinks of government officials, resulting in the death of all of them. The scene follows with a sniper's shooting and killing Patrick, whose body is brought to Ray's farm, where it is buried. Ultimately, it is understood that the oppressive regime is defeated. The novel ends with Jean,

Lorenzo, and the children going to Italy through Canada. As the United States starts recovering from the damaging effects of the movement, Jean thinks of returning to America to be politically more active in the following years.

3.2. LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF ENFORCING SILENCE

Language has been used by powerholders as a tool of oppression and colonization throughout history, particularly during periods of colonization. Through linguistic imperialism, the colonizer's ideology aims to erase the identities of colonized nations, which they perceive as inferior. Agyekum (2018) asserts that using education, religion, and media as means of dominance leads colonized people to adopt and internalize the colonizer's language (p. 101). In the context of *Vox*, language similarly serves as a means of suppression over women, enacted by patriarchal ideology to silence and otherize them. Although the authoritarian theological regime in the novel does not promote a language viewed as superior to that used by women, there is a common interest in eradicating a targeted group, in this case, women, from society, akin to colonialist ideology. Thus, it can be expressed that language is weaponized against women by the dominant ideology to subjugate and maintain control over them.

Women in *Vox* wear counters that count the words they utter each day. The system dictates that each woman may speak only 100 words daily, and exceeding this limit results in punishment by electroshocks, which the female characters in the novel describe as painful. Jean, the protagonist, describes herself as “a woman of few words” (*Vox*, p. 1), adding that women “have allotments of one hundred words a day” (*Vox*, p. 18). A critical analyst and linguist, Fairclough (1989) claims that language and ideology are strongly connected; as language is the commonest way of social interaction, it thereby plays a significant role in creating common sense and the truth of a society (p. 2). In *Vox*, women are taught and expected to be “women to keep silence and to be under obedience” (*Vox*, p. 104). Regarding Fairclough's view, this quote given and the limitation on language reflect how the dominant ideology uses language to silence women both literally and symbolically, through which the belief that woman is a silent and submissive creature will be normalised and internalised. Besides, the United States is portrayed as a country of liberty according to the Bill of Rights, which declares freedom of speech, particularly through the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” (Bill of Rights Institute, 2025)

In contrast to the general belief in the United States as the land of dreams, Dalcher demonstrates the potential consequences of the growing support for right-wing conservative ideology in the 21st century, resulting in an authoritarian system that enforces silence. In fact, the situation of women under the authoritarian religious regime is briefly summarized when Jean says, “We’ve turned into necessary evils, objects to be fucked and not heard” (Vox, p. 35). This quote illustrates the overall situation women face in the religious authoritarian system, which reduces them to voiceless objects serving male satisfaction. They are objectified, muted, and stripped of autonomy, existing solely to fulfill men's desires while being denied the opportunity to express their own identity. Dalcher, who pays significant attention to freedom of speech and highlights its importance during an interview with Gentry (2018), asserts that language is the most distinguishing feature that sets humans apart from other species. Furthermore, after witnessing the Washington March, she expresses confidence that some people wish for those women to stop speaking and marching (Ellor, 2020). Regarding her views, in an interview with the Sunday Post, she says, “I always fear any State that has too much power, so the message is that we can’t be silent. We have a responsibility to speak out” (Coia, 2018). Therefore, it can be insisted that everyone must struggle and speak out while it is not too late, even if it is not for their own benefit.

The restriction on speaking does not take place suddenly; women are gradually being excluded from the public sphere. With the new system supported by the Pure Movement, women are stripped of their jobs, passports, bank accounts, and property. Additionally, their paychecks are directed to their husbands, and Jean does not question the reason behind this (Vox, p. 127). The reason Jean does not question her paychecks being deposited into her husband’s account is that this patriarchal government has blocked all women’s bank accounts. Within this framework, it can be inferred that patriarchal societies possibly believe that money, which may symbolize

power, is a male domain, so excluding women from the public sphere effectively prevents them from being fully independent individuals with power. Women are stripped of their rights step by step, as Jean states, “Our passports went before our words did” (*Vox*, p. 6). So, a normalization period might be adopted by the system under their truth, which Foucault states is not neutral and universal, but rather, constructed by the power dynamics of a society. On this issue, he claims that “... it [truth] is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint...Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true...” (1980, p. 131).

Silencing women is used as a strategy to suppress any potential threat to the male-dominated authority through the ban on language, regarding which Kenyan postcolonial writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1987) says “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (p. 13). In *Vox*, it is seen that women are deprived of language both as a means of communication and as the continuation of their autonomy. The government, supported by a religious movement, silences all age groups; however, particularly younger girls might be the target, as they tend to internalize and acknowledge the silence of women as usual and natural. An important example of this occurs when the young daughter of Jean, Sonia, who cannot read, sees the love note Jean writes to Patrick on the bathroom mirror. Despite not understanding the meaning of the words, simply recognizing those markings as letters drives her to react, “Letters! Bad!” (*Vox*, p. 19). This scene strongly reveals how deeply the new government's indoctrination has taken root, thereby the regime will not have to try to deal with the currently young generation's any possible protests against the authority, as the so-called ‘truth’ is constructed and made internalized by the government from the very beginning through systematic control. This is the biggest anxiety of Jean, the linguist mother who knows quite well about the language processes, that's the reason she several times in the novel shows her reaction against the strategy on the little girls, and that they will know the silence as the norm. For instance, in the scene when Reverend Carl comes to offer a job to Jean on the president's brother's illness, Jean explains the intention of the state, which is to create “docile women and girls”. Following it, Jean adds that the state tries to control the older generations; however, by the time Sonia becomes a mother, “Pure Women and

Pure Men”, which is Reverend Carl’s vision, will have become the norm, the truth of the time (Vox, p. 100). These statements reveal Jean’s worry about how deeply the regime’s ideology will penetrate future generations, emphasizing the devastating power of language and silence as means for shaping social conformity and control.

Women of Vox are not only deprived of the workforce but are also excluded from their past accomplishments. As they are restricted to houses, they have lost their professional titles and are pushed back to traditional roles of becoming just wives and mothers. After the limitation of speaking, their professional titles are also taken away. Jean, who used to be a respected neurolinguist, was called ‘Dr. McClellan’. However, she has been merely ‘Jean McClellan’ since the new regime held the authority. When the government officials come to talk about the cure for the illness that she is an expert in, her counter is unlocked, and with it, she is recalled as ‘Dr.’ On regaining her title, Jean remarks, “Now, this is different. I haven’t been ‘Dr.’ anything since last spring” (Vox, p. 56). This scene illustrates the connection between words and the intellectual field. By the time Jean can speak, she reaches a male status; thereby, granted access to her former title, which is reserved for males by the patriarchal regime. As speaking is privileged to males, so is intellectual recognition. Thus, this scene can be analyzed as how both literal and figurative silence of women is enforced in every domain of life by the regime to reinforce its broader control over female autonomy.

Societal messages concerning gender roles and the dominant ideology are internalized, especially by young children, through various means of imposition. In Vox, it is illustrated in the scene where Jean describes the picture Sonia has drawn: “Instead of standing next to Patrick, or even at the far end of the family line, bookending our kids, I’m fifth. After my husband, after Steven, after the eleven-year-old twins. And Sonia has made me smaller than everyone except for her” (Vox, p. 114). This reveals how the silence of women is deeply indoctrinated in the minds of children, as seen through Sonia’s drawings. The drawing is not innocent but rather a reflection of the world in which girls are taught that their voices are insignificant, positioned as secondary in both voice and presence. As Kamal (2024) interprets, the proportions in child drawings reveal psychological perception; larger objects symbolize confidence and high self-esteem, while smaller ones signify dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Additionally, while the objects in the center represent the present, those drawn on the

left or right stand for the past or future. In a society where women are forbidden to speak, even children who turn to drawing, an activity that requires no speech, unconsciously internalize this silence and depict women as silent and voiceless figures. Thus, this illustrates that the dominant discourse controls even the field of creativity, albeit indirectly yet deliberately, in a targeted manner.

Dalcher, having studied language acquisition, claims that the process of language acquisition is active and easier at young ages, and that's why it is hard to acquire after a certain age (Prhlibrary, 2018). Sonia is at risk of not acquiring since she does not acquire the language at the right time due to the denial of this opportunity. Dalcher calls it the use-it-or-lose-it theory. She adds that linguists claim that if you do not use language for a certain time, you will not be able to in the future. For the daughter, it can be the literal interpretation of the theory; however, for the protagonist, Jean, the metaphorical meaning of the theory is seen. As Jean did not use the language while she had the opportunity, she lost it after a while (Prhlibrary, 2018). About the time she was free to speak, Jean recalls her friend Jackie, a women's rights activist, warning women against the uprising of an authoritative patriarchal regime that women should be careful about and take precautions against. She highlights possible terms they might face, like "... 'spousal permission' and 'paternal consent.' ...waking up one morning and finding you don't have a voice in anything" (Vox, p. 12). During their college years, Jean used to be apolitical, prioritizing her college subjects over politics, elections, and nominations. There were others like Jackie, who were aware of the inevitable rise of an authoritarian government, which is now running the state as expected. In those days, Jean did not join the marches and protests against inequality; in other words, she did not speak up and take action when she had the chance. In the meeting with Prhlibrary (2018), regarding the issue of inaction, Dalcher states that to change and achieve what we want, we need to step up and do what is necessary. She further follows with the quote she attributes to Edmund Burke from Vox: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing" (Vox, p. 370). Jean exemplifies the quote since she did not speak up while she could, being aware of it, she offers a kind of confession: "My fault started two decades ago, the first time I didn't vote, the umpteen times I told Jackie I was too busy to go on one of her marches or make posters or call my congressmen" (Vox, p. 263). She also compares herself to

her computer, which has not been used for a long time, and she worries about whether it will power up or not. On this thought of her, she says, “I’m worried it might not power up, that a year of nonuse will have sent it into the same dormant silence I fell into” (Vox, p. 130). Thus, she is quite aware of her role as a citizen in the situation they are expected to bear. However, Jean has done nothing for the good of people, letting the bad-minded ones become dominant and gain control. Ultimately, due to the inaction, the good are defeated.

This limitation on language places women in extreme difficulty socially and psychologically. Throughout the novel, it is evident that women are forced to alter their daily routines and habits due to this enforced silence. Jean reflects on how they have to give up their ordinary practices, such as reading bedtime stories to her daughter Sonia before sleeping or looking up the recipe book to find out the proportions, since any activities naturally including speaking or reading are prohibited for women. Although Jean continues some of the routines, she notes that she goes to the hairdresser not to change her cut but to get her hair styled, as she explains she would need to consume too many of her daily words while telling the hairdresser about how much to take off and leave (Vox, p. 19). This shows how women are not only restrained from speaking but also are constrained in their own lives due to the word limitation. Moreover, women do not have rights over their health as well. For instance, before calling her doctor, Jean must decide her questions, avoiding any modifiers to consume as few words as possible, as the word recorder is on (Vox, p. 87). So, it can be seen that the new male-dominated government indeed governs women’s even the smallest decisions and actions in their personal lives. Although it is indirect, it can be inferred that the patriarchal regime maintains control over women’s autonomy in a deeply invasive manner.

Women are expected to be confined to houses, excluded from the public sphere, being denied the rights they used to have, as mentioned before. During an author meeting event organized by the Gloss Book Club (2020), Dalcher, talking on Vox, mentions the culture of domesticity by which she explains how women are pushed back to their previous positions after the males decide that they do not need them anymore. This propagation of domesticity is generally supported by media, religion, education, and traditions over time. In Vox, backlash to the traditional roles is strongly

supported by the Pure Movement. Limiting a woman's speech has the same impact whether or not it is stated explicitly that her role in the home is to be a mother, homemaker, and angel of the house, because restricting her speech has the same effect. When she is unable to speak, she is also compelled to restrict her behaviors and actions. In an interview conducted by David Canfield for *Entertainment Weekly*, Dalcher expresses her worries, stating, "I'm particularly concerned about what might happen if (or when) too much control falls into the hands of anyone with an agenda" (2018). In this respect, Dalcher's worries are reflected in *Vox*, in which this agenda appears as a gender roles-based, religiously motivated movement targeting to silence women for the sake of maintaining its ideology.

Respected people in society also impose ideology through the media as an example for society. The president's wife is shown near him, positioned slightly behind and to his right, wearing beautiful clothes that complement one another (*Vox*, p. 45). This scene can be interpreted as a representation of a woman's place, which is to be near the leader, a role typically reserved for males in patriarchal societies, remaining silent in a gesture of consent, implying that she is content with her position. This illustrates the implicit hidden agenda of the ideology presented. Moreover, instead of being called by her name, the first lady is referred to as 'the President's wife', which illustrates the gender dynamics in the patriarchal regime where women are defined according to their relation to males around them. So, a systemic erasure of agency is exercised by the regime to silence women, reflecting de Beauvoir's concept of 'second sex'. Furthermore, on TV programs, the issues women face are portrayed as outcomes of changing gender roles, suggesting that, due to feminist advancements, women are surpassing their traditional roles in the domestic sphere. This shift leads to problems such as traffic, air pollution, illness rates, drug use, single parenthood, debt, and crime. Moreover, a program participant highlights that "We don't know who men are or who women are anymore. Our children are growing up confused. The culture of family has broken down" (*Vox*, p. 50). Regarding this kind of argument taking place repeatedly, Susan Faludi (2006) mentions backlash, which she asserts is "...a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway toward equality, a seemingly inevitable early frost to the culture's brief flowerings of feminism" (p. 61). The Pure Women characters who support the Pure Movement

believe in their definitions of gender and work for the spread of the ideology, echoing Faludi's assertion: "It must be all that equality that's causing all that pain" (p. 2). Thus, the movement aims to restore the order that they believe is corrupted because of the shift between spheres through silencing women as a solution.

Media as an instrument to propagate the discourse of the dominant ideology is also controlled by the state. House-imprisoned women's preferences are disregarded; moreover, their preference for spending their leisure time is also determined by the state. TV programs such as "sports, garden shows, cooking demos, home restoration, cartoons for children, some movies" (Vox, p. 47) are restricted following their service to the dominant ideology. As Jean continues, "All movies are PG" which stands for 'parental guide', as she follows the other programs are "password protected" for use by the heads of the house. The restriction reinforces the suppression of women's autonomy, aligning with the force over women's identity. Additionally, with the free-to-watch programs, traditional gender roles are reinforced. This act of the state illustrates how it censors women and the media for the maintenance of its authority. In addition to the ideology-serving programs, actresses are also silenced one more time. Although women are denied their jobs, actresses are still on screen for the objective of the state and the pleasure of male spectators. Mulvey (1975) claims that while males are the active ones, females are the passive ones in viewing pleasure in sexually imbalanced societies (p. 11); in other words, while males are the subjects, females become the objects. About the films shown on screen, Jean observes, "...the only time I hear female voices unconstrained and unlimited. Actresses are allowed a special dispensation while they're on the job. Their lines, of course, are written by men" (Vox, p. 19). This highlights that even when actresses appear to have a voice on the stage, they are still restricted. Although they are granted to speak beyond their daily word limit, they do so only within a firmly controlled framework. The words do not belong to them but rather are scripted by men, reinforcing a deeper silencing. Metaphorically, these women are muted and diminished to mere objects, acting for the male gaze and supplying men's viewing pleasure instead of demonstrating their autonomy. Thus, they can be heard; however, in fact, they are not speaking.

"All those houses, I think, are little prisons, and inside them are cells in the shape of kitchens and laundry closets and bedrooms" (Vox, p. 219), states Jean.

However, in prisons, criminals are controlled physically and aim to be rehabilitated; furthermore, to benefit society, they may be offered educational programs or opportunities for productivity through work programs and workshops. In contrast, women imprisoned in houses are not only restricted in their physical movement but also in their intellectual freedom. While punishment can be a common element for both institutions, prisons, and houses, their aims regarding rehabilitation differ. Prisons target positive rehabilitation that will contribute to society, whereas houses enforce submissiveness and silence, stifling any contributions to women's intellectual development. In fact, they are consciously and systematically restricted from the intellectual domain. Therefore, comparing houses to prisons might not be appropriate, as, in the case of *Vox*, houses are worse than prisons. The regime further employs public shaming on TV as a means of instilling fear in women; by watching the punishment of others, women are encouraged to self-police. Regarding Julia's punishment, Jean notes that the regime televises nonconformist women until a new victim emerges. She continues by stating that as public shaming footage is played during the programs, they are certain that people will watch. Although the channels airing the footage are not mandatory viewing, by integrating them into other programs, viewers are, in a way, compelled to watch (*Vox*, p. 187). This illustrates the vicious and cunning nature of the regime, which utilizes every domain to control, exercise power, impose, and dictate its ideology of silence, either through rules or enforcement.

In addition to being restricted to speaking only 100 words a day, women in *Vox* are explicitly forbidden from using sign language as well. This mirrors historical practices of cultural oppression; for instance, according to Waapihk (2024), colonial assimilation efforts or state-enforced strategies intended to erase immigrant identities by forbidding native sign language. Despite not being deaf, the women in *Vox* are denied alternative ways of communication, just as Indigenous sign languages were banned to preserve cultural continuity. In *Vox*, women's verbal and gestural silence is enforced only to serve a patriarchal agenda that aims to suppress and control feminine expression, not due to disability. With cameras placed everywhere, women are monitored to ensure they are not using gestures that hint at sign language (*Vox*, p. 37). As explained by Steven, signing damages the aim the authority tries to achieve (*Vox*, p. 85). Moreover, as an allusion to George Orwell's 1984, Jean expresses, "We don't

have it as bad as Winston Smith, having to crouch into a blind corner of his one-room flat while Big Brother watches through a screen on the wall, but we do have cameras” (Vox, p. 237). This illustrates how oppressive regimes enforce their power through similar strategies. In addition to cameras, younger men are also responsible for instructing girls at school not to use sign language and informing them of the consequences if they do. As Steven, Jean’s son, who wears a pin with the letter P, meaning ‘Pure’, explains the reason behind the restriction of sign language, suggesting that singing defeats the purpose of what they are trying to do (Vox, p. 85). Therefore, it can be asserted that, for the sake of the patriarchal agenda, women are deprived of any means of communication and are subjected to permanent silence through either counters or cameras as reminders of the punishments. Thus, the anxiety and fear instilled in women through the threat of punishment supports Foucault’s concept of self-control or self-policing based on the idea of the panopticon. Through the panoptic system of the oppressive regime, women are threatened and manipulated to control their actions, which ultimately serves the regime’s ideology as it ensures the internalisation of surveillance using panoptic strategies. Therefore, in addition to the external limitations on women’s speaking, self-censorship out of fear reinforces the ideology as well.

Furthermore, similar to Fanon’s thoughts on the significance of language in *Black Skin White Masks* (1967), where he defines language as an instrument revealing the worldview, culture, and indeed identity of a group, he further suggests that when a native wishfully acquires the colonizer’s language, they will be whiter than the whites (p. 38). Interpreting his ideas on Vox, it can be stated that those who are willing to acknowledge the doctrines of the states will become much more patriarchal. Within the framework of Vox, there is no language of the colonizer. However, there is a lack of language that supports the patriarchal agenda, rendering women docile, submissive, and silent. The neighbor, Olivia King, is so devoted to the Pure movement that she vehemently endorses limitations on women’s speech and freedom. She embodies an extreme patriarchal woman, internalizing the perspective and intention of enforced silence, reflecting Tyson’s definition of a patriarchal woman. Tyson (2006) states that individuals are socially programmed not to recognize the oppression of women caused by society, which promotes traditional gender roles that privilege men. In summary, a

patriarchal woman acknowledges and internalizes the norms and values of patriarchy (pp. 85-86). Therefore, Olivia King, a staunch supporter of the patriarchal regime and movement, acts as a spokesperson for patriarchal ideology by criticizing women for their behavior, which is deemed inappropriate according to the regime's standards of lifestyle and parenting. Moreover, she blames women for the corruption of society while advocating for traditional roles constructed by the patriarchal system, which contributes to the glorification of men and the humiliation of women. Thus, it can be concluded that Olivia King, as a member of Pure Movement, sees herself as superior to other women. Her cooperation with the patriarchal state and advocacy of male values may lead her to believe she is superior to other women, yet inferior to men, as she acknowledges. Ultimately, she becomes more patriarchal than the patriarchy itself, fully devoting herself to reinforcing the values and norms of patriarchal thinking.

In *Vox*, men are the owners of the words, which symbolize their power over women. Deborah Tannen (1990), a linguistics professor, asserts that:

For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as storytelling, joking, or imparting information. (p. 77)

Steven, a devoted follower of the movement, exercises this privileged power over the women around him, including his mother, Jean. Aware of the power language grants him, he exceeds his limits, disregarding respect norms and daring to teach or remind his mother of woman-limiting gender roles. In a scene where Jean warns him not to finish all of the milk, he responds, "Maybe you should go out and get another carton, then. It's your job, right?" (*Vox*, p. 84). Steven's courage in speaking to his mom this way stems from the ideology that men are superior to women, regardless of age. He further replies to her after she slaps him, saying, "Nice, Mom. Real nice. One day, that's gonna be a crime" (*Vox*, p. 84). This dialogue between mother and son reflects a shift in authority within the family; however, this is valid only for the mother's side. Fathers are still recognized as the heads of the household. Sylvia Walby categorizes patriarchy as private and public; the former refers to the oppression and

expropriation of women at home, whereas the latter describes patriarchy in the public sphere (1990, p. 24). In light of her statement, it can be argued that Steven represents private patriarchy as he attempts to control his mother's actions. His reaction to his mother's slap illustrates his use of language as a means to assert his status within the hierarchy, implying the potential next step of the state to diminish the sole authority of women as mothers. Regarding Steven's general behavior and his devotion to an oppressive regime, Jean notes that such attitudes are not innate but rather acquired and shaped by those who think they know better and have superior perspectives. In light of this thought, she remarks, "Monsters aren't born, ever. They're made, piece by piece and limb by limb, artificial creations of madmen who, like the misguided Frankenstein, always think they know better" (Vox, p. 258). Through this allusion to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Jean implies that Steven is, in fact, a victim of the prevailing circumstances, a product of the dominant environment that changes, shapes, and makes him a deep supporter of the Pure Movement. Thus, akin to Victor Frankenstein's creation, Steven is molded by the powerholder who believes they know best and possesses the correct ideology; consequently, he is transformed into an obedient enforcer of the authoritative, oppressive system.

Mansplaining is defined as "the act of explaining something to someone in a way that suggests that they are stupid; used especially when a man explains something to a woman that she already understands" by Cambridge Dictionary (2025). In her seminal essay *Men Explain Things to Me*, published by Guernica American feminist writer Rebecca Solnit (2012), expresses that although the term is thought to have been coined by her, this is incorrect; however, she acknowledges that she has written the foundation of the term. Solnit further shares one of her experiences at a dinner party during which a man patronizingly explains a book to her without realizing that she is its author. This moment causes Solnit to reflect on the phenomenon of men explaining things to women regardless of their knowledge. Solnit emphasizes that this behavior is a social issue through which women are silenced, undervalued, or made to feel inferior, thereby marginalizing them. Mansplaining, as a form of humiliation toward women, is exhibited both by Steven, as illustrated in the aforementioned scenes, and by Patrick, the husband. Both use language as a weapon that only men possess, explaining things to Jean that she already knows. In chapter fourteen, where statesmen

visit Jean for the negotiation over the cure, her counter is unlocked, and Jean expresses her suspicions about the possible manipulations of the state regarding the anti-aphasia serum. As a linguist, she notices something amiss in Reverend Carl's speech concerning the tone, pattern of sentences, intonation, and filled pauses. When she raises these observations in relation to her growing mistrust, Patrick becomes angry and retorts, "You know, babe, I wonder if it was better when you didn't talk" (Vox, p. 75). Jean, based on her expertise and knowledge, offers a reasonable analysis; however, Patrick ridicules her with a patronizing attitude, which is an act of mansplaining that belittles Jean's knowledge. Through his response, he attempts to silence her in two ways: first, through condescension, and second, by implying that her speech must be restricted through the counter. Thus, both literal and figurative silence are imposed on Jean as forms of domination over her voice and independence.

The language women are expected to use is also determined by society, aligning with gender roles. In most societies, women are taught to speak ladylike, while a similar concern is not shown for men. Lakoff (1973) expresses that society expects women not to use strong expressions; therefore, women's speech is shaped by their sex, which is defined by their relation to men, reducing women's identity through language (p. 45). She further explains that the polite speech of women results from being taught to speak like ladies from an early age (p. 57). Women in *Vox* are similarly constrained by the words they choose to use. The government tells Jean not to use "four-letter words" and "blasphemy" (Vox, p. 101). The patriarchal state not only restricts women to speaking only one hundred words per day but also decides which words they should use. So, women are forced to self-police their instant reactions or unconsciously uttered words while revealing their feelings and thoughts, which can be seen as another psychological oppression over women, making the restrictions multiple-layered. Furthermore, in cases where women accidentally use forbidden words, the consequences are significant; 10 words for each misdeed reduce their word count, but the stateman regards it as too little. Women are expected to endure continuous restrictions as a form of punishment. This is also illustrated when Steven, who has a relationship with the neighbor's daughter Julia, reports her for their premarital relationship. After the report, Julia is punished with a maximum of zero words each day. Although both premarital and extramarital intercourse are prohibited

in this government, the punishment is solely directed at women, resetting their word counters to zero per day. Thus, the double silencing of women occurs as a means of punishment without allowing them a chance to defend themselves, as women lack freedom of speech.

Furthermore, since males are heads of households in Vox, they are the only decision-makers, even though the issue concerns the woman herself. In a scene where Steven mentions 'his' decision regarding marriage to Julia, Jean reacts first because they are too young and, second, because she does not believe that Julia has a say in the matter, given her limited ability to speak despite Steven's assertions. In a defensive manner, and to justify his decision, he states, "Me and Julia have it planned out. When we get married and have kids, she'll take care of that house stuff while I'm at work. She loves it. I'll make the decisions, and Julia will go along" (Vox, p. 124). Regarding the internalization of household responsibilities as women's roles and the lack of questioning their basis, Oakley (2018) discusses how women are socialized from a very early age to view households as their primary responsibility (pp. 119-125). Thus, it can be expressed that the indoctrination is so deep that, similar to Julia, most women do not consider their own preferences. In light of Oakley's interpretation, the willingness to do housework is not truly Julia's decision; instead, she has been conditioned to fulfill this role. Moreover, marriage, a life-changing decision, is made between Evan, Julia's father, and Steven, since the decision-maker must be the head of the household; in this case, it is Evan, according to patriarchal society. Therefore, Julia is objectified and entirely controlled by the males around her. Both public and private patriarchy is exercised over Julia; public by the state through dictating her position and actions, such as speaking, and private by her father, who treats her as his property.

Along with women, sexual and gender minorities are also being restricted. In Vox, this community is rejected and faces discrimination from the religious authoritarian regime campaigning with the slogan "MAKE AMERICA MORAL AGAIN!" which likely alludes to Donald Trump's 'Make America great again!' phrase during the 2016 presidential campaign. Changing the word great to moral illustrates the government's so-called religious priorities. In light of this ideological basis and in the name of traditional norms, people whose sex is considered 'unnatural' are punished

and sent to camps, formerly prisons. Furthermore, on the president's advice, a gay man and a lesbian are planned to be put in the same cell, under the belief that it will convert them to heterosexuality. In addition to this group, single women are forced to either "marry or move to a cathouse" (Vox, p. 147). Since they cannot speak or work, they do not have economic independence; therefore, they are bound to men. Consequently, single women will serve a man directly or the community of men more broadly. This is one of the rare scenes in Vox society, where women are ironically 'allowed' to make decisions about their lives. This so-called choice, by the way, demonstrates the system's hypocrisy. As Jean remarks, referring to the justification of prostitution as something that "is the oldest profession. And you can't kill anything that old" (Vox, p. 146). Thus, women's autonomy is both condemned and exploited under the guise of morality by the state, particularly through muting them, which reveals the intersecting silence of women: physically, metaphorically, and emotionally. Joseph Dewey (2025) explains Muted Group Theory as the silencing of women and other marginalized groups, whose voices are diminished at multiple levels within patriarchal systems that control language, establish rules, and define norms. Vox clearly reflects the concept of MGT, portraying a society in which the voices of women and other oppressed groups are systematically suppressed.

3.3. RELIGION AND EDUCATION AS INSTRUMENTS OF FEMALE SUPPRESSION

Oppressive regimes utilize basic social institutions to reinforce and maintain their authority. Institutions like religion, education, and marriage are transformed into means of control, indoctrination, imposition, and oppression at the expense of social rights. Franz Neumann (1956) defines social rights as rights that can be "exercised only in relation to other members of society. They are, in a proper sense, rights of communication...One limitation is inherent in them: the exercise of these rights must not deprive others of theirs" (p. 173). In the line of Vox, although women do not harm others' rights, they themselves are deprived of these very communication rights. Under a regime supported by a religious movement, women are silenced and stripped of their autonomy, aligning with Neumann's view that dictatorships may indeed "control education, the means of communication and economic institutions to gear up the whole of society and the private life of citizens to the system of political domination" (p.

236). The perspective of Neumann is reflected in *Vox*, where religion, education, and other institutions are completely under the control of the regime, mirroring Neumann's view that absolute control means have become insufficient for the government (p. 235). Thus, to maintain total dominance, social institutions are manipulated by them to enforce their ideology and reinforce female silence and submissiveness.

Theological societies justify the discourse that women are inferior creators through religious norms. Simon de Beauvoir (2009) argues that prominent people in a society claim the subordinate position of women as a Godly order. As she follows, "Religions forged by men reflect this will for domination: they found ammunition in the legends of Eve and Pandora. They have put philosophy and theology in their service" (p. 31). In light of her argument, a similar strategy to dominate women is utilized by the government in *Vox*. In the scene where Jean defines the hierarchical structure, she orders it as "God, man, woman" (*Vox*, p. 42). This quote can be briefly interpreted as the inferior position of women under the dictates of men, be it the state, the father, or the husband. According to this diagram, while men are to obey the rules of God, women are to follow both God's and Men's.

The patriarchal, authoritative regime in *Vox* seeks a rebirth of Puritanism in which strict gender roles prevail. According to Puritanism, women's main duty is to be submissive and obedient to their husbands, both in words and deeds (Hughes, 2008). Considering this Puritanical agenda, in *Vox*, women are encouraged "to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands" (*Vox*, p. 42). Moreover, a disturbing reflection of the Puritan period emerges when Steven mentions the social shaming video of Julia that is televised at school, in which all her hair has been cut off. The Puritan ideology echoes when Steven expresses his teacher's statement that it was the punishment given to the Salem witches, and that this is what should still be done (*Vox*, pp. 227-228). Thus, it can be expressed that the Puritan discourse is aimed at reemerging as it serves the oppressive patriarchal regime's ideology.

Gender roles are propagated through religion, apart from the Puritanical ideology as well. Women are continuously reminded of their roles and their place in a male-dominated society. In the scene when the statesmen come to reset Jean's counter,

they explain that it is different from the previous ones, as these new versions have more developed services that serve males undoubtedly. The development mentioned is that women will be reading the given scriptures, which glorify men, once a day, and fortunately, these readings of the scriptures will not drop off from the 100-word limit. These scriptures include the idea that man is superior to women and that they are the image of God, such as “I BELIEVE that man was created in the image and glory of God, and that woman is the glory of the man, for man was not made of woman, but woman was made from man” (Vox, p. 102). Moreover, with several other statements, women are expected to repeat mandated statements emphasizing men’s glory, their being the head, and that women are to be silent, submissive, sober, pure, and modest instead of being fanciful and proud (Vox, p. 104). Furthermore, they are forced to state every day that if a woman wants to learn something, she needs to ask her husband at home, since it is forbidden for a woman to question the glorified leadership of males in the house. This perspective reflects Millett’s view on the distinction made between males and females. Millett (2000) emphasizes with her following statement, “The female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males as those who hold power” (p. 54) that, as males are the power-holders in patriarchal systems, they are the decision-makers. Therefore, they have the right over women’s autonomy, individuality, and their wish to improve themselves. Consequently, aligning with Millett, it can be inferred that women are subjected to the ideology of the dominant group through the utilization of religion as an instrument of indoctrination.

Religion is strategically employed as a means to advocate gender roles and restrict women’s agency throughout *Vox*. By encouraging and glorifying the roles assigned to women through religious language, women are expected to internalize these traditional roles as sacred roles. Women are defined as divine housekeepers, with their main and holiest identity that is defined as being a “wife and mother, and angel of the home”. Additionally, women are further described as the holiest and queenliest mortals. This religious teaching imposes on women that they have already reached the highest status of mortals; thus, they are discouraged from the ambition to seek anything higher (Vox, p. 65). In other words, through manipulative religious rhetoric, anything beyond domestic life is discouraged from being done intentionally. Within this

framework, through such religious rhetoric, *Vox* demonstrates how religion can be weaponized against women to manipulate and alienate women from their identity as free female individuals. On the use of religion as an instrument of suppression over women, Gerda Lerner (1993) also expresses, “the core texts of the Bible... were used for centuries by patriarchal authorities to define the proper roles for women in society and to justify the subordination of women” (p. 138). Therefore, it can ultimately be stated that the cult of domesticity is both reinforced and elevated to a holy ideal through the use of the Bible as a vehicle, thereby limiting women’s potential to be free, autonomous individuals.

The teachings advocated by the regime, which are said to be from the Bible, are those that marginalize, otherize, and silence women. Jean reflects her doubts about the Bible not being the right one as she follows, “Bibles are still allowed, if they’re the right kind” (*Vox*, p. 52). This further illustrates how the Bible might be changed to serve the superiority of males. This utilization of religion perfectly reflects Machiavelli’s well-known idea, ‘the ends justify the means’. Considering the definition provided by the Cambridge Dictionary (2025), it becomes clear that the regime exploits and instrumentalizes religion to justify its patriarchal agenda. In its struggle to bring back traditional gender roles, the patriarchal structure perceives all means as legitimate, including deception and manipulation, in order to achieve its goals. Gender-based institutionalized religion, paradoxically, functions as a powerful instrument that promotes this religious regime's ideological power.

‘Woman’ is a title given to women by society, which defines them according to societal norms. As Simone de Beauvoir (2009) expresses, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 330). This famous statement of de Beauvoir highlights the distinction between sex and gender, and more importantly, underlines that womanhood is indeed a construction of a society that is not innate but shaped by societal expectations. Similarly, regarding the construction of identity for women, Dalcher, in an interview conducted by O’Keeffe (2018), expresses that the basis of the Pure Movement in *Vox*, which advocates for traditional gender roles, reflects the Cult of Domesticity, a movement in the late 19th century and early 20th century of America. She further states that “The idea was to go back to Biblical roles, to separate men and women,” adding that society expected women to embody the following features: piety,

chastity, submissiveness, and homemaking. *Vox* reflects the justification and reinforcement of strict definitions of femininity that are constructed and maintained through religion. Religion is instrumentalized to prescribe what a woman must be; therefore, it helps create a subordinate identity for women. As a key example of this redefined identity, Olivia King, whom Jean considers, has consumed the entire poison, until the last drop (*Vox*, p. 42). She is a devout supporter of the religious movement, embodying the idealized 'Pure Woman' title. The 'P' pin, standing for pure, shows that she fulfills her duty as a Pure Woman, conforming to the oppressive system's expectations. The internalization of the superiority of masculinity and patriarchal values is so deep that those so-called 'Pure' women participate in the punishment of women deemed impure and sinful by patriarchal standards (*Vox*, p. 83). That is why Jean thinks that she has consumed the whole poison until the last drop as reflecting her total devotion to theological patriarchy. This scene illustrates how the word pure does not correspond to its literal meaning; instead, the concept of purity is altered and repurposed for the benefit of patriarchal control, turning a religious virtue into an instrument of suppression. Thus, the religious title given to followers of the Pure Movement reveals that genders are constructed and mandated by the regime.

Most religions ban and condemn prostitution, so those who participate in this act face punishment. In Christianity, prostitution is portrayed negatively, and involvement in it is discouraged. Regarding this theme, Jesus Christ states during one of his sermons, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Bible Gateway, n.d.). Thus, according to Jesus's teaching, not only the action itself but also the inward intention is regarded as similar to participation in prostitution. Considering this rigid warning from Christian teachings, the religious patriarchal regime not only shows a lack of effort to stop this very issue, but it also promotes it through cathouses, as evidenced by single women being forced to choose between marriage and moving to cathouses (*Vox*, p. 147). Moreover, Jean mentions the double standards when she learns about the existence of the private clubs, referring to them as "double standard, the private clubs that had cropped up in cities and towns where single men of certain means could go to unload their stress and sperm on professional ladies of the entertaining sort." She further reports how prostitution is

defined as the oldest profession, which is said to be the very reason the authorities cannot eradicate it (Vox, p. 146). This paradoxical attitude of the so-called religious movement illustrates the use of religion as an instrument that reveals its hypocrisy. Furthermore, it can be expressed that religion is exploited for the sake of male pleasure at the expense of the objectification of women.

In addition to religion as a significant and powerful instrument, the authorities also control education systems to promote and teach their ideology. Althusser (1971) expresses that there are two kinds of state apparatuses: repressive state apparatuses (RPS) and ideological state apparatuses (ISA). RPS includes governments, administrations, courts, prisons, armies, and police forces, apparatuses that function predominantly through violence. The latter, ISA, includes institutions such as religion, education, family, and traditions, which are not public entities but private ones. Additionally, unlike RPS, ISA functions predominantly through ideology. However, as Althusser argues, there are no apparatuses that function solely through repression or ideology. In both types, elements of violence and ideology coexist; however, in RPS, violence is predominant, while ideology is secondary, whereas in ISA, ideology is predominant, and repression is secondary, contrary to RPS (pp. 142-145).

In light of Althusser's distinction, education, in addition to religion, also functions as an Ideological State Apparatus. The patriarchal regime promotes its ideology of returning to a time when women knew their places and everyone was happier. This effort to separate spheres is taught under the belief that "...things were so much easier back when we all knew our places" (Vox, p. 86), conveyed through both the media and the education system. By enacting these ideals through both government institutions and schools, gendered expectations are normalized and becomes natural from an early age. Consequently, schools play a crucial role in indoctrinating this discourse. To justify the notion that women belong in their assigned spaces, homes, teachers assert that children are negatively affected when both parents work. Steven, supporting the teachings at school, explains the justification as "You know, like about how hard it is on kids when both their parents work, how we've gotten to this place where people forget about simple things" (Vox, p. 43). Thus, to find a solution to this so-called problem for the benefit of the children, it is concluded that women should leave the workforce and return to their traditional duties. This also

indicates that, according to this ideology, women are expected to renounce their identities, sacrifice their individuality, and devote themselves to their families for the sake of their children, whereas men are not required to make similar sacrifices.

David Perley (2019) argues that colonizers imposed an education that benefits their ideology. The colonizer decided on the education system, so the colonized people had no voice in their own educational process (p. 258). Mirroring Perley's argument, the education system in *Vox* is entirely shaped by men being superior and the ones to be served, which also reflects Millet's criticism that women are obligated to males, the power-holders, for their accomplishments. Boys are assigned subjects that glorify manhood, such as Fundamentals of Modern Christian Philosophy, Pure Manhood, and AP Religious Studies, in addition to classic academic subjects. Young girls, however, are deprived of formal education in schools. The kind of education they receive focuses on teaching them their roles as mothers, wives, good housekeepers, and angels of their homes, concluding that higher education is not permitted for girls by men; ultimately, men become the decision-makers of women's futures and autonomy. Since women are considered 'the other' and 'the second sex', as de Beauvoir reflects, they are taught to serve men. Jean outlines some of the courses offered to girls: "home economics, physical fitness,... Simple Accounting for Households" (*Vox*, p. 2). She further explains the main intention of these courses: "...one day my daughter will be expected to shop and to run a household, to be a devoted and dutiful wife. You need math for that, but not spelling. Not literature. Not a voice" (*Vox*, p. 3). This quote illustrates the aim of the regime; although there are subjects in math, they serve not for intellectual development but rather to prepare them to fulfill their duties at home as responsible wives. Grady (2018) also stresses that in order to impose the dominant ideology, girls are taught rudimentary arithmetic and homemaking skills.

Gerda Lerner (1986) argues that "Women have been systematically excluded from the enterprise of creating symbol systems, philosophies, science, and law. Women have not only been educationally deprived throughout historical time in every known society, they have been excluded from theory-formation" (p. 5). Considering Lerner's perspective, young girls in *Vox* are subordinated and otherized by the oppressive patriarchal system, which aims to silence them. In one scene, Sonia, the daughter, comes home exclaiming, "Won prize! she said. Lowest!" (*Vox*, p. 109). As

Sonia has not uttered more than three words at school, she receives a prize for remaining silent the entire day. This suggests that schools, as ideological apparatuses, successfully implement the regime's ideology by manipulating children with sweet rewards like ice cream. Although the prize is literally sweet, it symbolizes the greatest pain women endure under this manipulative regime, leading to self-censorship. In an interview conducted by K.L. Romo (2019) in response to a question about the indoctrination of youth, Dalcher states that "...indoctrination of youth is such a well-honed tool in revolutionary tactics...if you want to change the world, you don't start with the adults, you start with the kids. They don't have the benefit of having lived through historical horrors." Considering the indoctrination of children in *Vox*, it becomes clear that, due to their limited experience, power holders find it easier to influence and shape the beliefs and attitudes of youth, making them the primary targets for imposing the desired ideology. The schools in *Vox* are also described as places where girls do kitchen chores, "...as they cut cookies and knead dough and crimp pies." Jean continues with her worries that "This is what school is now, and what school will be for some time. Maybe forever" (*Vox*, p. 95). The curriculum prepared for girls advocates and indoctrinates the regime's discourse.

Crossouard and Dunne (2021) argue that education was used as a crucial and effective instrument to legitimize Western knowledge and values while securing the regulation and subordination of women during colonization periods (p. 1). Similarly, in *Vox*, as knowledge is deemed power, the education offered to women serves to reinforce patriarchal norms and instruct them on their responsibilities. Society deprives women of access to knowledge by excluding them from higher education. Jean relates that "My books, even the old copies of Julia Child and—here's irony—the tattered red-and-white-checked *Better Homes and Gardens* a friend decided would be a cute joke for a wedding gift, are locked in cupboards (*Vox*, p. 18). All the goods that may possibly give pleasure to women or that may accidentally contribute to their intellectuality are forbidden and therefore locked away, with husbands possessing the keys. This reflects the significance of knowledge, as knowing offers the possibility of resistance. In other words, since knowledge is associated with power, it is taken under full control of males in patriarchal societies. The male-dominated authority's fear drives them to control anything related to reading, which aligns with Papalexopoulou's

(2024) argument that excluding women from knowledge, taking it under complete control of men, serves to maintain and reinforce deeply fixed inequality.

In addition to indoctrinating women regarding their private roles, family members also bear the responsibility of contributing to the same purpose as an ideological state apparatus. Patrick, the father, pays attention to Sonia's development in her school subjects (*Vox*, p. 2). Steven, the son, is also interested in his sister's progress; he even blames his mother for not teaching Sonia her duties, stating, "How're you going to teach Sonia and work and take care of the house, Mom?" he says around a mouthful of pasta. "We still don't have any milk" (*Vox*, p. 123). These scenes depict the family as an institution that serves the discourse of patriarchy; however, they place most of the burden on mothers, as it is deemed their duty to raise the children according to societal norms. Regarding the continuation of the dominant ideology, Lerner (1986) claims that the maintenance of patriarchy is bound to its cooperation with women and that through "...gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history... discrimination in access to economic resources and political power..." (p. 217), this goal is secured by the patriarchy. Women like Olivia, who have already internalized a patriarchal mindset, cooperate effectively with the oppressive regime as they are silenced, manipulated, suppressed, and imposed upon in various ways. Reflecting a Foucauldian perspective, individuals become central objects to be "manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces" (1995, p. 136). Consequently, objectified women who did not have the same opportunities as men to improve their reasoning faculties could not show any signs of resistance or take action as they are shaped, educated in accordance with serving the power of the state. In other words, due to the unequal conditions, women are conditioned to be silent and submissive, acknowledging their position and contributing to the dominant ideology.

3.4. THE QUIET RESISTANCE IN SMALL ACTS

Feminist resistance is another significant subject in *Vox* against the patriarchal regime, which has taken control due to the silence of the people, as Jean, like most citizens, did not fulfill her duty as a responsible citizen. Regarding the silence of the people, Dalcher states that "...collective inaction sometimes leads to detrimental

change” (Firmann, 2018). The scene where Jean acknowledges her fault for not doing her duty as a citizen illustrates how inaction may lead to fatal outcomes. Witnessing the oppression faced by women, young girls, and other marginalized groups under the oppressive regime, some characters in *Vox* begin to resist through small actions. Baccolini (2004) claims that in authoritarian regimes, the past and collective memory are shaped based on the state’s ideology, while individual memory is erased. Therefore, Baccolini further adds, “individual recollection therefore becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action” (pp. 520-521). These acts of individual defiance that gradually evolve into a more collective resistance can be seen in *Vox*, aligning with Baccolini’s view. The repeated phrases, “One step at a time...” and “...start small...”, serve as personal signs among some of the oppressed, functioning as self-encouragement and an expression of collective action. These phrases illustrate how resistance often starts with private, individual acts that later gradually evolve into collective action. Moreover, Bell Hooks (2015) claims that to understand gender politics, it is important to know who is speaking; however, she further adds that what is spoken is the most important (p. x). Thus, rather than focusing on which characters are uttering these phrases, the meaning of the message behind them is more crucial.

Staying silent has been criticized by oppressed people, such as A. Lorde (1984), who, based on her own silence, states that “My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (p. 41). This quote emphasizes the importance of raising your voice; otherwise, remaining silent can lead to your own eradication. Having experienced this very situation, Jean realizes her fault and begins to advocate for women’s rights against the mandated silence and otherization of women by the patriarchal state, starting from the most fundamental unit of society: the family. She avoids teaching Sonia the assigned roles and tells Steven to meet his own needs when he insists on gender-based roles. Thus, Jean refuses to contribute to the patriarchal ideology through small acts of defiance that may seem insignificant. As a way of personal encouragement, Jean motivates herself, “One step at a time, Jeanie. Start small” (*Vox*, p. 189). For instance, she challenges the mandated gender roles when statesmen visit her to persuade her to join the group on the treatment of aphasia. She intentionally asks Patrick to bring some cold water to the guests. When Patrick brings water, Jean observes that everybody realizes “...the slight shake of Reverend Carl’s

head. I'm the wife. I should be the one serving" (Vox, p. 59). Within the framework that women are the most crucial collaborators of the patriarchy, it is evident that Jean does not cooperate and rejects submission, despite the external enforcement.

Talking back, which Hooks (2015) defines as "speaking as an equal to an authority figure...daring to disagree...having an opinion" (p. 5), is another act of resistance demonstrated by Jean. During a conversation with statesmen, when Reverend Carl, the leader of Pure Movement, tries to persuade Jean to help with the cure for the illness, he begins with, "We were hoping, Dr. McClellan, that you would—." Not waiting for him to finish, Jean responds, "Well, I won't" (Vox, p. 99). Jean's refusal and expression of her opinion as acts of talking back illustrate her individual resistance against the suppression that women endure. During this visit, Jean is offered an increase in Sonia's word limit to one hundred fifty or two hundred words. However, Jean rejects the offer, even if the quote could be extended to thousands. As an expert in linguistics, Jean comments, "She's not talking as it is." Her refusal highlights her maternal resistance. Although the regime aims to manipulate her through the distortion of maternal affection, Jean resists these strategies and maintains her agency against oppression.

James C. Scott (1985) claims that everyday forms of rebellious actions, though seemingly insignificant, are indeed the weapons of oppressed groups. Scott employs a metaphor for these minor actions, stating that:

Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own. There is rarely any dramatic confrontation, any moment that is particularly newsworthy. (p. 36)

Considering Scott's comparison, it can be expressed that Jean contributes to building a collective resistance on the scene when she visits a governmental office to select counters for both herself and Sonia with Patrick. The officer speaking to Jean, at Jean but never with Jean, suggests a pink one for Sonia, which also shows that colors, too, are gendered, similar to roles. However, Jean picks a silver one for herself

and a blood-red one for Sonia, which she describes as “A trivial act of defiance” (Vox, p. 70). Disregarding the one that is found appropriate for young girls by the patriarchal mindset, which shows her cultural and symbolic resistance, Jean chooses the one she decides, showing her autonomy. Even though she lives in a world that is entirely governed by the strict rules of an oppressive patriarchal regime, her attitude serves as a representation of her individual resistance. In line with James Scott's philosophy, this seemingly insignificant deed contributes to the development of a larger collective resistance.

Resistance may not merely include actions; it can also encompass thoughts and feelings, which can be signs of defiance. In *Vox*, abortion is forbidden by the theological regime. Jean, who becomes pregnant by Lorenzo, is worried about the future and the fate of her unborn child, particularly if it is a girl. Regarding the old tactics of abortion, she considers smoking as a way to stop her pregnancy (Vox, p. 202). Thus, upon critical reflection, refusing internal acknowledgment may be deemed a form of resistance, as resistance can be defined as multidimensional. Jean states in a scene where she thinks of exceeding the limit that “They won’t kill us for the same reason they won’t sanction abortions. We’ve turned into necessary evils” (Vox, p. 35). This quote illustrates the objectification of women’s bodies and autonomy for the purposes of a patriarchal ideology aiming to restore traditional roles. Women are perceived as valuable only because they are seen as reproductive tools; thus, for the maintenance of society, women are needed. According to the authorities’ view, women are forced to bear children when they are pregnant. Aligning with the second-wave feminist motto ‘The personal is Political’, Jean’s internal conflict and silent resistance become political acts. Her anxiety, fear, and refusal to bring a child into this oppressive society, thereby rejecting forced motherhood, illustrate that private feelings and mental resistance can indeed challenge systemic oppression. While the regime strictly controls women’s behavior and words, it cannot control their thoughts and feelings, as long as they remain invisible to authorities. Thus, these internal acts can evolve into a powerful form of resistance.

Nonviolent struggle is embodied among the resistance members. Gene Sharp (2010), while exemplifying nonviolent struggle acts, states that “One may act to protect children from the attackers’ propaganda by education at home or in illegal

classes” (p. 32). Jean, refusing a gender-based, institutionalized education system and rejecting the enforced motherhood duty of teaching Sonia the ultimate goal of a woman, struggles to save her daughter from the dominant discourse. This is evident when Jean lists her conditions should she accept the offer for the cure for aphasia: “I want my daughter’s counter removed. I want her excused from school; I’ll teach her at home Friday through Monday. I want Lin on the project full-time, not just backup” (Vox, p. 116). Realizing the detrimental effects of the regime’s educational system, Jean aims to protect her daughter with the power she possesses, since the state has no other option but Jean to find a cure for the president’s brother’s illness. Thus, Jean politically resists the patriarchal ideology by regaining her and Sonia’s voice, rejecting their indoctrination-based education, and stepping outside the domestic sphere to participate in the public sphere, including her female colleague Lin. This scene strongly illustrates the political and cultural resistance as a nonviolent struggle that Jean employs.

Underground networks of resistance, hinting at collective defiance, exist in the novel through which those opposed to the dominant discourse struggle against the regime. Del, the messenger, turns out to be the one who enables secret communication between underground resistance members. As Sharon, Del’s wife, reports, Del is indeed an engineer disguised as a mailman, demonstrating that the covert resistance is carried on secretly in Vox. Through his disguised role, he enables the secret communication among the underground resistance members. Furthermore, by giving Sharon and the daughters their voice back secretly through fake counters, which is understood when Sharon explains, “Fake. Del made it for me last year, once he figured out how to get the real one off. Made three more for our girls” (Vox, p. 196), it is understood Del’s family has already symbolically challenged the regime using the regime’s own weapon that is ‘language’. The act of unmuting a small group of women with the regime’s own instrument may symbolize the ultimate resistance.

Moreover, resistance of the colored oppressed group is also demonstrated in Vox. Del’s wife, Sharon, a black woman, predicts that the regime’s next step will be the eradication of people of color. Historically, people of color have often been subjected to oppression, particularly women, since they face multiple layers of oppression both for their race and gender. In other words, intersectional oppression

endured by black women has been a recurring incident throughout history. Regarding multiple-dimensional oppression on black women, Hooks (1981) and Crenshaw (1989) argue that black women are suppressed due to both their race and gender. Because of this intersectional oppression, they cannot contribute to or fully take part in either feminist movements or movements against racism. That is to say, black women are marginalized and excluded from both movements due to their two-dimensional identity, as neither movement captures their overlapping identities (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140; Hooks, 1981, p. 9). Within this framework, Sharon, aware of the possible following step of patriarchy, chooses not to remain silent and begins a struggle against the system with her family. The initial act of their resistance is to provide women of the family with their fundamental right, which is speaking, made possible by Del's creating a fake counter that looks functional as a real counter, yet indeed becomes a tool and a sign of their empowerment.

Furthermore, 'disguised disobedience', which Sharp (2010) defines as hidden, closely displayed acts of resistance by officers of government such as the police, army, and security forces, aimed at weakening repression and reducing personal risk (p. 64), is also employed by the underground resistance network in *Vox*. Mr. Poe, who introduces himself as the project security, is revealed to be one of the resistance's secret members. He performs this hidden role so convincingly that even Jean does not suspect him. Throughout the democratic struggle process, Poe, seemingly a government officer, exemplifies disguised disobedience as a nonviolent tactic by unnoticeably ignoring the orders, aligning with Sharp's view (p. 65). Furthermore, Jean also disguises her intentions and employs scientific sabotage to undermine the authority's plans. Jean, realizing the intention behind the serum that is ordered to be administered to cure aphasia, learns that it will indeed be reversed into a serum that will be used to cause aphasia intentionally, which Jean defines as 'bioweapon' (*Vox*, pp. 274-275). So, Jean and her team consciously undermine the regime's scientific agenda, sacrificing their safety. Patrick, the president's science advisor, likewise participates in disguised disobedience. Initially concealing his covert role even from Jean, he ultimately uses the serum against high-ranking officials, sacrificing his life for the freedom of all the oppressed groups. As Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) asserts, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the

oppressed” (p. 2). *Vox* reflects this principle strongly, as individuals demonstrate defiant acts of resistance, which lead them to make challenging decisions under authoritarian regimes.

Consequently, various forms of resistance, such as disguised disobedience, sabotage, solidarity networks, and personal sacrifice, have successfully challenged the oppressive regime by a group of nonconformist people including both women and men which Pinakoulia (2020) states this struggle “deconstructs the government’s effort to define specific gender roles and segregate men and women into distinct spheres” (p. 203). Jean asserts, “The radios and televisions came to life again; the presses started to roll out newspapers. Women marched in silence until their wrists and words were freed” (*Vox*, 385). The symbolic walk in silence demonstrates the contrast between the mandated silence imposed on women and the unrestricted voice of the resistance. In other words, it highlights how enforced silence can be loud and deafening in its implications. Thus, collective resistance, through which silence is replaced by voice and fear is replaced by hope, enables the restoration of the country. Therefore, *Vox* depicts how societies under authoritarian regimes can regain their freedom and rediscover ways of justice through collective resistance. Consequently, through its open ending, *Vox* evokes a sense of hope and the possibility of restoring societal order, equality, and justice following the collapse of the oppressive regime which is also noted by Altaf (2023), who states that the novel achieves this sentiment “by suggesting the downfall of the totalitarian regime and by simultaneously hinting at the emergence of potential collaborative efforts by people to return to a glorious past” (p. 131). Thus, it can be concluded that quiet, small acts of resistance, though seemingly insignificant, can ultimately lead to revolutionary changes.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1. CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Christina Dalcher's *Vox* have been analyzed in light of the suppression, otherization, silencing, control of women, and traditional gender roles, along with the distinction between the public sphere and domestic sphere in patriarchal systems. The two discussed novels are analyzed through the lens of feminist theories and perspectives. This thesis also analyzes women's objectification and loss of autonomy under oppressive theological authorities that utilize social institutions to enforce the dominant ideology, aligning with Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Althusser's ideological state apparatuses. While *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox* illustrate the restrictions on women's individuality imposed by patriarchal societies, they also critique the gender-based institutionalized oppression of women.

The Handmaid's Tale was written in 1985; however, there is no specific date for the Gilead Regime throughout the narration. Regarding the time of the regime, the Historical Notes chapter, which is also part of the fiction and written at the end of the novel, hints at the approximate period of it. The twelfth symposium on Gileadean Studies at the University of Denay is noted to take place in 2195, and Professor James Darcy Pieixoto explains the originality of the tapes of Offred, noting that they must have been recorded at least one hundred and fifty years ago. In this context, according to Pieixoto's explanation, the Gilead Regime exists around the late 21st or early 22nd century. *Vox*, which was written in 2018, also does not provide a specific year regarding the time of the narration. However, through contemporary technology, political references, contemporary issues related to women depicted in the novel, and the lifestyle similar to that of the early 21st century, it can be inferred that the narration suggests a timeline close to the present. Therefore, both novels, despite lacking specific dates, take place in a near-future United States.

Both Margaret Atwood and Christina Dalcher express that they wrote their literary works in response to the prevailing unacceptable conditions of society, demonstrating their disapproval of these conditions as outlined in related chapters. Furthermore, each author argues that granting unlimited power to one party is likely

to produce undesired outcomes. Although these novels are classified as dystopian, defined as an imagined society where fear, injustice, difficulty, and generally authoritarian elements prevail, both authors assert that contemporary issues of their time inspired them to create their novels. Therefore, the novels reflect the authors' own experiences and ideologies. Mirroring the historical context of the times they were written, both novels emerged during right-wing-supported administrations, with *The Handmaid's Tale* crafted during the Reagan Era and *Vox* produced during the Trump Era. A common theme in both eras is the call for a backlash against 'old times' by right-wing supporters, a notion embraced by both administrations. In this context, reflecting the historical backgrounds of their writing, both stories take place in a near-future United States governed by oppressive, theological patriarchal regimes that otherize and control women's autonomy. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of distinguishing between spheres and depict the patriarchal aim to revert to traditional gender roles. The domestic sphere, or home, is designated as a space for women, while the public sphere, encompassing politics, economics, literary and intellectual domains, is reserved for men and, consequently, dominated by them. Deeply entrenched traditional gender roles, mirroring the distinct spheres, are reinforced through systemic indoctrination and imposition strategies utilizing social institutions such as religion and education.

In both novels, religion is portrayed as a means of glorifying males, indoctrinated through the so-called religious scriptures. Both the female protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* and Jean, the protagonist of *Vox*, harbor doubts about whether the scriptures are truly derived from the Bible. Since both protagonists believe that the regimes have subverted religion to support their ideologies and maintain dominance over women, they do not believe in these scriptures. However, they cannot verify the truth of these texts, as all research sources, including the restricted or potentially altered Bible, are forbidden to women. Thus, women in both novels are compelled to accept the mandated ideology without a chance to question it. Furthermore, the indoctrination imposed on women through the repetition of selected scriptures is mandated by both regimes, targeting normalization and internalization. Consequently, the novels share a common instrumentalization of religion, emphasizing an idealized version of womanhood. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Handmaids are compelled to

repeat “Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent...Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted” (*THT*, p. 96) before each meal, reinforcing their obedient and submissive role. Likewise, in *Vox*, women are forced to repeat several statements highlighting their subordination, such as “I will seek to adorn myself inwardly, and to be pure, modest, and submissive. In this way, I will glorify man, thereby glorifying God.” (*Vox*, p. 104). These quotations strongly align with de Beauvoir’s famous statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 330). Thus, from this perspective, it can be seen that both novels depict how womanhood is not innate but rather a construction of society. In other words, these two novels powerfully illustrate how genders are created and shaped by societal expectations through traditional norms.

The theme of hypocrisy exists in both novels. The two regimes, Gilead from *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the State supported by Pure Movement in *Vox*, are portrayed as religious. However, they reshape, rewrite, or directly usurp religion to serve their objectives. Concerning the teachings about women’s holy role, the assertion of men’s superiority, and the regulation of social order, a quite religious tone is employed to persuade individuals. Nonetheless, both novels depict brothels that cater to male pleasure. Additionally, women in these brothels are either coerced into service with no other options for survival or sent there, to brothels as a form of punishment, which reflects Millett’s argument that women rely on men for their survival. Moreover, women are objectified to satisfy male desires both psychologically and physically. Psychologically, this emerges through men’s awareness of their superior status in the society they have created and shaped according to male superiority and their role as the absolute decision-makers over women; physically, it is demonstrated in the exploitation of women’s bodies for male satisfaction. Unlike *Vox*, while the Gilead regime in *The Handmaid’s Tale* enforces strict dress codes aimed at covering women as much as possible, the rules are violated for Jezebels, the women in brothels. Instead, they are compelled to wear revealing outfits once more to satisfy the male gaze. Thus, it is evident how the so-called theological authorities manipulate religion for their goals while at the same time violating its principles for their own pleasure.

In addition to religion being used as a tool for dominant discourse, the education system is also completely under the regimes' control in these two works. In

The Handmaid's Tale, fertile females are specifically taught their responsibilities as handmaids through the education provided at schools called Red Center. They are designated as handmaids since their ultimate duty is to bear children for the highest-ranking members of society. Furthermore, instead of being addressed by their names, they are referred to with the prefix 'of' followed by the name of the commander they serve, such as Of-Fred. Within these educational centers, fertile women are constantly taught roles detailing how to behave, how to speak, and how to ritualize intercourse between the Handmaids and Commanders, attended by the Wives during Ceremony nights, which is justified through a Godly order stating, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (*THT*, p. 95). Similarly, in *Vox*, younger girls, deprived of higher education, are taught that their ultimate goal is to be the angels of their houses. Consequently, their education, including subjects such as cooking, gardening, and household arithmetic, focuses on the discourse of the dominant patriarchal society. Therefore, it can be asserted that the educational systems in both novels, using religion as a basis to justify their discourse, are entirely controlled by the regimes to impose their ideologies.

Moreover, both novels demonstrate that anything contributing to women's intellectual development is prohibited. Under strictly enforced gender roles, women are deprived not only of higher education but also of tools related to reading and writing. In each novel, the female protagonists remark that books, newspapers, magazines, and TV programs that would assist women beyond their sacred responsibilities are all restricted, even including the Bible. Offred, talking about the Commander's books, says, "Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous" (*THT*, p. 145), and Jean states that "My books, even the old copies of Julia Child...are locked in cupboards" (*Vox*, p. 18). In both novels, women are denied access to reading and writing materials, which, like women, are placed under the control of men, as they are deemed the owners of knowledge. However, materials producing knowledge are placed under the control of males because they are associated with power and thus regarded as superior; therefore, they belong to males. In parallel, women are also placed under male control because they are perceived as inferior in the social hierarchy. As both regimes advocate for traditional roles, they strongly oppose women's intellectual self-improvement. This mindset illustrates how knowledge is

perceived as a powerful tool, privileged to males. This is the very reason women are excluded from the public sphere; otherwise, they would become potential challengers to the dominant discourse. Reflecting Millett's statement, women are made dependent on male approval for their survival and advancement, as males are the power holders and decision makers regarding women's autonomy (1970, p. 54). Thus, it can be concluded that in each of the novels, the absence of these knowledge-making tools serves as a means of oppression and othering of women, prompted by patriarchal regimes.

Mass media and public rituals also play a crucial role in normalizing and indoctrinating the discourse of patriarchal society. According to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the repressive regimes in both novels usurp the media for their own narratives. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the media is completely silenced and is used solely to reinforce the dominant ideology. Sharing a common theme with *Vox*, the media and public demonstrations illustrate public shaming to instill fear in the individuals, thus targeting those likely to oppose the regulations of the regimes to control their actions. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, executions of individuals deemed criminals by the state for not obeying the regulations are displayed; moreover, people are encouraged to participate in these executions, which can be interpreted as a manipulative strategy of the regime, fostering a sense of power within them. Similarly, the public shaming of Julia King in *Vox*, the neighbor's daughter, who is reported to the regime by her partner Steven for premarital intercourse, is televised in schools, and similar recordings are also shown on televisions with the same intent: to evoke fear and prevent potential ones to control their behavior. Regarding this theme, the novels successfully explain the use of media as an instrument to impose the dominant ideology.

Another significant theme reflected throughout both novels is Foucault's concept of panopticon, which he defines as "a marvellous machine which...produces homogeneous effects of power" (Foucault, 1995, p. 202). Likewise, Foucault's prison design in which prisoners are aware of being constantly watched and so internalize constant surveillance, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, regime officials such as the Angels, the Eyes, and the Aunts function as CCTV cameras to monitor people's actions constantly, evoking a sense of self-policing. One possibility of being realized by any

of them becomes enough to control their action. Similarly, in *Vox*, women are subjected to surveillance not only through the word counters they have to wear on their wrists but also through the cameras installed everywhere that monitor any attempts to use sign language. A common theme in both narratives is the self-surveillance fostered by various forms of 'eyes' watching, which generates a psychological suppression so that women are led to police their own behavior. These constant monitoring and controlling apparatuses ultimately reinforce a culture of fear, restriction, and control through the replication of the panoptic system by both regimes, exemplifying Foucault's conceptualized prison.

Furthermore, through the tactics embodied by the patriarchal regimes, women's identity and their titles are redefined according to their relations to males, which reflects de Beauvoir's argument that "He is the Subject...She is the Other" (2011, p. 26). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, deprived of their agency, female characters are named in relation to their functions in the male-dominated community, such as Handmaids, Wives, Aunts, Martas, and Jezebels. Likewise, in *Vox*, women are defined as mother or wives instead of their autonomous identity. For example, rather than being addressed by name, the first lady is merely seen as 'the president's wife, or Olivia King is often defined as Evan King's wife, which illustrates the gender dynamics of the patriarchal societies in which women are defined according to the relationship with males around them. More importantly, these names given to women mirror how patriarchal societies deprive women of their agency, illustrating the systemic erasure of female individuality and enforcing them to a secondary status which aligns with de Beauvoir's definition of women as 'the second sex'.

In both novels, the body parts of women are objectified and suppressed. Both the female body and language are restrained and placed under the control of the regimes, erasing female identity. While in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the commodification of women's bodies is the predominant form of colonization, it may be interpreted as a secondary theme in *Vox*. Offred states, "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (*THT*, p. 103). This quote by Offred illustrates how women are reduced to mere breeding machines for the patriarchal mindset, aimed at commodifying them for so-called national purposes. Thus, women in *The Handmaid's Tale* exist only if they can breed, rendering them as reproductive tools. Similarly, in

Vox, Jean expresses that they are creatures reduced to satisfiers of men's pleasure (Vox, p. 35), illustrating the dehumanization of women in a patriarchal society. They are also forbidden the right to reproduce, as it is predetermined by the regime. Therefore, women in Vox are not allowed to make decisions about their bodies and must give birth if they are pregnant. Both narratives illustrate how states control women's autonomy, turning women, whose agency is erased, into objects serving males and their objectives. This commodification strips women of both their choices and their individuality. Aligning with the reflection of novels, both novels satirize and display systemic gender oppression, highlighting the dangerous impact of dehumanizing women.

Language plays a crucial role in both patriarchal regimes, as both regimes utilize and restrict it for their similar intentions: to suppress, silence, control, and subordinate women. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, while the limitation of language can be seen as a secondary theme, since the control over breeding is a much more dominant theme, it is still restricted to prevent any possibility of communication that may foster solidarity. Instead of freedom of speech, women are forced to use recited phrases when greeting, showing that even their words are regulated by the regime, which demonstrates how language is weaponized. Additionally, as women are deprived of the fundamental right to speak, the narrative reveals how they feel increasingly alienated from the language they once used freely. This alienation is exemplified in the Scrabble game scenes, where Offred struggles to recall words, she once used without any difficulty, marking the beginning of a gradual loss of language, her mother tongue, which is a defining element of her identity. In other words, the denial of language use undermines the agency that language provides for women. Furthermore, women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are also denied access to sign language, and to prevent any attempt, they are forced to wear wings and veils that restrict free body movement. Overall, there is rigid regulation of communication methods, likely due to a fear of solidarity that could lead to resistance. Limitations on ways of communication ultimately support the regime's mindset, both through predetermined religiously inferred phrases that underscore women's reduced status as child bearers and through the suppression and silencing of women, that women must be silent, submissive, and obedient members of society. So, the regime aims to achieve its objectives by

internalizing and normalizing mandated positions. This systemic control over language and expression ensures isolation, powerlessness, and easy domination.

Language as a common theme to *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a predominant instrument used by the regime in *Vox* to silence and suppress women. In *Vox*, women are particularly denied the language that would enable the patriarchy to redefine and reshape female identities as silent, submissive members of society. They are restricted to speaking only one hundred words a day, monitored by counters they must wear. If they exceed this limit, they face electroshock punishment. Additionally, these women are constrained by a ban on using swear words, which is considered inappropriate for females; this also illustrates control over their reactions and emotions. Thus, women limited to 100 words must carefully think and plan each word they say, even in situations where they might not be aware. Violating this rule results in an additional penalty, cutting their daily quota by ten words for each infraction. Therefore, women become responsible for any words they might utter unconsciously. Beyond spoken language, women are also prohibited from using sign language, which is monitored through cameras placed everywhere. This limitation is justified by the patriarchal mindset, asserting that signing could undermine the regime's objectives. Reflecting Fairclough's strong connection between ideology and language, both novels illustrate how regimes impose their ideologies by weaponizing language to create silent, obedient, and submissive women, which aligns with the traditional gender definitions that both regimes seek to reinforce. Therefore, it can be concluded that women are silenced multiple times through linguistic control aimed at reinforcing the dominant ideology of oppressive regimes.

Another significant theme common in novels is the internalization of constructed gender roles, defined by men, of some female characters. Tyson (2006) reflects on this condition as patriarchal women who internalize the norms and values of patriarchy, thereby promoting a culture that privileges men. Moreover, as women are imposed upon and socialized according to these gender roles, they fail to recognize the oppression faced by women (pp. 85-86). In line with Tyson's view, both novels, particularly the Aunts in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the neighbor Olivia King in *Vox*, can be seen as representatives of patriarchal women. Each contributes to patriarchal ideology, having been shaped by religion, tradition, society, and other ideological

apparatuses. The Aunts, enjoying more privileges than other women, such as literacy, consider themselves superior, though not to the extent of men, because they clearly acknowledge that men are the superior members of society and women are inferior figures. However, these privileges are enough to otherize and exert their limited power over other women, especially the Handmaids, who are also subjected to impositions, teachings, and indoctrination strategies that aim to turn them into patriarchal women. Similarly, Olivia King, a devotee of the Pure Movement, becomes a spokesperson for the movement by condemning women for their 'inappropriate' behavior, way of life, and motherhood, blaming them for societal disorder and advocating a return to old times, as she believes societal corruption is due to shifts in traditionally distinct spheres. Both characters, aligned with patriarchy, perceive themselves as powerful, rational, and strong, characteristics typically attributed to men in patriarchal societies. Embracing this belief, they propagate patriarchal norms, having fully internalized a patriarchal mindset, leaving them ignorant and unaware of the oppressed positions that other women experience.

The theme of feminist resistance is common to both novels; however, while in *The Handmaid's Tale*, acts of resistance do not lead to a significant outcome, in *Vox*, the regime's defeat is clearly evident. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, resistance is particularly showcased through the character Moira, a former women's rights activist. She embodies this resistance through small personal acts of defiance. However, because the oppression of women is so severe, she cannot achieve her aims, despite cooperating with the underground resistance group named MayDay. Nevertheless, the historical notes discussed in a university symposium at the end of the novel may suggest that the Gilead Regime does not exist or has been challenged. The tapes of Offred recounting her experiences as a Handmaid serve as evidence from the Gilead Regime Era, and these recordings assist the university in its studies, from which it can be deduced that the regime is violated in the end. In *Vox*, however, the challenge to the regime is clearly depicted through a resistance group employing small, quiet acts, initially in person and later collectively. Reflecting Sharp's examples of resistance, the underground group in *Vox* embodies covert resistance, sabotage to prevent the regime's goals, disguised disobedience, and personal sacrifices aimed at challenging the dominant ideology. Thus, it can be concluded that even though the fall of the Gilead

Regime is not explicitly stated in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the last section titled Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale* implies that the regime has ended. So, both novels illustrate the significance of feminist resistance, showing how the resisters can face oppression and severe punishment; nevertheless, the struggle must persist to attain an equality-for-everyone philosophy.

In conclusion, this thesis has discussed the colonization of women through several themes to explain the oppression of patriarchal ideology over women's agency based on traditional gender roles, which define a woman as silent, submissive, obedient, passive, and inferior within society, both in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox*. Both Atwood and Dalcher likely intend to raise awareness of the suppression of women and critique the institutionalized gender roles rooted in oppression within their dystopian societies, where distinct gender-based spheres, manipulation of social institutions such as education and religion, limitation of language, objectification of the female body, and self-surveillance are utilized to uphold the authoritarian regime's ideology. Moreover, each novel depicts the constructed roles imposed by the patriarchy, powerfully reflecting de Beauvoir's "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2011, p. 330). Therefore, women's autonomy should not be determined by their biological sex; that is, biological differences cannot be used to justify the humiliation, dehumanization, or objectification of women, nor can they define women as an inferior identity. In other words, merely because of biological differences, women cannot be treated as less human, less worthy, and less capable; thus, biology cannot be used to justify oppression and uphold patriarchal ideology. Both novels illustrate the resistance of marginalized groups, including the ultimate challenge to the regimes, whether it be implied or explicit. As a woman is equal to a man, she must not be viewed and defined according to her relation to males, and her position should not be shaped or limited according to patriarchal cultural norms and beliefs; therefore, the patriarchal ideology must be challenged. Consequently, both novels serve as cautionary works written against the mandated discourses aimed at otherizing, suppressing, and silencing women. By highlighting the potential outcomes of extreme ideologies, both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox* emphasize the fragility of female autonomy within patriarchal societies that normalize systemic inequality. Through a feminist lens, this study shows how women are exploited, objectified, controlled, and

silenced within these systems. By revealing and resisting these forms of control, both novels ultimately challenge and actively subvert the ideology that seeks to oppress women. Through this, these novels aim to serve as powerful guides urging readers to think, question, and oppose patriarchal mindsets.



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