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**“Under His Eye”: Power and Gender  
Performativity in Margaret Atwood’s *The  
Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake***

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A word after a word after a word is power.

—Margaret Atwood



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## **Abstract**

This Master's thesis engages in a comparative analysis of two characters from two different novels by Margaret Atwood: Offred, from *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Oryx, from *Oryx and Crake* (2003). This comparative analysis is divided into two parts: the first one is concerned with the use of power, language and discourse observed in both novels and characters, following Foucault's theories; the second one explores the differences and similarities of Offred and Oryx regarding gender performativity and the objectification of women, following Butler's considerations and reflections. The main aim of this analysis is to find relevant parallelisms between two seemingly opposite figures, and to examine Atwood's work in the light of Foucault's and Butler's theorization. Finally, the juxtaposition of both characters is aimed at attracting attention to the character of Oryx, which I regard as unfairly neglected and highly significant in Atwood's oeuvre.

## Introduction

Margaret Atwood (1939–) is a widely known and acclaimed author. Many studies have been published on what could be considered her most famous novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), especially after the release of its successful series adaptation in 2017.<sup>1</sup> The totalitarian, women-centered, women-oppressing system of Gilead and the story of Offred, the novel's protagonist, attract not only the public's attention but also a considerable amount of academic interest. However, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood's second dystopian novel and the first book of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, has not raised as much enthusiasm, and one of its main characters, Oryx, remains in my opinion vastly understudied. This might be due to several causes: the shy reception and impact of the novel, and Oryx's brief and limited presence in the narration, given that she is not the protagonist nor the focalizer or narrator of the depicted dystopia, which has not women as its fulcrum, but focuses, instead, on aspects such as genetic engineering, scientific ethics and transhumanism.

The main aim of this Master's thesis is to carry out a comparative analysis of Oryx and Offred, two characters portrayed in two novels by Atwood which depict different dystopian, patriarchal systems, and find similarities and parallelisms between them in spite of their apparent differences. With regards to the methodology followed in this essay, I have relied on Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's theories. In particular, the analysis is intended to provide for a contextualized reading of Atwood's fiction following Foucault's reflections and connections of discourse and power, as well as Butler's thoughts and work on gender, sex and gender performativity. Finally, with this work I intend to attract attention to the character of Oryx in *Oryx and Crake*, which I personally consider highly interesting and full of nuances.

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<sup>1</sup> See Miller, Bruce, creator. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Hulu, 2017.

To this end, I will firstly introduce Atwood, the history and origins of dystopian fiction and its presence in Atwood's oeuvre, focusing on the *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. Later, I will structure the comparative analysis in three blocks, starting with a contextualization of each of the two characters, focusing in the second part on power and discourse and on gender performativity in the third one. Finally, I will present the findings and conclusions of my research work.



## 1. Margaret Atwood and dystopia

### 1.1. Introducing Margaret Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, inventor,<sup>2</sup> essayist and activist who was born in Ottawa in 1939 and is considered to be one of Canada's leading contemporary writers and, in some critics' opinion, "Canada's greatest living novelist" (Bukerman). She has received numerous awards such as the Arthur C. Clarke Award for her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the Giller Prize for the historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996), and the Man Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin* (2000). She has also been awarded the Prince of Asturias Award for Literature. In addition to the foregoing, her most notable works are *Surfacing* (1972), *Cat's Eye* (1988), and the *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013). Despite the fact that she is best known for her work as a novelist, Atwood is a prolific and multifaceted author and her oeuvre includes sixteen novels, eight pieces of short fiction, eight children's books, more than twenty one poetry collections, ten non-fiction works, three TV scripts, a radio script and a theatrical adaptation for her own novella, *The Penelopiad* (2005). She is also a renowned literary critic and has been translated into more than 40 languages.

Atwood's oeuvre encompasses a variety of themes including the power of language, gender and identity, religion and myth, climate change and politics. She is known for the use of irony in her fiction, which is saturated with social critique (Van Steendam 8). Profound existential and philosophical questions and dichotomies (Nature vs. Man, Man vs. Woman, Art vs. Science...) are also typical of her novels. In fact, the so-called "war of the sexes" is a central topic in the novels that Atwood published in the 1970s, closely linked to politics and imperialism, and continues to be a central issue in her more recent works (Somacarrera 48).

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<sup>2</sup> In 2004, Atwood invented a robotic writing technology, called "LongPen," which uses the Internet to enable a person to remotely write in ink anywhere in the world and allows for a variety of applications, not only for book-signing writers, but also for business and legal transactions (Bukerman).

## **1.2. Dystopian fiction**

### **1.2.1. Tracing the genealogy of dystopian fiction**

One cannot talk about dystopias without utopias; the two concepts go hand in hand. The roots of dystopian fiction are easy to excavate, as it is generally accepted as a subgenre of utopia. The latter, coined in 1516 by Thomas More, in his homonymous work of socio-political satire, resembles two Greek words: “outopos”—no place—and “eutopos”—good place (Sargent 5). The resulting potential meaning could even be taken as a pun: imaginary yet positive: “Although a pleasing goal, utopia has never existed” (Babae 64). In this work, More demonstrates utopia to be not only an impractical idea but also the means to satirize his own times. Lyman Tower Sargent defines the term utopia as “a non-existing society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space” (9), while Fátima Vieira sees it as a “tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfillment” (6). Historically, utopias have attracted significant academic attention, given the powerful nature of their possible resonances: religious roots in paradise, political roots in socialism, economic roots in communes, etc. (Gordin et al. 1). Its history appears clear and accessible to historians, who trace its roots back to “a utopian vision that invests in our imagination that seeks to create an ideal and perfect world” (Babae 64).

Despite its name, dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia, as a truly inverse term would define “a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful” (Gordin et al. 1). Rather, a dystopia is a utopia gone wrong, or one that could only be seen as a utopia by a certain sector, or sectors, of society. The genre of dystopia flourished in the eighteenth century, after many intellectuals recognized the impossibility of utopian thinking. A wave of “anti-utopianism” emerged in literature, rejecting the utopian thought as an unrealistic and impossible quest for an ideal future, which, combined with the

turbulent political and economic atmosphere, resulted in the deterioration in utopian thought (Babae 65).

Scholars such as Tom Moylan, Beauchamp and Babae established the birth of dystopian fiction with E. M. Forster; Moylan even considers his short story *The Machine Stops* (1909) a pioneer of the genre and the first modern dystopia.<sup>3</sup> After its publication, many more examples of dystopian fiction emerged, starting with Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which are also known as the "paradigm of dystopian narratives in the twentieth century" (Babae 65). *We*, which takes a critical look at humans' faith, is recognized as the prototype of dystopia and the motivation for Orwell to write *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a criticism of Stalin's totalitarianism. *Brave New World*, for its part, is considered a reaction to capitalism and bourgeois society, and Walsh sees it as the "most perfect [dystopia] from a literary viewpoint" (92).

Utopia and dystopia are intimately linked, although their relationship is not exactly binary and opposite. On the one hand, all utopias come with an implied dystopia, either in its practical implementation or in the auto-corruption of the utopia itself. Gottlieb explains, "to a significant extent, each of these novels makes us ponder how an originally utopian promise was abused, betrayed or, ironically fulfilled so as to create tragic consequences for humanity" (8). Good examples of this are *Player Piano* (1952), by Kurt Vonnegut, a critique of a mechanized, automated world; *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), by Ray Bradbury, a criticism of a society in which reading is illegal; and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a feminist satire of totalitarianism.

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<sup>3</sup> This work is widely accepted as a pioneer of the genre, due, among other factors, to its first introduction of technology in a dystopian setting, marking the beginning of technological dystopian fiction that would be extensively followed by later authors.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, a dystopia does not necessarily need to be an inverted utopia; in fact, the nature of the universe itself makes a dystopia—chaos—more plausible than a utopia—order. Moreover, people frequently perceive their environment as dystopian, and find in these works their lived experience, rather than the hopeful future offered by utopias: “Whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now” (Gordin et al. 2). This exploration of a “terrifying future” is what speculative fiction excels at.

### **1.2.2. Margaret Atwood’s dystopian fiction**

Atwood’s interest in science fiction found only incidental expression in her early work. At the end of her novel *Lady Oracle* (1976), the narrator, a woman writer, states “maybe I’ll try some science fiction. The future doesn’t appeal to me as much as the past, but I’m sure it’s better for you” (345). Certainly, the first work of hers that could be categorized as such took almost ten years to get published: *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the novel that, among other awards, won the Los Angeles Times Prize and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. It is, in fact, considered to be the best and most successful speculative fiction novel written by a Canadian writer (Ketterer 209).<sup>4</sup>

However, Atwood does not feel entirely comfortable with the terminology. Regarding science fiction, she maintains she is no expert on the matter: “I’m not a science fiction expert. ... Although I’m a writer, I’m not primarily a writer of science fiction. In this genre I’m a dilettante and a dabbler, an amateur” (Atwood, “Context” 513). The reason for her doubts

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<sup>4</sup> Other novels such as *The Blind Assassin* (2000) can be considered as “ventures” of hers into speculative fiction (Ingersoll 162).

about the use of the term is the distinction she makes between science fiction and what she calls “speculative fiction”:

I said I liked to make a distinction between science fiction proper—for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go— and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth. (“Context” 513)

With this taxonomy, Atwood separates “traditional” science fiction, with space travels, monsters, and alien civilizations, from more plausible, potential futures for our current world, in order not to “raise false expectations” among readers. She prefers the term “speculative fiction” (“Roots”), which she takes as an umbrella term, a “tree” in which science fiction, science fiction fantasy and fantasy are the branches.<sup>5</sup>

In this “speculative fiction,” Atwood explores futuristic scenarios driven by quite pessimistic political, environmental and social evolutions. *The Handmaid’s Tale* was the first of her works to show these features, and *Oryx and Crake* (2004), the first book of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, continued along the line and would later be completed with the publication of *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, although both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* share a genre and a similar outset (a frightening future), they are in fact very different in essence, as Atwood herself states: “Although lumped together by commentators who have spotted what they have in common—they are not novels in the Jane Austen sense, and both take place in the future, that never-never land equivalent to the other world visited by shamans—they are in fact dissimilar (“Context” 516).

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<sup>5</sup> Science fiction fantasy is a subgenre that mixes scientific-based elements often found in science fiction with violations of laws that could be derived from science, usually found in fantasy (Malmgren 260-61).

<sup>6</sup> Later examples of speculative fiction, such as *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), can be found in Atwood’s oeuvre.

## *The Handmaid's Tale*

As anticipated, *The Handmaid's Tale* is the first dystopian novel written by Atwood, who considers it as a “classical dystopia.” For this narrative, she took inspiration from George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, particularly for the epilogue (“Context” 517). The story, narrated in first person by the female protagonist, Offred, shows a society restricted by the stringent standards of the dictatorial government of the Republic of Gilead. The regime has absolute power and control over the citizen’s lives, especially the women, who have been classified according to their age, social class and fertility. This last aspect is particularly relevant, given that pollution and radioactivity have rendered most people infertile and the few remaining fertile women (called “Handmaids”) are seized and controlled by the authorities of the regime.

Many of the features of Gilead are typical of dystopian fiction: the lack of freedom, the discourse manipulation, the underground movement, etc. However, *The Handmaid's Tale* is by no means considered a typical work of dystopian fiction; it is instead seen by some as a truly “feminist dystopia” due to the female point of view of the protagonist and especially to the nature of Gilead’s social structure itself. It is undeniable that the novel invites interesting possibilities regarding gender and feminist readings. Atwood, nevertheless, does not agree with this designation of “feminist dystopia,” and she offers her reasons for this:

The majority of dystopias—Orwell’s included—have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. ... I wanted to try a dystopian fiction from the female point of view. ... However, this does not make *The Handmaid's Tale* a “feminist dystopia,” except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered “feminist” by those who think women ought not to have these things. (“Context” 516)

## *Oryx and Crake*

*Oryx and Crake*, the second of Atwood's dystopias, tells a double story through one character's—Jimmy's—present and past perspectives: on the one hand, a post-apocalyptic, kind of last-man-standing scenario, and on the other hand, his memories from childhood to adulthood in the form of flashbacks, which also describe the technological advances and the events that led to his (and the world's) present situation.

The novel deals with current techno-scientific trends such as genetic engineering, eugenics, neo-imperialism, materialism and capitalism and the philosophical implications of an unrestricted scientific community that wants to “play god.” *Oryx and Crake* is considered a “dystopic projection of sociocultural proclivities that mark life in much of today's connected world”<sup>7</sup> and also a “double-sided dystopia” (Banerjee 236), as both Jimmy's present and past could be seen as dystopian.

In spite of these obvious dystopian elements, Atwood argues *Oryx and Crake* is not a classic dystopia, given that the reader does not really get an overview of the structure of the society like the one provided in the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*: “I'd say instead that *Oryx and Crake* is a combination of antigravity ray and marshmallow toaster. It's an adventure romance—that is, the hero goes on a quest—coupled with a Menippean satire, the literary form that deals in intellectual obsession” (Atwood, “Context” 517).

The author has also emphasized that the novel functions as a “book end” to *The Handmaid's Tale*, and she encourages her readers to find the connections between her two works of “speculative fiction” (Ingersoll 163), which is precisely what I intend to do in the following pages.

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<sup>7</sup> Although “dystopian” is the canonical term that is accepted by Oxford Dictionaries, an increase has been observed in the use and popularity of “dystopic” as an alternative nomenclature.

### 3. Offred and Oryx face to face: a comparative analysis

#### 3.1. A preliminary look at Offred and Oryx

As seen in the preceding chapters, Offred and Oryx are both female characters who belong to works of fiction categorized as “dystopian,” and, although their contexts and stories are rather contrasting, they are subjected to circumstances deriving from a similar origin.

Offred, the protagonist and first-person, autodiegetic narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, lives in the republic of Gilead, under an authoritarian, patriarchal, religion-based government. She is a Handmaid in the house of Commander Fred, an important personality, and his wife, Serena Joy. This “title” of Handmaid entails the task of bearing a child for them through what is called “the Ceremony” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 124), a compulsory sexual encounter between a Commander and his Handmaid. The Ceremony is held under the peculiar supervision of the Commander's Wife—who has failed to become pregnant and is subsequently thought to be infertile—and its sole purpose is achieving a pregnancy.

The readers gradually get pieces of information from Offred's past through analepsis or flashbacks. After the establishment of the regime of Gilead, she was labeled “morally unfit,” given that her husband, Luke, was divorced, and the government nullified all previous divorces, thus effectively turning her into an “adulterous” woman (Atwood, *Handmaid* 466). When she tried to escape to Canada with Luke and their daughter, they were intercepted and separated, and Offred was sent to the Red Centre for a “retraining” and became part of the first generation of Handmaids.

After some time, the protagonist ends up in Commander Fred's house. During her time as a Handmaid there, she makes contact with a secret resistance group called “Mayday” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 310); she also has a hidden affair with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur and a (suspected) Eye, i.e., a member of the secret police of the regime. Through this arranged



affair, fixed by Serena Joy, who suspects her husband is infertile, Nick and Offred have occasional sexual encounters and eventually become lovers. At the end of her narration, Offred is taken by the “Eyes,” although she is told by Nick that they are in fact members of the resistance who are rescuing her: “It’s alright. It’s Mayday. Go with them” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 451). The novel has an open ending where she ventures into the unknown.

The van waits in the driveway, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 453)

Being the narrator and focalizer, Offred’s thoughts and feelings are open and reflected at all times, except for the epilogue, the fictional “Historical Notes.” This text was allegedly found in thirty tape cassettes that were found years later, kept in a metal foot-locker. On June 25, 2125, a conference entitled “Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies” is held at the University of Denay, Nunavit (Atwood, *Handmaid* 457). In this conference, a group designated as the “Gileadean Research Association” discusses different aspects of what they call the “Gilead Period,” which is now well in the past period of history and studied as such. According to this epilogue, it was Offred herself who made an active effort to document her story and situation by means of tapes, and their existence suggests that she did in fact survive long enough to record them. Thus, it could be assumed that the “Eyes” were actually members of Mayday.

As for Oryx, she is already gone before the main storyline in *Oryx and Crake* takes place, as she was murdered by her boss and lover, Crake. That is why she is introduced through Jimmy’s reminiscences, flashbacks and hallucinations; her memory haunts him to an extent that he has episodes of delusion (Atwood, *Oryx* 131). Her first appearance takes place

when she is about eight-years old, when Crake and Jimmy are teenagers and visit “HottTotts,” a pornographic website which offers videos of real sex tourists. She immediately catches their attention, since she stands out among the rest of girls in the videos:

This was how the two of them first saw Oryx. ... Her name wasn't Oryx, she didn't have a name. She was just another little girl on a porno site. None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy—they'd always struck him as digital clones—but for some reason Oryx was three-dimensional from the start. (Atwood, *Oryx* 103)

Oryx is described as Asian; however, the physical descriptions we have of her are scarce and ambiguous: delicate, small-boned, with a small face and “the palest yellow” skin (Atwood, *Oryx* 133). She was originally born in a small, poor village, in an undetermined location that she fails to provide details of, but that is assumed to be in Southeast Asia: “Some distant, foreign place. It was a village though, said Oryx. A village with trees all around and fields nearby, or possibly rice paddies. ... A village in Indonesia, or else Myanmar? Not those, said Oryx, though she couldn't be sure” (Atwood, *Oryx* 133-34).

Oryx is sold by her mother at a young age to a man called “Uncle En,” who “employs” her, along with her brother and several other children, to sell flowers to tourists in the streets of an unknown city. When the man disappears—he is said to have been found dead in a canal—, another man takes over the children and divides them; Oryx is sold to a third man and asked if she “would like to be in a movie” (Atwood, *Oryx* 159). Thus began a period of sexual exploitation in the pornographic industry.

Years later, Crake finds her through “Student Services,” which is insinuated to provide sexual services. He ends up offering her an “official job” as a teacher for the Crakers,<sup>8</sup> although he still requests her sexual services. Meanwhile, Oryx gets close to Jimmy, who had been secretly obsessed with her for years, ever since they first came upon her online. She is a mystery; it is her who tells Jimmy the story of her life, but she is not a reliable narrator and her telling is at all times oblique, incomplete and veiled. She is evasive; she continuously changes the subject and avoids or rejects the questions she does not want to answer, ignoring them or pleading not to remember. Neither Jimmy nor the reader can ever be absolutely certain whether she truly does not know, whether she refuses to look back or if she does not want to reveal certain parts: “So he would ask, and then she might say, ‘I don’t know. I’ve forgotten.’ Or, ‘I don’t want to tell you that.’ Or, ‘Jimmy, you are so bad, it’s not your business.’ Once she’d said, ‘You have a lot of pictures in your head, Jimmy. Where did you get them? Why do you think they are pictures of me?’” (Atwood, *Oryx* 132).

Her story must therefore be reconstructed through other characters and her own narration, which is hindered by her particular vision and mentality regarding her own story and situation. Her deep acceptance and justification of her childhood abuse and sexual exploitation, and the subsequent emotional and mental trauma, influence and shape her narration to the point that she ends up sounding almost brainwashed:

“Did they rape you?” He could barely squeeze it out. What answer was he expecting, what did he want? “Why do you want to talk about ugly things?” she said. ... “We should think only beautiful things, as much as we can. There is so much beautiful in the world if you look around. You are looking only at the dirt under your feet, Jimmy. It’s not good for you.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 169)

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<sup>8</sup> The “Crakers” or “Children of Crake” are pseudo-human creatures, created by Crake in the so called “Paradise Project,” who exhibit carefully selected physical and behavioral features in an attempt to liberate mankind from the hardships of illness, ageing, love, violence and abstract thought.

Although, as will be seen, many similarities and parallelisms can be found between them, Oryx and Offred differ in an essential aspect: while Offred desperately records her tale in hopes to be heard by anyone, anywhere, anytime, Oryx is reluctant to share her story with others. She does not want to fit in or live up to anybody's expectations. She refuses to be defined. The type of narration of these character's stories is not only one of their aspects in which they differ, but also an indicator of the influence of their societies' respective discourses in their mindset, as will be explained in the following chapter.

### **3.2. Power and discourse: a new truth and an old mindset**

Discourse, power and knowledge are the three apices of Foucault's philosophical universe. According to the French theorist, power is exerted and maintained through the production of knowledge and discourse. That is, knowledge is power and power has control over knowledge: "It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is not possible for knowledge not to engender power" (Foucault, *Power* 52). According to Foucault, actions, opinions and interpretations are intimately linked to and dependant on what the fundamental "truth" of that discourse is: "Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (Foucault, *Power* 131). Furthermore, power is maintained because it "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, *Power* 119). This discourse production leads to the treatment and creation of language as a strong power tool: language is the foundation for thoughts, and those who can control language can also restrict thought.

Another important aspect of the connection between power, truth and discourse is that those in power have “specialist” knowledge, i.e., a well-founded, contrasted argument: “Truth is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it ... it is produced and transmitted under the control of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)” (Foucault, *Power* 131-32). In other words, “specialist” knowledge provides power and control, because the specialist’s word is regarded as authoritative (López 151).

Both Offred and Oryx live in societies with patriarchal discourses, although their nature is different. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, people and particularly Handmaids live under the tight grip of the Republic of Gilead’s regime. This control is exerted through two devices: direct violence and language (Pettersson 4). Firstly, physical and psychological violence is the most striking type of oppression and it is present all along the novel; secondly, the power of language is essential in Gilead, the foundation of the mentality that maintains and supports the republic. The Gileadean discourse boldly creates what Foucault calls a “fundamental truth”: “Each society has its regime of truth. Its ‘general politics’ of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts ... as true, the mechanism and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements” (Foucault, *Essential* 131). Such manipulation of “truth” is common in authoritarian regime dystopias, such as the one depicted in this novel, and one clear example of it is women being blamed for male violence towards them: “It’s Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion ... ‘But whose fault was it?’ Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger ... ‘Her fault, her fault, her fault’, we chant in unison” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 111).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Aunts indoctrinate the Handmaids; they are entrusted with the crucial duty of training them because they rank among the most powerful female agents of the patriarchal order (Callaway 50). Ironically, they are women who enforce a sexist, manipulative, patriarchal discourse and discipline over other women, the Handmaids.

The regime's discourse shapes everyday language, which is limited and manipulated. Some words (e.g. "infertile") are literally forbidden: "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 95). On the other hand, people—and Handmaids in particular—are required to say certain fixed expressions and phrases that are, by all means, closely linked not only to religion ("may the Lord open") and fertility ("blessed be the fruit") but also to the fixed, passive role of women: "under His eye," a common greeting, encloses the connotation of the existence of a divine power and of certain "panopticon" vigilance over them. In addition, the expression constitutes a permanent reminder of their inferior position under the active observation of God, who is, needless to say, a male figure in Gilead's patriarchal, biased rendition.

Gilead's discourse was imposed simultaneously with the regime itself; hence, both its language and discourse are recent. The Republic, created after the ambiguously described "revolution," is the result of the new pseudo-Christian government's extreme policies. Before the advent of the new regime, the life Offred briefly remembers in flashbacks seems ordinary and realistic, similar to life in North America in the eighties—when the novel was written.<sup>10</sup> The regime takes away their independence, power and self-sufficiency when they are already adults; abruptly, late, and artificially: "Women can't hold property anymore, she said. It's a new law. Turned on the TV today?" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 276). That is the reason why the few remaining fertile women—i.e. the future Handmaids—enter the Red Center, a facility where they will be indoctrinated and "trained" for their future jobs. This forced reeducation immediately attracts the readers' attention, due to the concepts and values which are

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<sup>10</sup> June and her husband go grocery shopping (Atwood, *Handmaid* 99), they have a car (128), visit art galleries (106), and she even has a tattoo (101).

externalized and presented through defamiliarization.<sup>11</sup> For the adults in the novel, such reeducation is carried out in what could be considered as a “later” moment in their lives, which contributes to the sense of it being forceful and “artificial.” However, for the next generations, who will be born within this context, it will not be necessary, as the discourse and the “truth” of Gilead will be accepted as the only one known by them: “‘You are the transition generation’, said aunt Lydia. ‘It is the hardest for you. ... For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.’ She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 181).

In sharp contrast, the nature of the patriarchal discourse the reader finds in *Oryx and Crake* does not imply a visible, compelled process of reeducation. Oryx is born into a patriarchal, class-biased discourse that hardly changes in spite of the radical shifts in her life. Such discourse is meant to justify oppression and abuse and encourage submission in the lowest social classes, and especially among women. Even at the critical moment, the transaction when Oryx is sold by her mother to a man that will exploit her, the action is excused by Oryx herself in her narration, if not as the best thing to do, at least as something that “has to be done” to prevent further damage. This manipulative discourse has been engraved in the villagers’ minds, and yet at times it is not compelling enough. The gaps in the argumentation, which are usually skillfully dodged by the oppressor, are occasionally intuited by the oppressed: “All of this was understood, and if not condoned, at least pardoned. Still, after the man had left, the mothers who had sold their children felt empty and sad. They felt as if this act, done freely by themselves (no one had forced them, no one had threatened them) had not been performed willingly” (Atwood, *Oryx* 140).

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<sup>11</sup> The term was coined by Viktor Shklovsky to “distinguish poetic from practical language on the basis of the former's perceptibility” (Crawford 209). Nowadays, the term is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “the effect or technique of disrupting the reader's or audience's habitual perception of the world and making familiar elements in a text, play, etc., seem strange and fresh, especially by means of drawing attention to the language or formal devices used.”

This discourse is subtler than the one surrounding Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and it is shared and unconsciously imposed by everyone. While throughout Oryx's life it is men who both handle the discourse and benefit from it, in the case of Gilead it has been carefully designed by the regime and deliberately imposed by different authority figures: the Commanders, who are at all times the most powerful and dominant figure of the house, the Aunts, elder women who "reeducate" and train future Handmaids, and the Wives, who differentiate themselves from the latter on the basis of this created hierarchy. This artificial, late imposition of a defamiliarized, allegedly new discourse might be one of the reasons why Gilead's discourse is striking and shocking for the readers, while the one found in *Oryx and Crake* is subtler and harder to notice, due to its constant presence and subsequent normalization within our own society.

The future Handmaids obviously carry many memories of their lost freedom and the previous way of life, which are at the same time an obstacle to their adaptation process and tools for the regime, which thus justifies society's disciplinary technologies and carceral forms. Gilead's "truth" is controlled by patriarchal men, shaped by the strict pseudo-Christian religion, and dictated by Gilead's political interests. It is manipulative and it uses negative aspects of the previous society to justify the current mindset and the emergence of Gilead itself: "Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 338).

It must be taken into account, nevertheless, that the alleged innovative nature of Gilead's discourse is debatable. While apparently recent, it had been constructed and grounded in the society prior to the revolution, in what Foucault calls "semi-silence": "everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that



precedes it” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 25). Subsequently, the “previous” society was not free from the values and ideas of Gilead; they were already being incubated there (Pettersson 5). This interferes with possible interpretations of Offred’s narration, which mixes remnants of the society “before” with the new framework of the discourse of the regime (ibid.). She even seems to accept or at least shows signs of a future acceptance of this “truth.” Arguably, her narration is not free from Gilead’s discourse’s strict framework. She moves between two discourses, between two “truths.”

Similarly, despite the radical, post-apocalyptic scenario observed later in the novel, the society’s discourse in *Oryx and Crake* and in particular the one surrounding Oryx is suspiciously similar to ours. While *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as befits speculative fiction, shows the possibilities of a future development—and spiraling out of control—of the already existing patriarchal mindset; events such as those depicted in the novel have actually taken place, still happen nowadays and will probably continue to do so in the future. For Ingersoll, “Oryx is yet another chilling reminder of the reader’s world” (168), while Spiegel considers her as “the embodiment of globalization” (127). There are some other critics such as Elaine Showalter, who interpret the character of Oryx as the author’s instrument to voice her actual opinion about current affairs: “The elusive Oryx is the vehicle in the novel for Atwood’s indignation at child slavery, prostitution, sex tourism and other extreme forms of female victimization” (35).

Oryx leads a difficult life with clear, distinguishable stages as she passes from one “owner” to another; however, the discourse never takes the dramatic turn of Gilead as the society around Oryx remains stable and coherent. She has not been compelled to adapt to a new society and system; on the contrary, she seems to have internalized the “truth” of her society’s discourse as hers. She seems to have assumed, understood and accepted her past, present and future, and she appears to be at peace with it, even when it comes to her own

mother selling her when she was a child. As Suman Makhaik claims in “Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood,” Oryx “has a pragmatic sense of the social and economic context that drove her mother to do what she did and a reasoned approach to making the best of her value” (235).

On her part, Offred often meditates about how her former passivity and lack of critical thinking contributed to the construction of Gilead, regretting now having overlooked the patriarchal control that was already forming in the times prior to the revolution (Neuman 861). Although she has internalized some aspects of Gilead’s discourse, she is at all times conscious of the manipulation of the discourse and the injustice and barbarism of her situation. She makes mental ironic remarks at the expense of the figures in power—the Commander and his Wife, the Eyes or the Aunts, etc.—and does not hide her fear and hatred of them.

Notwithstanding her past, Oryx holds no resentment and refuses to feel sorry for herself: “Oryx had neither pity for him nor self-pity. She was not unfeeling: on the contrary. But she refused to feel what he wanted her to feel” (Atwood, *Oryx* 225). She does not feel Offred’s longing melancholy, given that her prior life was not much better, nor does she express the rage and hate towards her oppressors that Offred hides. In fact, she seems pragmatic and reasonable, and the discourse deeply engraved in her psyche makes her justify and even empathize with the abusers: she cried when she found out about Uncle En’s death (Atwood, *Oryx* 159), and she considers the man who brought her to the United States to keep her in his garage a “kind man who was rescuing young girls” (Atwood, *Oryx* 371).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Oryx’s situation closely resembles a neo-imperialist discourse that can be observed more clearly in works such as Merlinda Bobis’s short story “The Long Siesta as a Language Primer,” one of the readings in the Master’s courses.

In spite of their abyssal differences in personality and dispositions, some parallelisms can be found in Offred's and Oryx's situations. One of the first elements they share is the forced deprivation and change of their names. In Atwood's earliest dystopia, the Handmaids are deprived of their names and given a patronymic consisting of the preposition "of" and the first name of the Commander to whom they are assigned, to further the removal of the "old" discourse. This process encourages the oblivion and erasure of their former personalities and individualities; it also illustrates the clear patriarchal domination in the language and discourse of Gilead, which makes the very existence of women male-dependent. In the fictional "Historical Notes" that close the book, Offred's real name is said to remain unknown (Atwood, *Handmaid* 468). And yet, at the end of the first chapter, a list of names that the future Handmaids whisper at each other is recited: "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 5).<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, Oryx is given a new name, in this case by her "owner," Uncle En, when she is sold to him. She is told to forget her old name and she is re-baptized as "SuSu" (Atwood, *Oryx* 151). It is not the only name she will ever have, although her "real" one is never mentioned. Like Offred, she has "no real identity outside the perceptions of those who control her" (Byrd 619). The new name also acts as a symbol of the vanishing of her old life and the new servitude and duty she has with Uncle En as a street vendor under his lead and protection. However, Oryx ends up naming herself in an act of alleged self-assertion when she starts to work officially as the Crakers' teacher; supervised, however, by Crake, who offers her a list of names to select from (Atwood, *Oryx* 365).<sup>14</sup> Oryx's new life under Crake's leadership is signed by a name he pretends to let her choose.

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<sup>13</sup> Since June is the only one not later used by Offred to refer to one of her fellow apprentices, it can be argued that it could be her name "from before," an intuition confirmed by the recent Hulu series adaptation of the novel.

<sup>14</sup> Both Oryx's and Crake's animal nicknames are taken from the computer game "Extinctathon," which Crake is said to use to meet and join a secret, mysterious group of anarchist activists (Atwood, *Oryx* 254).

Therefore, both Offred and Oryx are named by men who control them and intend to “own” them, restricting, among other aspects, their sexual agency. Offred, as has been said, secretly hates being subjected to this control, and she ends up risking her own life in order to join a secret resistance group and collaborate with them. She despises the Commander as much as she fears him—“He laughed. I could have slapped him. I think I could get some of that, he said, as if indulging a child’s wish for bubble gum” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 244); she internally ridicules the Aunts’ logic and arguments—“They made mistakes, says Aunt Lydia. We don’t intend to repeat them. Her voice is pious, condescending, the voice of those whose duty it is to tell us unpleasant things for our own good. I would like to strangle her” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 174)—and she disregards the Wives’ hypocrisy—“More like a daughter to you, as you might say. One of the family. Comfortable matronly chuckles. That’s all dear, you can go back to your room. And after she’s gone: Little whores, all of them, but still, you can’t be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 177).

Offred renounced her “old” name out of fear and resignation of the irretrievable loss of her prior life; the new name marks her objectification and her official “function” in society:<sup>15</sup> to bear a child for the Commander Fred and his Wife. Such “mission,” which will be further analyzed later, is the only reason she is the Commander’s “property.” As a matter of fact, their relationship is officially confined to what Cavalcanti calls “the monthly rape ‘Ceremony’” (66). However, in his later arrangements to see her privately—which is illegal and secret—in order to “make her life more bearable” and prevent events such as the suicide of the prior Handmaid, Offred uses her sexuality to read—something forbidden for women—and gain knowledge, and therefore power, about the regime and the state.

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<sup>15</sup> Objectification is the act of regarding a person—or an animal—as an object, usually turning them into an instrument for their own means. Sexual objectification of women has been a recurring topic in feminist theory since the 1970s (Fredrickson and Roberts, 174).

Foucault argues that “sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality; useful for greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies” (*Sexuality* 108). In other words, he claims that, although sexuality does not produce power directly like language, it is a tool that women could use for either resisting the patriarchal rules of their societies or complying with them. Certainly, Offred taking advantage of the Commander’s concessions is not the only example we can find in the novel: she also creates an alliance with Nick, her lover, through her sexuality and intimacy. At the end of the novel, Nick ends up turning into her ally and helper in her flight. As Chalak Ghafoor Raouf argues, in the most puritan, stringent scenario, Offred learns to use her sexuality to achieve control over other characters and reach her objectives (415).

Oryx, meanwhile, is no stranger to using her own sexuality to her benefit either. The reader meets her as a child porn actor, being exploited and turned into a sexual commodity for the viewers, and she remains an object of consumption throughout the novel (Irshad 588): she passes from one man after another, being used and abused by them. However, her narration does not sound powerless and she never appears to find her own abuse and early sexualization as humiliating or hurting, although this could be of course due to the trauma or her characteristic secrecy. Moreover, Oryx finds a way to turn over her sexualization and take advantage of it. She “trades” with the cameraman of the pornographic movies for him to teach her English and how to read and write in exchange for “doing film things with her when there were no movies” (Atwood, *Oryx* 165-66). In spite of Jimmy’s infatuation with her, it is Oryx who actively seduces him, which could be almost interpreted as an act of pity—“I didn’t want to see you so unhappy, Jimmy,’ was her explanation” (Atwood, *Oryx* 367). One could even argue that the relationship is conducted on her terms: “Crake is my boss. You are for fun” (Atwood, *Oryx* 368).

Notwithstanding this light-hearted tone and Oryx's affair with Jimmy, the figure of Crake exerts a huge influence, if not total control, over her. Contrasting with the Commander's condescendence towards Offred, Crake respects Oryx, and trusts her on a professional level: "She was an expert businesswoman, he said. He'd given her a slice of the BlyssPluss trials" (Atwood, *Oryx* 368). However, this is always done from a distance and keeping the hierarchy in place. Just like Jimmy, Crake is allegedly in love with Oryx, but far from Jimmy's childish idealization, their relationship is toxic, cold and possessive:

And Crake loved Oryx, no doubt there; he was almost abject about it. He'd touch her in public, even. Crake had never been a toucher, he'd been physically remote, but now he liked to have a hand on Oryx: on her shoulder, her arm, her small waist, her perfect butt. *Mine, mine*, that hand was saying. (Atwood, *Oryx* 368)

Crake uses Oryx in several ways. He hires her for her sexual services in what seems to be a specific, emotionless agreement they both fulfill methodically; always, needless to say, on Crake's terms and subjected to his requirements. Their relationship is also business related; Crake sends Oryx off on a worldwide promotion of the pill he has invented, BlyssPluss, which is later revealed to be the cause of the mysterious disease that almost wipes out the entire human population. Crake does not reveal to her that the pills are part of his ultimate plan towards human extinction; Oryx does not know the mortal effects they end up triggering. All in all, she is another instrument in Crake's machinations. This idea is addressed by Danette DiMarco, for whom "Oryx retains an instrumental and dehumanized quality ... : in receiving payment to tend to the Crakers, in serving both Crake and Jimmy sexually, and in delivering the BlyssPluss pills worldwide" (185).

Crake ultimately kills Oryx in front of Jimmy, while she appears to be drugged and unconscious (Atwood, *Oryx* 285), in a dramatic scene where she has been compared to "[Crake's] Bride of Frankenstein, whom he is sacrificing to the Mother cult she will

eventually represent for the Crakers” (Ingersoll 171). In doing so, Crake is ensuring that his plan to exterminate humanity on earth is flawlessly executed, as her death prevents Oryx and Jimmy from producing offspring (Dunlap 10). It seems, as expected from Crake, an anticipated and meticulously planned action: “‘If I’m not around, Oryx won’t be either,’ said Crake. ‘She’ll commit suttee?’<sup>16</sup> No shit! Immolate herself on your funeral pyre?’ ‘Something like that,’ said Crake, grinning. Which at the time Jimmy had taken both as a joke and also as a symptom of Crake’s truly colossal ego.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 376)

Oryx shows no visible signs of the internal rebellion found in Offred’s narration. She seems to be not only submissive but also utterly loyal to Crake at all times, up until her death. She depends on him, follows his orders and feeds his ego. She considers him a “brilliant genius” (Atwood, *Oryx* 369) and seems infatuated not only with his work but also with his view of the world: “‘I would never leave Crake. I believe in Crake, I believe in his’ – she groped for the word – ‘his vision. He wants to make the world a better place. This is what he’s always telling me. I think that is so fine, don’t you, Jimmy?’” (Atwood, *Oryx* 377).

And yet, notwithstanding her apparent passivity, Oryx is not as powerless and submissive as it could seem on a first reading. Unlike Offred, she never shows signs of rebellion and direct action against her oppressors; however, she controls and limits her narration and she uses her own sexuality to obtain knowledge, and hence power. Their difference in attitude is obvious: while Offred is trying to escape the grip of a system she fears and despises, Oryx understands the rules of the world she lives in, and plays them in her favor whenever and however she can, in order to survive.

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<sup>16</sup> This term, derived from the traditional Sanskrit “sati,” alludes to a traditional Hindu rite of sacrifice where the widow immolates herself upon the funeral pyre of her deceased husband (Spivak 93).

### 3.3. Gender performativity: two faces of the objectification of women

The dichotomy between sex and gender is relatively new. In fact, until around the 1960s, “gender” used to refer solely to the grammatical inflexion of nouns. In 1972 John Money proposed using “sex” to define the biological male/female classification and “gender” to designate behavioral differences by sex, and feminist scholars soon began to make the distinction between biologically determined differences between male and female and the aspects that are socially constructed around it (Udry 561).<sup>17</sup> The relationship between the two terms has raised multiple debates along the years, and still does so currently. The theory of essentialism, on the one hand, suggests that the differences between men and women are permanent, determined at birth and ultimately caused by biological factors, leaving aside any external, environmental influence (Smiler and Gelman 864). Although often criticized as biologically inaccurate,<sup>18</sup> essentialism is nowadays widely accepted and interiorized as true, and several authors—such as Margaret Atwood—expose, caricaturize and criticize it in their works.

The aforementioned sex/gender binary supported by essentialism is deconstructed by Butler’s theory of gender, along with their alleged relation and mutual causality. She rejects the idea of biological sex determining gender and views gender as constructed, and thus, as variable and unstable: “whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (Butler, *Gender* 8). Moreover, she argues that it is gender that constructs our biological understanding of sex as male or female, and not the other way around: “Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex ... ; gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves

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<sup>17</sup> Nowadays, however, gender is often used as a simple synonym of sex, which it has come to substitute in most cases.

<sup>18</sup> Among many other academic critics, one can find Bohan and Wilson.



are established” (Butler, *Gender* 10). Thus, Butler negates the existence of sex as a natural category and states that both sex and gender are products of discourse, constructed by reiterative performances in a certain culture and society:

There is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; [and] because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. (Butler, “Performative” 522)

Hence, according to Butler, our gender identities are mere performances which are intrinsically contextual and dependent on other dimensions of our identity such as culture, race, class, and ethnicity (Irshad 586). She defines performativity as “that discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler, *Bodies* 13). She argues that identities are constituted by this performativity and do not actually exist prior to it: “My argument is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the “doer” is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler, *Gender* 195). Thus, it is through the reiterative performances of individuals through generations that the binary categories of “masculinity” and “femininity” have transcended and permeated our culture and society as theoretical norms and standards (Irshad 586). Furthermore, these conventions narrow and restrict our agency as members of a society, as Butler pointed out: “gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions” (Butler, “Performative” 527).

Butler’s idea that gender is not biologically determined but a socio-cultural construct is taken to the extreme in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as Annette Kirkvik maintains in *Gender Performativity in The Handmaid’s Tale and The Hunger Games* (13). The most critical

problem of Gilead, the overwhelming rates of infertility, shapes not only its discourse but also society's hierarchy: "In Gilead, all men are not created equal: some men are second-class citizens and all women are third-class citizens" (Callaway 48). Given that men's infertility is not on the table, women are classified in two groups; those who cannot bear children, which are further divided as per their status (Wives, Aunts, Marthas, Prostitutes and Unwomen), and those who can: Handmaids.

Handmaids are the most important and yet the most despised part of Gilead's system. Procreation is now the center of their existence, their value and their main defining feature as women; they have been reduced, in Kirkvik's words, to "containers," "twolegged wombs" and "ambulatory chalices" (12), which have no importance or interest apart from their ability to reproduce. They are no longer perceived as human beings; only as productive ovaries (Callaway 51). This entails a total redefinition of femininity and the construction of new gender performances for Handmaids to fulfill.

Offred's objectification as a mere reproductive medium finds a parallel in Oryx's motherhood, which is forced upon her by Crake, who constructs her as a "Mother Goddess" figure for the Crakers he created and "fathered," bringing together the two facets he reduces her to: "mother" and "whore" (Ingersoll 168). Moreover, her figure is deeply linked to nature, as she is supposed to have created the animals. Oryx and Crake appear as a couple of divinities and their jurisdictions are clearly separated; Crake is venerated by men, and Oryx is the protector of women. Her figure is relegated and dominated by him, who is considered the highest authority and the "head deity": "Not coincidentally in this new cosmogony the human-like creations are made in the Garden by their Father, while the other fauna can be relegated to the Earth-Mother, whom this male deity supplants and dominates as his consort" (Ingersoll 169).

The objectification of Oryx, however, focuses on sex rather than reproduction. As discussed above, she is used as a sexual commodity and, as such, forced to perform a specific, prearranged role—wear certain clothes, complements and even wigs, adopt a particular attitude, etc.—always with the objective of fulfilling men’s fantasies and expectations:

Being in a movie, said Oryx, was doing what you were told. If they wanted you to smile then you had to smile, if they wanted you to cry you had to do that too. Whatever it was, you had to do it, and you did it because you were afraid not to. You did what they told you to do to the men who came, and then sometimes those men did things to you. That was movies. (Atwood, *Oryx* 163)

Oryx’s objectification and “role-assignment” happen at the moment of her birth, and they are conditioned by her context: she is a female in a poor village, and thus her worth depends on her body. As a child, she learns that “the roles and duties of women revolve around her body, as she is seen only as a body. The village women make all effort to make her, ‘look pretty and healthy’ as these were essential requisites for them to be purchased by rich people” (Irshad 588).

Therefore, Offred and Oryx are both objectified and given specific performative “instructions” regarding their “functions”—reproductive and sexual, respectively—as females. They belong to the lowest levels of their societies: Offred being a fertile, “morally unfit” woman in the new regime, and Oryx being born a poor but “pretty” girl somewhere in Southeast Asia. Their “womanhood”—that is, their female body—is their main trait; it defines them and determines their behavior, their way of speaking, their appearance, their fate and desires, and their position in society.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In one of his most famous quotes, “Anatomy is destiny,” (182) Sigmund Freud encloses the very basis of essentialism, linking the human body—or, rather, its genitals—not only to one’s role in society but also to a ineludible, predetermined fortune.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the social construct and expectations of gender performance are highlighted and exaggerated, resulting in the creation of an “extreme gender” which is boldly forced upon the Handmaids (Kirkvik 13). Here, De Beauvoir’s statement that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” acquires its ultimate meaning: the Handmaids’ lives are a constant performance of femininity, which can only be constructed through self-restraint, purification and discipline (Kouhestani 130). In fact, in spite of the acceptance and internalization of the new discourse, Offred herself is aware of her “nature” being a performance and not an innate thing: “I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 104). She is not only conscious of her constraints but also displeased by them: “I avoid looking down at my body (...). I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 98). One could understand this exaggeration as a critique of gender essentialism through the portrayal of the consequences of its extreme enforcement (Kirkvik 25).

Oryx’s case, on the other hand, is subtler. She is subjected to the use of women as bodies since her very childhood, and she learns early how society and particularly men want her to look and behave, which is never really a secret: “She had a general idea of what else the man might want—the other children already knew about such things and discussed them freely” (Atwood, *Oryx* 153). She knowingly performs the role she is supposed to, presents herself as docile and “obedient” and “[does] as she [is] told.”

However, when examining Oryx’s alleged conformity to the role and the performativity she has been assigned according to her gender—along, in this case, with her class status—it must be taken into account, once more that, contrary to Offred, she is not the narrator; instead, she is merely “the object of male gaze” (Makhaik 234), observed through the biased lens of Jimmy, who is the protagonist and only focalizer of the novel. Despite the fact that Oryx tells

Jimmy the—partial—story of her life, the reader never gets to know her perspective, her interior monologue, or what her true feelings are. For the readers, Oryx is one-dimensional; her only image is the one perceived by Jimmy, and her narration is composed of the fragments he remembers having heard from her—all reconstructed, filtered and completed through Jimmy's interpretation and imagination.

Moreover, both Oryx and Crake are presented through the limited lens of Jimmy's binary and constructed stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. Since Jimmy's birth, his father instills in him that reasonable and practical behaviors are associated with masculinity, while display of emotions and tears is demarcated as an exclusively feminine trait: "Women always get hot under the collar" (Atwood, *Oryx* 19). From his point of view, women are stereotyped as mysterious and whimsical whereas men are believed to be firm and stable. Later, Jimmy projects his preconceptions, feelings and desires on Oryx and hopes for her to feel empathy and share his grief and resentment, although ultimately she does not react as he expects, and "refuses to provide him the emotional vent he tries to seek in her" (Makhaik 235). As has been seen, Oryx refuses to be a victim in her own narration. Reversing Jimmy's vision of gender stereotyping, she is pragmatic and reasonable while he himself has an emotional, immature reaction to his own misfortune. Moreover, she is "sexually adept and expert," which seems to contradict the prevalent vision of females as sexually passive (Irshad 590) and her own history—having been sexually exploited as a child in the pornographic movies she was forced to star in, along with the sexual abuse she is insinuated to suffer from the man who brought her into the United States and kept her locked in his garage (Atwood, *Oryx* 371).

In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, clothes and general appearance are strongly linked to Offred's and Oryx's gender performativity. Offred wears the mandatory attire for Handmaids: a red, floor-length robe and a red veil and a white bonnet (called

“wing”) covering the woman’s hair. The color red is not arbitrary, but an important symbol that could stand for passion, lust and sexual desire—which would, however, collide with the puritan, modest nature their clothes intend to have—or for menstrual blood, and subsequent fertility (Feuer 90), among many other possible interpretations. This garment is meant to identify Handmaids and make them recognizable from a distance, while covering their bodies with the modesty the regime’s strict religion demands. It also renders visible the aforementioned classification among women, whose clothes are all color-coded to externalize their status: Wives are dressed in blue; Aunts are dressed in brown, etc. Offred has only been forced to use her new attire for a few months, but it has already become ordinary in her eyes. When she sees some foreign women, she remarks:

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture. ... Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 45)

Having already internalized many aspects of the regime’s discourse and standards, the vision of a group of female tourists, dressed as she used to before the establishment of Gilead, shocks Offred. She sees high-heeled shoes as “instruments of torture” and emphasizes the sexual connotations of their makeup, exposed hair and apparent “nudity,” although these elements used to be common aspects of her daily life not so long ago, and, on those days, she had probably worn a similar attire without much thought. Gilead’s totalitarian control over ordinary life and its discourse’s “truth” have now warped her mindset, and the new strict, puritan view fills her mind with guilt and embarrassment in the presence of foreign, “free” women.

In contrast with Offred, Oryx's standards about her appearance have not changed; her worth is measured by her physical aspect since her birth and she knows not only that she should appear attractive but also exactly what is considered attractive in her world. This applies not only to the obvious, carefully constructed attires her "owners" impose on her during the recording of the pornographic films—"I could look different, I could wear different clothes and wigs, I could be someone else, do other things" (Atwood, *Oryx* 163)—she has also internalized the importance of looks and is always careful about maintaining an immaculate, feminine image: "She'd washed her hands, she was painting her nails now, her delicate oval nails, so perfectly shaped. Peach-coloured, to match the flowered wrapper she was wearing. Not a smudge on her. Later on she would do her toes" (Atwood, *Oryx* 163). She even plays with the impression she wants to make and the effects she knows it has over men, alternating it and changing her own behavior to match its variations: "Oryx had a wig like that. She liked to dress up, change her appearance, pretend to be different women. She'd strut around the room, do a little strip, wiggle and pose. She said men liked variety" (Atwood, *Oryx* 271). Her experience and awareness of her expected performativity allow her to consciously manipulate it, mimicking the different theatrical performances and roles that she can swap between, according to her humour, objectives or intention.

Oryx's and Offred's view of clothing and appearance could seem at odds with one another at first glance: while Oryx is supposed to appear "pretty" and sexually attractive for men, the physical appearance of the Handmaids is, while imposed by men, designed to avoid attracting men's gaze. As mentioned, the Handmaid's attire is supposed to flee from drawing sexual attraction and enforce modesty and non-superficiality, which is intimately linked to the religious, puritan bias of the regime. However, in both cases, this external determination of women's clothing and appearance can be interpreted as one of many facets of patriarchal oppression and control over women's lives and bodies. Whether it is pursuing purity or hyper

sexuality, the simple establishment of a standard of “perfect femininity” and the compulsory or expected compliance with it constitute one of the most revealing aspects of the patriarchal control women are subjected to in society. Their physical appearance is only one among many other elements that comprise the constant and lifelong gender performativity they have to engage in as women.

In the preceding discussion I have tried to prove that, while the aims of their objectification are quite different, Offred and Oryx are clear examples of two faces of gender performativity. Once again, Oryx’s situation is subtler and conjures up our present society more than a dystopian future. Her performativity as a woman is sex-related and follows a duality “virgin-whore” (DiMarco 184) that is not new in the Western world, while it is also reminiscent of the “exotification” of Asian girls and women through infantilization. Oryx’s attire while filming pornographic films—ribbons, flowers—and the innocent, shy attitude she is supposed to adopt aim for a general childlike image that is mirrored in our society’s usual portrayal of Asian women, simultaneously depicted as “sexualized and infantilized, for they are seen as both ‘sexy’ and ‘cute’ at the same time” (Bong 7). This distorted view mirrors the so-called “male gaze,” understood as a position of appreciation that comes from a heterosexual white male—who observes, performing an active role—and his sense of entitlement to the women’s bodies—that perform a passive role (Mulvey 2186). Meanwhile, Offred’s new and forced performativity is focused on reproduction and transforms women not simply into objects but into mere vessels, instruments to produce babies that will never be acknowledged as their children. While blatantly far-fetched and “dystopian,” one can distinguish in this situation the sadly extended notion of “a woman’s place,” i.e., staying at home and taking care of their children, that still plagues our current societies.



#### 4. Conclusions

Although Atwood does not consider any of her works as “feminist dystopias,” there is no doubt that they allow for a fruitful analysis from a feminist perspective. After examining Offred’s and Oryx’s characters side by side, many similarities were found among them, in spite of the differences in the characters’ personality, portrayal and context. Moreover, the analysis of Atwood’s work through the lens of Foucault’s theories allows for the discovery of an interesting parallelism: Offred and Oryx are both oppressed and manipulated by their societies’ discourses—a bold new one in the case of Offred, and a constant, hidden-in-plain-sight one in the case of Oryx. They share their position at the lowest level within their societies’ hierarchies, mainly due to their gender—although Offred’s fertility and Oryx’s social class weigh in their positions as well. However, both characters fight back for and try to recover their stolen power and agency: Offred chooses to do so through active rebellion, while Oryx learns to play the system’s game and follows it in order to achieve her objectives.

Likewise, these characters’ objectification, while pursuing different aims, is also similar, and so is their gender performativity. In both cases, their expected, gender-dictated behavior and appearance are not as original and “new” as it could seem at first sight. Although taken to the extreme, many traces of Offred’s gender performativity, which are forcefully imposed during the Gilead regime but not completely new, can be found in the patriarchal values that we unconsciously acquire while growing up in most Western societies nowadays. However, Oryx’s sexual exploitation, along with the exotification and infantilization of her Asian female body, are, unfortunately, noticeably present in the Western world. As seen in this Master’s thesis, these two characters’ situations are meant to mirror existing—although sometimes unnoticed—expectations, impositions and constraints, which are suffered by women in our current world. In doing so, Atwood brings attention to some of the many traces of the patriarchal discourse that are yet to be removed from our society.

To conclude, the most important aspect Oryx and Offred have in common is not the resemblance of their situations, but the author's similar—if not identical—intention behind their creation. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* portray dystopian scenarios that are possible futures for our current society; nevertheless, in their depiction of women's status and situation, Oryx represents what is already happening, while Offred's case constitutes a terrifying premonition of what could be yet to come. They are both instruments in Atwood's masterful hands, which she uses to magnify and thus ridicule and denounce different aspects of the patriarchal oppression she continues to observe in our world, where, to this day, women are still observed and judged through a biased lens, living and working "under His eye."

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<sup>20</sup> For this list of works cited and throughout this Master's thesis, I have followed the eighth edition of MLA style, which has introduced important changes regarding prior editions.

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