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“WALKING WOMBS”: LOSS OF INDIVIDUALITY AND SELF-ALIENATION IN THE HANDMAID’S TALE

“Yürüyen Rahimler”: Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü’nde Benlik Kaybı ve Kendine Yabancılaşma

Gökçenaz GAYRET

Öğretim Görevlisi, Giresun Üniversitesi
Eynesil Kamil Nalbant Meslek Yüksekokulu,
gokcenazgayret@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8939-6659

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Öz

Margaret Atwood, *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü* adlı romanında ataerkil rejimin kadını güçten, öznenlikten, öz kimlikten ve öz saygıdan mahrum bıraktığı fütürist distopik bir toplumu tasvir etmektedir. Kadınlar, okumalarına, yazmalarına, düşünmelerine, konuşmalarına katı yasaklar getiren, mal varlıklarına, banka hesaplarına el koyan, işlerinden kovan, öz kimliklerini silen, kullandıkları dili basitleştirip idare eden, kadın öznelliğini kısıtlayan teokratik düzenin baskıcı toplumsal dayatmalarına hapsedilmişlerdir. Margaret Atwood, dişil özgürlüğe baskıyı kasvetli distopik bir hikâye ile anlatarak kadınların toplumsal roller tarafından nasıl siyasi, ekonomik, biyolojik, cinsel ve ruhsal olarak istismara uğradığını, kontrol edildiğini, sınırlandırıldığını ve hüküm altına alındığını açıkça göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, öncelikle kadın kimliğinin parçalanması, baskıcı ataerkil düzende kadının nesnelleştirilmesi ve itaat etmeye zorlanması ile ilgilidir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma, köktendincilik, sürekli gözetleme, sınırlı dil, şiddet ve korku salma, özgürlüğü bastırma ve beyin yıkama yoluyla ataerkil toplumsal düzenin kadınları haklarından nasıl sıyırdığını, kadın bedenini yürüyen rahimlere indirgeyerek nasıl kontrol altına aldığı göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, aynı zamanda kadınlar üzerindeki biyolojik, psikolojik baskının ve ötekileştirilmenin iç kimlik kaybına nasıl dönüştüğünü, kadınların toplumsal cinsiyet normlarını nasıl içselleştirdiklerini, kadın bedenini disipline ederek, yabancılaştırarak, kadın özverisini idealleştirerek ve kadınlığı müesseseleştirerek ataerkil toplumun kadınlara nasıl boyun eğdirdiğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Distopya, yabancılaşma, kimlik, ataerkillik, tahakküm

Abstract

Margaret Atwood, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, delineates a futuristic dystopian society in which a male chauvinist society debars women from self-identity, subjectivity, self-esteem, and power. Women are incarcerated in oppressive societal imperatives of a totalitarian theocratic state which restricts women’s individuality; simplifies and manipulates language; erases their inborn identity; discharges women from their jobs; confiscates their properties and bank accounts; and imposes strict bans on reading, writing, speaking, and thinking. Creating bleak dystopian tale of oppression vis-à-vis female freedom, Atwood manifests how women are politically, economically, biologically, sexually, and psychologically exploited, controlled, restricted, manipulated, and subjugated by socially circumscribed roles. The present study is primarily concerned with fragmentation of female identity, objectification and subordination of women within oppressive patriarchal regime. In this regard, it aims to speculate how patriarchal social order strips women of

their rights and asserts control over female body by reducing to walking wombs through religious fundamentalism, constant surveillance, limited language, inflicting violence and fear, repressing freedom, and brainwashing. The study also shows how the biological and psychological oppression on women and otherness lead them to the loss of an internal identity; how women internalize social conditioned gender norms; and how subjugating women is maintained by disciplining and alienating female bodies, idealizing female self-sacrifice, and institutionalizing femininity within patriarchal society.

Keywords: *Dystopia, alienation, identity, patriarchy, oppression*

The woman they did not kill.
Instead they sewed her face shut,
closed her mouth
to a hole the size of a straw,
and put her back on the streets,
a mute symbol.
-Margaret Atwood, True Stories

1. INTRODUCTION

The woman wakes up to an iniquitous bleak morning. Her identity is stripped away. Her personal rights are eroded. She is fired. Her bank accounts are swept away. Disempowered, exploited, and silenced, she has no longer to speak, write, read, and even think. No real power, no autonomy, no place in political decisions and intellectual life... Deprived of all privacy, she is disrespected and stucked in patriarchal totalitarianism. No longer be sovereign of her physical body. It is owned and controlled by authorities. She is only capable of ovulation and insemination. Henceforward, she is a uterus with two legs. Identity fragmented, body tortured, mind mandated, forced into perpetual sexual servitude... Woman is torn between two choices: disciplined or punished. Is this outlandish situation a dystopian prophecy or entirely streaks of reality?

Margaret Atwood speculates a cautionary futuristic dystopia of atrociously political and social power on the exploitation and reduction of women to voiceless childbearing vessels, walking wombs, and consumer objects tossed aside in due time ignoring their human basic rights in a totalitarian theocratic state in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This literary work "projects the culmination of the feminist issue where the identity of a woman has been dragged down to the nadir hardly leaving any scope for its retrieval" (Mouda, 2012, p.1).

Recounted by a female narrator, the story is set amidst devastating power of the Republic of Gilead in which nuclear war erupts, a world-wide

pollution spreads, the infertility rate is immense, the fundamentalist coup takes over the reins, laws are formed into teachings of Bible, and government takes extreme steps to disenfranchise women. In Gilead, all women are subjugated to men regardless of their status and divided into various groups for their potential ability to bear children. Deprived of their individuality and autonomy, they are marginalized and morphed into the conventional passive roles in the society: homemaker and baby-maker. The absolute power of new regime “grows out of the barrel of a gun, utilizes repressive laws and politics, and is solidified by the isolation of each woman, the fragmentation of her social world, and the reconstruction of each woman’s world into Gilead’s mold” (Stillman& Johnson, 1994, p.75). Put differently, Gilead rams a life based on male domination, fear, and conformity down female citizen’s throat. Thus, the female sense of self commences to be degraded, subjugated, and fragmented by patriarchal theocratic domination.

As an exemplary novel underlining “the extrapolated, exaggerated horrors of the near future”, the reader is alerted to the possible dangers evils in our current time in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Yamamoto, 2009, p. 197). It speculates what will happen if we do not pay heed to the potential dangers of existing medieval mind supporting men’s supremacy over women, instructing them to keep silent, holding them down into their socially and biologically determined roles, and putting them back where they belong. As Davidson observes, Atwood reprimands “present propensities that make Gilead possible” through “envisioning an appalling future already implicit in the contemporary world (1988, p. 113). Envisaging the terrible plausibility of political and social exaggerations in her dystopian scenario, Atwood, indeed, encourages the readers to question and reject probable destructive tendencies and consequences of current patriarchal stance and mind intending to silence and alienate women.

It is a crystal-clear fact that Atwood narrates this misogynistic dystopia to resist the efforts to thwart the female individual identity; to forewarn women to redeem themselves from patriarchal oppression and subordination; to shatter the reign of silence; not to perpetuate the listlessness of ignorance and compliance; to give message women to never accept any one’s definition but to define themselves; to rebuild the self rather than obliteration; to regain control over the body; to reject social and biological predetermined roles; to prevent women from reiteration of inferiority, internalized oppression, lack of self-esteem, and submersion of the self; not to turn a deaf ear into female emancipation; to augment

consciousness raising to women studies; and to raise questions and objections about the systems attempting to dehumanize, disempower, and disrespect women: “By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (Atwood, 1985, p.203).

2. IDEOLOGICAL IMPLEMENTATIONS

Gilead is an autocracy which reduces women to silence with invincible power, oppresses their femininity to humiliation, and keeps them under strict vigilance. The regime’s misogynistic social system uses various ideological implementations and depersonalizing techniques to settle women’s hash in the novel: indoctrination, the exploitation of religion, deprivation of individuality, degrading them into biological functions, objectification of female body, over-glorification of motherhood, manipulating language and communication, inflicting fear, and constant surveillance. All these factors drag women into a deadlock: internalized oppression, identity crisis, loss of self-esteem, alienation, and silence.

2.1. The Exploitation of Religion and Indoctrination

The totalitarian systems assume total control over their citizens in two probable manners: “the complete destruction of human personality” by building “authority, orthodoxy” regarded as “ideological control”; “complete disciplinary control” over “beliefs and ideas” through “ordering and regimentation of society” via indoctrination (Cassinelli, 1960, p.90). As other totalitarian societies practice, the Republic of Gilead constitutes a form of mental violence so as to discipline its female subjects by affecting their minds and lacking fortification of the self via The Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre in which the Aunts dictate the faiths of new ideology and implement control over the female masses.

In Gilead, religion is one of the most effective instruments of ideological implementation to “divert people’s point of view into believing in and adhering to a religious creed that, in reality, actually reinforces the political creed of the dominant power group” (Banner, 1973, p. 27). The new social order is grounded on a biblical story of Rachel- Jacob’s wife: infertile Rachel tells Jacob “Give me children, or I shall die” and asks him for having sexual relationship with her handmaid to have a child (Atwood, 1985, p.8). The state presumes on this religious story through assigning fertile women, Handmaids, to lie with men in higher status in order to overcome the risk of population crash resulting from a nuclear explosion. The system vindicates

the Handmaid's sexual servitude as blessedness by perverting the religious context so as to empower its beliefs and needs. The Handmaids are forced to believe that childbearing is their blessed duty and salvation because "Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" and "she shall be saved by childbearing" (Atwood, 1985, p. 170). Through religious indoctrination and enactment of laws, the state perpetuates and normalizes this mindset, thus guaranteeing female citizen's compliance to authority. Exploiting parts of biblical scriptures aligning with its policies is the chief devastating power of the state to normalize and justify the new norms derogating and reducing woman to an object.

The preach that only women can be barren is so oppressive that Offred's inner response to the idea that man can also be sterile shows her internalization of religion doctrines deteriorated by the state: "I almost gasp...There is no such thing as a sterile man...There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren. That's law" (Atwood, 1985, p. 52). Additionally, the Aunts indoctrinate the beatitudes as follows: "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" (Atwood, 1985, p.74). Although Offred disconfirms these teachings and recognizes they are made up, there is no way to check them. The woman is forbidden to possess and read the religious books because the system does not want any woman to reason and to check the sections which do not overlap with Gilead's doctrines. Offred is right because Gilead distorts the religious contexts to justify their policies, hence playing a crucial role in stifling, silencing, stereotyping, and alienating women.

2.2. Fragmentation of Identity

As well as deterioration of religious doctrines, Gilead takes concrete steps to remove the sense of individuality in an effort to condition women to deference, self-abnegation, and perpetual servitude to men. In the process of becoming a handmaid, women are first stripped of their real identities. The system forbids their original names and entitles them composing of the prepositions "of" and the name of Commander to whom they are forced to serve. The reader never knows the narrator's real name because her identity is deracinated by oppressive patriarchy so as to thwart the link to her unique self. When she assigns to the Commander Fred, she is renamed as Offred. In other words, she is "of" the Commander Fred. As the potential breeder of the society, Offred is typified as the possession of the Commander. Their concubine names denote that handmaids are not individual but commodities and objects in men's property. This stigmatization explicitly corresponds to

Beauvoir's argument (1949, p.26) that man regards woman as an appendage to him, not as a self-governing and autonomous individual in *The Second Sex*.

The absolute male power as a basis of patriarchal state of Gilead debars women from their self-identities and the handmaids' names are indicators to whom they belong. "It is much more important to be oneself than anything else" (Woolf, 1929, p.94); however, the ban which women cannot flout is to be themselves. Furthermore, they do not have a stable sense of identity. The handmaids are sent to a new house after three attempts to procreate for the Commander and his wife. At each assignment, they have to leave their former name and adapt to their new Commander's names. Whereas the narrator's name is now Offred, she may be then become Ofwaren or Ofglen. They do not even have independent names distinguishing them as an individual. Not only are the handmaids manipulated and modified physically but also declared null and void as the target of Gilead policies. This mandate embodies the disruption of women's social role, thereby inducing sense of loss of continuity to their individuality.

The handmaids realize that they are considered as a "national resource" (Atwood, 1985, p.56) by being given an alias. Robustness of individual identity is eroded and they are being tossed, turned, and blown about by every wind of patriarchal doctrine. Hence, the handmaids quietly mouth their real names so as to overcome identity crisis at the Red Center at nights. Bearing their real names in mind greases the skids for adhering to their ab initio identity in a world of strict regulation and oppression. This split second, even if just a smidgen, moves forward emancipation of women and eradication of patriarchy for them. Offred explains the significance of identity fortifying the essence as provided hereinbelow: "My name is not Offred; I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark" (Atwood, 1985, p.69). Although Offred never utters her real name throughout the novel, it is of great significance to her. Her name becomes the essence of who she is and thus she keeps it to herself in the hope that she will someday get her identity

back. Atwood seems to demonstrate that Offred is still adhered to her core identity, yet oppressed, because she does not belittle herself as Of-Fred, the name assigning her to solely a man's property.

Another contributing cause which sabotages female individuality in the novel is color-coded clothes. Clothing is perceived as a means of expressing individuality. The patriarchy, this once, fuels the fire with clothes as a tool of misogyny and oppression. Each woman is classified into a strict hierarchy with different clothes in specific colors so as to emblemize her role in society. The rigid color coded clothes reveal female status within society while masking selfness, hereby remarking that their individual identities are evanished in predetermined roles by patriarchy. Without choice of clothing, the female self-determination is extenuated and individual differences are minimized. It is a total case of Hobson's choice, an option that indeed offers no alternative for women. Offred describes her uniform as follows: "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color 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. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. *I never looked good in red; it's not my color*" (Atwood, 1985, p.14).

The uniform of handmaids not only obscures their faces and forecloses their bodies from being seen but also subjugates their sight. The woman is not noticed by the system as she is not of the slightest importance. What matters most is the role of woman within the society. Function matters, not woman herself, hence reinforcing Offred's reflection that they are only "two-legged wombs" (Atwood, 1985, p.109). The red gown is also a functional oppressive image associated with womb, fertility, and menstrual blood. As Offred sees Japanese tourists on the street, she is "fascinated, but also repelled" (Atwood, 1985, p.29). She remembers that she used to dress as tourists do and this is freedom for women to wear what they choose. The color coded uniform to her social function negates the individuality of the female citizens. As uniforms strip the individuality away and the society tells the woman who she is, she learns to hide her real self, becoming distorted.

However, Offred yearns for sense of herself as an individual independent from others while the self is split mercilessly. In the beginning, she repudiates to embrace the room she sleep, uttering "the door of the room-not my room, I refuse to say my-is not locked" (Atwood, 1985, p.14) because she has no key to secure her privacy and to be on her own when the need arises. As the time passes by, yet, she espouses the room and calls it as "mine" (Atwood, 1985, p.44). The room is an individual escape from direct

surveillance and the protection of the self though it is left unlocked. Offred's sense of ownership conjures up *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf, 1929) underlying the significance of a room for women's self-expression and freedom. Regarded as a possession of the society, Offred simply keeps her individuality alive and finds solace in the room.

2.3. Biology as Destiny

In Gilead where female body is treated as a fertile object, biology is another ideological implementation to oppress, silence, and alienate women. The female body is totally under control of the patriarchy and considered as a means of reproduction. Women are confined and consigned to biologically-determined social roles: childbearing and breeding. The patriarchy misuses biology as an obstacle against women's liberation through positioning them as wombs, mothers, and viable ovaries. In other words, the biology is Gilead's ideological pretext for berefting women from social life, thereby locking them in a servile status.

The female body entraps and imprisons women as the Gilead patriarchy builds up. They are compelled to endure the othering, being second sex, and their biological destiny: If they are born with a womb, they will be restricted, censored, plundered, and silenced. Her essence identity is repressed depending upon sexuality which is calibrated and manipulated within the means of patriarchy. The degraded female image based on her biology in Gilead explicitly remarks Beauvoir's assertion: "Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb. An ovary; she is female. This word is sufficient to define her... The term female is derogatory not because it emphasized woman's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex" (1949, p.41).

Her fertile anatomy leads woman to retire into her shell, isolating her to specific roles and identities in Gilead. The Handmaids are seen as precious and serviceable merely for their viable ovaries and wombs, not for who they are apart from their anatomy. As Barr (1993, p. 92) expounds, the female bodies, "as a juxtaposition of the human and the mechanistic" are compelled to function as birth machines composed of female flesh. Being degraded into an incubator, women are overexploited in connection with anatomical features.

Although humanity is essentially not biologically determined, the patriarchal culture of Gilead culture defends to the death that woman is born with wombs and ovaries; therefore, she can never and ever elude herself from fulfilling her procreative functions. Put it differently, the patriarchy

directs women's destiny in accordance with their biology through deprecating the idea that we are all born the same, human and utterly equal, taking otherness of women as principle. Offred's following utterances bring the severity of the situation to the light: "We are for breeding purposes...We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1985, p. 109). Since Offred is rendered by the functions of her uterus, she is unable to realize herself and to develop her individual, social, and cultural capabilities. Instead, she reorients herself to patriarchally circumscribed roles by conceding her only worth is incumbent on her biological function. It is also soul shattering to bear witness to Offred's conceding herself as an object in patriarchy's pocket: "resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object" (Atwood, 1985, p. 218). Relegating her all humanistic values and capabilities, the state subjugates, manipulates, and curtails her sense of self. Offred's internalization of her body as an object creates a severe loss of self-esteem. It is totally tombstoning: plunging into self-abasement, self-denigration, and self-estrangement.

Offred also detaches from her body and disembodies herself during the Ceremony, forced sexual interaction with the Commander Fred under the eyes of the Wife Serena, in order to alleviate her pain: "I would steel myself. I would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh" (Atwood, 1985, p. 125). As the female body is shattered into sexual functions and degraded into commoditized vagina, womb, and ovaries, the system bulldozes into the female self-conception, thereby aggravating bleeding in her soul. Furthermore, Offred's following bath scene shows how exploiting female bodily functions as political instrument wreaks havoc on the female body image and self-esteem: "My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated...Shameful, immodest. 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" (Atwood, 1985, p. 54). The condition of female emancipation is to retrieve total control over their own bodies; however, Offred abhors and detaches from body which is abnegated as merely a womb. She is slammed with a fertile identity, thereby leading her to self-rejection, self-loathing, and reiteration of her inferiority.

Maternity is another delineative biological function in fictionalizing woman and in strengthening masculinity ideology's hand in keeping the female identity down. Enshrining the notion of motherhood, the patriarchy defrauds and besieges the self-integrity of female identity as it ostracizes

barren women who cannot invest the seeds of men and accomplish their stereotypical roles towards the society. The procreation, the female body, and motherhood are meshed and inseparable, morphing into lethal weapon for the abnegation and persecution of woman and prompting serious traumatic collapse in women's self-integrity and self-psychology. As the female infertility is a disgraceful state for the society, woman is evicted from the society and aggrieved from indignity, humiliation, and perplexity; hence, she automatically loses her self-regard.

2.4. Fear, Surveillance, Language

Inflicting fear, constant surveillance, and manipulation of language are another ideological implementations of Gilead so as to suppress the female sense of self, devoice and isolate women, idealize the female self-sacrifice, and objectify the female body. The misogynist system enfolds "power, not choice; coercion, not volition; fear not desire" (Malak, 1987, p. 14). The system's ideological implementation and control encompasses public execution and punishment by spreading fear; isolation and immobilization by constant surveillance; and stereotypization by controlling language just because what the society merely expects from women are procreation, silence, and submission as the Commander Fred utters: "Let the woman learn in silence with *all* subjection...But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (Atwood, 1985:170).

Gilead uses violence to seize power, indigenizes an ideology based on religious fundamentalism and misogyny, and then proceeds on its way through using fear factors in order to perpetuate the ideology. The handmaids are driven by fear, especially fear of not being pregnant. Unless they conceive, they will be sent to Colonies which is contaminated by radioactive waste and pollution as "Unwoman". Moira describes the bloodcurdling Colonies as follows: "the toxic dump and the radiation spills. They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves" (Atwood, 1985: 191). The handmaids also cringe from stepping out of line because they will die of throat trouble in the Wall which is used to display the executed bodies if they disobey the laws and regulations. Offred figures the blood and thunder scenes of the Wall as follows: "The three bodies hang there, even with the white sacks over their heads looking curiously stretched, like chickens strung up by the necks in a meatshop window; like birds with their wings clipped, like flightless birds, wrecked angels" (Atwood, 1985, p.211).

The bloody-minded state displays public executions to hector about how those who dare to rebel or break rules will be penalized, to force women to renounce their rights, and to assign them specific roles in male chauvinist society. Due to such startling experiences, Offred, like other handmaids, assents to be silenced and subjugated. Heightening the fear of punishment and creating an eerie mood, Gilead gives a clear message that female citizens cannot interrogate the system without being slaughtered and hung. Thus, the woman quails at the patriarchy, bending the knee, retiring into her shell, and lapsing into silence.

The patriarchal regime also instills fear through a ubiquitous presence of surveillance to train docile female bodies. The female characters are kept under constant scrutiny of the guardians, called as the Eyes, by whom the female subjugation and submission are ensured. Aunt Lydia's assertion that "To be seen-to be seen- is to be...penetrated" (Atwood, 1985: 30) totalizes the surveillance regulation of Gilead's patriarchy. The constant surveillance rebuffs the female freedom, leaving no private sphere for women. The prescribed farewell in Gilead "Under His Eye" also sounds like a warning that women are constantly under men's custody (Atwood, 1985, p.40). The most extreme form of surveillance comes to light during monthly Ceremony, sexual relationship with the Commander under the Wife's eyes. Offred experiences multiple penetrations to her personality, physically through commander's "a regular two-four marching stroke"(Atwood, 1985, p. 77) and spiritually through Serena's gaze, thereby suffering from lack of privacy, indignity, loss of personality integrity, and devastation of the self-image and self-respect.

Suspicion is a key factor to stabilize constant surveillance since the sense of being watched breaks the female defiance hereby leading female characters to stick to the roles prescribed by the patriarchy. The state manages to establish a self-surveillance through creating a sense of suspicion. Women act as if they were being watched even if they are not due to the possibility that there is a saboteur, spy, or a traitor nearby. Such suspicion is an ultimate effect of surveillance which is organized and distributed. The indoctrination of the Aunts that "Friendships were suspicious" (Atwood, 1985: 60) creates distrustfulness between female individuals, thus zipping their mouths and dragging them into deep loneliness and isolation. Offred's following utterances show her nostalgia to friendship and even gabfest to break silence and perpetual loneliness: "How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange of sorts" (Atwood, 1985, p.15).

Furthermore, women are constantly observing one another superficially to protect the state but in reality to preserve themselves. It is mandatory for them to always walk in twos since the state appoints them to spy on one another. In other words, they are both prisoners and wardens. This is evident in the relationship between Offred and Ofglen. Neither of them is a true believer of Gilead's regulation; however, they do not reveal themselves to each other in virtue of gnawing suspicion and lack of trust. Although they finally discover that neither of them is a true believer and Ofglen confesses that she is a member of Mayday, a resistance movement, Offred still suspects that Ofglen is laying a trap for her because, as Offred states, "such is the soil in which we grow" (Atwood, 1985, p.131).

The further muting and objectification of women is provided through imposing bans upon women's literacy. The female masses are not even permitted to mingle with words because Gilead recognizes the language as a death blow to oppression. Therefore, the patriarchy exploits the language in order to maintain power and compel women into submission. Forcing female citizens to speak in a certain manner, the system standardizes and uniforms them. In this way, women are silenced by the interweaving of linguistic manipulation and dominant patriarchy, depriving of their individuality and uniqueness.

Language without any restriction validates an individual's existence. Without freedom of speech, female citizens are transfigured and redecored in order to harmonize the regime's ideology. This restrictive discourse is notably evident in the prescribed and limited greetings between the Handmaids: "Blessed be the fruit" and "May the Lord open" (Atwood, 1985, p. 22). The fruit refers to child and even the greetings connote the Handmaid's ultimate role in the society: procreation. Stonewalled from intimate relations, authentic communication, and privacy, Offred and other handmaids are not permitted to go beyond a social sanction for procreation.

While the patriarchy shrivels her life and liquefies the self, Offred discovers an engraved Latin phrase in her room: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" (Atwood, 1985, p.45). This scratched message meaning "Don't let the bastards grind you down" succors to Offred under captivating and unsettling conditions of Gilead (Atwood, 1985, p.146). This linguistic resistance to oppression acts as a buried hope and war cry demanding that women reclaim their voices men silence. Offred gradually discovers the liberating power of language. Despite of all the precautions taken by Gilead, the moment when Offred steals into the Commander's office also is a slight resistance to imprisonment in silence. She flouts the ban on language by

reading magazines and playing scrabble. Using a noninvasive language is “like trying to walk without crutches” for Offred (Atwood, 1985, p.121). She reinscribes and reconstructs her command over language, subverting the dehumanizing effects of language the patriarchy extorts. Offred rhapsodizes how language liberates her unlocking the cage door as follows: “I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it” (Atwood, 1985, p.11). She equates the unlimited and uncontrolled use of language with freedom. For a while, she controls language, language does not. Atwood deliberately reveals two sides of the same coin: language as male domination to dehumanize the self and language as female liberation to rehumanize the self.

3. THE LACK OF FEMALE SOLIDARITY

Atwood’s touching on the word “fraternize” in the beginning of the novel is not hit-and-miss: “*Fraternize means to behave like a brother...there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister*” (1985, p.16). This is a striking linguistic reference to the absence of female unity in the novel and the patriarchal constraints impeding such a union. In Gilead, the patriarchy uses women to condition women. Bewilderingly, the woman curbs and bridles the woman. While reducing the handmaids to commodities of the society, two groups of women actively participate in oppressing and indoctrinating female obedience to the new order: the Aunts and the Wives. It is striking that they anchor in the doctrines of Gilead so as to perpetuate the status quo despite of possessing more power than other women. The lack of female solidarity disturbingly heightens the regulations of Gilead patriarchy.

The Aunts are the leading women in establishing dominance over the handmaids through brainwashing and conditioning them to embrace socially instituted reproductive purposes. Miscalling the handmaids as “ambulatory chalices” and “sacred vessels” (Atwood, 1985, p.109), the Aunts delude and persuade them coercively that their self-sacrifice and holly body serves the common good as well as indoctrinating the over-glorification of maternity, impeaching the women who do not bear a child as “wickedness”, “lazy women”, and “sluts” (Atwood, 1985, p.91). They take an active role in enslaving the handmaids to the patriarchy, bringing to their knees; therefore, the Aunts are the most striking figures applying strict pressures on their fellows.

Although Aunt Lydia usually preaches that she is doing her best to give handmaids the best chance they have, her mission is to imbue the

submissiveness through violence, brainwashing, threats, and abasement. For instance, when Moira tries to run away from the Red Center, the Aunts strike her with steel cables on her feet. Whereas the aunts harass the female solidarity, Aunt Lydia's ironic pep talk echoes as follows: "The women live in harmony together...Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together" (Atwood, 1985, p.127). While disguising oppression as building camaraderie for a greater society, the Aunts essentially reeducate the Handmaids brutally to deter them from liberation and to digest the reactionary values of patriarchy. They relentlessly prefer holding power against the Handmaids to bestowing hand on them. As Stein (2000, p.82) states, the Aunts overhaul "women's appetites for freedom and knowledge, slimming down their minds and behaviors to be acceptable to Gilead's social standards".

The most tragic moment for sisterhood is when the aunts abase and condemn Janine because she was raped. They believe that her predicament is her own fault as follows: "But whose fault it was? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. *Her fault, her fault, her fault*, we chant in unison. Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. *She did. She did. She did*. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? *Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson*" (Atwood, 1985, p.61). In this scene, the Handmaids cooperate with the Aunts to oppress Janine, jeering and returning a verdict of guilty instead of commiserating with their fellow. Intimidated and victimized from public humiliation, Janine bursts into tear, comes to unfair accusations, and confesses: "It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain" (Atwood, 1985, p.61). Janine is caught in limbo of internalized oppression which relapses into silence, poisons the mind, and incarcerates the soul in self-humiliation as a result of lameness of female solidarity.

The Wives accuse the Handmaids of being whore; the Marthas recognizes the Handmaids not as a fellow being reduced to slavery but as any other necessary chore; the Handmaids walk in pairs to spy each other. All women in the novel are victims of the same misogynistic regime; however, they fail to be tight-knit in order to pose a threat to Gilead. Humiliation, spy, mutual dislike, the lack of empathy- given different circumstances, that could be me-, disunity, and anger between women... All betrays the female solidarity, thereby allying with the patriarchy and strengthening the oppressive social order's hand. Gilead derives benefits from the lack of female solidarity in maintaining and perpetuating the male supremacist order as Atwood illustrates in the novel: "the best and most

cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves” (1985: 232).

4. IGNORANCE AND COMPLIANCE VS. RECOGNITION AND RESISTANCE

The novel comprises of manifold grounds getting women entangled in knitting yarn of patriarchal expectations and societal enforcements; however, Atwood underlines the pivotal point as follows: “We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it” (1985: 49). Ignoring...It is thinly-veined threat to female emancipation, clapping women in irons and keeping them glued to the spot. Springing from ignoring, Gilead swiftly insinuates himself into the female self, more’s the pity.

In her pre-Gilead life, Offred is oblivious of what is socially and politically going around. She reads the stories of “corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated”; however, she believes that they are “bad dreams dreamt by others” and they are “about the other women and the men who did such things were other men” (Atwood, 1985: 49), blindfolding herself to the victimized women. She evaluates these stories staggeringly melodramatic and stands idle by in the relief that she is not the woman in the papers and it does not happen to her. Neither does she pay heed to the restrictions imposed on her by the society, nor does she attach importance to demonstrations organized to protest the limitations. Reluctant to collaborate with Moira and her mother, she belittles them and recognizes their feminism as an unnecessary trouble. Instead of being concerned with women as a group, she behaves self-absorbed by giving priority to her romantic and escapist life. When even the protests break out against the rampant Gilead, she takes apolitical stand regardless of her abolished rights: “I didn’t go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her” (Atwood, 1985, p.140). Her willed ignorance enhances desensitization to resistance, blockading Offred’s mind, reducing her silence, and dragging her into succumbing to repressive misogynistic conditions of Gilead.

In the midst of endless black seas of ignorance, Offred, for the first time, awakens to the imbalance between her husband and herself and the forthcoming grave danger which will degrade her to man’s property when she is fired. This delayed recognition reverberates in her manifestation: “It occurred to me that he shouldn’t be saying *we*, since nothing that I knew of

had been taken away from him. We still have each other, I said. It was true. Then why did I sound, even to myself, so indifferent? ... But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll...We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his" (Atwood, 1985, p.141).

When women are dismissed, Offred also questions herself about what makes her feel they deserved it. Willful ignorance...Offred rises to recognize that ignorance paralyzes resistance and they act as an accomplice in the creation of Gilead, being indifferent to goings-on. The patriarchy does not tolerate and pardon their ignorance; therefore, Gilead rears up, their rights and individuality are paralyzed, and women's voice is gradually drowned out by the roar of the men. The greater the ignorance the greater misogyny! They disturbingly compensate the ignorance with their freedom and disoriented self-perception.

Offred recognizes that her individuality is concealed, veiled, and eclipsed in the encapsulation of Gilead. Ignorance stimulates compliance, yet recognition catalyzes resistance. Though Offred implies to retrieve and rebuild her individuality through saying "I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose", she resists not to compliance but to resistance, thus composing herself as a socially- constructed submissive walking womb (Atwood, 1985: 57). Her following relapse into connivance also proves that ignorance and compliance are the softest pillows on which Offred can rest her head: "Maybe I don't really want to know what's going on. Maybe I'd rather not know" (Atwood, 1985, p.152). For this reason, she never forms a self by giving up resistance and resigning herself to compliance. This stance associates with Atwood's four basic victim positions: individuals in position one reject that they are victim because they are not aware of the oppression; individuals in position two notice that they are victims but they do nothing to overcome the situation; individuals in position three resist to oppression, rejecting their roles as victims; individuals in position four are no longer victims, emancipating themselves from oppression (1972, p.34-41). Offred is ensnared in position two, taking no overt reaction against Gilead to liberate herself from oppression, surrendering to the strict conditions of Gilead, and hiding behind compliance as a condition of physical survival.

Her aversion to resistance is evident in the fact that she dissents to cooperate with the underground resistance, Mayday, in despite of forgoing opportunities to spy on the Commander and turns down Ofglen's offer to escape. Rather than actively bearing against the misogynist policies, Offred not only envisages her inferior status but also internalizes the crippled self-

perception by handing over the reins to the patriarchy as follows: "I'll obliterate myself...I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice...I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce"(Atwood, 1985, p.218). Instead of escaping conformism and regaining a sense of self, she guarantees physical survival by bearing on an inferior identity and pain by being whipped to masculine parameter. She physically survives, yet she is still mentally and spiritually malnourished and her self images crumple away.

Unlike Offred, there are women sacrificing themselves for freedom. Moira who is even engaged in marches during pre-Gilead times resists and escapes from Gilead. Offred evaluates Moira's escape as follows:

"I think we found this frightening...She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure...Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy...she was a lava beneath the crust of daily life" (Atwood, 1985, p.107).

Moira always strives for freedom through refusing physical security stemming from complacency. For this reason, Offred recounts her feelings when her friend is caught and sentenced to Jezebels as prostitute as follows: "I don't want her to be like me...I want gallantry from her, swash-buckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack" (Atwood, 1985, p.192). As for Ofglen who is involved in the underground resistance, she hangs herself in order to protect the Mayday instead of being arrested by the Eyes. When Ofglen commits suicide, it is vexatious to witness Offred's relief that she is safe and no one will find out her weak relationship with Mayday: "I feel great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later" (Atwood, 1985: 218). She believes that she has to surrender to survive, thus betraying her sense of self and being overwhelmed by self-alienation: "I'm abject" (Atwood, 1985, p.218).

Offred's story ends when she surrenders to the hands of strangers. She climbs up into the black truck without knowing what lies ahead for her. Did Offred escape? What became of her? There are two options: The strangers may be the Eyes or may be Mayday in disguise. Before she is taken, she noodles over a series of ways to disobey: "I could set fire to the house, for instance. I could bundle up some of my clothes" (Atwood; 1985: 221). Yet, she does nothing. She asks for having weapons such as knife, garden shear, or sewing scissors heaps of times to resist, but she never tries to get them. She repeats the phrase "Don't let the bastards grind you down" to herself but "it conveys nothing" for her any more (Atwood, 1985, p.221).

She resigns herself to the strangers through submitting to what happens to her and not gaining control over her destiny.

5. CONCLUSION

The impetus behind this study is to pose how ideological implementations of the patriarchy rebuffing women pertaining to such issues as indoctrination, religious exploitation, deprivation of individuality, biology as destiny, constant surveillance, and manipulation of language spark off submersion of self, self-alienation, loss of self-esteem, and self-rejection. The study discloses that the patriarchy exploits religious indoctrinations to maintain total control over women, to silence and discipline them, and to dictate them perpetual self-abnegation and compliance to himself. The patriarchy also sabotages the robustness of female individuality and stigmatizes women as possessions of men, thus eroding their self-continuity, self-control, and self-determination. Assigning biologically determined roles to women, the male-chauvinist society objectifies the female body and marginalizes them as wombs, ovaries, and breeders; thereby bringing the female self-esteem to the ground and incarcerating them in otherness, self-denigration, and self-loathing. Atwood also vindicates that the female voice censored and muted through restriction of communication, limited language, constant surveillance, and violence in patriarchy encumbers self-socialization and self-expression. As well as ideological implementations fragmenting the female self, Atwood ascertains that the lameness of female solidarity aid and abet the patriarchy to lay siege to the female self. Furthermore, the patriarchy rears up to paralyze the sense of self as the female ignorance and compliance catalyze the constraints on women, hence blocking against self-actualization and self-identification.

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