



Universidad
Zaragoza

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Prostitution and Feminism in Margaret Atwood's
The Handmaid's Tale

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2023

Abstract

This dissertation discusses the concepts of “prostitution” and “feminism” around Margaret Atwood’s acclaimed novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, published in 1985. Atwood’s dystopian narrative presents a terrifying future society in which a totalitarian system deprives women of their rights and reduces some of them to the status of handmaids, who are only valuable for reproduction.

This essay undertakes a comprehensive exploration using a comparative analysis of different subgroups of feminism, the radical subgroup and the liberal subgroup, and how these are portrayed in two different time settings in the novel. Radical feminism emerged in the second wave of the feminist movement, where women stopped fighting for common purposes and pursued different goals. Atwood's novel corresponds to this period, and readers can infer the author’s beliefs through the protagonist, Offred. The story subtly conveys the importance of solidarity among women. Together, the two subgroups have similar objectives but differing perspectives on prostitution, which are also depicted in the book.

Aspects of real-life prostitution are compared to the two different types of prostitution that exist in the novel: the one imposed on the handmaids by the regime and the other carried out in the secret Jezebel’s club. My contention is that these two versions of prostitution also represent the two subgroups of feminism mentioned above. This comparison is made to show that prostitution is a prevalent issue, and it is so deeply ingrained, as the exploitation of women for sexual benefits is either not perceived or ignored due to the influence of patriarchal culture.

Patriarchy not only hides prostitution but also fosters competition and mistrust among the women in the novel. The lack of sisterhood reflects the second wave of feminism that Atwood criticizes. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we encounter women’s hostility towards other women as well as a new matriarchy where women perpetuate the oppressive system through indoctrination, undermining the potential or forming alliances and collaborating against the regime.

Ultimately, *The Handmaid’s Tale* serves as a cautionary tale on individual oppression and the subjugation of women within the prostitution industry. The novel urges readers to question the abuse of power affecting women’s rights in society and encourages the resilience of women coming together to work towards a better future.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *The Handmaid’s Tale*; Feminism; Prostitution; Women; Patriarchy; Sorority

Resumen

Este trabajo ofrece un análisis de los conceptos de "prostitución" y "feminismo" en torno a la famosa novela de Margaret Atwood *El Cuento de la Criada*, publicada en 1985. Esta distopía de Atwood presenta una sociedad futura aterradora en la que un sistema totalitario priva a las mujeres de sus derechos y reduce a algunas de ellas a la condición de “criadas”, sólo valiosas debido a su poder reproductivo.

El ensayo/disertación incluye un análisis comparativo de diferentes subgrupos del feminismo: radical y liberal, y cómo se representan en los dos escenarios temporales de la novela. El feminismo radical surgió durante la segunda ola del feminismo, en la que las mujeres dejaron de luchar por objetivos comunes y tomaron caminos separados. La novela de Atwood se corresponde con este periodo temporal y los lectores pueden

percibir la ideología de la autora, que se insinúa sutilmente a través de la mente de la protagonista, Offred para tratar de iluminar a los lectores sobre la importancia de la sororidad. Aunque los dos subgrupos del feminismo tienen objetivos similares, tienen perspectivas distintas sobre la prostitución, que también se describen en el libro.

Se comparan aspectos de la prostitución en la vida real con aspectos de los dos tipos de prostitución que existen en la novela: la prostitución impuesta a las criadas, establecida por el régimen, y la prostitución que se lleva cabo en el prostíbulo secreto, Jezebel. Al mismo tiempo, estas dos versiones de la prostitución también representan los dos subgrupos del feminismo mencionados anteriormente. Esta comparación se realiza para demostrar que la prostitución existe y está tan profundamente normalizada que la explotación de mujeres para obtener beneficios sexuales no se percibe o incluso se ignora debido a la cultura patriarcal.

El patriarcado no sólo favorece la prostitución, sino que también crea competencia y desconfianza entre las mujeres de la novela. La falta de sororidad representa la segunda ola del feminismo que critica Atwood, por eso en *El Cuento de la Criada* nos encontramos con el odio de las mujeres hacia el resto de mujeres, así como con un nuevo matriarcado donde son las propias mujeres las que sostienen el sistema opresivo mediante el adoctrinamiento que sólo refuerza la imposibilidad de establecer vínculos para colaborar en contra el régimen.

En conclusión, *El Cuento de la Criada* sirve como advertencia sobre la falta de libertad individual y la subordinación de las mujeres que pervive, persiste, sobrevive... hoy en día en la institución de la prostitución. La novela ayuda a los lectores a cuestionarse el abuso de poder que afecta a los derechos de la mujer en la sociedad y fomenta la resiliencia de las mujeres que se unen para trabajar por un futuro mejor.

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood; El cuento de la criada; feminismo; prostitución; mujeres; patriarcado; sororidad.

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Part 1: Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale, published by Margaret Atwood in 1985, is an acclaimed novel that nowadays continues to be a very famous and important book in the world. Atwood was born in Ontario, Canada, in 1939. She was an early reader and writer as she showed interest in literature at six. After graduating high school, she studied English Literature at the University of Toronto. Initially, she showed a big interest in screenplays however, she did not consider herself a professional writer until she focused on poetry and published the anthology, *Double Persephone*, in 1961. Later in life, she also wrote fiction and published her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, in 1969. Atwood became a professor in different universities in the US and Canada as well as an editor. She also kept studying and writing and, over the course of her more than 60-year career, has published more than 60 works, which would include novels, short story collections, poetry, essays, children's books, and graphic novels. (Bloom 10-12)

***The Handmaid's Tale* in Context**

A highly committed author, Atwood has always been very interested in political and historical events. As Jadwin explains, Atwood investigates and collects files with information that can help her develop her works, that way, she reflects on her concerns about aspects that she has encountered; that is how, in 1985, one of her most influential novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* was published, which was subject for different discussions. One of Atwood's biggest fears during the second half of the 20th century was how the rising totalitarianism and the fanaticism of mono-theocracies rose in the Middle Eastern Countries, and many of the government forms taken were portrayed in her novel. However, she not only noticed this danger in the Middle Eastern countries, but she perceived a growing political backlash against liberalism with the implementation of conservative policies in the United Kingdom—Margaret Thatcher—in Canada—Brian Mulroney—and in the United States—Ronald Reagan—that brought back traditional, religious and right-wing values. These new policies situated women and homosexuals as a threat, outlawed abortion and envisioned a traditional family life. These examples of oppression are taken further by Atwood into *The Handmaid's Tale* and moved to another time and space to resemble a possible future that could happen in a matter of years; in this case, the novel is set in the United States of America. Her fears are constructed and portrayed making the novel part of the dystopian genre as a warning after evaluating and exploring societies that are ruined by capitalism and patriarchy to

“warn against the path that society is currently traveling” (Dinucci 2), in this case, Atwood warns about the illnesses she contemplates during the 20th century, especially related with the changing branches of feminism.

As the 20th century drew to its end, literature became a tool to show the inequality between the sexes as the work of women gained visibility. The understanding of women’s lack of opportunities was denounced, and the focus on creating a new form of writing that shifted from the masculine traditions was expressed. However, during the 1960s, Atwood considers that there was a backlash regarding feminism with the advent of the second wave of feminism. The second wave of feminism failed at being presented as the movement that represented all women because of “its obvious focus on the malaise of white middle-class suburban women [...] and ignor[ance of] working-class and minority women” (Callaway 16). For this reason, Atwood aligns herself more with Liberal feminism, inspired by the first wave. Furthermore, according to Callaway, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a response to the second wave (12). Feminism had created a division between privileged and unprivileged women, this is why different subgroups were formed focusing on different and specific women’s causes. Furthermore, it was during the second wave of feminism that the Radical Feminist movement rose, an extreme development of liberal feminism. Nachescu explained that radicals believed that patriarchy and sexism are the most fundamental factors in female maltreatment (qtd in Mohajan 15). Therefore the 1960s movements “instead of participating collaboratively as part of the same overall movement, [. . .] often took separate, sometimes parallel, often conflicting, tracks” (Callaway 17).

Part 2: Analysis

Atwood and *The Handmaid’s Tale* Controversy with Feminism.

The novel is an acclaimed dystopian novel famous for its apparent feminist perspective. However, many studies reflect on the applied term “feminist” used to define the novel and other Atwood’s works. Atwood was not drawn to any specific subgroup of feminism as she perceived the lack of female solidarity leading to a bigger insecurity about women’s identity and goals (Callaway 17). This idea may be seen in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This is why she has admitted on several occasions that she aligns more with Moderate or Liberal Feminism (Callaway 21). However, she has also said that she does not like to be labeled as a “feminist” writer “because of the broad scope of

the term ‘feminist’” (Callaway 21). Atwood defines herself instead as a person concerned with human dignity, characterizing her notion of feminism as “human equality and freedom of choice” (Callaway 23). While radical feminism stands as ‘sex-negative’ and, according to Jeffrey, “criticize[s] the whole construction of sexuality under male dominance as eroticizing of women’s subordination” (316), Atwood’s vision as a Liberal feminist may be considered as sexual liberalism which sees sex as something positive and aligns with the economic ideology of neo-liberalism, which subtly kept damaging the feminist community as Ammeson argues “pornography and prostitution should be decriminalized and subject to the ordinary rules of the market” (qtd in Jeffreys 316).

The Handmaid’s Tale is set in the fictional world of Gilead, ruled by totalitarianism. The story is narrated by Offred, a handmaid in an oppressive system, which main purpose is to regulate the reproductive abilities of women. Throughout the novel, Offred navigates her life while recalling her past life and the events that led up to the regime and wonders through the different relations she forms until she is drawn into a resistance movement and becomes involved in their activities.

Atwood wants to represent and fight for women’s rights in a unique way, as she projects very specific ideas: at the same time, she wants to praise the feminist movement, but she also undermines some of its theories, therefore, the kind of revindication she claims is complex. Feminism can be manifested in different categories and movements, which can suppose a struggle among women to agree on moral philosophies. However, with Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is possible to distinguish two different perspectives on prostitution related to two different time settings as well. During the 80s, when the novel was published, there were mixed opinions about whether prostitution should be decriminalized. During that era, according to Matthews, “feminist women in sexualized labor began to speak for themselves through the publication of books, creation of arts and self-organizing” (12). These claims carried out by prostitutes worked both ways: women who began to coin prostitution as sex work in order to try to attain better conditions such as fair benefits and health insurance; and the abolitionist women/radical feminists who believed that prohibition was needed as the administrative regulation was still harmful to prostitutes (Mathieu 153). Atwood had more in common with the first group of women, the liberals, who constantly accused the radicals of being dangerous and extremist because

their interpretation of prostitution harmed the prostitutes' agency and freedom to perform their "job". However, nowadays in the 21st century, although those two opinions are still visible, there has been a considerable change of perspective considering prostitution. Each time there are more people that understand the ambiguity of the "neo-abolitionism"/sexual liberalism in terms of prostitution or pornography "the freedom to prostitute oneself, which is recognized in theory, is denied in practice by the psychological discrediting of those who try to exercise this freedom" (Mathieu 155). That is, although laws may be helpful in some cases, they could hardly regulate the entire prostitution system and the real conditions of prostitutes would still be improper.

In the novel, Atwood portrays the existence of the two different ideologies by showing opposite times of history. The narrator, Offred, depicts through her memories a past that is portrayed as a liberal society, thought to be set around the year 2000, and a present under a totalitarian system, supposed to be around the year 2005. Atwood also shows two opposite spheres in the novel: a society with castes and the Jezebel's sex club. In this project, I will analyze the various situations presented in the novel and draw connections to different ideologies within feminist movements. Additionally, I will explore prostitution as depicted in the novel and its parallels to the realities of prostitution in the 21st century. My aim is to bring attention to a harsh reality that often goes unnoticed in real life—the obscured harm of prostitution and the diverse forms of oppression that impact women collectively, although in different ways.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, two main periods of time can be found which are quite different: the past that could represent our society nowadays and the 1980s, when Atwood wrote the book: a democratic society with magazines, sexuality, pornography, "provocative" clothes, etc. And the present time of the story narrated by Offred: a theocratic dictatorship that measures a woman's worth by her reproductive abilities where almost everything is censored as there is linguistic, physical and psychological oppression (Gulick 25). *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays this contrast by the descriptions and even desires of Offred when remembering the old times "I used to dress like that. That was freedom" (Atwood 31), "There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes[...]" (Atwood 26). The past could be therefore linked to liberal feminism and the first wave of feminism, which happened to occur at the end of the 19th century. Liberal feminism, according to Mohajan, is "the most widely accepted social and political philosophy among feminists" (8), as its main theory focuses on equality. However, Tong, Zhang & Rios mention how some issues that could be contemplated of

this movement were to not fully address the root that causes women subordination, but considering that women are just like men and that they should not be denied the freedom to act upon their ambitions (qtd in Mohajan 10). This neo-liberal ideology leads to a false belief of freedom where patriarchy and capitalism converge and create new desires, which result in the dehumanization and objectification of women to the point that they become a necessity (Tiganus 45). That is why, as Mohajan states, when comparing the different feminist movements, in general, liberal feminists reject to condemn or criminalize prostitution and pornography. The beginning of the novel already makes this distinction by the explanation given by the Aunts of the different kinds of freedom: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (Atwood 28). The word ‘anarchy’, used in a pejorative way, is how Atwood could see her current society in reality when writing the book and therefore the reason why she decided to create Gilead within a patriarchal society.

It could be argued that Atwood’s ideology appears to be conveyed through Offred’s character. As mentioned before, sexual liberalism was identified by its supporters as ‘sex-positive’, while radical feminism argued for a ‘sex-negative’ perspective. The institutionalized system in the novel despises sex that is not controlled and is seen as a threat, as its only purpose is to bear children. That is where the separation of the female gender starts: the women, those who are fertile, and the unwomen, those who are sterile. In order for reproduction rates to increase, the power to reproduce does not rest with individuals but with the system, thereby denying their individuality (Gulick 56). The system is threatened not only by the action of merely having sex but also by many other things around it, such as provocative clothing, talking freely, etc. However, Offred’s thoughts fight against that imposition, and many times she wishes to go back to a time when egalitarian sexuality was normalized and taken for granted as a right, i.e., women could have pleasure on their terms. In fact, she realizes she is internalizing the male discourse and feels guilty when she finds herself in some positions like having sexual fantasies or enjoying the attention of others: “I know they are watching, [...] I move my hips a little, [...] I enjoy the power, [...] I hope they get hard [...]” (Atwood 26).

Furthermore, Offred's ideals and thoughts seem to be a reaction against radical feminism, which in this case is encapsulated by her mother. Her mother is described as a radical feminist and as an unwoman that has been sent to the colonies. Although, according to Bloom, "Her[mother] feminist convictions still live to some degree in the memories of her daughter" (60), the mother's ideology even before the dictatorship is seen as dangerous by Offred considering her participation in magazines-burning. In this specific case of the magazine burning, readers are able to see how Offred disapproves of the act because when she is given a magazine she looks at it with interest, demonstrating how her views and those of her mother were in fact very different. Furthermore, the mother's, participation in protests and the declarations about her husband "A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women" (Atwood 113), can even be considered as women-supremacist and a pro-natalist. Offred alternates her rejection and admiration for his mother "I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. [...] She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas" (Atwood 114). By expressing the presumed opinion of Atwood on extreme radical behaviour through Offred the narrator, what the author achieves is to question the mother's figure as a heroine and decrease the interest in that movement. Furthermore, Atwood appears to be mocking not only at Offred's mother's ideology but also that of the radicals as the mother symbolizes the entire group. This mockery is evident in the ironic commentary introduced through Offred's internal voice when she addresses her mother: "You wanted a women's culture. Well now there is one" (Atwood 119).

Although that old society, the one previous to the totalitarian system, is what is being praised and what Offred longs for, Atwood emphasizes the contradictory ideas that existed around the different feminist branches, and that is why, as mentioned before, she did not like to name herself as a feminist. Feminism is an umbrella term for a number of cultural phenomena and the debate upon abolitionism, regulation and prohibition of prostitution is still going on among feminists. Moreover, as Jeffreys states, "this disagreement is preventing feminists from moving on and really addressing the issues at stake" (317), which ultimately only makes women more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Having in mind the contradicting and unclear movements and their ideals, is important to consider that Atwood creates a paradox out of those different statements. Offred wishes to go back to liberalism but that is also the point where the

fears start and the dystopia is born. Atwood warns the readers about the dangers of liberalism, the carefree and extreme attitude of our era, in order to express that if we continue that way, the Gilead society might occur in a future.

Comparisons of Prostitution in Real Life and in the Novel

Although all the women who live in Gilead are oppressed by the system, it is fair to say that the ones who suffer the most are the unwoman sent to the Colonies. Nonetheless, the readers are most affected by the misery of the handmaids, who are forced into prostitution. The prostitution system is different depending on the time period and region, i.e. prostitution may not be the same in South America than Europe and it varies from 200 years ago to the present. However, there are some aspects that all of them share. The most used justification in order to keep ignoring prostitution is that it is women who choose that “work”, which although sometimes that can actually be voluntary, those times women are deceived and manipulated. As Dunicci explains, women driven towards sex work is because the choice is “little more than a choice between work and death” (51). The thing that should matter besides how a woman becomes a prostitute is if that woman then decides to remain one. The same thing happens in *The Handmaid's Tale*, society changed in a small amount of time and everyone was forced to change their lifestyle.

Another thing the system in *The Handmaid's Tale* and prostitution share is that it is always men the one who are in control and the ones who benefit. As Pateman states “A universal defense of prostitution entails that a prostitute can be of either sex. Women should have the same opportunity as men to buy sexual services in the market. “The prostitute” is conventionally pictured as a woman, and in fact, the majority of prostitutes are women” (55). It is the patriarchy that turns men into pimps and into buyers, the same way in the novel they are turned into Commanders, guards or doctors. For example, when Offred is asked to see the Commander she is scared and she thinks “But to refuse to see him could be worse. There’s no doubt about who holds the real power” (Atwood 128). The superiority of men makes women guilty of everything as Gulick mentions “Interestingly, it is assumed that any reproductive problem exists because of the woman” (55), the possibility of men also being sterile in the novel does not exist. Tiganus relies on her own experience and explains that the patriarchy has considered them [prostitutes] guilty by nature and deserving of being raped (39).

The use of violence is also a common aspect in real life prostitution and in the novel. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred explains that all women need to behave and commit to their mission, if not they are threatened with violence, death or to be expelled to the colonies: "It's too dangerous, I can't [...] The penalty is death" (Atwood 62). This is something in common with real life prostitution, as Rachel Moran, an ex-prostitute and now activist, mentions, violence is inherited from prostitution and prostitutes encounter violence as a matter of routine (121). She goes on to say how the threat of violence can be even worse as it is also a mark of psychological abuse. She mentions how prostitutes were victims of clients when simply "they do not correlate with the fantasies they are paying to indulge" (125) or when men get drunk, which will later also become a beating of the bosses. This all goes besides the fact that the expectation of some sex practices can already be violent in their own way. Along with violence and because of it, both prostitutes and handmaids experience a lack of agency as they are unable to say "no" and unable to act differently from what they are expected, as mentioned before they are subordinated and threatened. For example, when Moira warns Janine to act normal, she tells her "They won't even bother to ship you to the Colonies. You go too far away and they just take you up to the Chemistry Lab and shoot you" (Atwood 200).

Another evident scenario both in the book and in real life is the numbing of women's minds. Specifically, the abolitionists denounce the sex of prostitution as it "constitutes violence against women because it ignores the pleasure and personhood of the woman whose body is used, and she disassociates emotionally from her body to survive" (Jeffreys 318). Moran mentions that dissociation when being a prostitute does not only rely on the moment of having sex, but it happens on all levels: it affects women's personalities by using an alias or by trying to run away from reality. She mentions that dissociation and the separation of your own self are necessary but also dangerous as it is a big paradox: "Dissociation is essential here; the prostituted cannot maintain her identity or sanity without it, but the cruel double-bind is that, on a psychological level, dissociation is a betrayal of the self. She's damned if she does and damned if she doesn't, on the deepest of levels" (Moran 140). As Cavalcanti observes, households rely on "the monthly rape 'Ceremony' [...] [which] grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead" (qtd in Callaway 56). Callaway continues by explaining that Offred must detach from her body and her

emotions, and only views the Ceremony as her duty, and at the same time it is insulting and humiliating for Serena as she is required to watch (57). Readers can observe how she differentiates the mind and the body “What he is fucking is the lower part of my body” (Atwood 89) and Offred herself mentions when the Ceremony is happening “One detaches oneself. One describes” (Atwood 91), “I would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh” (Atwood 148). This is really paradoxical as readers know that Offred is a woman who yearns touching and sexuality, nevertheless, her experience is related as a mechanic act which she wishes to escape. Another type of dissociation that can be observed is the fact that her real name is taken away from her, and she keeps it as a secret. As Bloom explains her given name remains a mystery and replaced by “Offred”, marking her as a possession of a Gileadean Commander, in this case, Fred (16). This happens with all handmaids whose names change according to the commander, and whose personality and individuality are clearly denied because they are diminished to beings that can be possessed just like objects.

“Real” Prostitution in the Novel

The Jezebel’s club is a secret whorehouse that breaks all the assumptions of the Gilead system. The Commander takes Offred to Jezebel’s one night in order to show his power to the rest of the men in the club as well as to Offred herself. The depiction of Jezebel’s is done through the perspective of Offred. The club can be linked to liberalism which can be seen in the exaltation of sexuality, the body of women or alcohol, that is why, although she mentions it is a little dull and pathetic, she sees things in it that she urges, such as the conversations or the physical touch. The club approaches the roles of women in a different manner and approves casual sex only for pleasure, things that in the eyes of Offred are almost like luxury, once again despising radical feminism and longing for sexual liberalism. Jezebel’s matters for looks “Here they haven’t removed the mirrors [...] You need to know, here, what you look like” (Atwood 224). In the novel however, men are still the ones who are taking advantage of women’s bodies again, and justifying by stating “But everyone’s human, after all” “You can’t cheat Nature” (Atwood 219) and claiming that the women who “work” there “They prefer it here” (Atwood 220). Although the existence of Jezebel’s seems appealing to Offred, her descriptions mix positive and negative connotations as its existence really signifies the hypocrisy of the regime for ruling in contradicting ways.

The problem with this representation is that Jezebel's, being a brothel, contains an actual representation of the prostitution system, therefore it is instinctively linked to how it could be in real life. However, by portraying it with such 'positive' conditions and definitions, it actually cleans the image of the real situation of prostitution as what happens there does not come close to the truth. Nonetheless the use of 'positive' descriptions can be understood as the situation in Jezebel's is being compared to the situation Offred undergoes: one where there is no individual freedom. The positive aspect is that through it all, Offred seems to acknowledge that women in the club are other oppressed community (Gulick 121), those who are there are only staying because it is the best option they have. Bloom explains "She[Moirra] is eventually given a choice: Jezebel's or the Colonies. Moira explains the advantages of the club, including face cream, decent food, drugs, and only working nights" (61). This is something prostitutes in real life are always blamed for, thinking they are actually happy and enjoying because they remain there. Moran explains that prostitutes in fact do not possess that choice:

I have seen this played out in so many lives that I fully understand there is no point talking about choice without identifying the presence or absence of *viable* choice, because when a woman cannot choose between two or more viable options, she can hardly be capable of truly consenting to the single 'choice' that she has. In other words, if a woman has no viable choice, she may as well have no choice at all. (160)

This is where the surviving strategies begin: Tiganus mentions that prostitution forced her to put all her senses into surviving (200). This is merely done in order to mentally endure their exploitation, some strategies employed are attempts to control, rejection of the truth, or substance abuse, which can all be seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* sex club. Prostitution is contemplated in two different ways, creating a paradox. For instance, Jezebel's, which could be directly interpreted as prostitution, is not immediately portrayed as something negative. In fact, Offred's desires applied to create an idyllic perception. Meanwhile, the prostitution of the handmaids is not directly interpreted as prostitution but as it is narrated through Offred's perception so readers are able to identify more with it. However, the two methods still share an organization by men that deals with the trafficking of women in order to benefit from sexual exploitation and commodification of women's bodies. The fact that the handmaids and prostitutes are both living under identical situations where they have to settle with a condition that is not horrible but still bad according to, somehow, their preferences, determines that they are in fact not living but just surviving.

(Lack of) Sorority in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Alongside Atwood's implied critique of the second wave of feminism, which we have previously established as characterized by a lack of solidarity as its participants went their separate ways, Callaway mentions that, for Atwood, this division was one of the most destructive tendencies of Second-Wave Feminism (67). This can be seen in how little the women in the novel interact with each other. The different existing communities, including Econowives, Wives, Aunts, Marthas, and handmaids, each take care and do what they are told, and are not involved in any other activities. With this extremely artificial organization of castes Atwood ironically presents Gilead as a society where each woman should be happy knowing that they are performing their assigned task, working for the greater good of the community. This is what the Aunts indoctrinate the handmaids. However, the theory is far away from reality. This lack of interest shown by most women, goes further as the "The result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as women's hatred of women" (Callaway 49). The matriarchy shown in the novel acts as another, and more effective, form of enslavement as the systematic division only highlights the complexity and corruption of the gender power dynamics because women themselves are upholding the oppressive regime.

The hatred they experience can be seen multiple times throughout the novel within all different communities: "One [econowife] scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us" (Atwood 45) The future of the wives is represented for their unfulfilling existence and the handmaids are a constant reminder of their failures and humiliation "I am a reproach to her, and a necessity" (Atwood 17), "How she[Serena] must hate me, I think" (Atwood 87). Furthermore, the definition used to refer to the other women are many times extremely negative and full of repugnancy: "Last week, Janine burst into tear [...] She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her" (Atwood 71, 72).

This feeling derives from the impossibility of establishing real links among women. The relationship that they must have has also been indoctrinated by the Aunts, and the small interaction that they have is either completely false or being forced to recite what they have been taught: as for example when Offred describes her conversation with Ofglen "During these walks she has never said anything that was not

strictly orthodox, but then neither have I” (Atwood 23), or “I think of her as woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act” (Atwood 35) This indoctrination is part of the plan of patriarchy because “if women are disunited they have little hope of making the lasting revolutionary changes they see as necessary for social improvement” (Callaway 67).

This absence of connections is exactly what Tiganus denounces as well “There was no place to make friends. The patriarchy, well versed in divide and rule, resorted to competitiveness to prevent us from revolting against the slavery imposed on us. It was also the business strategy for maximum profits” (my translation, 55). Women in brothels/sex clubs also experience the matriarchal network although it may seem the opposite. Women that are victims of prostitution are also victims of the competitive environment created among women, as Tiganus explains that it was a place where your main attention was on surviving, it was either you or the others (214). It is true that some women were able to establish authentic friendships and sometimes it could be a necessity, however, that was extremely complicated as women were from different places, speaking different languages. Therefore the language barrier also applies, and women were constantly moving places in order not to establish deep bonds with anyone and the goods, the women, would be different.

This inability to establish genuine connections starts in the Red Centre, where the indoctrination takes place and from the very beginning it is shown how women are supposed to act with each other: “The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us” (Atwood 15) and following Offred points out to the fact that the word ‘sororize’ has been erased from their vocabulary; “Friendships were suspicious, we knew it, we avoided each other [...]” (Atwood 69). Furthermore, in the middle of the novel, Aunt Lydia explained the future they wanted:

For the generations that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them, and when the population level is up to scratch again we’ll no longer have to transfer you from one house to another because there will be enough to go round. There can be bonds of real affection, she said, blinking at us ingratiatingly, under such conditions. Women united for a common end! (Atwood 150).

With this statement they are already explaining that those all conceptions are missing in their present time, and they justify it by saying “Your daughters will have greater freedom. We are working towards the goal of a little garden for each one [...]”

But we can't be greedy pigs and demand too much before it's ready, now can we?" (Atwood 150). These fake promises are what will enable women to keep oppressing others by accepting that they are to remain disunited. With this speech that demands women to just be patient and do nothing, readers are able to see that "women of Gilead are trained to place their allegiance to men before their allegiance to women" (Callaway 68).

The lack of sorority is perceived in the prostitution and in the Gilead system as women are victims of their own fears which only leads them to act as perpetrators to other women. This is a full circle where women are unable to trust other women, therefore they prefer to remain alone. At the same time and emphasized by the dangerous atmosphere, they perceive women as unapproachable and as a threat to their personal safety. As a consequence, they become more aggressive and combative.

However, Atwood's ideology seems to break through as many times we are able to see how there are moments of subtle camaraderie and empathy among women, especially from Offred's perspective. Offred multiple times expresses her desire to touch or communicate with other women: "It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman" (Atwood 53), "Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia. There can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances. This is something you can depend upon: there will always be alliances, of one kind or another" (Atwood 120). In spite of the fact that Offred is additionally loaded up with the assimilated discourse of the totalitarian system, she also expresses in her thought the ideology of Atwood's supporting the First Wave of Feminism, where activist women had not taken separate ways yet.

Part 3: Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale, according to Callaway, offers as a critique of the Second-Wave of Feminism as Atwood herself witnessed in the early 1980s a conservative revival that assaulted the progress women had struggled for decades before (66). A very important aspect of the novel is the separation of the two time settings that appear in it. As established previously, those two time settings could refer to the two first waves of feminism as well as to two branches of feminism: the liberal feminism and the radical feminism. Although the two branches share a commitment to gender equality, they

differ in their approaches and perspectives on how to approach it. On the one hand radical feminism views patriarchy as the root cause of women's oppression and beliefs in the need for a complete restructuring of society, therefore they often engage in grassroots activism and direct-action. The representation of this branch, as established before, is mainly portrayed by Offred's mother who participates in demonstrations, desires the creation of women-only spaces and even criticizes her own husband by stating that all men are guilty. This version of feminism is ironically materialized in the actual totalitarian system of Gilead where in theory women, especially handmaids, are the most valued and sacred people in order to attain a good future. Nonetheless, the actual circumstances all women face is that they are also the most despised.

On the other hand, liberal feminism sees gender inequality as a result of discriminatory laws and opts to challenge those inequalities through legal reforms where women acquire the same opportunities. This other version of feminism can be observed through the memories of Offred when reminiscing society before the totalitarian system where women defy all the patriarchal rules by exalting their freedom of speech, of sexuality or of discrimination.

Women's rights and agency have been reduced to the mere role of reproduction therefore, in that sense prostitution is not explicitly depicted. However, there are implicit parallels between the physical and psychological abuse suffered by the handmaids and that experienced by prostitutes: the organized society in Gilead references sexual servitude, dehumanization and objectification. With *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood creates a universe which is hostile to gender equality by using the patriarchal system that is inherently present in human nature. Furthermore, due to the implied monetary value placed on women's bodies in these civilizations' patriarchal cultures, women have been compelled to pursue jobs in sex work. This perspective of prostitution is also applied to the prostitution experienced in Jezebel's club. Although the descriptions of Jezebel's may seem more appealing to Offred, the club still represents a manifestation of patriarchy, and therefore, Atwood creates characters that are constantly "choosing" prostitution or being kind to the system in order to survive.

The systems of prostitution in real life and in the novel can be directly linked to the concept of sorority, or lack of it. Women are pitted against one another and discouraged from forming meaningful connections. Furthermore, men benefit from this version of patriarchy as women are also the ones who maintain the new social order, all

of this being masked as female collaboration. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a complex portrayal of women's relationships in an oppressive society, which are the outcome of the internalized misogyny. The indoctrination of the handmaids consists of the encouragement to spy on one another, creating an environment of suspicion and isolation where, not only the handmaids, but all women, view each other as potential threats.

Despite the pervasive atmosphere of competition and suspicion, the novel also highlights moments of solidarity through the thoughts of Offred and acts of resistance such as their covert interaction, sharing information or forming secret friendships. This way they are engaging in small acts of defiance within their limited sphere of influence. The relationships of women created reflect on the dynamic of power and survival, subtly pointing out that women can be both victims and perpetrators. Atwood aims that through portraying these complicated power relationships, readers would consider how repressive regimes may change. Furthermore she calls attention to the importance of women being united for challenging the patriarchal system as well as for the individual growth and sisterhood.

The Handmaid's Tale serves as a powerful exploration of feminism and sisterhood where the system of prostitution can be ignored or misinterpreted. This novel, being a dystopian work works as a wake-up call for society to recognize and eliminate oppressive structures, such as patriarchy among others. Readers must realize that patriarchy is succeeding and has been succeeding for thousands of years at its job by making prostitution invisible almost everywhere, and at the same time blaming and punishing the real victims and, what is even more important, making the real culprits invisible as well. Prostitution is a system that most of the world is aware of but many keeps ignoring it due to several factors: because we are not able to see the reality behind it, because there is much stigma around sex industry, and because it operates underground, among many other reasons. Furthermore, pornography, objectification and torture have been standardized and eroticized by the patriarchy and capitalism, who always go hand in hand, turning them into a model to follow (Tiganus 46). *The Handmaid's Tale* is a great example that acts like a warning, to portray how society can create an institutionalized prostitution, leaving aside fundamental humans rights and still people cannot even notice or think of it as a disturbing structure. Furthermore, people can consider it something normal for certain people and that can be contemplated in a regular basis. Women and children are the ones who suffer the most

because of prostitution and it is up to them to join the abolitionist movement in order to eradicate it.

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