

## New Norms of Gender and Emergence of Identity Crisis in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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### ABSTRACT

*Using Butler's theory of gender performativity and her analysis of the psychic form of power, this paper attempts to show how the modification of gender by power in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has resulted in an identity crisis in the female protagonist, Offred. One significant aspect of the totalitarian regime of Gilead is its gender hierarchy that is further consolidated through sex discourse. Sex in Gilead turns into a privilege granted only to men of high social status. Men are presented as normal sexual beings, whereas women are entirely excluded from this discourse. Femininity in Gilead translates into invisibility, modesty and silence. Women are regarded as being sexually neutral and are reduced to means of reproduction. Offred, who has lost her voice and agency in this society, attempts to create her own narrative through which she can exercise her resistance. However, the lack of consistency and her inability to adjust herself to the new values and norms result in an identity crisis, which is represented through her sense of melancholia and the obvious inconsistencies in her values.*

*Keywords: Gender Study; Power; Subjection; Performativity; Discourse*

### INTRODUCTION

Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and her analysis of the relations of power with the subject's psyche, this paper aims to discuss how power's alteration of sex discourse impacts the notion of gender and results in an identity crisis in the female protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred. Butler is known for her work in gender theory and her writings on the psychic influence of power on the subjects, and the status of identity in relation to gender (Nayak & Kehily 2006, p. 460). In her works, she tries to develop Michel Foucault's understanding of power and how it simultaneously constructs and limits the subject. Butler elaborates on the relationship between gender and identity in the context of power in a heteronormative society.

Butler introduces performativity in order to challenge the idea of gender and identity as fixed entities. Her core idea of gender performativity is grounded on the fact that gender is a repeated performance that reenacts a set of socially established norms (2010). Therefore, she dismisses the idea of fixed gender as a myth and contends that gender is culturally and socially constructed by repeating a set of discursive performances, entailing whatever a person is socially allowed to say and enact. The perpetuation of these norms defines masculinity and femininity and distinguishes a man from a woman. For Butler, subjects are constructed through power relations; however, the power that creates the subject simultaneously creates the opportunities for the subversion of the norms. One should know these power relations and how they work in order to effectively resist the dominant norms. She suggests that, discourse precedes identity, meaning that identity does not exist outside language and that gender conditions the subject's existence (2010).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead represents a government established on a system of patriarchy whose function is contingent on women's full discursive displacement. In order to normalise this mindset, the government proposes a new set of norms that are perpetuated in society through enactment of laws. These laws guarantee people's compliance with the norms. Offred, as a woman who was born and raised during women's liberation movement, finds herself in a situation where she is expected to embrace her invisibility as a natural dimension of her gender. On the one hand, she still feels attached to her former ideology, and on the other, her life depends on the internalization of the latter. This process of adaptation, continuously hindered by her former ideology, results in an evident inconsistency in Offred's personality that surfaces in the form of an identity crisis. As Butler contends, "the effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practice of gender coherence" (2010, p. 34). Therefore, the incoherence in this pattern of performance, which is due to the close affinity of gender and identity, can result in a disorder both in the subjects' perceptions of their gender and of their identity. Using Butler's idea of discursive performativity of gender, this paper analyses new gender norms generated by power and discusses how the perpetuation of these norms and Offred's struggle to adapt herself to these norms result in her identity crisis.

#### THE PROCESS OF NORMALISATION IN GILEAD

Gilead faces a population crisis due to a nuclear explosion. In order to tackle this problem, the government employs Handmaids, fertile women who have sex with men of high social status. Each Handmaid can maximally sleep with three men, and if she fails to impregnate, she will be declared as Unwoman and the government will send such handmaids to the Colonies. In contrast, if they deliver healthy babies they are permitted to live and die a natural death, and are exempted from ever being declared an Unwoman.

In order to establish its order, the government employs a juridical disciplinary power that plays both a productive and repressive role. The productive nature of power highly affects how it can be resisted (Marandi, Ramin & Shabanirad 2017, p. 41). And while disciplines carry a discourse that represents the natural rule of a norm (Foucault 1978), punishment ensures people's submission to the new norms. Seeing it as an essential move toward normalization and installation of new norms, Gilead tends to avert all activities and ideologies that connect people to the former society and its social and moral values. Hence, the government sets severe corporal punishments for the transgressors and organise educational institutions to teach people the new social norms.

Before starting their job, Handmaids are trained in the Red Centre, since the government believes that "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (Atwood 1985, p. 320). Therefore, on a micro-level, the government allows a matriarchal system taking charge of the Handmaids' education. The Aunts run the Red Centre and they are responsible for the justification of the abnormal life of women through brainwashing and fabricating the truth. They also monitor Handmaids to ensure that they are committed to their training.

The Aunts are masters of rhetoric. Exploiting their affectation and gestures, they make the false appear true to the Handmaids: "Her [Aunt Lydia's] voice is pious, condescending, the voice of those whose duty it is to tell us unpleasant things for own good...She is rich in pauses, which she savours in her mouth" (Atwood 1985, p. 124). In addition to their deliberate acting gestures and postures, they are also effective public speakers. Their role in Gilead has close affinities with the role of Christian preachers in the Classical Age. Just like preachers, they teach Handmaids how to live in Gilead. In his studies

of Christian preachers of the Classical Age, Foucault likens the relationship between a preacher and his followers to a master/disciple relationship and points out that in teaching people arts of living, they modified their being, changed their ontological status and provided them with "modalities of experience" that are highly constitutive of the other (2009, p. 31). The art of living is closely related to one's idea of the truth and his/her perception of the quality of being.

Offred is a member of one of the transitional generations of Handmaid women who try to survive. In a society that works to silence her, she seeks to maintain herself by narrating her story of past and present. Offred's thoughts often manifest conflicts of her trainings and her former ideology. At one stage in the novel, Offred reminisces women's security in the former government:

Women were not protected then.

I remember the rules, rules that were not spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble...don't go to a Laundromat, by yourself, at night.

I think about Laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself. I think about having such control. (Atwood 1985, p. 37)

Throughout the novel she vacillates between her present indoctrination and her former ideology. In the aforementioned instance, she starts by speaking of the privilege of security that Gilead had granted women by a statement that highly resonates the state ideology — this way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace (Atwood 1985, p. 284). Yet, as always, her longing for her former independence, control and right of ownership interrupts her train of thought.

Despite admitting women's insecurity under the former government, Offred's unceasing efforts to find someone that can protect her demonstrate that she does not feel safe under Gileadean government either. During her stay in Gilead, she turns to many people for protection: Moira, Cora, the Commander, the Wife and Nick. Therefore, she clearly did not feel protected in a country that would let her live as long as she can reproduce.

In Gilead, a sexual act is acceptable only if it happens between a husband and a wife or a Commander and his Handmaids. Having a wife and a Handmaid signifies one's high social status. Sexual act becomes a privilege that is exclusive to people of high social castes. Gilead's new culture valorises the sexual act as long as it is done for the purpose of reproduction. This brings up the Christian theory of the natural vessel which Foucault also discussed in one of his lectures.

...Christian theory of the natural vessel is therefore a theory with two elements: the naturalness of the sexual act comprises two points of anchorage, on the side of the subject of course (the male) and on the side of the object (the woman, the natural vessel—this correlative element is indispensable for the good naturalness of the sexual act).

(2017, p. 85)

This issue refutes transgender and homosexuality as a valid sexual orientation, and only validates heterosexuality as normal and acceptable.

Aligned with the Christian theory of female as the natural vessel, in Gilead, women are reduced to "two-legged wombs", "sacred vessels" and "ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 1985, p. 179). Women's situation represents a precise instance of gender-defined destiny that was heavily challenged by the feminists of the 70s. In Gilead, women's procreative ability defines their womanhood and they are women as far as they deliver a baby. In the former society, the ritual sex-taking place between a Handmaid and a Commander would be

construed as rape; for it is done without the consent of the Handmaid. In order to refute the rape accusation, the government engages in the construction of a reverse discourse.

As noted earlier, in justification of the laws, the state heavily relies on religion. Officials selectively choose parts of the Bible aligning with their policies. The idea of Handmaids' sexual service is derived from the story of Rachel and Jacob, in which Rachel, due to her infertility, offers her maid to Jacob<sup>1</sup>. The Aunts recite this story to Handmaids every morning before breakfast. The Commanders also read this story as part of the sex ritual to remind the religious history of this ritual to everyone and also increase the emotional effect of the ritual. All these reverse discourses result in vitiating the rape accusation of the Handmaids' sex service. As Offred says: "...nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (Atwood 1985, p. 126). However, she fails to discern that a socially imposed choice is not truly a choice.

The extramarital sex between a Handmaid and her Commander takes place monthly in a ritual called the Ceremony in the presence of the Wife and her entourage. The sex is always brisk and brief, and is done in silence. Even the Handmaids cannot find an appropriate word to describe the ritual, however, they know what it is not: "It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance... It has nothing to do with sexual desire" (Atwood 1985, p. 107). This detachment from sex turns it into a commodity in control of the government. In this context, taking pleasure in sex will not be necessary, but only "a symptom of frivolity" and a distraction (Atwood 1985, p. 115).

Sex in the Ceremony somehow consolidates the gender hierarchy that exists in the society. Sexual intercourse in this manner requires women to be passive and subordinate, and men to be dominant and in control. Radical feminist, Andrea Dworkin, in her book *Intercourse* argues that in a patriarchal society, the purpose of laws on intercourse is to further men's dominance over women and maintain women's submission. Therefore, she concludes these laws "work by creating gender" (2007, p. 189). Men are the subjects of sex while women are regarded as the sexual objects. Sexual behavior of both genders at the Ceremony reflects their social place in the society. Women have a submissive role in this society, while men have more control and more chances of survival. And these roles are being reinforced in the Ceremony more explicitly. The Handmaid lies down passively, while the man always stands up. He has the agency to act while the woman always remains passive.

Confession is another technique that Gilead has borrowed from religion. It mainly serves as an apparatus to confirm the former socially disgraceful actions by the Handmaids. Offred describes one of the Testifying moments in the novel as follows:

It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. She told the same story last week. She seemed almost proud of it, while she was telling. It may not even be true. At Testifying, it's safer to make things up than to say you have nothing to reveal... But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says... Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on?... 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. 90)

During Testifying Aunts aim to project a reverse-discourse of what was normal under the former government. The validity of the stories has no importance; for the purpose of Testifying is condemning women's former actions, and what the current social norms consider as debauchery. With regard to the function of confession in society, Butler argues that Foucault regards confession as an "act of speech in which the subject "publishes himself"" (2005a, p. 112). It becomes the verbal and bodily scene of the self-demonstration. In this context, the sinner does not have to give an account that corresponds to events, but only makes him/herself manifest as a sinner (2005a). In the above excerpt, according to the Aunts, Janine is guilty in the gang rape accident that occurred to her. Since as they always

remark, for a girl, "[t]o be seen is to be penetrated" (Atwood 1985, p. 47). And girls have to be "impenetrable" (47). In other words, the Aunts use the unacceptable behavior of women under the former government as a technique to reinforce the state ideology in relation to women.

### THE MODIFICATION OF SEX DISCOURSE

Girls have to be "impenetrable" and modest, and in Gilead, it means invisibility (Atwood 1985, p. 42). Therefore, they cover their whole bodies, including their faces. They do not use any lotion or cream to soften their skin, for they should learn that their bodies have only one purpose to serve and that is reproduction. Moreover, sex and sexual drive exist only to serve the procreative purpose. Sexual drive becomes a masculine trait as well. While the Aunts perpetuate the idea that men are sex machines who only want women for sex, they remind the Handmaids that women are created differently. And whereas God created men with strong sexual urges, women are granted control over their reaction to these sexual urges. "He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked" (Atwood 1985, p. 57).

In Gilead, men are represented as seducers and women as helpless victims who have to act modestly and obliterate their bodies in order to protect themselves from men's wild sexual urges. Women are displaced from the discourse of sex as a result of the perpetuation of the socially constructed truth that men are naturally driven by sex, while women are not. The Aunts' speeches at the Red Centre abound with admonitions to Handmaids about the dangers of men and their gaze on the body of women.

In Gilead, propaganda and fabrication of truth greatly assist the government in establishing its values. There is a baby delivery part in the novel, in which Offred remembers one of the slogans of the Red Centre: "From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his need. We recited that three times after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts" (Atwood 1985, p. 128). As Nancy Walker in her article, "Ironic Autobiography: From The Waterfall to The Handmaid's Tale," argues, this is a Marxist slogan in which "him" is replaced by "her", a substitution that appropriates Gileadean "use of women for men" (1988, p. 207). However, the Aunts foist this slogan as a religious statement in order to brainwash the Handmaids into their social roles, and as it seems, Offred has accepted this as truth.

In Gilead, infertility seems to be a feminine issue, men are never sterile. "There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, at least not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (Atwood 1985, p. 74). This case illustrates how power in Gilead perpetuates, establishes and maintains its ideology through law and generating truth. In justifying men and women's differences, the Aunts greatly rely on manipulating the idea of nature and state an essentialist view of sexuality.

Men are sex machines...and not much more. They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is metaphor. It's nature's way. It's God's device. It's the way things are. (Atwood 1985, p. 154)

The Aunts try to educate women, convince them of men's sexual nature, and justify the government's approach to the issue of women and why they are expected to be submissive and humble in the society.

## IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

Butler argues that a person's existence and their agency are provided by language; in other words, language provides the framework which enables the subject to express itself (2010). She takes this idea further in *The Psychic Life of Power*, by stating that the subject does not exist without a name that would provide his/her linguistic existence (1997). Women in Gilead have been stripped of their names. All Handmaids are known in relation to the Commander they serve, and other women have adopted new names that are different from the ones they had under the former state.

The reason for the name change lies in the fact that Gilead strives to form a new society and needs new subjects who fit into the newly set social and political roles. Although men's social place has undergone changes too, women face the most radical changes. Therefore, not only are they being manipulated and modified physically, but also their very existence becomes the target of the state reformation policies. As for Handmaids, they do not even possess independent names that distinguish them as individuals. They get their identity from the Commander they serve.

For Offred, her name acts as a mediate between her past and present identities. Like everyone else, she tries to adjust to the state laws by convincing herself that her name does not represent her; however, in every attempt she fails to believe herself:

...what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. 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. 96)

Her analogy of her name as a precious treasure that she has to hide exhibits her attachment to her past identity and her rejection of her recently made identity.

In a post-structuralist vein, Handmaids do not exist in Gilead, for a subject can exist only when it holds a linguistic place. The government benefits from the ban on people's free use of language as it reduces the chance of resistance and transgression of the rules. For, language that forms and shapes the identity of the subject also produces the source of subversion and resistance as well. On the other hand, the transgression of defined boundaries is "a fundamental site for identity construction and subjectivity reformation" (Mohammed, Wan Yahya, Kaur & Mani 2016, p. 123). Thus, Subjects' weakness in using language benefits power and damages the subject. As failure to be acknowledged by society causes anxiety and tension in the subject, and moreover, disturbs its balance of identity, the state profits from these consequences, as the demobilization of people from using the language translates into more state control over subjects.

Butler believes the same discursive norms that rule and restrict the subject can provide the condition for its emancipation, as through the repetitive practice of the norms they provide the subject with new possibilities for subverting the norms (2010). The rules that generate the subject do not determine it, "because *signification is not a finding act*, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantialising effects" (2010, p. 198). Moreover, the discursive formation of the norms under power never ends and subjects can take advantage of this vulnerability to turn against the norms (Fleche 1999). In Gilead, the limitations on using the language puts the government on a margin of safety, for it means limitation on the production of discourse and consequently a limitation on the subversion of the dominant discourse.

Gileadeans do not engage in the act of producing language. Reading and writing are also banned to the extent that even store signs and shopping lists are written in a symbolic

form. Following post-structuralist theorists, Butler regards the subject not as an individual, but as "a linguistic category" (1997b, p. 10). Individuals as subjects are understood as long as they establish themselves in language. Therefore, language and discourse precede the existence of the subject. Thus, the strict restrictions on using the language would cause subjects great troubles in understanding their social place and identity.

In facing a power that tries to eradicate her voice, Offred turns to narrating her own story in order to contain and retrieve her agency and her voice and also to keep her sanity:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it.  
Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.  
If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an  
ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.  
(Atwood 1985, p. 55)

Hence, the therapeutic aspect of storytelling helps her keep her denial, and helps her adapt more easily and smoothly. She narrates stories of her past and present in order to retain her notion of the past and resist the new imposed norms restricting not only her movements but also her existence.

Language and the subject's body speak together to generate what we know as "the social speaking subject" (Fleche 1999, p. 348). In this sense, a verbal violence involves bodily harm too. Before distribution, Handmaids were educated and brainwashed in the Red Centre to get prepared for their job. Every day, they prayed God for obliteration and mortification of their body, as they learned in order to be worthy to be filled: "with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies" they need to empty their body of themselves (Atwood 1985, p. 205). Offred describes Handmaids' conditions on the occasion of these prayers as "abasement" (p. 189).

Butler suggests that the reason that the subject clings to social norms, despite knowing that these norms cause its subordination, lies in the strong urge of the subject to attach to its identity (1997b). She believes that subject's conformation to social/cultural norms can be sought in the fact that the subject follows the norms in return for the identity that it believes is in the hands of society and she/he can maintain by living by the norms. This willingness to attach to norms in subjects in Gilead takes place in a different way because Gileadeans are still living in a limbo of the past and present.

On the one hand, Gileadians are in the process of internalizing new social/cultural norms and values; on the other, they still feel attached to the past. Offred's longing for the past, Moira's firm resistance to new reformations, Jezebel, and the fact that Commanders visit Handmaids in private to have a normal—as in the old days—communication with them, are all some of the instances in the novel that show Gileadeans' attachment to the former norms. The back and forth shift between the past and present norms results in an identity crisis, as the subjects are trying to adapt to the new norms, but still feel attached to the old norms. Furthermore, the subjects' identity rests upon the social norms and regulations that define their subjectivation, and grant them their identities in return of conforming to the norms. In other words, the subject has a right to live in its subjectivation. Nevertheless, this does not precisely happen in Gilead, as along with docility, social caste also plays a major role in the subject's destiny.

The humans' evermore vulnerability to power causes their attachment to power even if the attachment means detachment from their desire (Fleche 1999). This vulnerability prompts Offred to conform to the rules and not to show any vivid resistance to the established laws. However, as Butler, echoing Foucault, states, resistance is internal to the very power that it opposes (Allen 2006), nonetheless, "one cannot criticize too far the terms by which one's existence is secured" (1997b, p. 129). With the strict rules and tight surveillance in Gilead, Offred can merely turn to resisting by storytelling.

In the matter of femininity and masculinity, the government firmly upholds an arbitrary binary system of gender, not only due to the fertility crisis but also because other types of sexuality are not acceptable in terms of religion. Moira, Offred's best friend is the only lesbian introduced in the novel, who firmly resists state ideology. She is punished several times and at last is sent to Jezebel—Gilead's brothel. Despite Moira's resistance to the state ideology, she has to give up a great part of her freedom and agency to get her sexual freedom. She might have granted some freedom of choice and speech, however, just like heterosexual women, her actions are highly restricted. Just like other women in Gilead, her femininity and sexuality have also taken a form of commodity, and are used to satisfy the sexual needs of men of socially and politically high status. The rules are the same as Gilead, she cannot leave Jezebel and if she gets sick, they would kill her. In other words, if in Gilead, procreational ability marked womanhood, in Jezebel, the sexed body defines femininity. Yet, all these women have one thing in common: society does not acknowledge their existence.

With the exception of the Wives and Daughters, women in Gilead either do not exist or exist collectively; that is, the society does not acknowledge them as individuals but as groups. In this case, Handmaids' names represent a good instance. Unlike what the Aunts profess about Handmaids' social place and the importance of their service, not only does the public regard their job with contempt, but also the power that assigned them this service does not recognise their existence. For, they only get acknowledged in relation to the Commander they serve. They are not linguistically represented; therefore, they do not exist.

#### IDENTITY AND MELANCHOLIA IN GILEAD

According to Sigmund Freud, melancholia is the loss of loved ones that takes place in the narcissistic realm (Bergmann 2009) in which the object loss is not necessarily irrecoverable. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler draws upon this idea in order to explore the psychic forms that power can take in the subjectivation of an individual. As she states:

[M]elancholia is the limit to the subject's sense of *pouvoir*, its sense of what it can accomplish and, in that sense, its power. Melancholia rifts the subject, marking a limit to what it can accommodate. Because the subject does not, cannot, reflect on that loss, that loss marks the limit of reflexivity, that which exceeds (and conditions) its circuitry.  
(1997b, p. 23)

Butler regards melancholia as an object-loss that the subject feels attached to. However, since this object does not have a place in discourse, it does not hold a place in the linguistic structure either. Butler refers to it as a limit that cannot be exceeded by the subject. Nonetheless, the object-loss makes its impact on the subject, and ego's failure to substitute its place in the unconscious will cause an ambivalence in the subject that is represented through the subject's melancholia as a result of its "ambivalent reaction to loss" (1997b, p. 174).

To fill in the place of the object-loss, Offred turns to storytelling in which she tries to resolve the caused inconsistencies in her sense of identity by giving an account of herself to a "you" that she does not exactly identify in the course of the novel<sup>ii</sup>. In the face of a government that seeks to obliterate her identity, she "come[s] into being as a reflexive subject" by initiating giving an account of herself (Butler 2005a, p. 15).

Butler argues that social norms verify the legitimacy of a person's account, as for an account to be "humanly recognizable", there should be a conformation to norms or some negotiations (2005a, p. 36). Therefore, one cannot have any authority in the act of narration. For, social norms precede one's existence, hence the person will always lack that "authoritative knowledge" necessitated for authority (p. 48). Although in the newly established Gilead, subjects' existence exceeds norms', the reiteration of these norms in the



course of the establishment of the state results in the internalization of the norms, which is clearly evident in Offred's account of herself.

Offred clearly feels a strong attachment to her past, nonetheless in the course of the novel, she remains determined to survive in the Republic of Gilead. This persistence helps her adapt herself to the norms that greatly differ from what she is used to and detaches herself from the object-loss. Freud explains that the reason behind the detachment of the object-loss lies in the fact that after the disappearance of the object of love, the ego "is persuaded by the sum of narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished" (2009, p. 255). Offred goes through the same process, and despite her intense yearning for the power and control she used to have, she compensates this loss for being alive: "... a chair, sunlight, flowers these are not to be dismissed. I am alive. I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight" (Atwood 1985, p. 18).

Offred never stops thinking about her family and best friend. From the outset of coming to the Red Centre and starting her job as a Handmaid, she was looking for someone to protect her and be her confidant. At first, she had Moira, her best friend who also serves as a foil character to Offred. Yet, after Moira escaped for the second time, she never heard of her again until she saw her in Jezebel. Offred longs for a motherly figure, someone trustworthy she could freely talk to without worrying about getting caught or crossing boundaries. She wants to express herself and be heard.

Offred's love for her close friend and family seems natural, however, what she actually misses here is not just a loved one, but someone that can appease the anxiety, fear and tension she suffers as a Handmaid in Gilead. Her condition is what Jill Stauffer refers to as ethical loneliness: "the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard" (2015, p. 1). She suggests that this loneliness is caused by an unjust treatment or the dehumanization of a human being, brought about by another human or a political system, who survives the hardships just to realise that no one hears her/his testimony (2015). Offred's dehumanization was clearly caused by depriving her of all basic human rights, yet none of them worked as effectively as depriving her of language use.

A human being as a quintessentially social being is complete when it is exposed and made responsive through language. "One comes to "exist" by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other" (Butler 1997a, p. 5). The absence of others in a person's life causes an unraveling effect on his/her sense of identity as one's identity and self-formation are shaped in their interaction with others and their responsiveness (Stauffer 2015). As a Handmaid, Offred faces social injustices on a daily basis: she monthly gets raped, is forced to separate from her family and friends, and is not allowed to leave the country. In the face of all these injustices, she has to remain silent. The fact that neither the government nor the people protect her before these violations shatters her trust in people, and leaves her in a state of ethical loneliness.

Offred's loneliness along with self-beratement and self-hatred mark her Melancholy state. There are several examples of self-reproaching in the novel in which Offred sees herself more worthy of reproach and hate:

Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. 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. 81)

This quote and similar ones manifest her desire to distance herself from the feminine body that not only determined her so distinctly but also caused her so much suffering. Moreover, her long and constant exposure to the Aunts' speeches at the Centre impacted her notion of her body and her perception of gender and sexuality. Therefore, she feels guilty.

Melanie Kleine states that the sense of guilt as part of melancholia takes place as a consequence of ego's failure to compensate for the loss of the love object in order to keep the love itself (Butler 2005b). However, Butler does not regard this reason convincing enough to explain the subject's desire to remain in its subordination<sup>iii</sup>. Therefore, by drawing on Althusser's theory of interpellation and Nietzsche's bad conscience, she argues that a guilty conscience can be a form of subjection that is politically caused by the subject to its own conscience (Magnus 2006).

According to Butler, discourse can impact both the social and psychic realities; in other words, subjectivity is generated in the subject's psyche under political and social circumstances, formed in the social structure of discourse. The sense of guilt that accompanies Offred through the novel is the result of internalization of norms through discourse. Despite the resistance in the face of power, Offred does absorb gender and social norms of Gilead because she performs them every day and watches others performing them too.

Offred decides to follow the norms and rules at least at the surface level, since she loves her life and existence. Even though she lost her freedom, independence, control, identity and any personal sense of power, she is determined to protect her life by submitting to the norms. In Butler's words "subjection is the paradoxical effect of a regime of power in which the very "conditions of existence," the possibility of continuing as a recognizable social being, requires the formation and maintenance of the subject in subordination" (1997b, p. 27). In other words, subjects consciously or unconsciously engage in their subjection in order to gain their social status.

The insecurity that Offred feels among Gileadians heightens her yearning for her family and friends. "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. I want to steal something" (Atwood 1985, p. 110). Her thirst for getting acknowledged as an individual, her feelings and the needs she expresses here may have been superficial needs she always took for granted under the former state. However, her dehumanization by the law and her reduction to a commodity trigger these very basic but essential feelings of being loved within her.

The government took her mother to the Colonies, her husband, Luke, was arrested by the Angel forces and her daughter was taken to education camps for young girls. Therefore, her only hope is seeing Moira and talking to her. Prior to seeing Moira in Jezebel, Offred still displays tinges of denial of her state of living and melancholy. Her covert meeting with the Commander made her audacious. For, firstly, after violating one of the critical rules—although not by choice—she knows she does not have anything to lose. Secondly, her secret meetings made her feel powerful before Serena since she is defying her rules in her own realm.

In the Red Centre, Moira was the only one Offred could have a real conversation with. Moira leaves Offred behind after fleeing, nonetheless her resistance to the government encourages Offred that despite their unprecedented and anomalous situation, resistance is possible.

Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked. (Atwood 1985, p. 145)

Moira's audacity and rebellion made power seem less invincible and appalling in the eyes of Offred, even though at that point, she knew she could never act and be like Moira.

Meeting Moira in Jezebel greatly disappoints Offred. Seeing her friend as a sex slave in a condition utterly different from Offred's imagination shocks her, and causes her to take refuge in denial once again by changing her story:

I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swash-buckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack.  
Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn't tell you that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. (Atwood 1985, pp. 265-266)

Utterly dismayed, Offred does not want to lose her only gleam of hope. Hence, she tries to deny the truth about Moira. On the other hand, meeting Moira made Offred realise that she is alone in her journey of survival, and if she wants to survive, she has to do something herself.

Meeting Nick somewhat changes the game for Offred. In her relationship with Nick, she does not seek sex, but love. As she says: "nobody dies from lack of sex. It is lack of love we die from. There's nobody here I can love" (Atwood 1985, p. 114). Sticking to the government's definition of femininity, the ban on using the language, losing her family, identity and being watched all the time for a lapse worked together to make her feel melancholic. Even though meeting Nick was arranged and suggested by Serena Joy, the subsequent meetings took place by her choice.

Butler does not perceive agency necessarily in relation to autonomy, choice or intentionality, for all of these require political and social systems (Magnus 2006). In a Butlerian vein, what Offred did in disobeying her superiors was not an agency-based action, but a mere resistance that was caused by her subordination. As Offred puts it: "A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (Atwood 1985, p. 175). Still, in her subordination, she replaced her loss object with Nick.

I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known. I act like a dunce. I should know better. I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout.  
...He seems indifferent to most of what I have to say, alive only to the possibilities of my body, though he watches me while I'm speaking. He watches my face. (Atwood 1985, p. 313)

This piece patently demonstrates the reason behind Offred's yearning to see her family and friends. In a society that reduces her to a mere vehicle of reproduction, Offred longs for some human connections. She wants to be recognised, loved and listened to. This relationship helps her retrieve her identity and she feels empowered as not only she is transgressing the state ideology on sexuality, but she is also making a choice, even though it is highly restricted by the state laws.

## CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the effect of power's alterations in gender norms on Offred's identity crisis. Since social norms play a major role in the formation of the subject's identity, inconsistencies in the norms can have the same effect. Shocked by the radical changes happened very fast in the country, Offred found herself in a society with utterly new gender norms. Offred's resistance to totally give in to the state norms and her observation of the state's hypocritical administration of the norms lead her to live a life in a limbo of her past and present norms. In the course of the novel, she cannot fully subscribe to either of the norms, nor can she decide which one she should follow as the right path. She lives by the

current state norms while thinking about the past norms all the time. This indecision, in the face of the state's deep indoctrination of norms, creates a sense of guilt in Offred that never leaves her. Moreover, the ban on free use of language, and losing her identity as the subject of language work together to increase her confusion about who she really is.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. 1 And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? 2 And She said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her 3 (30: 1-3).

<sup>ii</sup> Offred addresses her story to Luke at some point in the novel; however, she does not stick by it:

Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one.

You can mean thousands.

I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you.

I'll pretend you can hear me.

But it's no good, because I know you can't.

<sup>iii</sup> For further reading refer to *The Psychic Life of Power*.

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