
Hegemony practices and an Identity Crisis in Atwood ‘s novel “The Handmaid’s Tale” Critical Studying

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" is one of the best novels that highlights patriarchal culture and its effects on women and society. The novel is dystopian fiction that can serve as a warning about the destructive effects of hegemony practices. Despite being a feminist book, as many critics and readers believe, Margaret Atwood's 1985 book "The Handmaid's Tale" is one of the greatest at depicting hegemonic power in a vivid way. Men's control and dominance over women are depicted in the book in great detail and accuracy. My research paper explores the theme of the practice of hegemony as well as the theme of individual identity since they are contradicting and none of them can be achieved with the existence of the other. My study investigates the connectedness between the practice of hegemony and an identity crisis. My study focuses on the strategies and procedures that are used by the totalitarian, theocratic, and patriarchal state named Gilead Regime in practicing hegemony. These strategies and procedures can be classified into two categories: consent and coercion. One of these strategies is the stripping of the individual identity (female self-identity) and imposing a restricted group identity. My research paper studies and discusses the followings: the Regime of Gilead's using of religion, ideology, language, and manipulation in the practice of hegemony on women. Offred's suffering from an identity crisis because of forcing and persuading her to adopt a new identity while clinging to her previous identity.

Key words: cultural hegemony, religion, self-identity, female body, discourse and manipulative language, an identity crisis

Introduction

Although Atwood's novel "The Handmaid's Tale," published in (1985) is a feminist novel as most critics and readers think, it is one of the best novels that vividly depicts hegemonic power. The novel presents a detailed and accurate description of men's rule and dominance over women. Undoubtedly, the concept of hegemony exists in literary works such as novels, just as it exists in reality, because most authors draw inspiration from reality or their own personal experiences when writing literary

works. (Mirzayee, 2019). The novel is dystopian fiction that can serve as a warning about the destructive effects of the practice of hegemony. According to Robert Cox (as cited in Houssay-Holzschuch, 2020), hegemony is the dominance of one group over another by spreading that group's worldview or desire to be viewed by another group as being typical and preferable, or "common sense."

In addition to the theme of hegemony, Atwood's novel "The Handmaid's Tale" explores deeply the theme of individual identity since they are contradicting and none of them can be achieved with the existence of the other. In other words, the practice of hegemony cannot be achieved without stripping the individual identity as well as imposing a restricted group identity. The loss of identity is fundamentally a loss of power. Without identity, individuality cannot exist; without individuality, anyone can be easily marginalized. In her novel, Atwood describes a dystopian future society where men dominate all aspects of life, subjugate women, and debar them from the right to self-identity, power, self-respect, and subjective nature. Women are imprisoned by the repressive social norms of a totalitarian, patriarchal, and theocratic regime that divests women of their individual identities.

"The Handmaid's Tale" is a story that takes place in a totalitarian, patriarchal, and theocratic state called the Republic of Gilead, where a nuclear war breaks out, pollution spreads throughout the world, the infertility rate is extremely high, and women are subjugated by the Gilead regime. Regardless of their positions, all women are submissive to Gilead rulers and are separated into several groups based on whether they have the ability to conceive children or not. As a result of being stripped of their individuality and subjectivity, they are marginalized and transformed into the traditional passive positions in society, such as handmaids and marthas. The hegemonic power of a 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).

It's very important to shed light on the conditions of women in the totalitarian Gilead regime that imposed drastic measures against them. After the Gilead regime has seized power, it fires women from work, confiscates their possessions and bank accounts, and separates them from their families and friends. Women are banned from reading, writing, speaking, and even thinking. They are silenced, disempowered, and exploited sexually, biologically, politically, socially, and culturally. Their privacy is violated, their value is depreciated, and they have no sovereignty over their own bodies, which are possessed and controlled by Gilead commanders. Their roles are only to be able to inseminate and ovulate. Under these terrible conditions, women suffer from an identity crisis, sexual abuse and exploit, body torture, objectification and marginalization, and mind cancellation. They have only two choices: either they are obedient and lose their existence, or they are disobedient and get punished.

Offred, a handmaid in Gilead, is the main character and the story's narrator. On the pretext that the infertility rate was increasing, the Gilead regime arrested all fertile women and sent them as handmaids to Gilead commanders, who, as the Gilead regime alleges, their wives cannot conceive. Offred is one of these handmaids who is separated from her husband and daughter and sent to one of the commanders and his wife, Serena Joy. As a handmaid, Offred's role is only to be copulated and impregnated by the commander in order to have a baby. So, she is only a breeding tool. Offred is the central character in the novel, and her first-person narrative presents to the readers a clear description of the new society (the Republic of Gilead) and reveals to them the ideologies, strategies, and norms of this totalitarian, patriarchal, and theocratic regime. Her flashbacks also help the readers recognize the society before Gilead.

After this short and gradual introduction, it's quite clear that Atwood, through her novel, focuses on two concepts: hegemony and female self-identity (individual identity). On this basis, first the research paper will study and analyze the concept of hegemony, the practice of hegemony by totalitarian, patriarchal, and theocratic regime on women exactly (handmaids), strategies, procedures, and manipulatives that this regime used to implement hegemony, and the role of hegemony in stripping female self-identity and imposing restricted group identity. Second, the research paper will explore Offred's self-identity and how her individual identity is fragmented and changed throughout the novel because of the hegemonic power of the Gilead regime. Most of the time, Offred is obedient to the norms and values of the Gilead regime and ready to adopt her new identity as a handmaid. Sometimes she seems disobedient and tries to retrieve her true identity. Offred suffers from internal and constant conflict. In fact, she suffers from an identity crisis.

According to the above-mentioned introduction, the main research problem of this paper is to investigate the connectedness between the practice of hegemony and an identity crisis. The practice of hegemony is achieved by using certain strategies and procedures that can be classified into consent and coercion. One of these strategies is the stripping of the individual identity (female self-identity) and imposing a restricted group identity. Undoubtedly, when an individual is forced or persuaded to adopt new ideologies, values, norms, and roles (a new identity) and he or she is still clinging to his or her previous identity, this will lead him or her to suffer from an identity crisis. According to the main research problem, there are two key questions that will be discussed and answered in my study. I) How did the Gilead regime use religion, ideology, language, and manipulation in the practice of hegemony? II) How did forcing and persuading Offred to adopt a new identity while clinging to her previous identity lead her to suffer from an identity crisis?

Methodology

The main research problem of the current study is the effect of practice of hegemony on an individual identity. My research paper is a literary study and analysis. It is qualitative. The novel's original text is the main source which I use in

studying and analyzing. The textual analysis will be applied to the selected data. The following steps will be implemented to do the textual analysis. I- Obtain and collect the detailed data from the original narrative text of the novel (*The Handmaid's Tale*). II- Choose and define a set of concepts and then discuss and explain these concepts to create and build the conceptual framework. III- Use Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony in analysing of the selected data of the original narrative text. IV - Record the final findings after conduct the textual analysis of the selected data. V- Draw conclusions.

Theoretical Framework

Hegemony is described as a system by which people are forced to submit to a set of values and practices that are damaging to their welfare but beneficial to those in positions of power over them (Brookfield, 2005; Hall, 1997). People should naturally act in a way that is consistent with their worldview. Hegemonic practices, however, influence people to behave in ways that serve the interests of the ruling class. In this way, the subaltern class willingly consents to being dominated by the ruling class. As Gramsci indicates, a subaltern class refers to those who consistently and spontaneously give their consent to be governed by the ruling government (Gramsci, 1999). In this regard, Gramsci (1999) further illustrates that these people are always the subjects of the ruling class's hegemonic activities.

In his theory of hegemony, Gramsci emphasizes vital roles and the connection between coercion and consent. In this regard, he demonstrates that both of these concepts are crucial to the hegemonic process, although he believes that hegemony depends more on consent than coercion (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2020). According to Gramsci (1999), coercion serves as hegemony's armour. In this regard, he asserts,

The 'normal' exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterised by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority (Gramsci, 1999, p. 248).

It is well known that the state (from Marx's point of view) is divided into a base and a superstructure, but Gramsci made more divisions when he considered that the superstructure is divided into political society and civil society. Political society, on the one hand, refers to coercive institutions such the government, armed forces, police, and others. Civil society, on the other hand, refers to all institutions that don't use coercion, especially all institutions involved in the formation of public opinion. Gramsci says "everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets." (Boggs, 1976, p. 389).

For achieving the consent of the subaltern class, Gramsci asserts that the ruling class must adopt some societal norms and values and make them its worldview, permit the subaltern class to express its desires, and grant the subalterns specific rights. (Jones, 2006). Gramsci also confirms that consent is attained when the interests of the ruling class and the interests of society appear to be the same interests in general (Jones, 2006). It is quite clear that hegemony cannot be achieved by coercion, but rather through as Boggs refers “the permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations.” (Boggs, 1976, p.39). So, the dominant class uses several tactics like brainwashing, manipulation, and ideology to make the dominated class believe that the ruling class’s norms, values, and beliefs are acceptable and proper standards and accept them willingly.

Marx's understanding of hegemony is modified by the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is not just political and economic, but also cultural. He sees culture as a means through which the upper class dominates the lower class. In general, the term "cultural hegemony" describes the dominance of upper classes over lower classes by using culture and ideology. By controlling social institutions, the upper class will affect the norms, values, concepts, beliefs, and actions of the general populace.

Ideology is a domain of values, customs, and beliefs in which people are categorized as social agents, according to Gramscian theory. The social agents produced by this domain have an impact on the overall structure of society and the level of production economically. Since the products of ideology, as represented by social agents, are affected by institutional and economic factors, Gramsci argues that ideology is both Marxist materialistic and constitutional. Furthermore, Gramsci views ideology as a battlefield where enduring conflicts arise between two hegemonic principles. (Mouffe, 1979).

Ideology, in Gramsci's view, has intellectuals and representatives who are assigned to practice it. Propagating ideology and observing its intellectual and moral influence is Intellectuals’ responsibility. Their leading role is to use institutional structures in a way that they would be able to persuade people of their ideological beliefs and values. Educational institutions, churches, and the media are all tools that can be employed to further an ideology.

The setting in which these tools are existed to generate ideologies is called civil society. According to Gramsci, stability is achieved by civil society when hegemony operates within two kinds of institutions. In the first kind, coercion is used by military institutions and police forces to maintain people's subordination. In the second kind, people’s consent is preserved by media, educational institutions, and religious organizations. Here hegemony is produced and achieved by ideology and it can be practised by certain social group to dominate another (Mouffe, 1979).

Findings and Discussion

Cultural hegemony

According to the above-mentioned, cultural hegemony is achieved by getting the consent of the subaltern class to be governed by the ruling class. Consent is achieved when the subaltern class believes that the interests of the ruling class are the interests of society. To achieve the consent of dominated class, the dominant class uses culture, ideology, language, religion, and manipulation. In other words, the dominant class will influence the norms, values, beliefs, concepts, and behaviors of the dominated class by controlling the cultural, educational, and social institutions. By controlling these institutions, the subaltern class will believe that the ruling class's beliefs, norms, and values are proper standards and accept them willingly. Gramsci claims that consent, in addition to coercion, plays an essential part in hegemony. (Gramsci,1971).

Ideological strategies

It is quite clear for any reader to realize that “Rachel and Leah Training Centre” is one of the major institutions that is responsible for indoctrinating ideologies in the totalitarian Gilead regime. On the pretext of a sharp decrease in population because of nuclear war and the spread of environmental pollution, the patriarchal Gilead regime arrests all fertile women and sends them to the “Rachel and Leah Training Centre” where they are indoctrinated with the regime's norms, values, and beliefs by the Aunts who are also women, but they work for the patriarchal Gilead regime.

In “Rachel and Leah Training Centre”, Aunts play a big role in preparing fertile women to accept their new identities as handmaids socially, culturally, and psychologically by using several ideological methods like exploitation of religion, stripping the individual identity, objectifying the female body, and manipulating language. After these fertile women get prepared to do their duties as handmaids, they are sent to Gilead commanders, whose wives cannot conceive, so that they are impregnated by the commanders and have babies.

Totalitarian regimes impose complete control on their people in two possible ways: “the complete destruction of human personality” by constructing “authority, orthodoxy” considered as “ideological control”; “complete disciplinary control” over “beliefs and ideas” through “ordering and regimentation of society” by using indoctrination (Cassinelli, 1960, p.90). The Republic of Gilead uses mental violence, as do other totalitarian societies, to make its female subjects by influencing their minds and destroying their sense of self through The Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre, where the Aunts indoctrinate new ideologies and exert control over the majority of females.

Religion

One of the most effective strategies for implementing ideology in Gilead is religion. “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 structure is based on the biblical

narrative of Rachel, Jacob's barren wife. In order to have a child, Rachel begs Jacob to have a sexual relationship with her handmaid and says, "Give me children, or I shall die" (Atwood, 1985, p. 8). In order to control the sharp decrease in population due to a nuclear explosion, the Gilead regime takes advantage of this religious biblical narrative to assign fertile women as handmaids to have sexual relations with men of higher status.

The Handmaids' sexual slavery is justified by the Gilead regime as a blessing by distorting the religious text in order to support its goals and beliefs. The Gilead regime makes the handmaids convinced that having babies is their sacred duty and means of redemption 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). The Gilead regime normalizes and reinforces this mindset by indoctrinating religious ideology and imposing laws, and consequently, the Gilead regime achieves female citizens' submission to its authority.

Offred's inner responses to the notion that man can be sterile demonstrate her internalization of religious beliefs deteriorated by the state, which preaches that only women are afflicted by infertility: "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). Furthermore, the beatitudes are indoctrinated by the Aunts in the following manner: "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).

Stripping of individuality and subjectivity

One of the effective strategies used by the Gilead regime is stripping women of their individuality. In addition to degeneration of religious beliefs, the Gilead regime takes drastic measures to strip women of their sense of individuality or (self-identity) in an attempt to make them adapted to submission and self-denial. To prepare fertile women to be handmaids, the first step, which the Gilead regime took, was stripping them of their true identities. The Gilead regime prohibits their real names and imposes on them names made up of the preposition "of" and the commander's name that they are compelled to serve. The narrator's identity is obliterated by repressive patriarchy in order to prevent the reader from knowing who she really is. As a result, the reader is never aware of her true name. When she is sent to the Commander Fred as a handmaid, her name is changed to Offred, which means "of" the Commander Fred. In other words, as a handmaid, Offred is typified as one of the command's possessions. Handmaids' new names indicate that they are not independent individuals but objects owned by men. The Gilead regime regards women as nothing more than sexual objects. "It is much more important to be oneself than anything else" (Woolf, 1929, p. 94).

Offred provides the following explanation of the importance of identity in reinforcing the essence:

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).

There is no doubt that imposing certain types of colour coded clothes on women is one of Gilead's attempts to obliterate female self-identity since clothes and colours are viewed as aspects of self-identity. To symbolize her status in society, each woman is categorized into a rigid hierarchy and is required to wear specific clothes in colors that represent her role. The strict color-coded clothing shows women's position in society while concealing their individuality, demonstrating how the patriarchal Gilead regime has erased their individual identities into predetermined roles.

By depriving women of the right to choose the clothes they want, their self-determination is diminished, and individual differences are decreased. Handmaids are forced to wear a uniform consisting of a red dress and a white bonnet in an attempt to strip them of their sense of self-expression and individual identity. The following is Offred's description of her uniform:

Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. 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 colour (Atwood, 1985, p.14).

The handmaids' uniforms restrict their ability to see, in addition to hiding their faces and preventing others from seeing their bodies. Since the handmaids cannot be seen by others, they are human beings, but without identity. In fact, they are more faceless objects than human beings. Because they are not even slightly important, the patriarchal Gilead regime ignores women. The role of women in society is what really matters, as Offred says: "two-legged wombs" (Atwood, 1985, p. 109). "Red, which defines us," is how Offred describes their clothes. Here, the colour red is used to represent menstrual blood, which in turn represents a person's fertility and capacity for procreation. Gilead is compelling the handmaids to publicly express who they are and identify only as handmaids and nothing else. The purpose of the handmaids' uniforms is to further link them to their social group and social role in society while eliminating any sense of individuality or identity.

In an attempt to obliterate female individual identity, the patriarchal Gilead regime prohibited Handmaids from engaging in any activities or interests outside of those that serve to further their identity as Handmaids, just like in other parts of Gilead. They are only permitted to practice giving birth, specifically. This demonstrates that the handmaids are only permitted to engage in activities that are further associated with their role: procreation, as opposed to being able to knit like the wives or cook like the Marthas. It is also forbidden for handmaids to form new friendships. Referring back to Tajfal's notion of social identity, this implies that social group formation is prohibited for handmaids. They lose some of their identities and this kind of social support when they don't have a social group.

Objectification of female body

In Gilead, biology is just another ideological tool used to suppress, subjugate, and isolate women. The female body is viewed as a fertile object. The patriarchy completely controls the female body and views it as a tool for procreation. Women are restricted and subjugated to social roles that are determined by their biology: childrearing and reproducing. The patriarchy portrays women as wombs, mothers, and functional ovaries, misusing biology as a barrier to women's liberation. Stated differently, Gilead uses biology as an ideological justification to deny women access to social interactions and confine them to a subservient role. As the Gilead patriarchy grows stronger, women are enslaved and imprisoned by their bodies. They are forced to put up with the others for being second-class and to face their biological destiny, which is to be muted, restricted, censored, and pillaged if they are born with a womb. Their true identities are suppressed in accordance with their sexuality, which is controlled and manipulated by patriarchy. Gilead's degrading view of women due to their biology directly challenges Beauvoir's assert:

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 (Beauvoir, 1949, p.41).

One of the ideologies that is promoted and defended to the death by the patriarchal system of Gilead is that women are born with wombs and ovaries, and consequently, they are unable to escape performing their reproductive duties, even though humanity is fundamentally not biologically predetermined. In other words, by degrading the notion that all people are created equal and that women are inherently different, the patriarchy shapes women's fate according to their biological nature. The gravity of the situation is highlighted by Offred's following remarks: "We are for breeding purposes... We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1985, p. 109).

Offred is not able to become aware of herself and to promote her individual, cultural, intellectual, and social abilities because her role and existence are restricted by the functions of her womb. Instead, she adapts herself to patriarchally determined roles, accepting that her whole value stems from her biological nature. It is a heart-

shattering experience to witness Offred surrendering herself as an object in the pocket of patriarchy: “resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object” (Atwood, 1985, p. 218).

In order to subjugate, manipulate, and strip Offred of her sense of self, the patriarchal system of Gilead diminishes all of her humanistic abilities, principles, and values. Offred's self-esteem is severely impacted by her internalization of her body as an object. Falling into a state of self-abasement and self-estrangement is absolutely devastating. During the ceremony, Offred disembodies and separates from her body, forcing herself to have a sexual relationship with Commander Fred in front of Wife Serena in an attempt to ease her suffering. “I would steel myself. I would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh” (Atwood, 1985, p. 125).

The female self-concept is eroded by the system as the female body is broken into sexual activity and reduced to a commodity consisting of the womb, vagina, and ovaries, deepening the internal bleeding of the woman. It is undoubtedly that Offred's following bath scene demonstrates how the use of female bodily functions as a political tool can have a negative impact on 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).

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 society. 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 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.

Patriarchal Discourse and Manipulative language

Interpretations, views, acts, and statements must all fall within the bounds of what Foucault considered to be the essential "truth" of that discourse's values. “Each society has its regime of truth. Its ‘general politics’ of truth—that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanism and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements” (Foucault, 1994, p. 131). In addition to coercion, the Gilead regime uses certain language as one of several effective strategies to subjugate and dominate women. By using certain language, the Gilead regime tries to succeed in spreading and promoting its ideologies, values, and beliefs and to get people's consent to adopt these ideologies. Although Offred's

narrative relies on the Gilead discourse framework, it also includes traces of the "before" society. She shifts from Gilead discourse to pre-Gilead discourse. Stated differently, her narrative relies on Gilead's "truths" as well as the "previous" society.

Offred speaks in a language that is largely consistent with that of Gilead. It is a language that is controlled by men, and Offred appears to be speaking in a male-dominated discourse, which restricts her position in Gilead society. As a result, even though Offred's story is written outside of Gilead's discursive sphere, it nonetheless contains the limitations of what Gilead's discourse permits her to consider. One of the clear examples that shows how Offred is influenced by Gilead discourse is her visiting the doctor to have her fertility tested because the only purpose of a handmaid is to conceive. Given that her commander might not be fertile, the doctor offers to get her pregnant himself. Although it is against the law, there is little chance of being caught. She hesitates in spite of this:

'I could help you', he says. Whispers. 'What?' I say [...] 'I could help you. I've helped others' [...] '[t]he door is locked. No one will come in. They'll never know it isn't his.' [...] 'Most of the old guys can't make it any more [...] or they're sterile.' I almost gasp: he said a forbidden word. Sterile. 'It's too dangerous,' I say. 'No I can't.' The penalty is death. I put on my clothes again behind the screen. My hands are shaking. Why am I frightened? I've crossed no boundaries, I've given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation. (Atwood, 1986, p.70-71).

Since Offred will be regarded as an "unwoman" and banished to the colonies if she fails to get pregnant after three attempts with her commander, it is unlikely that fear alone will have any effect on her. Regarding the actual sexual act with the doctor, she displays no hesitation at all. Offred would find it no more disgusting or different than her sex act with the commander. So, it seems reasonable to argue that Offred's mode of thinking has actually been influenced by patriarchal language and Gilead's values. There are moments when she recognizes that her actions align with the Gilead discourse, such as when she and Ofglen visit a store and run into several Japanese visitors.

Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before. I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. (Atwood, 1986, p.38)

Currently, Offred is not allowed to wear what she used to wear in the "before" period. That kind of dress and makeup, in her opinion, are inappropriate. It is an opinion she just cannot resist having. Gilead's discourse is too persuasive. She knows

she shouldn't be thinking that way, but she is conscious of it and realizes it is inevitable.

It's worth noting that knowledge is one of the main topics that falls under the discourse domain. Controlling knowledge leads to controlling power, which in turn leads to controlling what can be said and claimed. This is power, and Foucault comes to the conclusion that "[t]here are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault, 1994, p. 331).

Thus, in order to prevent the "subjects," or young women like Offred, from learning and gaining knowledge, reading is banned. The television programming that she is allowed to view is governed by the state and exclusively displays content that is favourable to the government. Offred is particularly interested in learning about organized resistance, but neither of these topics is covered by the state-controlled television that she is permitted to watch. With reference to the news, she states, "who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none" (Atwood, 1986, p. 92). Offred describes Gilead's discourse as being very influential, to the extent that she wishes that if only it were true, she would believe it. She also describes it as completely convincing and manipulative, to the extent that she struggles not to believe it.

Ofglen, another handmaid with Offred, is a woman who appears to be far more courageous than Offred. Ofglen is a member of the opposition. She informs Offred of the opposition and requests that Offred share information obtained from her commander—something Offred is afraid to do. Ofglen's suicide, rather than being taken into custody by "The Eyes," Gilead's secret police, relieves Offred because it means Ofglen won't be able to provide any information on her. "She did it before they came. I feel great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later" (Atwood, 1986, p. 298). Offred feels relieved that she is secure for the time being, rather than expressing sadness. Offred is content to simply remain alive, but some women, like Ofglen, sacrifice their lives rather than reveal any information that could harm the resistance.

In her essay "From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor asserts: "She is flooded with relief when the first Ofglen kills herself, because it means that no one will learn of her own disobedience and indirect affiliations with MayDay (the resistance, own note). She quickly realizes that by feeling this way, she has deceived herself: "I am abject", she says. "I feel, for the first time their true power" (Wagner-Lawlor, 2003, p.86). By experiencing relief rather of sadness, Offred has effectively "betrayed" her comrade

Ofglen through the Gilead discourse. She realizes that her mental state has actually been impacted by the regime's power.

Despite the fact that Gilead is a society based mostly on male dominance, a number of women contribute to its maintenance. Due to their efforts to break the unity of women, these women—who are the object of control—are granted a restricted amount of power by the regime of Gilead. Those women who are granted this power will struggle to retain it, not just for the benefits it offers but also, eventually, out of fear of reprisals. The regime of Gilead, through this action, wants to use these women, who have restricted power, as a security barrier for protecting it from oppressed and manipulated women (handmaids). In the novel, these women who have restricted power are represented by the "Aunts". The Aunts are women who support and aid in the domination of the handmaids because they believe that this type of governance is justified. They are responsible for re-educating and indoctrinating the handmaids with Gilead's ideologies and values. They use several different ways to make the handmaids accept and adopt Gilead's values, like brainwashing, manipulation of language, sanctification of motherhood, and others.

It's very important to shed light on Aunts' leading role in falsifying facts, fabricating lies, and manipulating language to make the handmaids accept and adopt Gilead's values. The Aunts are rhetoric experts. They deceive the Handmaids into believing the false to be true by using their affectation and gestures. Offred describes Aunt Lydia as: " 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).

A Christian society is the regime's ultimate goal, and the Aunts use the negative sides of the former society to defend Gilead. We learn about the dangerous conditions that women faced in the past through Offred's flashbacks. Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never 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. Keep the locks on and keepgoing. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a Laundromat, by yourself, at night. (Atwood, 1986, p.34)

In order to justify their conditions under the government of Gilead, the Aunts tell the handmaids stories about the dangerous situations in society "before". They are informed that "[m]en are sex machines [...] and not much more. They only want one thing" (Atwood, 1986, p.153).The Gilead discourse promotes the belief that men's behavior is "natural" and so they cannot be held accountable for it. The handmaids are informed that: "It's up to you to set the boundaries" (Atwood, 1986, p.55).

Concerning the issue of freedom, aunt Lydia proves that she has an exceptional ability in manipulating language by describing severe restrictions on the handmaids' freedom as a different kind of freedom: "There is more than one kind of freedom said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of the anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood, 1986, p.34). Thus, the Gilead logic is that while the freedom to actively do as you please—that is, dynamic freedom—might not have been totally horrible, the consequences were too terrible. Because males cannot be held accountable for their conduct, women's freedom must be restricted. This freedom was the root cause of men's aggression against women. Instead, women under the government of Gilead enjoy real and true freedom. In other words, they are free from the harmful influence of men's dynamic freedom.

The decreasing birth rates in the society "before" are another justification that the Handmaids endure, and it's a very significant one for the reason why there are Handmaids.

Aunt Lydia [...] showing the birth rate per thousand, for years and years: a slippery slope, down past the zero line of replacement, and down and down. Of course some women believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode. That was the excuse they used, says aunt Lydia. They said there was no sense in breeding. Aunt Lydia's nostrils narrow: such wickedness. They were lazy women, she says. They were sluts. (Atwood, 1986, p.123).

In feminist thought, the conflict between a woman's right to govern her own body and the fetus's right to life is extremely important. This is settled in Gilead, therefore Offred and other women cannot think in another way. "People's identity is supposed to coalesce with the coded concepts and the predicated state by which they are defined. Handmaids are supposed to merely think of themselves 'as seeds', as objects with a procreative function that should save the world from threat of sterility, as 'two-legged wombs' (Staels, 1995, p.457). In the same context, men are never sterile in Gilead; infertility appears to be a female problem. Offred says: "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 serves as an example of how Gilead's power creates, upholds, and perpetuates its ideology via the application of the law and the generation of truth. The Aunts heavily manipulate the concept of nature and present an essentialist interpretation of sexuality in order to defend the inequalities between men and women.

The Aunts' demeaning and condemning of Janine for being raped is the most devastating event for sisterhood. They think that she is to blame for the following because of her situation: "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). Instead of feeling sorry for their fellow, the Handmaids in this scene work with the Aunts to mistreat Janine by jeering and declaring her guilty. Humiliated and victimized in public, Janine breaks down in tears, faces false accusations, and confesses: “It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain” (Atwood, 1985, p.61).

In addition to the role of Aunts in justifying Gilead by focusing on violence against women and low birth rates in society “before”, Offred's Commander offers additional justifications for why change was required. In their private interactions, he tries to defend things to Offred and says that “the problem wasn’t only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore [...] the sex was too easy, anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel” (Atwood, 1986, p. 221). According to Barbé Hammer, the Commander “calmly justifies the oppressive regime which he partly masterminded with the observation that in the old society men felt they were no longer needed by women; he thereby suggests that women's liberation forced American men to take this drastic action; ergo the present regime is ultimately the women's ‘fault’ “ (Hammer Barbé, 1990, p.3).

The Commander also makes an effort to defend Gilead from the viewpoint of women. We’ve given them more than we have taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before [...] don’t you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn’t? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin and or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. (Atwood, 1986, p.231). The Commander claimed that women were incapable of living in the viciously competitive culture of the society "before." He asserts that things are better now since “this way they all get a man” (Atwood, 1986, p.231).

Identity crisis

According to Erik Erikson, Identity crisis means: Identity crisis is the failure to achieve ego identity during adolescence. It is also a period of inner conflict during which one examines one's value and makes decisions about life roles. The search for identity and self-identity crisis does not only happen in adolescence but also for adulthood by experiencing something that ruins their life and makes them need to find their self-identity. (Erikson,1970, p.88).

It is worth noting that a person who experiences an identity crisis is unable to understand who he or she is, what he or she stands for, and how he or she connects with others and their surroundings. People who have an identity crisis suffer from inner conflict and a state of oscillation and doubt. They believe that they are worthless, useless, and even meaningless in this world. Believing that they are

incapable of analyzing themselves, forgetting their qualities and individuality as human beings, and being confused and doubtful about themselves in any circumstance.

Gileadeans still feel a connection to the past, even though they are in the process of internalizing new cultural and social rules, conventions, and values. Some of the novel's examples of Gileadeans' clinging to past norms are Offred's yearning for the past, Moira's strong opposition to new reformations, Jezebel, and the fact that commanders visit handmaids in secret to have a normal—as in the old days—communication with them. Since the subjects like Offred and others are attempting to adjust to the new standards but are still attached to the old norms, the back-and-forth shifting between the past and present norms causes an identity crisis.

It is quite clear that throughout the novel, Offred is experiencing a state of oscillation and doubt caused by an internal conflict resulting from the Gilead regime's attempt to impose a restricted group identity on her while she clings to her former individual identity. As a handmaid woman attempting to live in her transitional generation, Offred is one of them. She tries to preserve herself by telling her story—past and present—in a culture that wants to silence her. Offred's thoughts frequently show tensions between her former values and ideologies and her new values and ideologies imposed by the Gilead regime. Offred remembers women's security under the previous regime at one point in the novel:

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)

She begins the aforementioned example by emphasizing the security that Gilead bestowed upon women, a claim that strongly aligns with Gilead ideology. But as usual, her thoughts are cut off by her yearning for her previous freedom, authority, and ownership.

The change in names is due to Gilead's efforts to establish a new society and its need for new subjects who can fill the newly established political and social positions. Women have experienced the most drastic shifts in social status, even though men have also experienced changes. As a result, the state's reformation programs target not just their physical manipulation and modification but also their entire existence. And as for the Handmaids, well, they don't even have unique names that set them apart. Their identity is derived from the Commander they are assigned to.

Offred uses her name to bridge the gap between her former and current identities. She attempts, like everyone else, to convince herself that her name does not represent her in order to conform to state rules, but she never believes 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)

Since the name indicates existence and represents the basic framework of identity, Offred tries to keep it like something hidden or a treasure. Keeping her true name is a clear indication of Offred's clinging to her former identity, even though she attempts to adapt to her current identity imposed by the Gilead regime. Although she tries to convince herself that her name does not represent her, she fails. According to the above-mentioned, Offred is experiencing a state of inner conflict caused by an identity crisis.

The patriarchal society of Gilead maintains to the point of death that women are born with wombs and ovaries and, as such, are unable to escape performing their reproductive duties, even though humanity is fundamentally not biologically predetermined. In other words, by demeaning the notion that all people are created equal and that women are inherently different, the patriarchy shapes women's fate according to their nature. Offred highlights this patriarchal culture with the following words: "We are for breeding purposes... We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1985, p. 109). Because of this patriarchal culture, Offred believes that she is useless, meaningless, and worthless. She thinks that she has no role in political, social, or cultural issues and that her role is confined to the nature of her body. Offred's words imply that, on the one hand, she is valueless, and this is clear evidence that she suffers from an identity crisis; on the other hand, she is highly influenced and submissive to this patriarchal culture, and this is evidence of her identity crisis.

Offred is unable to establish her own sense of self and her unique social and cultural capacities since she is limited by the functions of her uterus. She concedes that her only value is based on her biological function and instead reorients herself to duties that are defined by patriarchy. Witnessing Offred accept that she is only a tool in the hands of patriarchy is equally heartbreaking. "resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object" (Atwood, 1985, p. 218). The state limits, subdues, and controls her sense of self by depriving her of any humanistic values and capacities. Offred suffers from a serious loss of self-esteem as a result of internalizing her body as an object. The descent into self-denigration, self-estrangement, and self-abasement is absolutely devastating. It is completely natural for Offred to say that she is an object because she has lost all her humanistic and

individual characteristics, she has no longer sense of herself, and consequently, she suffers from an identity crisis.

Her distaste for resistance is demonstrated by her refusal to assist Mayday, the underground resistance, even though she might have spied on the Commander and refused Ofglen's request to flee. Rather than aggressively opposing the misogynistic policies, Offred gives the patriarchy the upper hand by internalizing her crippled self-perception and envisioning her inferior condition 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). She maintains her physical survival by accepting a more limited identity and suffering by being subjected to masculine domination, rather than struggling against conformity and regaining her sense of self. Her self-image crumbles, and her mental and spiritual condition remains severely unstable and deficient despite her physical survival. It is easy for any reader to realize that Offred, after a bitter inner conflict and mental and physical suffering, failed to maintain her self-identity and that she is ready to accept her new identity, even though it is very limited. All this indicates that she is suffering from an identity crisis.

By rejecting physical security resulting from complacency, Offred's friend Moria struggles for her freedom and a sense of self-identity. Because of this, Offred describes how she felt when her buddy was discovered and found to be a prostitute in Jezebels 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). Ofglen, a member of the underground resistance, chooses to hang herself rather than be taken into custody by the Eyes in order to safeguard the Mayday. It is irritating and frustrating to see Offred's relief after Ofglen kills herself, knowing that no one will discover her fragile 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). Undoubtedly, Offred's contradictory and disparate attitudes towards her friends Moria and Ofglen are a sufficient indication that she terribly suffers from inner conflict stemming from two conflicting views: steadfastness and resistance for freedom and preserving self-identity, or surrender and submission for physical survival, with the loss of freedom and individual identity. Offred's two opposing attitudes towards her friends are a clear indication of oscillation that leads to an identity crisis.

Throughout the novel, there are a number of examples that indicate Offred's oscillation between resistance and submission, preserving individual identity and adapting to a new limited identity, longing for the past and living with painful and unpleasant present reality. This oscillation is convincing evidence that Offred suffers from bitter and constant conflict and that Offred is psychologically and mentally devastated. It's quite clear that Offred's oscillation is a result of her suffering from an identity crisis where Offred neither adapts to her new limited identity nor preserves

her true self-identity. She lives with two characters. One character longs for the past, and the other character tries to adapt to new norms and values. It is impossible to live this way unless you suffer from an identity crisis. That's what Offred suffers from.

Conclusion

"The Handmaid's Tale" is set in the authoritarian Republic of Gilead, where high infertility rates have led to women being subjugated by the regime. All women, regardless of status, are subjugated to Gilead rulers and categorized based on their fertility. As a handmaid, Offred's role is only to be copulated and impregnated by the commander in order to have a baby. So, she is only a breeding tool. In conclusion, the paper's primary research question examines the relationship between hegemony practice and identity crisis. The practice of hegemony involves the application of specific tactics and methods that fall under the categories of coercion and consent. Some of these tactics that are practiced by the totalitarian Republic of Gilead to dominate and subjugate women are distortion of religion, stripping of individuality and subjectivity, objectification of the female body, patriarchal discourse, and manipulative language. Stripping the individual identity and imposing a limited group identity is one of these tactics. An identity crisis will surely occur when someone is coerced or compelled to embrace new beliefs, values, roles, and conventions (a new identity) while still clinging to their old identity. An identity crisis is characterized by a person's inability to understand themselves, their beliefs, and their relationships. It results in inner conflict, a state of oscillation and doubt, and a feeling of worthlessness. This leads to difficulty in analyzing oneself, forgetting individual qualities, and constant confusion.

Even though Gileadeans are assiduously assimilating new cultural and social norms, practices, and values, they still have a sense of attachment to the past. Throughout the book, there are several instances of Gileadeans holding onto past customs and values, such as Offred's longing for the past, Moira's adamant resistance to new reformations, Jezebel, and the commanders' secret visits to handmaids in order to have regular—as in the past—communication with them. An identity crisis results from the subjects' constant switching between the past and present norms, since they, like Offred and others, are trying to adapt to the new standards yet are still bound to the old ones. Throughout the novel, Offred is experiencing a state of oscillation and doubt caused by an internal conflict resulting from the Gilead regime's attempt to impose a restricted group identity on her while she clings to her former individual identity. Offred's thoughts frequently show tensions between her former values and ideologies and her new values and ideologies imposed by the Gilead regime.

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