

## I. Margaret Atwood as a Political Writer

As a participant of the Canadian politics and feminist movement, Margaret Atwood born in Canada in 1939, believes in the social function of art and the writer's responsibility to the reader. Her works are mostly connected with contemporary social and political issues. She considers that literature is attached to politics: writing is a political act. She writes books and she also studies them. She thinks that a literary work can both offer people ideas and lead them away from oppression. Atwood regards a writer as "eye-witness, I-witness" (*Second Words* 203). Atwood assumes that "art is a moral issue, and it is the responsibility of the writer artist not only to describe her world, but also to criticize it, to bear witness to its failures, and finally, to prescribe corrective measures perhaps even to redeem" (Rigney 1). Hence, as a writer, Atwood is much attracted to the Amnesty International because of the distinct morality in her works: "all it does is tell stories. I make the story known. Such stories have a moral force. A moral authority which is undeniable" (*Second Words* 203). For instance, in Atwood's *Bodily Harm* and *Life Before Man*, the moral is political: "having to do with power: who's got it, who wants it how it operates" (353). The author explains that the meaning of the political is "how people relate to a power structure and vice versa" (Ingersoll 185). Further, she defines the term *politics* as follows: "Politics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom. That's politics . . . Politics really has to do with who people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power" (149). Actually, Atwood's definition of politics accommodates her abiding thematic concerns: her scrutiny of the relations between men and women, which has always been taken by the author as a form of power politics, her engagement concerns with human basic rights

and their protection. Nevertheless, the issue of gender remains the author's major concern.

Atwood portrays the suffering of her female characters confined to their feminine roles in the earlier novels: *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle*. She is regarded as a feminist writer, for "her protagonists are always explorers through tradition and myth in search of a new identity and in search of a voice, a tongue, a language, an art, with which to proclaim that identity" (Rigney 10). Her works always share the obvious concerns of feminist writing. The author's political consciousness and her feminist issues become even more apparent in her later works as well. In her eyes, men are more dangerous, when they are in control, or because they have power.

Moreover, gender is the essential theme for analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the regime of Gilead, people are bereaved of their individual freedom and ordered to serve the state in different types and functions. Men are chiefly divided into six categories: the Commanders, the Eyes, the Angles, the Guradins, the doctors, and the workers. Women are also divided into *eight* groups: the Wives, the Handmaids, the Aunts, the Marthas, the Econowives, the Unwomen, the widows, and the prostitutes. The author expands her political view to encompass a world where both men and women are caught up in the struggle to see "who can do what to whom and get away it, even as far as death" (*HT* 144). Oppression is always Atwood's subject in her novels and poetry. Her novels *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, and her poetry entitled *True Stories* are profoundly political: "all represents the confrontation with power and its universal forms: dictatorship, tyranny, torture and the reality of violence" (Rigney 104). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, most men are oppressed in Gilead. Male bodies are hung

on the wall. Male characters, such as homosexuals, Roman Catholic priests, or Quakers are executed. If male sexual activity is restricted, women and the female sexuality are even more harshly violated. The Handmaids are valued merely as child-breeders because of women's subordinated positions to men after the overcoming of the state by the Sons of the Jacobs. Besides, the state is threatened with various problems, such as pollution, AIDS, and natural diseases; thus, the national birthrate has fallen to a very low level. The definition of women as "two-legged wombs" works entirely in the interests of the patriarchal elite who deny women any freedom of sexual choice or of lifestyle in Gilead.

However, *The Handmaid's Tale* is very different from the author's other works, because of its original genre as a feminist dystopia. The genre of utopia is adopted by some feminists during the rise of the women's movement in the 1970s. Feminist utopias are used to explore gender issues in society. The utopian novels of the 1970s usually provide the reader with a better world, far away from sexual hierarchy and domination. By contrast, Peter Fitting suggests that "more recent fictions no longer give us images of a radically different future, in which the values and ideals of feminism have been extended to much of the planet, but rather offer depressing images of a brutal reestablishment of capitalist patriarchy" (142). In the dystopian novel of *The Handmaid's Tale*, set in 1990s, women are totally under the control of male members of the patriarchal households. Women's sexuality and maternity are regulated and repressed. In Fitting's view, the dystopian novels are taken as more ominous signs than the utopian texts, used to warn the reader about the real social and political events which take place in the same dangerous circumstances as our present lives do (143). *The Handmaid's Tale*, written in the mid 1980s, describes a patriarchal world that reflects the new right

ideology in the American culture of that era. The New Right is one of Atwood's prime targets for its warnings against the declining birthrate, its anti-feminist, anti-homosexual position, its racism, and its strong adherence to the Bible (129). Above all, the author, as a feminist writer, worries that the American New Right advocates some traditional family values which confine women, because its aims may serve to frustrate the feminist movement of the 70s and 80s, and negate women's promoted status in society. With the rise of feminist consciousness, women begin to work outside their home as members of the labor force. Women are gradually becoming economically independent. The standard family form in the New Right's perspective collapses: that is, the white, heterosexual, married couple with children, in which the husband working in the labor force and woman is the wife and mother, who should take care of the children at home. The New Right seeks to restore the patriarchal authority and dominance of husbands, or father-figures, in the traditional American family. Women, without any sense of feminist consciousness, are forever relegated to second place as mothers and wives, and receive unfair treatment, under male control, at home. For instance, the Gileadean society blames women's reproductive function for the decreasing birthrate and the constant rise of infertility in the state; thus, women are transformed exclusively to the traditional, passive roles of mothers.

Furthermore, the feminist dystopia presents the reader with the Gileadean society based on seventeenth-century American Puritanism and biblical tenets. As a Canadian, Atwood also reveals the inherited Puritan culture in Canadian prehistory. The author depicts that, "those nagging Puritans really are my ancestors . . . the mind-set of Gilead is really close to that of interest in Puritans" (Ingersoll 223). *The Handmaid's Tale*,

inscribed in the policies of the New Right, presents historical reconstruction of Puritan patriarchy. The novel is originally a dedication to two noted figures: one is Mary Webster and the other is Perry Miller. Mary Webster, one of Atwood's favorite ancestors, was a witch hanged in 1683 but she survived from her hanging and escaped. During the seventeenth century, many witchcraft persecutions occurred for witches' destructive power and their threat toward Puritan religion and society. Another dedicatee is Perry Miller, an American scholar of Puritanism, who studies the witches' story. As Karen Stein points out, "in explicating and valorizing the texts they interpret, both Pieixoto and Miller ignore the deeply misogynist strain of Gileadean and Puritan cultures (60). In *Historical Notes*, the character Professor Pieixoto misreads the Handmaid Offred's story because of his own masculine prejudices and his suspense of moral judgment in studying Gilead during the conference (Michael 166). Being a vanguard of American scholarship to celebrate the Puritan tradition, Perry Miller overlooks the rigidly and punitive society that seeks to destroy Mary Webster, and seems to misinterpret the legend of the witch. Besides, Gilead also employs many of Puritan practices associated with childbirth. For example, the Birthing Stool and the provision of refreshments known as "groaning beer" and "groaning cakes," which are provided at a birth (Evans 183-4). The Handmaid Janine has to sit on "the lower of the two seats" of a Birthing Stool, and one of the Commanders' Wives "sits on the seat behind and above Janine," framing Janine with her legs in order to signify that the Wife is giving birth through her own Handmaid. And during the childbirth process, other Commander's Wives are served desserts, coffee and wine, and all Handmaids are offered grape juice and food downstairs.

Gilead is extremely misogynistic in its theocracy and practice. The name of Gilead originally comes from a religious story that concerns women's childbearing capacities. The book of Judges delineates that Jephthan of Gilead promises God to offer the first thing that comes from his house as he returns home, if God permits him to defeat Ammon. After winning the victory from the war field, he returns home and his only daughter is the first sight to greet him. The father, Jephthan, tells his daughter, to die without bearing any child is a tragedy for a woman to lament about. Besides, in Jephthan's story, it seems that the daughter cannot disobey her father's intention and sacrifices her own life to fulfill her father's promise, which suggests the role of the female role as an object only for male use. In Gilead, the state manipulates women's biological and reproductive capacities. The author creates a late-twentieth-century future society in which women's function to procreate is of paramount significance, for disease and pollution have led to a catastrophic decline in the birth rate. In addition, the author tries to reflect the current attitudes held by women that they will not have chance to break through the patriarchal yoke if it is established in a religious light. The patriarchal Gilead appropriates biblical texts to institute and to enforce political control over its people.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is represented in the form of a dystopia with some revision. The republic of Gilead prescribes a social life of frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror based on those general terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states. The truth is that sexual politics is the author's plainest theme, and she often uses "fairy tales dramatizing cannibalism and dismemberment of females" (Wilson xii). Atwood's most pervasive fairy-table image is probably that of the "dancing girl," the possessed victim in the famous fairy story, "The Red Shoes," by Hans Christian

Anderson. But the idea of dancing oneself to death becomes a crucial irony in *The Handmaid's Tale* for the heroine dressed from head to toe in red would face the fate of dancing from a hangman's noose (Rigney 10). In the novel, the author portrays a future patriarchal world where most women, but few men, are victims. Atwood states that, without doubt, power is absolute, and that control of sex also extremely stringent in such a dystopian text as *The Handmaid's Tale* (12). The Handmaids demonstrate the fact of women's being oppressed through their subordinated position in male-dominated society as Simone de Beauvoir claims in *The Second Sex*: "For him she is sex absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental. As opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute she is the other" (16).

However, as a Canadian and a woman, the author denies any easy passivity and naivety for Canadians and women to yield to whatever the power structures that may subject them. In the text, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood hints that Canada is "a collective victim; the central symbol for Canada . . . is undoubtedly survival, la Survivance" (1972, 32). The theme of survival can be implicitly seen through the prevalent scenes of women's victimization in the novel of *The Handmaid's Tale* also. The Handmaid Offred's survival indeed results from her resistance, expressed in the form of her storytelling. The following section are brief descriptions of the main body of my thesis in which I mainly concentrate on the connection between Atwood's text and the theories of Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, Catherine Mackinnon, and Helene Cixous.

## II. Issue of Gender and Body in Feminism

The issue of gender has been widely discussed since the publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex*, the key theoretical work of twentieth-century feminism, Beauvoir discloses the crucial truth about women's oppression in history. She indicates that the problem lies in the belief that man is the self and woman is the other (16). Women's oppression mainly results from their subordination to men. For Beauvoir, woman's subordinate position originates from her confinement to the virtue of otherness. Woman is the other because she is not-man. Being a woman, she will never be like man, the Self, who can define the meaning of his own existence. Beauvoir claims that "woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality" (20).

As Beauvoir exposes the prevalent gender relation between the sexes in history, she argues that "one is not born a woman, but, rather becomes one" (30). Beauvoir questions the notion of biology as destiny by inquiring into the formation of the female sex. Woman is categorized as the second sex, or the other, chiefly for the biological differences between the sexes. Beauvoir points out that biology is one of the most crucial factors for man to determine woman's subordination:

So there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores that fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he



believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison weighed down by everything peculiar to it. (15)

In Beauvoir's view, the female body justifies the traditional feminine fore, the Mother, which woman should undertake in society. However, the reproductive function is manipulated as a means for men to control women and cast them in the role of the other, and women are trained to be what a woman is in a male-centered culture. Woman has long been restricted to her body, and is always required to behave "Like a woman." It is evident that woman's inferiority and oppression are rooted in the female body. But women are of course more than simply a womb. Beauvoir implies that it is undeniable that one is born with a sexed body, but gender is not born with sex-it is acquired. Beauvoir seems to make a viable distinction between sex and gender in culture; it is manifest that for Beauvoir woman's emancipation is impossible without the transcendence of the limitation of her physical body. *The Second Sex* has achieved the status of a classic of feminist thought, and Beauvoir's feminism has inspired many later feminists. Several decades after Beauvoir's writing, the issue of gender is further developed by the radical feminists since 1960s.

*The Handmaid's Tale* describes women's oppression and victimization. The Republic of Gilead is a totalitarian state in which women are controlled and oppressed by men. It is obvious that gender is the source responsible for women's oppression in a patriarchal society like Gilead. Many critics pay attention to some feminist issues of the novel, such as the objectification of females and the value of women as merely maternal and sexual. The author indeed presents male domination and women's oppression under

patriarchy in a historical context. Likewise radical feminism demonstrates women's oppression in patriarchal society. As Valerie Bryson defines radical feminism, "it is essentially a theory of, by and for women; as such, it is based firmly in women's own experiences and perceptions and sees no need to compromise with existing political perspectives and agendas" (181). Radical feminists highlight the theme of women's oppression. Radical feminists even insist that women's oppression is one of the most fundamental forms of oppression in history and they claim that "it is the first, the most widespread; and the deepest form of human oppression" (Tong 71). Besides, unlike some earlier schools of feminism, they argue that it is patriarchy that controls and oppresses women: "it is the patriarchal system that oppresses women, a system characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition, a system that cannot be reformed but only ripped out root and branch" (Tong 2-3). The theory of patriarchy is radical feminists' major concern. Furthermore, they insist that male power is at the root of social construction of gender under patriarchy. However, it was Kate Millett who introduced the key concept of patriarchy into modern feminist thought. The term patriarchy is certainly not new to political theory, but the use to which Millett put it absolutely was (Bryson 184). In *Sexual Politics*, one of the first and most influential texts of radical feminism, Millett claims that the term patriarchy derives from the Greek *Patriarches*, meaning "head of the tribe;" it is central to seventeenth-century debates over the extent of monarchical power (Bryson 184-5). Further, Millett compares the power of a father with that of a king over his people and that both are sanctioned by God and nature. Thereafter, Millett's idea of patriarchy concerns a social system based on male domination and female subordination, and is regarded as a standard among current feminists. And

according to Millett, the term "sexual politics" refers to women's oppression under the unbalanced power between the sexes in patriarchy. In this respect, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* may aptly fit into the discussion of sexual politics as defined by Millett, since the novel depicts an appalling story of how women are oppressed within the patriarchal institution of gender inequality.

Further, Millett illuminates how and by what means the sex/gender system determines women's subordination and oppression in society. In *Sexual Politics*, Millett borrows Robert Stoller's perspective to illustrate the distinction between sex and gender. Stoller, as a famous radical feminist in surveying the topic of gender, argues that "gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms of sex are 'male' and 'female,' the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'; the latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex" (Stoller 9). Millett maintains that patriarchy always exaggerates biological differences between the sexes to make certain of men's domination, or masculine roles, and women's subordination, or feminine roles through the process of socialization (Tong 96). In *Sexual Politics*, Millett claims that biology, like sex, is a crucial factor that supports the social institution of gender and determines women's subordination and oppression in patriarchy.

Like Beauvoir before them, today's radical feminists point out that women are restricted to their biological functions, and are oppressed in maternity and sexuality to take their feminine roles in patriarchal societies. Rich and MacKinnon are the two major radical feminists who demonstrate how women are controlled and oppressed biologically in maternity and sexuality within the patriarchal society of gender inequality. Rich indicates that male control of women and their bodies through socially institutionalized

motherhood brings about an unfair relationship between the sexes and the modulation of women as mere mothers. As Rich claims, "the aim of institutionalized motherhood as have it, is simply that all women shall remain 'under male control'... most women in history have become mothers without choice" (305). Further, MacKinnon points out that male manipulation of the female sex abounds in a male-dominant society. MacKinnon suggests that male dominance of the female sex leads to gender inequality, and this dominance in turn results in social objectification of the female gender within the social institution of heterosexuality. Under the institution women's identity is reduced to an object namely, a sexual object. Being a beautiful thing for sexual use of men delineates "women's status as second class" people in society.

Moreover, Cixous challenges the premises of cultural biological determinism on women, in order to explore a female sexuality that is women's own bodily specificity, rather than on male sexuality. Cixous urges women to create their own kind of writing, in order to refute Freud's view of female sexuality, which is said to be shaped by penis envy and Lacan's point of man's language acquisition in the Symbolic order. Significantly, she proposes the idea of "the other bisexuality" to reclaim women's bodies and selves (84). As Cixous points out, "feminine writing" means embarking on "the passage toward more than self, toward another than the self, toward the other" (112). Cixous suggests that the purpose of feminine writing is "not to submit the subject . . . to the laws of cultural cowardice and habit" (118). Cixous, as a postmodern feminist, tells the ways of showing respect for the sexual difference and the significance of emancipating female selfhood in the phallogocentric culture.

The research applies Cixous's concept to discuss the significant theme of how female orality may empower women to resist the patriarchal oppression in Gilead and to search for female selfhood. *The Handmaid's Tale* concerns not only women's oppression, but also women's resistance through their voice. The novel indeed portrays the power struggles between the sexes, since the author deliberately uses female orality as a means, to counter whatever the opposite sex and the fate (of always being in a subordinated position) impose on women. The Handmaid Offred's storytelling may signify the major oral discourse that will lead to woman's resistance and reacquisition of female identity in the text.

When confronting the pervasiveness of male power in Gilead, Offred devotes herself to "writing" with her voice, a possible way for her to resist patriarchal oppression and to preserve the autonomy of female body and female selfhood. By her voice, Offred in her own way works hard to transform herself as a female victim of male violation into the very female victor and survivor. Furthermore, through her voice, Offred will reconstruct women's histories of repression.

In *Sexual Politics*, Millett defines the term politics as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (*SP* 23). Moreover, Millett argues that sex is a status category with political implications for male-female relationship, which is the paradigm for all power relationships:

Social caste supersedes all other forms of egalitarianism: radical, political, or economic, and unless the cling to male supremacy as a birthright is finally forgone, all systems of oppression will continue to

function simply by virtue of their logical and emotional mandate in the primary human situation. (487-8)

*The Handmaid's Tale* offers a tragic view of gender relations, in which 'the oppression of women' by men is seen as unchanging, universal, and monolithically imposed. The Republic of Gilead is a patriarchal prototype. The novel represents how a group of women are controlled and oppressed by more powerful men. The Commanders are the supreme leaders of the Gileadean Kingdom; in charge of the households and their women the Wives and the Handmaids. According to Millett, "sexual domination obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concepts of power" ( 25).

Gender has always been constructed for males to control females in patriarchal societies. Toril Moi argues that Millett's sexual politics means the process whereby the ruling male sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate female sex (26). Millett mentions that "sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialization' of both sexes to basic patriarchal polities with regard to temperament, role, and status" (26). Atwood's idea of the unfair gender relations in *The Handmaid's Tale* seems an echo to Millett's opinions on the "consent through the 'socialization' of both sexes." As Maggie Humm claims, patriarchy is an essential part of individual heterosexual relations, for these are permeated by male power (61). Millett indicates that patriarchal ideological indoctrination through the process of socialization is the chief cause for women's oppression. Women's subordination causes the oppression of women in patriarchy. Actually, *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes the two major forms of women's oppression under patriarchy, i.e., maternity and sexuality.

Maternity is Atwood's major concern and it is also a central issue of *The Handmaid's Tale*. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich clearly distinguishes between motherhood as "the potential relationship of any woman to the powers of reproduction and to children," and motherhood as "the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential and all women shall remain under male control" (13). Rich makes a distinction between the institution of motherhood, which controls women's reproductive capacities, and the experience of mothering that gives women great pleasure and great power. *The Handmaid's Tale* corresponds to Rich's view that women's experience of mothering is controlled and manipulated through the social institution of motherhood. In Gilead, not only the traditional feminine role as the Wives but also the Handmaids as surrogate mothers under the system of surrogacy indeed involve in the institutionalized experience of being a mother. What the Wives and the Handmaids experience is a kind of socially strictly defined, institutionalized motherhood. As Judith Evans claims, "Rich emphasized the difference between the way being a mother, as institutionalized in our society, is, and the way it could be; and between how some behavior is viewed now, and how it should be" (83). Patriarchy has always convinced women that a woman is a mother. In other words, mothering is women's own one and only job. Rich points out the restrictive maternal role that exists in patriarchy: "woman's status as child bearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like 'barren' or 'childless' have been used to negate any further identity" (11). The institution of motherhood may have originated from the power of the mother and male desire to control the mother. Men are jealous and fearful of women's biological reproductive powers to bear and nourish human life. Rich suggests that men's jealousy and fear stem mostly from their perception that "all human life on the

planet is born of woman" (11). For men, women have a unique power to create life. Rich further proves the patriarchal oppression of the female body:

Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recored from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies (through control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence. (40)

According to Rich, the female body is exactly "the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (55). Because of the institution of motherhood, women's bodies are probably manipulated for male use. What Rich implies is that women should cherish their own experiences of mothering and achieve women's own liberation. Rich argues that "the experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests; behavior which threatens the institutions, such as illegitimacy, abortion, and lesbianism, is considered deviant or criminal" (42). Hence, women are not whole persons but are reduced to different functions. In *Gilead*, women are categorized into three functions: domestics, sex prostitutes, and reproductive prostitutes. There are the Marthas, or domestics; the Wives, or social secretaries and functionaries; the Jezebels, or sex prostitutes; and the Handmaids, or reproductive prostitutes. Women easily become instruments of patriarchal appropriation of female sexuality.

In the essay, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory, MacKinnon" works with traditional Marxist arguments and makes analogies between the



oppression of workers and the oppression of women. In MacKinnon's view, the deprivation of workers' products of their work is to separate them from what constitutes their personal identity. MacKinnon points out the male control and exploitation of female sexuality. According to MacKinnon, sexuality becomes the main instrument of men's domination of women and the very "linchpin of gender inequality" (533).

MacKinnon argues that sexuality is the locus of male power and the socially constructed gender relations of male domination and female subordination is rooted in the institution of heterosexuality (533). For MacKinnon, it is the institution of heterosexuality "which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission" (533). Further, MacKinnon explains that "sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women . . . Man fucks woman; subject verb object" (541). Patriarchal society is filled with the experiences of sexual objectification such as rape, pornography and violence. Female sexuality is appropriated by men and exists merely for men (533). Hence, the formation of women's subordination is "what women learn in order to 'have sex,' in order to become women as gender comes through the experience of, and is a condition for, 'having sex' woman as sexual object for man, the use of women's sexuality by men" (531).

Moreover, MacKinnon indicates that rape, incest, sexual harassment, pornography, contraception/abortion, prostitution, and lesbianism, the seven specific social forms for men to dominate women through sex (109). As Humm claims, sexual violence, or the threat of violence, may constitute the material reality of women's lives (116). Specifically, sexual violence toward women or abuses of female sex is obviously seen in patriarchal Gilead. *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects upon a patriarchal society that is

full of male sexual violence of abuse of female sex. As MacKinnon assumes, "all the ways in which women are suppressed and subjected restricted, intruded on, violated, objectified are recognized as what sex is for women are as the meaning and content of femininity" (6). The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* corresponds to MacKinnon's idea that the experiences of sexual objectification within the institution of heterosexuality are inevitably linked with sexual violence and violation on women and also engender gender inequality in patriarchy. In MacKinnon's view, women's experiences of sexual objectification of rape, pornography, and violence are the true core of women's oppression (116).

There is also a need to search and explore the essential connection between orality and body in the novel. Many critics have discussed the important and meaningful oral act of Offred's storytelling. In fact, Offred's oral tale is a kind of feminine "writing" associated with the female body. The patriarchal regime of Gilead is obsessed with the female body and its reproductive system. Coral Ann Howells maintains that Offred must have realized that her strength to resist lies in the "writing" of her restricted role and, only through "writing," the "restricted" self can thus be transformed into the "emancipation of the marvelous text of her self" that Cixous focuses on in her discourse (137). As Cixous claims, "write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth...this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self which she must urgently learn to speak" (350-51). Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* to examine the writing on woman's body. Lucy M. Freibert suggests that, in terms of *écriture féminine*, Atwood demonstrates through Offred women, who are able to take risks and to tell stories, may hence transcend their conditioning to regain their voices for reclaiming

their bodies, selves and identities (18). Offred's oral act of storytelling symbolizes her resistance and survival in Gilead.

In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous emphasizes woman's libidinal economy, that is, "her Jouissance," "the feminine Imaginary" that "cannot be identified by man or referred to in the masculine economy" (90). Feminine writing is precisely the space where *jouissance* is inscribed. Moreover, woman should write the body because women inscriptions of themselves as women and their sexual experiences have been appropriated and determined by men (139). Cixous urges, woman should write: "No I-woman am going to blow up the law: an explosion henceforth possible and ineluctable; let it be done, right now in language" (94). Cixous exposes not only woman's negativity in language but also the binary structures traditionally embedded in the masculine system of thinking that grounds the opposition, activity and passivity, between the sexes. Woman always stays in the passive position under the heliocentric culture: "Either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left of her is unthinkable, unsought" (64). According to Cixous, in the Freudian/Lacanian theoretical discourse, because woman lacks any relation to the phallus or the transcendental signifier, she is always outside the Symbolic, that is, outside language, the place of law, and excluded from the relationship with culture and the culture e order (45). Woman's passive role within the linguistic system leads woman to be unable to Speak, desire, Speaking and pleasure under the Symbolic Order (45). Hence, Cixous says that, "woman, for man, is death" (48). Further, she claims that women "always inhabit in the place of silence, or at most make it echo with their singing. And neither is to their benefit, for they remain outside knowledge" (49). However, through

writing the body, a woman will return to the imaginary and receive "pleasure, happiness, increased value, enhanced self-image" (87).

Moreover, Cixous proposes the idea of "the other bisexuality" in her theoretical discourse, in order to refute Freud's concept that anatomy is destiny, that is, to establish female sexuality according to biological sex differences. As Cixous explains,

Bisexuality that is to say the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the non exclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this "permission" one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of body and the other body. (84-5).

According to Cixous, writing acquires the unique fluidity, having the capacity to encompass and shift freely within the two stereotyped categories of feminine or masculine. Cixous emphasizes the role of the mother's body in feminine writing. Cixous points out that "the inscription of the rhythms and articulations of the mother's body which continues to influence the adult self provides a link to the pre-symbolic union between self and m/other, and so affects the subject's relationship to language, the other, himself and the world" (86). Further, Cixous believes that women are closer to a feminine economy because "women's sex-specific experience potential physically to nurture and give birth to an other makes it easier for women to accept the disruptions (to the self) that an encounter with the other can bring" (9). Cixous insists that, in feminine writing, knowledge of the self is a precursor to knowing the other, but is not appropriate to the other's difference, in accordance with the masculine law. Besides, in Cixous's discourse, she stresses that the maternal voice allows women to

write their bodies. Cixous compares the maternal voice with "[the] song before the law the symbolic took one's breath away and expropriated it into language under its authority of separation" (93). Cixous claims that man lacks such voice which maternal woman has because woman remains constantly linked to the maternal "as no-name and source of goods. There is always in [woman] at least a little of the mother's good milk. She writes in white ink" (94). Cixous's feminine writing is the main route for performing women's sexuality and libidinal economy.

Furthermore, Cixous proclaims that woman should write, in oral or written language. "writing" by the voice is a significant theme in Cixous's discourse of feminine writing. For Cixous, feminine writing is not restricted to the rule of masculine writing of "writing by the written" (Stanton 167). The third chapter of my thesis attempts to highlight how Offred, through "writing" by the voice, indeed commits herself to woman's own writing to restore the autonomy of female body and selfhood. Cixous emphasizes that women should write to break through silence to voice. As Cixous asserts that "woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement" (347). And Cixous suggests that the feminine text is as follows:

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there is no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the lay, to break up the 'truth' with laughter. (357)

Through "writing" by the voice, Offred will recuperate her body, her self, and her speech. Traditionally, writing has been manipulated by men; hence, women are deprived of written language and play the silenced role in history. Women's histories are repressed in a male culture of literacy, and the significance that helps to reconstruct history as believed by Cixous.

The central focus of my thesis is the oppression and resistance of women within the institution of gender, as depicted in Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The introduction sketches a brief synopsis of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Second chapter has introduced the theories of the following feminists: Millett, Rich, MacKinnon, and Cixous. The views of radical feminists, such as Millet, Rich and MacKinnon, respond to women's subordination and oppression within the institution of gender in patriarchal Gilead: particularly, women are oppressed by the traditions of maternity and sexuality. Moreover, Cixous's idea outlines the dangers of women's deprivation of their identities and histories within the institution of gender and the necessity to redefine the female body and self under the oppression of patriarchal societies. In addition, the textual evidence in this novel supports these feminists' comments on women's oppression and their research of female selfhood and histories, which constitutes an act of resistance it, makes a point that.

### III. Bodily Exploitation of Women in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Republic of Gilead is a rigidly patriarchal kingdom. Immediately after the Handmaid Ofglen's suicide, Offred finds out that she can "feel, for the first time, their true power" (186). The Handmaid Offred's word "their" actually refers to the omnipresence of male power in Gilead. The novel degree by degree reveals, through Offred's narration, the fact that women are subordinated and oppressed by men in this male dominated world. Traditionally, it is through the family, the chief social institution in patriarchy, that women are controlled and oppressed; the family also encourages women's subordination to men and aggravates the unbalanced power relations between the sexes. For example, the wives, the women of the highest female class in Gilead, are deprived of the jobs and property that they once had in their pre-Gileadean lives, and revert back to the patriarchal prototype of the family, in which they are delegated to inferior positions under men, and they are owned and controlled by their husbands, known as the "Commanders." Furthermore, the novel suggests that women's position of subordination in the family and the maternal roles they assume (or are forced to assume) are deeply intertwined with the oppression of women. Religion is the major device for the promotion of the manipulation of women's biological functions and maternal roles in Gilead. The totalitarian state of Gilead indeed is a theocracy, in which the Bible is dominant, for the Bible is usurped by men to control and oppress women in their roles as mothers in the families, namely, the "Households" in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Moreover, in the novel, the oppression of women in maternity indeed results from the experience of the social institutionalized motherhood in the patriarchal society. Education is the major means by which men subordinate women as mothers within the institution of

motherhood. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Red Center is obviously manipulated by the Gileadean state as an occasion for the school to educate the Handmaids, and to force them to accept their tasks as mothers. By means of the function of education, women, as the Handmaids, are trained under the "Aunt's indoctrination to function merely as reproductive machines for men. The author Margaret Atwood seems to provide a bleak landscape of male domination in this dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which forms the author's indictment of the baldly patriarchal regime's control over "the female body and its reproductive powers" (Hansen 29). Under the regime, women's biological function in maternity is usurped and exploited in Gilead, for the sole purpose of male dominance.

First of all, the regime of Gilead is marked by its rigid, physical boundaries that confine women's activities. The chief female character, Offred, one of the numerous Handmaids in the novel, is permitted to travel only to the center of Gilead for grocery shopping and other errands. And on her way she is confronted with various kinds of physical barriers on the way for shopping. In the first place, she has to leave the Household through the back door, because the Handmaids are allowed to use the front door only on specific occasions: such as their first visit to their new post or their new post or their ceremonial participation in a Birth Day. The garden outdoors also strengthens the image of boundary with its vivid "flower borders" (31). The wall is where any transgress act is punished. There are often bodies, male and female, hung on the wall. In addition, the wall stands for the extreme reminder of the boundary that defines women's existence in Gilead. Offred says that she and Ofglen, "stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the wall" (32). The Handmaids have no options, but only adapt



themselves to the patriarchal surroundings of Gilead, and Offred craftily compares herself to a rat during the trip: "now and again we vary the route; there's nothing against it, as long as we stay within the barriers. A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (165). The Handmaids are more like hares deprived of freedom in a "maze" which is like a trap.

However, in Gilead, it is apparent, in truth, that "perhaps the more impermeable and intimidating barriers are those which exist between individuals in the form of strict gender and class segregation" (Myhal 215). Although Gilead is a society of male control, men do not escape categorization and strict ranking. For example, at the top are the Commanders, who stand for the high-class people and act the role of mastery of the state. Beneath the Commanders are the Eyes, the spying and intelligence operatives of the regime. Male characters occupy a superior status to that of women. The Commanders are the male figures who dominate the Households and his women like the wives and the Handmaids. Nevertheless, while men hold privileged positions, they are seen as mere functionaries of the dogmatic system of Gilead. During each monthly Impregnation Ceremony, the Commander is simply doing his duty to impregnate his Handmaid, Offred; there is no passion, felling, or emotion involved in this process. That is to say, men themselves are forbidden to go beyond their own boundaries to do anything else because of their different positions and functions within Gilead's plan.

On the other hand, the seven categories of the females in Gilead are visually reinforced by the different colors of attires that they were. The Handmaids are the most recognizable figures in the open field, because they wear red suits; as Offred relates, "everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us"

(8). Offred's scarlet, nun-like uniform also represents her imprisonment in the Handmaid's role; she calls herself "a sister, dipped in blood" (9). Other types of women also dress in unique and easily-recognizable uniforms. In fact, each woman wears a stigma of fixed identity which indicates her status and function in Gilead. Further, the functional boundaries, reinforced by these different women's uniforms, legally separate women. Although the Handmaids are designated "a position of horror" by the Aunts, they are shunned and despised for their inferior status, even among women themselves (13). For the Handmaids, as surrogate mothers, are indeed the good/bad women, the saintly prostitutes. Offred describes the distasteful feelings of the Wife, Serena Joy, towards her when she enters the Household earlier: "what does she envy me? She doesn't Speak to me, unless she can't avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity" (13). Besides, when Offred sees three Econowives mourning for a body's death on the street, Offred points out their hatred for the Handmaids: "Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, Spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us" (44). During the large ceremonies like Salvagings and Prayvaganzas, Offred observes that "our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope, like the kind they used to use in the movie theaters to restrain the customers. This rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us, makes for us a corral pen" (277). The image of being caged like an animal typifies the Handmaids' inferior position in the state.

After the elite sons of Jacob occupied the United States of the early twenty-first century, women's positions were drastically transformed. In Gilead, the Household embodies the place where women are confined and controlled by men: that is, by the Commanders. Kate Millett declares that "patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is

both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole" (33). In Gilead, the Household has replaced the family, the patriarchal prototype. Further, Millett indicates that the family would lead to women's subordination and oppression in a male-dominant society:

Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads. Even in patriarchal societies where they are granted legal citizenship, women tend to be ruled through the family alone and have little or no formal relation to the state. (33).

As Sir Henry Maine, one nineteenth-century historian of ancient jurisprudence, points out, "the eldest male parent is absolutely supreme in his household" (*HT* 122). The Handmaid, Offred, once remarks that "the Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part" (81). The Commander plays the role of father in the Household. Besides, Millett asserts that "classically, as head of the family the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is property" (33). The wife Serena Joy, as the property of the Commander, is owned and controlled by her husband in the Household. Millet criticizes the sex role ascribed to women in patriarchy: "in terms of activities, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male" (26). Being a blue-clad Wife, Serena Joy presides over her home and attends public functions such as the Prayvagnzas, Salvagings, and birthing birthings. The Marthas, primarily domestics seem to enact the role of housewife, because they

assist in the reproduction of patriarchy in their practical support of the Handmaids and the Wives in the respective households. In the Household, the Wife often sews in the sitting room. Usually, she devotes herself to some trivial domestic affairs as "knitting scarves, for the Angels at the front lines" (13). However, the aged and infertile wife Serena Joy can not bear any child. Instead, the wife produces woolen children, that is, those endless Angle scarves she knits. As Offred regards the Wife's act as: "Her form of procreation, it must be" (154). Besides, in Gilead, many of the Wives own such garden as Serena Joy's, because "it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (12). The silenced Serena Joy continually cultivates her garden day by day; these gardens seem to be the domains owned by the Wives. Often, Serena Joy rules over her depleted kingdom patiently with "her knees on cushion, a light blue veil thrown over her wide gardening hat, a basket at her side with shears in it and pieces of string in it for trying the flowers into place . . . the Commander's Wife directs, pointing with her stick..." (12).

Serena Joy plays the very tragic role of a wife. The Wife, Serena Joy, is neither the gorgeous lead soprano singing in the television program of the Growing Souls Gospel Hour before Gilead; nor is she an enthusiastic speech maker who makes speeches about "the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay at home" (45). As Offred ironically comments, "she doesn't make speeches anymore. She becomes speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her world" (46). All the Wife has to do is to be loyal to her husband and the family. Serena Joy, trapped in the role of wife, confined to the sanctity of the home, is "neither serene nor joyous" (Hammer 40). As the wife, she seems a dying,

withered flower. Offred expresses her chilling feelings towards Serena Joy as she meets the wife in the Household for the first time.

Her blue waist, thickened, her left hand on the ivory head of her cane, the large diamonds on the ring finger, which must once have been fine and was still finely kept, the fingernail at the end of the knuckly finger filed to a gentle curving point. It was like an ironic smile, on that finger; like something mocking her. (14)

Patriarchy endows the authority of men through the institution of family. Millet claims that "traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children" (33). Ironically, the Handmaids are "infantilized" and they are owned by the Commanders (138). The Handmaids are treated as child-like figures in households. The characterization of infantilization exemplifies the total ownership of the fathers, the commanders, of the female young, the Handmaids. For example, the Handmaid, Offred, mechanically responds to Serena Joy in an inauthentic, feminine voice as the wife tries to lay out the ground rules for their relation earlier: "They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll" (16). Further, treated like a child in the Household, Offred may not be told certain things. She is permitted to watch television news on the evening of the Ceremony. She is like "a child being allowed up late with the grown-ups" (105). When she asks a Marthas for a match, she feels "like a small, begging child" (268). More clearly, the Commander like a father, reads Offred, the child, "bed time story" from the Bible before the Ceremony (87).

The truth is apparent: "through its imposition of a rigid system of hierarchical classification, the Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallogentric economy" (137). From the outset, the Handmaids get involved in the name game. The Handmaids, as surrogate mothers, are stripped of their birth names before Gilead. However, the name game means that each Handmaid's name has multiple hidden meanings in it. For example, every Handmaid's name is called the possessive preposition of and the Christian name of the Commander to whom she is assigned: such as of-fred Of-wareen, Of-charles and so forth. While having completed a posting to bear babies, the Handmaids periodically abandon those names assuming new ones in three different households. The name Offred is not the real name of the Handmaid. On the earlier stage, there is a scene when the Handmaids seem furtively exchange their previous names in the Rachel and Leah Center, once called the Red center: "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moria. June" (4). Among these female names, June is assumed probably to be Offred's true name because it is the only name which is not accounted for throughout the text (Thompson 67). In fact, a name symbolizes one's identity. Women are bereaved of their names and identities. The name, Serena Joy, is not the Wife's authentic name either. Her actual name is "Pam," as Offred read in a news magazine in the pre-Gileadean life (45). The infinite interchangeability of the Handmaids' new names in different households stresses the deprivation of their self-identities in Gilead. As Karen Stein suggests, "the most chilling scene occurs when Ofglen, the partner whom Offred usually meets during the routine shopping trip, is not the usual one she expects" (269). But this changed woman bears the same name. Offred describes that terrible moment as she encounters the Ofglen: "Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer

Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names" (283). Debrah Raschke remarks on the multiple meanings of the name Offred, among which is Of Fred that "suggest her status as object" (265). The Commanders are the owners of everything in their houses, including women. The name game proves the general principle of male ownership toward women and women's subordination in Gilead's patriarchal society.

Religion also helps men to manipulate women's reproductive and biological capacities in Gilead. From the outset, in Gilead, there appears the absence of a religious apparatus, the church. The only church has been converted into a museum that celebrates its Puritan heritage. The only other church-like building is occupied by the Eyes as one part of their crucial headquarters, still, the church is replaced by those stores of Soul Scrolls which are mechanical and confined to only five official and endlessly repetitive prayers with "the toneless metallic voices repeating the same thing over and over" (167). Further, the ministers and the priests do not exist in the Gileadean society. Instead, the commanders and the Aunts are considered as the two chief figures to spread the Word, that is, God's creeds. The Aunts, like priests, are loyal to their God and maintain their right to quote God's creeds constantly while instructing the Handmaids. The commanders are the only persons who possess the Bible, and they read the Bible to other members in households.

In Gilead, the apparatus of church seems to be replaced symbolically by God's creeds. In other words, everything seems to run essentially under the control of God. It is obvious that those religious trappings of piety are reinforced by the formulaic language that is used by the Handmaids (Thompson 63). They have to greet each other with

"Blessed be the fruit," respond to each other with "May the Lord open," or fill in time with "Praise be" (*HT* 19, 44). Besides, the crucial image of eye cannot be neglected in the text, because the image of eye symbolizes the omniscience and authority of God. The Commanders' black vans are usually marked with "the winged Eye in white on the side" (22). When encountering Japanese tourists, Offred portrays the interpreter, who is dressed "in the standard blue suit and red-patterned tie, with the winged-eye tie tin" (28). The folding screen in the doctor's office is also emblazoned with "a gold eye" but "with a snake-twined sword upright beneath it, like a sort of handle" (60). Further, each of the machines known as Holy Rollers has "an eye painted in gold on the side, flanked by two small golden wings" (167). Actually, the power of religion operates overwhelmingly in Gilead "Under His Eye" (45).

In Gilead, the Handmaids wear sparkingly red suits; they are the most visible and noticeable figures in Gilead. Under the omnipresence of male scrutinizing gaze, the Handmaids are manipulated in fulfilling their tasks of bearing children. The most apparent manifestation of surveillance relies on the male Guardians, the routine police force of Gilead's politically charged security system. When Offred and Ofglen are shopping, they have to meet the male gaze from the Guardians. As Offred says, "I know they're watching...[with] their eyes" (22). The Handmaids are constantly exposed to a kind of operates a much more clandestine, menacing and violent police organization: the Eyes. When Offred sees Nick for the first sight, she unconsciously regards him as an Eye. Out of her worries of being observed, she considers that "perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do" (18). The Handmaids, watched by these men, cannot do anything transgress except for reproduction.



On the other hand, His Eye embodies the absolute power of male gaze and patriarchal authority. Further, God's creeds help to prove His omnipotence, also the mastery of the men in Gilead. One of the daily sayings two Handmaids use to greet each other is that: "Blessed be the fruit" (19). The fruit, which plays the coded symbol for fertility, implies the Handmaids' reproductive capacities. The greeting also reinforces the idea that the Handmaids' biological function, maternity, is actually sanctioned by God. In the Household, the Commander reads the Bible to the Handmaid Offred: "God to Adam, God to Noah. Be 'fruitful,' and 'multiply,' and 'replenish' the earth" (88). The three words *fruitful, multiply, and replenish* indicate God's blessings towards women's biological destiny. As the critic Lucy M. Freibert indicates, "the religious trappings that pervade the political structure foster the idea that the primary purpose of the system is to protect women, while the actual purpose is to control them and reinforce the notion that their biology is their destiny" (284). God's creeds operate forcefully and unconsciously in the Handmaids' minds and result in their willingness and spontaneity to perform their seemingly sacred role as surrogate mothers. The Handmaids obey God's creeds faithfully. Offred urgently wishes for her pregnancy, "What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled...oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man. Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled"(194).

However, God's creeds are transmitted, sometimes wrongly, by the Aunts. For instance, from Offred's previous memory of the Bible before Gilead, she catches and corrects Aunt Lydia's erroneous "all flesh is weak" to "All flesh is grass" (43). Offred also detects the truncations in Aunt Lydia's Quotations. Offred points out that the Aunt

does not go on to say anything about "inheriting the earth" after the sentence: "You must cultivate poverty of the spirit. Blessed are the meek" (60). Further, Offred refers to the Aunts' cutting off the sentence of "Blessed are the merciful" without adding the promise to the Handmaids "for they shall obtain mercy" (84). The Bible is regarded as "a trapped text turned into a lethal instrument because the regime makes it generate oppressive laws" in Gilead (Filipczak 171). Further, men's act of transcribing the sentences of the Bible results in the oppression and victimization of women as mothers. The Bible is locked in special wooden box and it embodies a totem of the totalitarian system in every household. Only the Commanders are allowed to touch and read the Bible. As Offred's Commander reads the sacred text before the Impregnation Ceremony: "He inserts the key, opens the box, lifts out the Bible, an ordinary copy, with a black cover and gold-edged pages. The Bible kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it" (87). The epigraph Genesis 30:1-3 emphasizes Rachel's plea for children to her husband, Jacob:

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. 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? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children. (qtd. In Freibert 282)

The biblical story tells us that two sisters, Leah and Rachel, who are engaged in a competition both make use of their handmaids to come up with the most babies for their mutual husband, Jacob. Here, in the novel, the Commander reads this particular story to

his women, the Wife Serena Joy and the Handmaid Offred. The story foreshadows and ominous contract sanctioned by God between the sexes in Gilead. The real purpose is to produce a baby. The Ceremony is about the sexual struggle of a man and two women. Three figures, that is, the Commander, Serema Joy, and the Handmaid Offred, participate in the impregnation Ceremony. And Offred, like Bilhah, bears upon the Wife's knees. Pamela Cooper suggests that "updating in the late twentieth century the misogynous economy of fertility expressed (for Atwood) in the biblical story of Jacob and Rechal, Gilead's regime positions women as the objects of a deeply punitive, ultimately masterful but technological, depersonalized masculine order of surveillance" (50). The Bible is manipulated by the society to foster male domination and to control women and their biological function in Gilead. What God says strengthens the maternal image of women like wives and the Handmaids. Gilead assures the continuation of male power by appropriating cultural values from Biblical patriarchs to determine women's maternal functions (Freibert 281).

More importantly, women must take the maternal role as Wives because of women's subordination to men. Rich argues that women always suffer from the identification of women mainly as mothers in patriarchy (30). In Gilead, women, as the daughters of the Commanders and the Wives, are initiated as wives when they are young. At women's propagandas, the veiled daughters in white marry the deserving members of the military, that is, the Angels. Offred describes the daughters who wear their shining, virginal; white bride dresses: "They'll always have been in white, in groups of girls; they'll always have been silent" (219). The wedding ceremonies held at women's prayaganzas are actually awards ceremonies. The awardees are the Angles, who have

"newly returned from the fronts," having won "military victories" (283, 285). The Angels' awards are these young girls; some of them are "no more than fourteen," because to "start them soon is the policy, there's not a moment to be lost" (283). The duties of being a wife are foreshadowed in the oath announced by the Commander:

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection... And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.

Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety. (221)

The Commander indeed points out women's biological destiny, for they can only be saved by childbearing. For instance, the EconoMies marry low-ranking men, and are expected to perform maternal roles as they manage households, bear children, cook, and scrub. Through the ritual of marriage, the twenty daughters, of the Commanders and his Wives, fulfill the patriarchal expectation of women as wives with the requirements of modesty, silence, obedience, and senses of guilt. They will use this shared sense of guilt to help themselves to fulfill their biological destiny, since most Wives in Gilead are infertile.

Traditionally, women are relegated as products used and exchanged by men. The role of mother can be traced back during Offred's relation to her husband Luke in the pre-Gileadean life. Offred memorizes having her own daughter, with Luke:

Lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly. The three of us, in bed, she kinking, turning over with me. Thunderstorm outside the window, that's why she's awake, they can hear, they sleep, they can be started, even

there in the soothing of the heart, like waves on the shore around them.  
(103).

With similar personal characteristics and positions, the two male characters Luke and the Commander act as twins in *The Handmaids Tale* (160). In Gilead, the Commander is the head of Household. Luke is also the father figure in the family. Luke's position of power, similar to the commander's, forces the subordination and the oppression of the female, that is, his wife, Offred. Besides, like the Commander, Luke is familiar with foreign languages. In the kitchen of the Household, Offred remembers Luke who enacts as a word authority who explains the work "fraternize" to her in the pre-Gileadean life:

Fraternize means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He sais there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages. I used to tease him about being pedantic. (15)

Further, he interprets "Mayday," a word Ofglen once uses, as the password belonging to the secret underground organization in Gilead: "Mayday, *Mayday*, for pilots whose planes had been hit, and ships-was it ships too at sea" and Luke also shows Offred the origin of the word: "it's French, he said. From *m'aidez*" (58). Luke wields his language prowess so as to keep his woman, Offred, in the position of the underpowered (Miner 155).

Above all, Like prefers old values. Offred describes the old ideas of her former husband Luke when attending to the meat purchases in one supermarket:

He liked to choose what kind of meat we were going to eat during the week. He said men needed more meat than women did, and that it wasn't a superstition and he wasn't being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences, he said. He was fond of saying that, as if I was trying to prove there weren't. (83)

These old values seem to introduce the sexual difference imposition between Luke and Offred. Further, Luke chauvinistically teases women in front of Offred: "Pretending to be the macho, he'd tell her women were incapable of abstract thought" (156). In the pre-Gileadean society, women possess their own work and property. After marrying Luke, Offred's job is to translate books onto computer disks in the library, which is called "the discotheque" by Offred and her colleagues. After the elite Sons of Jacob occupies the United States, Offred learns that all women are deprived of their jobs and even their credit accounts have been transferred to their nearest male relatives, she tries to seek consolation from her husband Luke: "Did they say why? I said. He didn't answer that. We'll get thought it, he said, hugging me. You don't know what it's like, I said. I feel as if somebody cut off my feet. I wasn't crying" (232). Luke's indifferent attitude and answer toward this drastic change let Offred feel terrible: "It's only a job" (232). In the marriage with Luke, Offred is bereaved of her career and acts as traditional women who depend on their men physically, intellectually, emotionally, and economically. As Offred sardonically says, "it's strange, now, to think about having a job. *Job*. It's a funny word. It's a job for a man" (173). Being the wife, Offred eventually realizes her object-like status: she finds out her real position within the marital life: "He [Luke] doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his" (236).

Though at the same moment, she also tries to subdue such thoughts as "unworthy, unjust, untrue" because Luke is her true love: "I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose him" (*HT* 236). In the role of wife, all Offred had to do is to take the maternal role in the family.

However, the oppression of women in maternity occurs as women experience the socially institutionalized motherhood within this patriarchy. Women have been idealized and exploited as well as mothers. The Handmaids, as wives, are forced to take the maternal roles that the society expects them to fulfill. It is more obvious to see how women are controlled and oppressed in maternity from these Handmaids through such institutionalized motherhood. In the novel, the reader may be impressed by the sentences that the Handmaid Offred uses to define herself and the other Handmaids when she has a secret date with the Commander in his study room. "We are for breeding purposes. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (136). Actually, these words from Offred's mouth indicate the common thing most Handmaids wish for, that is, the "sacred" maternal role they yearn to take in Gilead. Throughout the text, Offred like other Handmaids urgently expects herself to undertake the maternal role to fulfill the biological destiny: "I have overies. I have one more change" (143). The reader clearly perceives that the Handmaids are, in their minds, to take the maternal role in Gilead. If they fail to fulfill this obligation, they should consider themselves surrogate mothers, and the Handmaids feel very much guilty and depressed when Offred delineates her horrible failure in pregnancy: "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own" (73). However, the author Atwood "imagines a world [in] which women are explicitly defined by their potential fertility (or its absence);

procreation and maternity are simultaneously idealized and dehumanized" (102). For instance, in the text, the Handmaid Ofwarren bears not only a baby girl but also an Unbaby. The Unbaby means a deformed and disabled baby that will be sent to the Colony. Offred speculates on the appearance of what an Unbaby may be: "with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet" (112). As Stein suggests, "mothers of children with disabilities are the producers of defective merchandise": the process of women's bearing babies is equal to the process of producing products (77). The Handmaids have to bear children as reproduction machines under a policy of serious quality control.

Also, the Handmaids themselves seem to possess varied perspectives towards their bodies after beginning their Gileadian lives. Offred, for example, seems to gradually change her own thoughts towards her body throughout the text. While taking a maternal role in Gilead, the Handmaid Offred starts to consider her body as being a different entity. During the shopping trip, Offred feels shameful when using her original charming physical curves to tantalize young Guardians, though she seems to acquire a kind of illusion of power, "I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there" (22). Later, Offred and Ofglen encounter some female Japanese tourists, who are out shopping. Although Offred is hypnotized by the blatant sexuality of their Japanese skirts, hair, postures, cosmetics, and footwear, the Handmaid keeps her mind tightly in check with the official theory which Aunt Lydia taught her in the Red Center to protect her fertile body from being seen: "Modesty is invisibility...Never forget it. To be seen to be seen is to be...penetrated" (28). At the same time, the Handmaid Ofglen even tries to hide her gloved hands from the eyes of these foreigners. In Gilead, patriarchal ideology operates



efficiently to control the Handmaids serve as women-victims: merely reproductive instruments for men to employ. As Offred eventually realizes her doom, she says, "I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject" (286).

The Handmaids come to adore their role as surrogate mothers in Gilead. During one of the shopping days, the Handmaids meet and, together they idolize the Handmaid Ofwarren as Offred depicts, is "a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can be done: we too can be saved" (26). Other female characters in Gilead also seem to envy the maternal role ascribed to the Handmaids. In the Household, Cora, one of the Marthas, yearns as much as the Wife Serena Joy that Offred may get pregnant soon. The Martha imagines her own ceremony after Birth Day and she wishes that "maybe we have one, soon" (135). But Offred proudly points out the truth: "By we she means me. It's up to me to repay the team, justify my food and keep, like a queen ant with egg . . . instead she depends on me. She hopes, and I am the vehicle of her hope" (135). As for the Handmaid Janine, when getting pregnant for the second time, all she tries to do is to prepare well before being a mother, and she "sits with the taste of sugar still in there mouth, licking her lips. Stares out the window. Breathes in and out. Caresses her swollen breasts. Think of nothing" (115).

Aside from the handmaids' own willingness and eagerness, there are the Aunts in the Gilead who would try best to promote the Handmaids' devotion to the maternal role. Aunt Lydia demonstrates her loyalty to the Gileadean kingdom convincingly in persuading the Handmaids to be surrogate mothers: "I'm doing my best. I'm trying to give you the best chance you have" (55). In fact, the Aunts seem to place a high value on

"camaraderie among women," but ironically, they support the male supreme power structure of Gilead within its hierarchical arrangement of the sexes (287). Rich indicates that "the man may first have obtained power over woman as mother, [and] this power has become diffused through our society in terms of that first sexual enslaving" (65). The Aunts actually play a very active role in the states sexual enslavement so the Handmaids as mothers. Apparently, "the hand maids Tale describes the brutal reeducation of the Handmaids, who are coerced by the Aunts to forgo the ideology of women's liberation and to revert to the traditional values of the male dominate system" (144 ). In Gilead, the controlling agency is the Aunts, who, with cattle prods, torture, techniques and brainwashing slogans, educate the Handmaids, who would attend to school as children. The infantilization of the Handmaids appears not only in the households, but also in the Red Centre while being trained in the Rate Centre, Offered describes herself and other Handmaids as children, for" we had flannelette sheets, like 'children's" (4). Further, even when in the Household, Offered vividly recalls herself as a student in a ballet class under the indoctrination of Aunt Lydia, at the Red Centre; "She said, Think of yourself as seeds, and right then her voice was wheedling, conspiratorial, like the voices of those women who used to teach ballet classes to children, and who would say, Arms up in the air now; let's pretend we're trees. I stand on the corner, pretending I am a tree" (19). At the scene of Testifying, Handmaids sit line by line as in the scene of classroom and all Handmaids call for the Aunts teachings towards Janine ;"teacher her a lesson, Teach her a lesson " (71). Then, the Handmaids are taught by the Aunts to judge the Handmaids Janie's crimes of having been gang-raped and having had an abortion in the pre-Gilead and life.

Actually, education is one of the influential elements for the patriarchal ideology to run efficiently on the Handmaids as mother as mothers in Gilead. As Rich states,

Patriarchy is the power of the father; a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, custom, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (57)

The Aunts educate the Handmaids in how to take material role and fulfill their biological destinies. Through the text, the image of the body is represented in terms of parts, rather than as Wholes, especially in the Handmaids' minds (Rubenstein 103). Body parts are exaggerated or even grotesquely depicted in the novel. Oftentimes, Offred tries to portray the body, whether real or not, in parts, but not as a whole. The ceiling ornament in Offred's room resembles "the place in face where the eye has been taken out" (7). The grappling hooks on the wide Berlin Wall-like structure where criminals are hanged look like "appliance for the armless" (32). Particular, the image of disembodiment or dismemberment of the female body prevails in the text (104). Offred describes the doctor who monthly examines her body as if he "deals with a torso only" (60). Besides, Offred is forbidden to conceive of her hair as a natural part of her body the bath;

The bath is a requirement, but it also a luxury. Merely to lift off the heavy white wings and the veil, merely to my own hair again, with many hands, is a luxury. My hair is long now, untrimmed. Hair must be long but covered. Aunt Lydia said; Saint Paul said it's either that or a close shave (62).

With the body parts fragmented, the Handmaids sense of self values and significance is inevitably reduced to the only one segment of their bodies, the womb. While being trained in the Red Center' the Handmaids feet and hands are taught by the Aunts as useless organs; only their wombs are regarded as precious for fertility. In Gilead, surrogacy signifies the patriarchal exploitation and distortion of the female body.

Woman's value have been neglected and erased, except the reproductive function. Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids to "think of yourselves as seeds;" the Aunt's metonymic references restrict female autonomy only to the biological function of maternity (18). This is because refer to offspring, the one product most needed in the infertile Gilead.

For instance, in Gilead, Offered, along with other Handmaids, is constantly of the Aunt's moral or teaching which deal with her maternal role;"Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt's Lydia said, who was in love with either/or" (8).Most obviously, Aunt Lydia criticizes those women who are not prepared for engaging the sacred deed of reproduction in front of other Handmaids in the Red Center. As Offred describes it "Of course, some women believed there would be no future, they thought they would explode. That was the excuse they used, says Aunt Lydia's nostrils narrow; such wickedness. They lazy women, she says. They were sluts" (113).

In fact, the teachings of the Aunts embody the absolute manipulation of prevailing patriarchal ideology on the Handmaids and their bodies as mother. The seduced and magic word, pearl, is used by Aunt Lydia as a prize to the Handmaids, child-like figures, who are instructed to accept and fulfill their destinies. As Offered reveals.

A things is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls, She is rich in pause, which she savors in her mouth. Think of yourselves as

pearls. We sitting in our rows, eyes down, we make her salivate morally. We are hers to define; we must suffer her adjectives . . . All of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia with satisfied good cheer. (114)

Furthermore, one essential lesson the Aunt teaches the Handmaids to obey the food; "Healthy food. You have to get your vitamins and minerals, said Aunts Lydia coyly, you must be a worthy vessel. No coffee or tea though, no alcohol. Studies have been done" (65). In Atwood's novels, the act of eating is employed as an extremely subtle means to examine the power relationship between women and as amen (349). The Handmaids are powerless, and they have no choice about what they want to eat. They only can consume what the authorities, like Aunts, consider will enhance their health and fertility. For example caffeine, alcohol and cigarettes are disallowed for them, and even sugar is sometimes rationed. The connection between food and control of female body is perhaps most obvious as the Handmaids prepare themselves for the maternal role in Gilead. While the Handmaids take their meals, they are also indoctrinated with the ideological justification of the patriarchal state's aim and methods. Thorough controlling what the Handmaids, as mothers, eat, the totalitarian regime of Gilead in fact acquires the direct control over the Handmaid's bodies, because reproduction is thought as a natural function of female identity. as Rich argues, "the one aspect in which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense, authority over and control of another has been motherhood; and even this aspect, as we shall see, has been wrenched and manipulated to male control" ( 67).

Under the indoctrination of the Aunts, women even regard themselves as breeding animals. Offered considers not only of Glen as a "trained pig" but also herself as a "prize

pig" (69). In the text Offered sardonically compares herself to a "queen ant with eggs" (135). Actually, "enforced pregnancy not only entails a loss of control but also a threat to the self" (143). Janine, the only Handmaid who succeeds in pregnancy and gives birth, is portrayed as totally compliant and broken. And during the birth process, she crunches "like a doll, an old one that's been pillaged and discarded, in some corner, akimbo" (160). Similarly, Offered recalls an old film depicting childbearing in a pre-Gilead hospital that shows a pregnant woman "wired up to a machine, electrodes coming out of her every which way" so that she resembles "a broken root"(146). Janine subsequently becomes depleted, "as if the juice is sucked out of her" as soon as she is convinced that it is her fault to bear an Unbaby, "shredder" (278). Offered, as surrogate mother, is also preoccupied with fertility in her Gileadean life. Many phrases refer to women's reproductive fertility and sings of her fertility organs throughout the work. Offered travels down "the dusky pink runner" that carpets the hallway leading from her bedroom to the outdoor garden. But this passageway evokes the image of a fallopian tube; "the long space gently pink " (241).Offered claims the flowers in the Wife Serena Joy's garden as a kind of "fruiting body" just like hers (153). The ovulation cycle is also implied in the description when Offered mentions the red tulips which remind her of menstrual blood; "a darker crimson towards the stem as if they have been cut and are beginning to the heal there" (241). Further, Offered notices that the gravid smell of earth and grass fills the air when she leaves the Commander's house to participate in a Birth Day. During the birth process, Offered feels strongly the "smell of matrix" and she describes "the soft chanting [that] envelops us like a membrane" (123). Besides, the ecstatic frenzy of the Handmaids during the celebration reinforces the Handmaids to "identify with your body" to

accomplish their task as mother (124). The women's catharsis of participating in a Birth Day is nothing more than a short-lived illusion of unity, induced by the "spiked grape juice"; "we too need our orgies" (125). After the Birth Day, the Handmaids return their household "without emotion now, almost without feeling" and they only confront with destitution; "Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. What confronts us, now the excitement's over, is our failure" (127). Above all, Offred's anxieties towards her fecundity over determine the narrative as she meditates on an egg for breakfast.

The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like creatures on the moon. It's a barren landscape, yet perfect; it's the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside (110).

The handmaids Offred's delineations of an egg may show her subconscious fear of her possible inability to bear a baby, to fulfill the biological destiny ascribed to a mother. Along with the inside/outside and surface/depth oppositions, Offred contemplates the moon-like surface of the egg. These are the same dichotomies that she must overcome in Gilead, for women are regarded as containers, chalices, and vessels: that is, birth tools (Montelaro 242). Offred reveals that "we are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut" (96).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the author Atwood indeed highlights the destiny of women's bodies chiefly as reproductive instruments. The state of Gilead is actually a

world of modern technology. There are Compucheks and Compucounts in every corner of Gilead, so that women's identities may be easily erased. Gilead repudiates the pre-Gilead scientific and technological supports in women's birth process. On the other hand, the state insists that the Handmaids: *"I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children"* (146). In Red Center, Aunt Lydia shows the Handmaids a movie of an old birth in a hospital. In the film, a pregnant woman in the delivering process is greatly aided by reproductive machines and technologies. The powerless female patient is examined by the male doctor, and her body is under the control by machines operated by men: "Some man with a searchlight looking up between her legs, where she's been shaved, a mere beardless girl, a tearful of bright sterilized knives, everyone with makes on. A cooperative patient" (146). But, in Gilead, all the medical machines and equipment are abandoned. They are replaced by the other Handmaids, the Aunts, and the Wives. The other Handmaids chant around the pregnant Handmaid and the Aunts direct the whole birth process. Above all, the Wives should symbolically hold the Handmaid's hands and let the Handmaids lie on their legs while bearing babies. However, neither the abandonment of modern technologies promotes to liberate women from their biological limitations in Gilead. The author Atwood seems to intriguingly combine tow current issues, environmental problems and feminism, to highlight the essential theme about the suppression and exploitation of the female body in maternity under patriarchy. Environmental pollution threatens the existence of people in the future: that is the context of the infertile Gilead. The first epigraph suggests the importance of children to women. In Gilead, the Handmaids as surrogate mothers are like Bilhah, and their brief task is to bear children for the Commanders. Most of the Wives are



sterile, and only through their Handmaids' labor can they technologically fulfill the maternal function and become mothers; thus "in *The Handmaid's Tale*, finally, parenting has become a most distressing, unstable triangle" (164).

Gender inequality can be said to cause the oppression of women in maternity. Women are supposed to take the maternal role in the patriarchal society, and are manipulated only for breeding purposes. Being surrogate mothers, what the Handmaids should do is to succumb themselves to the authority of the Commanders, in order to reproduce. In Gilead, the system of surrogacy becomes a quick way to boost not only the population of the state, but also the institutionalization of motherhood under patriarchy to control and exploit women and their bodies as women accept their tasks as mothers.

#### IV. Conclusion

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel that focuses on women's stories. The author Margaret Atwood, as a Canadian nationalist and feminist writer, intends to explore the issues of gender, and women's problems that have occurred in the real world. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood tends to draw parallels between the previous history of Canada as a nation and the positions of women. However, the author denies that she is a "feminist," because she insists that women have never marched under a single banner. As a female novelist, Atwood believes that a lot of things that one observes as a novelist looking at life indicate that women are not treated equally. But that comes from observation. It doesn't come from ideology.

Moreover, Atwood discloses the patriarchal oppression of women in the Republic of Gilead, or in the current American misogynist culture. *The Handmaid's Tale*, as a feminist dystopia, reflects a male-dominated social system in which women are controlled and oppressed. Based on the historical context, Atwood's novel intentionally highlights the problem of gender inequality, and hence inevitably prompts the reader to see the existence of patriarchal domination in the real world. As a political writer, Atwood expects human equality and a harmonious gender relation as well in the real lives. She defines that an ideal relationship between a man and a woman should be a happy one. The research explores the novel from a feminist angle and makes a careful survey on gender inequality and women's problems on which the author concentrates and foregrounds in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The novel portrays women's extreme anxieties about male domination and sexual exploitation that have always plagued women. In it, gender determination and women's

subordination and oppression in the patriarchal society has been reflected. The author is mainly concerned with the oppression of women in maternity and sexuality in the novel. In Gilead, women, as the Wives and the Handmaids, are forced to take the maternal roles to reproduce babies because of the institutionalized motherhood in patriarchy. Besides, the Handmaids prove to be the very paradigms of female victims while they are sexually violated as sexual objects by the Commanders within the heterosexual order of Gilead. Actually, patriarchal societies are filled with sexual abuses toward women's bodies as the novel has discussed: such as rape, pornography, prostitution and so forth.

On the other hand, Atwood implies women's resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* and intends to look for a more balanced gender relation in the text or in the real life. The novel obviously portrays the power struggle between the sexes and women's sacrifice of their selfhood. In the novel, women break their silence to resist in searching their own complete self back and reconstructing women's histories of repression. Cixous's theme of writing by the voice may respond to Atwood's point that women should take action to resist their oppression, thus to restore their bodies and selves for their own survival in the novel.

The novel indeed provides readers with women's history of oppression. With the aid of some prominent feminists' theory and analytical work, this thesis has endeavored to explore and illuminate the issue and problem of the suffocating, patriarchal dominated society illustrated in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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