

“Who can do what to whom and get away with it”:

An Investigation of Power Structures in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Naomi Alderman’s *The Power*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the conditions that constitute and uphold a power hierarchy, emphasised by the two feminist dystopian novels *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Power* by Naomi Alderman. The two novels in question both depict a future society that reflects the oppression of women in our contemporary patriarchal society, and reveal how different cultural and social tools, such as language, ideology and gender roles, are used to establish and uphold power structures within a society. Furthermore, this thesis calls attention to the relationship between physical power and structural power. It will show how power is imbedded within our ideology and what role ideology plays in our social structures. This thesis will examine the ways in which the novels examine these tools through close readings with particular emphasis on the narrators and protagonists. To conclude, this thesis discusses the following questions, who has control over whom, and what devices do the authorities in the novels use to establish their power?

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“Who can do what to whom and get away with it” (Somacarrera 44) is a statement made by Margaret Atwood as a definition of power which largely summarizes what this thesis is about. Atwood’s definition can be related to many power-related issues, such as women’s role in various kinds of societies, gender issues, in addition to government power, asking questions like who has control over whom, and what tools do the authorities use to establish their power?

This thesis will be an investigation of different tools of power as explored through the feminist dystopian novels *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood and *The Power* (2016) by Naomi Alderman. The novels can be seen as works of speculative fiction which anticipate what the future might be like if we do not make any changes. In this sense, they function as a warning for their readers against a patriarchal organisation of society. I chose these novels because they focus on unveiling the harmful power structures that underlie a patriarchy, which are particularly connected to gender. These novels are also chosen because of the similarities in the social issues they criticize, as well as because of the differences in how they have chosen to explore and present these issues.

Both novels have accomplished a cultural significance throughout the last couple of years. Especially *The Handmaid’s Tale* has had a great impact since it was first published in 1985, and after it was adapted into a TV show this impact has only grown bigger. Arden Fitzroy’s article “The Lasting Cultural Relevance of ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’” (2017), focuses on how women are now attending protests and demonstrations dressed in red gowns and white bonnets, protesting abortion bills and the GOP health care bill. After the president election in 2016, the novel has become more relevant than ever when “in the U.S. a misogynist attempts to rule, and long-hidden resentments against women in power are revealed” (Fitzroy). *The Power* was voted as one of the “10 Best Books of 2017” by the *New York Times* and the paper has described it as “*The Handmaid’s Tale* for a millennial generation” (La Ferla). This is not surprising as Margaret Atwood was Alderman’s mentor during the writing of this novel. Atwood contributed with suggestions and inputs which resulted in Alderman dedicating the novel to Atwood. This mentorship is thus reflected in the novels’ similarities in both the political emphasis and feminist agenda.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* thoroughly brings up the various forms of oppression on women in a patriarchal society, where women have no rights or freedom and it comes clear that they function only to serve the men. *The Power*, on the other hand, emphasises this further when

Alderman turns her world upside down making men the victims of that same oppression. By doing this, Alderman successfully shows her readers how women are treated in a patriarchal society and the problematization of the combination of physical and structural power. She shows us how a corrupt society is based on power built on the threat of violence, and that patriarchy is founded on this threat.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a near future in a place which was once the United States. It has now been re-established as the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime where women have little to no rights and freedom. Through Offred, the narrator, the readers learn about her experiences as a handmaid whose only purpose is to breed children for the elite. The government is divided into a clear power hierarchy where the ones at the bottom, mostly handmaids, have no power at all. This state of powerlessness is emphasised throughout the whole novel and we read about Offred's attempt to regain some of it, if only the power to not lose her identity and individuality completely.

*The Power* is organised as a countdown from the first event where girls recognise their new electrical power imbedded in their collarbone where the power varies from a little electrical shock to become deadly and until "The Cataclysm". This "Cataclysm" appears in the end of the novel and is a global war through which women become the dominant sex. Going from a patriarchal to a matriarchal world where men face a decreasing power shows the readers the destructive nature of a patriarchy because a society based on the threat of violence will always be harmful. All the characters in the novel are trapped in power relationships based on the threat of violence either on a micro or macro level, and the violence varies from slave trading to governmental institutions.

This thesis will explore how the novels problematize patriarchy by emphasising the different tools that are used to generate and ensure power, with a focus on violence and ideology. Examples of ideology are language, gender roles, and religion. Patriarchy can be seen as a way of organising a society, both physically, when giving women the lack of freedom and rights such as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also as an ideology where women living in this kind of society know that they cannot dress or speak in a certain way due to the underlying threat of violence. In other words, patriarchy is both invisible as an ideology, but also concrete, and this thesis will show how the novels unveil both versions of patriarchy. A patriarchal ideology aims to control the people by placing strict rules and gender stereotypes on the oppressed sex. These stereotypes are imbedded within us as an ideology and thus become a part of our social structure.

Ideology is about understanding the world and our place within it, including the political aspect, meaning that the ideology can make us act in a certain way. The use of power will always take place in a framework of ideology. The concept of ideology can also be understood as what we consider as ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ which is incorporated in both novels. Nothing is normal in itself, it is just something that we have learned it to be. Ideology takes part in the creation of society and is not stable, but rather interchangeable. Both Atwood and Alderman use this concept to warn against the blind adherence to the ideology and our natural acceptance of it. In other words, what they are trying to say is that we should not take everything around as a natural ‘given’. It is not until we stop and take a look around us and start asking questions about our ideology we can see the possible problems with it and the changes that need to be made. This can be seen in the patriarchal society where we have been taught that men are superior to women. Women are physically weaker which makes it not safe for them to walk alone in the streets during the night due to the threat of violence. As small children, women have been taught this through fairy tales, their parents and the society, but as will be discussed in the literary review, this fear is not natural, but has become naturalized through the threat of violence incorporated in the patriarchal society and is thus ideological.

Language is something that is related to ideology as we use our language to define everything around us. This is shown as a crucial tool of power in both novels. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* the government explicitly takes over the language of the handmaids giving them just a few acceptable phrases to use. This control is very similar to the newspeak that occurred in George Orwell’s famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). The language is not made as a tool for communication, but is rather a way for the government to maintain control over its people. The idea behind it is that if you can control the language, you will eventually have control over people’s mindset as well as they do not have the ability or knowledge to organise a resistance. *The Power* integrates language as a tool of power through the journalist Tunde showing the readers the power that lays in information. When he uploads the videos and images of women showing off their electrical power, it quickly gets spread throughout the world inspiring other women to do the same. As a contradiction to *The Handmaid’s Tale* where communication lays to a bare minimum, it is here widely used to expand women’s power.

This thesis will also focus on how the novels pay attention to various aspects of gender ideology and gender roles that contribute to the continuing oppression of women in patriarchal societies. These kinds of societies uphold the inequality between men and women keeping women in subordination to men. Both novels, and maybe especially *The Handmaid’s*



*Tale*, can be read as a criticism of this kind of oppression in storytelling. They novels' frame narratives criticize how the system tends to favour male oriented narrative, and how male narratives are more important because they are given the important roles in that society, giving them the power to decide who is able to speak and also who is able to get heard. This can be seen in the 'Historical Notes' in *The Handmaid's Tale* where we first learn that the main narrative is actually an old cassette tape from a few hundred years ago. The ones who find this cassette are not satisfied of hearing about a woman's, and especially a handmaid's, story on the establishment of Gilead and would have rather have the story from the Commander. This is similar to *The Power* when Tunde is trying to sell the stories of men to CNN and they are not interested in hearing about their stories. Alderman has turned this around in order to emphasise how women are treated in the patriarchal society by letting men be treated the same way in a matriarchal society.

The relationship between power and gender roles is something that is crucial in the novels. This thesis will in some degree explain the difference between sex and gender and how the novels problematizes the stereotypical gender roles, especially in a patriarchal society. In *The Power*, for example, these stereotypes are criticized when letting women become physically dominants, and thus opposes the notion of a world run by women would be a peaceful place as women are naturally more nurturing. As this novel shows us, this is not the case as power will always corrupt no matter if there are men or women at the top of the hierarchy. This thesis will also discuss Judith Butler's concept on gender performativity which is understood as gender is something we perform, rather than something exact and determined.

In addition to criticizing aspects of female oppression and power relations, both novels emphasise the influence religion has on the power dynamics between men and women, and they offer a criticism of the cultural upholding of the stereotypical gender roles. This religious influence can be seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* where the Republic of Gilead goes back to traditional Christian fundamentalism where women's only role is to give birth to children and have no rights outside the home. In *The Power*, on the other hand, one of the main characters uses religion as a way of getting control over her people and to gain followers.

Both novels are structured as frame narratives, meaning a story within a story. This functions as a guidance for the readers on how to read the main story. The epilogues play a huge role in reading the stories. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the epilogue reveals to the readers that the story is actual an oral recording that has been found a few hundred years later and is now used to understand how the society was like in the establishment of Gilead. The survival

of this story can be seen as a feminist aspect as even though women were silenced in this extreme patriarchal society, Offred still managed to tell her story. However, the finders of this tape were not pleased to only have a one woman's view, and especially a handmaid, on the matter. *The Power* is framed within letters between the author of the main story and his female friend giving her comments on it. Already from the prologue, the readers will have a surprise as the language used in the letters is not something that will appear as normal as the tone between them shows a matriarchy and not the familiar patriarchy, and thus criticising the stereotypical gender roles. The ending of the main stories is also something to pay attention to. *The Power* builds up to an explosion that drastically changes the world, but the actual event is not narrated. It is up to the reader to interpret what happens when the "Cataclysm" takes place, which is very similar to the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* where Offred is placed in a car and driven away without letting the readers know what happens to her. The epilogues reveal an end of an era that the main narratives describe, and the fate of the characters remain an unsolved mystery for the readers. As seen, the structure of the novels and their narratives offer a greater impact in the understanding of the patriarchal issues and female oppression and this is something that this thesis will focalise on.

The thesis is structured into three main chapters where the first is a literary review explaining the main concepts explored in this thesis, the second is an analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the third is an analysis of *The Power*. *The Handmaid's Tale* is categorized into the different tools used to establish power, namely language, ideology, eradication of individual identity and feminism. This is done due to the impact these tools have in the novel and show the readers how Atwood is explicitly aware of how language is used in order to establish and maintain power in the society. The chapter of *The Power* is structured quite differently as the issues that this novel touch upon – gender roles, feminism and ideology – are all intertwined. This chapter will, then, be divided into the four main characters instead, as they, in their own way, deal with these issues and play a significant role in the upcoming revolution.

This thesis as a whole argues how language, ideology and gender roles can be used as tools of power within a patriarchal society. The two novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* portray these tools and issues in a way that functions as a warning for the readers to open their eyes and start question the ideologies around us to explain that the fight against patriarchy is far from over. They show us that by overturning these kinds of structures will benefit humanity as a whole, and how holding on to these structures will destroy us because a power structure based on oppression will always be destructive. Atwood and Alderman are

showing us that if we would stop fighting, the societies they portray, will become a possibility in the near future.

## Chapter 2: Literary review

This thesis will investigate how the two novels *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Power* by Naomi Alderman thematise patriarchy and ideology and investigate and explore the different tools of power that are used in establishing and maintain control. The close reading of the novels is based on the recognition that power and gender are strongly related in the two works. As a consequence, the reading will be strongly informed by feminist criticism.

### 2.1 Literature and other worlds

*The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* both belong to the fantasy/science fiction genre. Throughout the years, feminists have fought patriarchy in many ways, including through literature, and these novels are examples of this. Feminist dystopian literature usually criticises oppression of women and social inequalities in an exaggerated way in order to show the readers the essential need for change in our contemporary society. Both Atwood and Alderman present societies in an unknown future which are meant to say something about our own world as it is right now. This chapter will address some of the major concepts that the novels reflect on and how they all work together. Both patriarchy, ideology and gender roles are diffusely discussed in the novels and are ways that contribute to hold the power within a society. Before I start to explain each concept, I will begin with the genre of science fiction.

#### 2.1.1. Science Fiction

Science fiction is, according to *Britannica*, a form of fiction that deals with the impact of imagined or actual science upon individuals or society. It is a modern genre that offers customary “theatrics” that include prophetic warnings, elaborate scenarios for imaginary worlds, utopian aspirations and political agitations (“Science Fiction”). Some of the characteristics of this genre are mind control and fictional worlds which can be seen in the novels used in this thesis. The genre also makes it possible for the authors to create a world which allows for the readers to view our own world from a different perspective. Both Atwood and Alderman describe our own reality when presenting their worlds and they portray ‘thought experiments’ that show us how our world would be like if continue down the same path without making any changes. Especially in *The Handmaid's Tale*, mind control is

incorporated throughout the whole novel whereas the government give the handmaids specific phrases to use to limit the conversation between them, the lack of communication and through the withdrawal of the women's right to read and write. In this way, the government is able to control their mindset and to uphold control and power in Gilead.

In the introduction chapter of *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* (2006), Patricia Melzer explains that science fiction is valuable to feminists because of its narrative mode and some of the elements normally used in this genre are defamiliarization, confrontation of normative systems, and introducing new sets of norms (cf. 1-2). All of these elements are incorporated in *The Power* where such new sets are established, most frequently the gender norms. Another characteristic of this genre is systems that create "the freedom to voice assumptions otherwise restricted by a realist narrative frame" (2), and it is only within science fiction it becomes possible to imagine a new social order that differs from human existence as we know it (cf. 2). A world run by women, as Alderman addresses, can be seen as such a social order because it is hard for us who live and have lived in a patriarchal society for so long, to imagine a matriarchal society instead. One could question if this social order can only be real within science fiction, or if it is actually possible in real life as well.

Science fiction is related to the fantasy genre, and as Bould and Vint claim in their chapter "Political Readings" in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012), all fantasy is political in the sense that it functions like a cultural text to reproduce a dominant ideology (cf. 102). This genre scrutinizes the category of the 'real' in the way that it opens for disorder and what lies outside the dominant values in a system and thus reveals reason and reality to be inconsistent. It creates a fictive world in the middle of what is real and what is not. Moreover, these kinds of worlds comment on the things that are taken for granted as an ideological construction which is typically excluded or marginalized in the bourgeois reality (cf. 102). This can be seen, especially in *The Power*, when Alderman portrays a world similar to our own, but adds an electrical power in women which is not something that is real. In this way she creates a world in the middle of what is real and what is not. Furthermore, both novels comment on the patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles that are taken for granted as ideological constructions. Bould and Vint further say that one of the basic mechanisms in this genre is to question the premises of the natural. The genre emerged from the dialectic of reason and unreason that started with modernity and serves as a defence of the status quo as well as the maintenance of the economic order by managing the eruption of the irrational it depicts. The unreason that it serves has, thus, far been discussed to be the product of society

in the 19<sup>th</sup> century fantasy rather than a foreign invasion into it (cf. 103). The questioning of the premises of the natural is something that occurs throughout both of the novels in question here. Atwood and Alderman make the readers question what is natural in our own society by portraying extreme cases of oppression and in how the authorities exercise power.

Bould and Vint find that the tension between the world as it is and how it might be, is common in all kinds of fantasy literature and can make the readers think of their own world and how it works. It creates a link to what is going on in the society we are living in now and what may need to change. This way of displaying the society is common for feminist fantasy literature, and especially for feminist dystopian literature. Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* do this in order to warn about the future. *The Power* illustrates many of the struggles women deal with today, such as misogyny. Throughout the novel, Alderman criticises the patriarchy and shows the readers the problems with it. *The Handmaid's Tale* also takes issue with patriarchy, but instead of making the men the victims like *The Power* does, Atwood illustrates how subordinated women will be if they do not act now to get rid of the system.

Fantasy draws attention to the daily life of cultural politics without focusing on the governance. When using supernatural creatures, it is possible to explore and investigate social structures based on dominance and submission, and also offer a vision of social order which already exists in our contemporary society (cf. 104-105). Even though Alderman does not incorporate supernatural creatures, the electrical power imbedded in women is not something that is real and can be seen as work of fantasy and supernatural. As Austin Carmody explains in his article "Difference Between Science Fiction and Fantasy" (n.d.), the fundamental difference between the fantasy genre and science fiction is that the former one describes something that is impossible, such as supernatural elements, while science fiction describes something that is possible in the future and has a firm basis in reality (cf. Carmody). Both genres can then be seen in *The Power* where the electrical power can be seen as a narrative from fantasy, while the social structure is an element of science fiction. The supernatural element imbedded in the novel is used to communicate the messages about the world we live in and thus reveal the similarity between physical and structural power such as political, social and economic power. As women are naturally weaker than men, the only way to make them stronger is to give them a supernatural element. By doing this, Alderman manages to show us how the world would be like if women were on the top of the hierarchy, and thus criticises the patriarchy.

### 2.1.2. Feminist Dystopia

This thesis will mainly focus on the dystopian genre. In order to understand what dystopia is, it might be useful to look at its antonym – utopia. Utopia is an imaginary, perfect society that, similarly to dystopia, is not made to predict the future, but rather describes and presents our own reality. Or, as Veronica Hollinger says in the chapter “Feminist Theory and Science Fiction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), the “positive values stressed in the stories can reveal to us what, in the authors’ eyes, is wrong with our own society” (129). The authors take everything that is wrong with our own society and twists it to create this perfect world. In this way, it would become easier for the readers to recognise the flaws within our own contemporary society. By knowing about its characteristics, it will make it easier for the readers of this genre to understand what the authors warn about in their novels and to get a better insight in their own society. For this project, such knowledge would add a better understanding of the novels discussed in this thesis. Utopian and dystopian fiction are subgenres of science fiction and feminist science fiction is used as a powerful tool for imaginative projects that are necessary first steps in implementing the social and cultural transformation which are some of the goals of the feminist political enterprise (cf. 128).

Dystopian literature began as a response to utopian literature. Dystopia is, according to *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2015), a “very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination” (Abrams & Harpham 414). This kind of literature can challenge the readers to think differently about their own current societies and political climates. In general, dystopian literature offers a vision of the future. In the article “The rise of Dystopian Fiction: From Soviet Dissidents to 70’s Paranoia to Murakami” (2017), Yvonne Shiau states that modern dystopian literature emerged in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a time of political unrest. There were world wars coming up and people were anxious about the future. During these early decades of the century, the themes of dystopian literature were political capital, fear of the state and the power of government. After the Second World War, people were beginning to fear future apocalypses and yet a new war. Authors began to concern themselves about totalitarian governments representing a political system that restricts individuals, opposition to the state and exercises a high degree of control over people’s lives. Additionally, authors grew a suspicion of the new technologies that started to advance. From the 1970s, the most dominated themes in this genre were economic crises, misgivings over the body and a new era of cynicism (cf. Shiau).

Dystopian literature works in the same way as utopian literature whereas here the authors show what the future would be like if we continue down the same path we are doing now, without making any changes. Dystopian literature is often seen as the author's warning for the future. The power structures that we see in these novels are something that we may recognize, at least in some ways, in our own society today. By reading these kinds of novels and acknowledging how societies work, it can make us more aware of what changes that need to be done in order to not let it get so far as these societies address. Dystopian literature can, in other words, be seen as a mirror of our own world and is therefore political.

### 2.1.3. The novels

*The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* are chosen for this thesis because of their strong influence among people around the world today, how they criticise the oppression of women in a patriarchal society, and thus how they have interpreted the different tools used to establish and uphold the power within such societies. They are similar in many ways, but the most interesting aspects about these two novels, as the thesis will demonstrate, are their differences.

Both novels present societies in an unknown future and are consequently meant to say something about us and our own world now. The starting point of the novels are quite similar to each other and to how we live today, as they are both set in a patriarchal society where women are the subordinate sex. In *The Power*, however, this changes drastically when the women get their electrical power and after the revolution the society turns into a matriarchal world, where the women are the dominants, taking over the political and social power. After getting this power within themselves, they are almost invincible to everyone who comes in their way, making men the subordinate sex. Because of this, a gender war ensues which generates questions such as if power corrupts. The political and social system as we know it completely changes when the tables are turned, and women have the ultimate power. The concept of power in this novel does not only concern who has the power, e.g. who has control over the government and rules its people, but also about the physical power. In a patriarchal society, men both have structural and physical power over women, since they are both bigger and stronger. When the women get their electrical power, men have no longer physical power over women. As a result, power, of every kind, is transferred to the women. Alderman, in this way, investigates and criticises how closely structural and physical power are connected which results in a corrupt power because it is founded in the threat of violence.



This transformation of power becomes more visible towards the end of the novel when we learn that it is actually a manuscript about a revolution that happened a few thousand years ago and is about to be published, but the “problem”, however, is that it is written by a man. The man in question has emailed the manuscript to his female friend in order to get some feedback. The novel ends with her response as “have you considered publishing this book under a woman’s name?” (Alderman 339). This last line shows the oppression of patriarchy built up in this literary world. After a revolution happened a long time ago, the world is now matriarchal, and the fact that it is a man behind this manuscript is not as acceptable or will be as successful as if it was written by a woman. This is a powerful and feminist ending because it is something that can be seen as unrealistic for the reader, but it also shows the power the patriarchy has in our own current world, because this was a fact for women writers only a few decades ago. Women has struggled for many years to get their work published simply because they were women, and this shows how powerful the patriarchy has been and still is, and by questioning a man’s authorship is a strong criticism of this patriarchy.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, on the other hand, women’s rights have been withdrawn, both politically, economically and socially, and they are living in an extreme patriarchal society in the city of Gilead. The few fertile women left in the United States, the so-called handmaids, are placed in the households of the families of high status, only to produce babies for them before they are sent away again. Producing and carrying babies is the most important task for the women, and they are basically not allowed to do anything else. Even the women of the elite have limited freedom and no one is allowed to read, own property or hold jobs. The power is presented through control over sexual rights of women, threat of violence and language. It is an extreme patriarchal society where a group of conservative extremists has taken over the power in the city of Gilead. They turn the society back to traditional values where women are powerless and subservient to men. The elite is using God and religion as their reassurance for how and why they are ruling the city in this way, and the fear of punishment that women have for breaking the rules or not completing their tasks properly, illustrates how much power the head of state has. In contrast to *The Power*, where all women, despite their status, beliefs and ethnicity, take over the power in the world, the power in *The Handmaid’s Tale* only belongs to a religious and male elite.

#### 2.1.4. Literary themes and devices

For this project, I am going to do a feminist reading of the novels. Feminist reading means, according to Lois Tyson in the chapter “Feminist Criticism” in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (2006), to investigate the ways in which the novels undermine the political, social and psychological oppression of women (cf. 83). Further, a feminist reading also concerns itself with how aspects of our own culture are inherently patriarchal (cf. 85). This thesis will, then, be a close reading of the novels to investigate and discuss how they criticise the patriarchal aspects. Further in her chapter, Hollinger talks about how feminist theory has developed into being a political project that aims to achieve social and political justice for women and to destroy the patriarchal order where women tend to be the subordinate to men. Feminist readings, then, is not reading *about* women, but rather *for* women (cf. 126).

Science fiction, as the genre of change has been slow to recognize our ideas about sexual identity, gender behaviour and about the ‘natural’ roles of men and women. Science fiction has been considered as a masculine genre, but feminist readers are interested in looking more closely into its potential for the imaginative representation of the gendered subject and of difference and diversity. From the 1970s onwards, feminist science fiction became an important subgenre and in the last twenty years, more women have begun to read and write science fiction literature in order to exploit its potential for imaginative representations of difference and diversity (cf. 126). The novels investigated in this thesis are examples of feminist dystopian literature which is a subgenre of science fiction. An understanding of how feminists read this genre is, therefore, important in order to understand the novels and their potential influence for their readers.

In order for the novels to expose the questionable ideologies from our own society, different literary tools and devices have been used. One of the most important literary devices used in the novels is perspective. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we read the story only from Offred’s perspective giving us a narrow view on what really happened. As will be discussed in the analysis of this novel, Offred is also seen as an unreliable narrator which makes it even more difficult for the readers to understand what happens in the establishment of Gilead. *The Power*, on the other hand, presents multiple perspectives from the four main characters which offers the readers a greater view of the story. When reading the story from these four characters’ point of view, we get a broader sense of what happens during the ten years up the “Cataclysm”. As this thesis is a close reading of the novels, I will mostly look on the narration

of these novels. Both of them are written as a frame narrative which offer interesting epilogues that help determine how the stories should be read. They both also give a biblical epigraph which is used as a literary device. This biblical allusion is incorporated throughout the whole novels giving the readers a notion of the religious influence. Some of the main themes that both novels raise are sexual politics and patriarchal power structures. They both reveal patriarchal ideology by showing us a society based on the premise that a woman's choice and purpose in life is determined by her biology. This can be seen in *The Power*, where the novel brings up the question of what will happen if women rule the world.

Ida Aaskov Dolmer's article "Would the world really be a better place with women in charge? A literary analysis of Naomi Alderman's *The Power*" (2018) reveals one of the major literary tools that Alderman uses in her novel. In Alderman's literary universe, women are on top of the hierarchy after a gender revolution. Alderman has successfully reversed many of the gender identity markers that we see today, making men the subordinated victims. By highlighting gender discourse, she has been able to show the readers the problems in our own society. In addition, she is actively showing us that gender is not determined by biology, but that it is a choice we make. Further, she is revealing that gender may not matter when it comes to power. It does not matter whether it is men or women who are world leaders, the outcome will be the same. For those who do not have power will always be subordinated in society. Although Alderman presents the argument that the world would not be better if women were in control, she is still considered a feminist as she details the many awful things that women are subjected to in our world at this very moment. In her novel, men are portrayed as a reflection of the struggles that women are experiencing in the real world.

One example of a literary tool used in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the character representation of Offred where we get to know her thoughts and feelings. The totalitarian regime restricts the language of all women. No women in the city of Gilead are allowed to read and write, and handmaids are only allowed to use certain phrases when they speak. We can see how Offred's thoughts, ideas and understanding of both herself and of her surroundings are restricted. This happens because as her language is restricted, her thoughts become restricted too. Throughout the novel, Offred in some ways loses herself more and more due to the lack of language. In order to not lose herself completely, she quietly tries to hold onto everything that makes her *her*. She reminisces back to the life before to her roles as a wife, daughter, mother, friend and employee. She tries her best to stay sane, but it becomes more and more difficult the longer she is captured as a handmaid. This lack of language results in a 'false consciousness' and will be discussed further in the subchapter "Ideology

and power”. This presents the importance to be able to speak freely and the consequences when we are not allowed to.

## 2.2 Power Structures

The concept of power is crucial in both novels and gender roles, patriarchy and ideology are all different aspects that are related to power. They complement each other and show how power works in a society and who holds it. This following section will explain what these concepts mean, how they relate to power structures and how this is explored in the novels.

### 2.2.1. Gender roles

Gender roles play a crucial role in both novels as they both follow and work against them, and are much related to power structures. According to Robert Dale Parker’s chapter on “Feminism” in *How to Interpret Literature* (2015), the difference between “sex” and “gender” is that “sex” stands for what one is born with, while “gender” is for what we become. Since the 1980s, feminists have often used the terms *male* and *female* when talking about the sex, and *feminine* and *masculine* when referring to gender. If we separate gender and sex in this way, we could say that sex comes from biology and gender is the constructed product of culture and society (cf. 159). Gender roles can be seen as the behavioural expectations we have to the biological sex. We expect for example that men should not show weakness and to be strong, and that women are nurturing and emotional.

This is the fundamental idea of the gender essentialism which, according to *The Queer Dictionary* (2014), is the belief that gender roles are the result of biological differences between men and women, and the societal roles that are assigned to them are accepted based on these differences. It further states that the essentialism tends to be closely linked to misogyny (“Gender Essentialism”). This view on gender essentialism can be seen in *The Handmaid’s Tale* where the men in this society seek the ultimate power and control and are trying to turn the society back to traditional values where the men are the masters of the household and the women are the keepers of it. According to Anette Kirkvik’s thesis *Gender Performativity in The Handmaid’s Tale and The Hunger Games* (2015), the Republic of Gilead is a “society that enforces rigid gender essentialism that restricts the way women look, act, and think” (25). In this society, all women are dressed in a certain way according to their

social status and have certain protocols for how they are supposed to act which differ from the expectations of men. In *The Power*, on the other hand, women are the ones who have this ‘masculine’ behaviour and Alderman therefore twists the stereotypical gender roles, and thus the essentialism. Here, women are the ones who appear as strong while men are weak.

Another important concept within gender roles is gender performative which is a fundamental feminist concept and is crucial in both novels. In Judith Butler’s essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988), she explains that to be a woman is not something biological or natural, but rather socially or culturally determined. She further states that

gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. That expectation, in turn, is based upon the perception of sex, where sex is understood to be the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics

(527-528)

Gender performativity, then, rejects the essentialist beliefs that gender is biologically determined, and gender is rather something that is performed through words, acts and appearances. Anette Kirkvik further explains in her thesis that gender as a performance comes from the result of the enforced gender norms, and thus becomes relevant in the way “Gilead’s gender essentialism promotes behaviour that does not necessarily come naturally to the population, but instead the behaviour is necessary for survival” (cf. Kirkvik 25). The women of Gilead do not act or dress of free will or of their own choice but do this in order to survive in this society. The gender performativity can also be seen in *The Power* when boys start to dress up as girls to seem more powerful and they, then, perform gender in a different way than what we normally expect, which results in a reversal of the stereotypical gender performativity.

### 2.2.2. Patriarchy and power

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines the concept of “power” as “the ability to control people and events” and “the amount of political control a person or a group has in a country” (“Power”). This relates to “patriarchy” as this is defined as

a society in which the oldest male is the leader of the family, or a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage

(“Patriarchy”)

The latter definition is the most useful in this thesis and the one that will be focused on. The concept of patriarchy can be seen as the power in a patriarchal framework is irretrievably connected to sex and gender. The dominant ideology of patriarchy is structured both in the organized society and within individual relationships as well. This means that in this kind of society, women generally have the secondary voice to that of the man.

Linda Napikoski explains in her article “Patriarchal Society According to Feminism: Feminist Theories of Patriarchy” (2020) that power is related to privilege and in a system where men have more power than women, they have some level of privilege to which women are not entitled to. One of feminism’s main goals is to even out this power relationship between men and women, and thus the levels of privileges (cf. Napikoski). Patriarchy is a way of structuring power, but it is also an ideology in the way that it normalises many of these power structures in our minds. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there are a lot of events that emphasize the lack of power for women. For example, when Offred is going to the doctor to check if she has been able to get pregnant, the doctor says that most of the men are sterile, but the responsibility for a failed pregnancy always falls on the women (cf. Atwood 95). Another example is when Janine, another handmaid, is telling that she has been raped by a group of men, the Aunts make all the other handmaids to gather around her saying that it was her own fault that the rape has happened (cf. Atwood 111-112). In other words, everything becomes the women’s fault which reveals the lack of power they have and how subordinated they are in the society.

In the aforementioned chapter “Feminist theory and Science Fiction”, Veronica Hollinger explains that the feminist theory tries to resist the ideological self-representations of the masculinist cultural text that is often seen as the universal expression of a homogenous ‘human nature’ (cf. 125), meaning that within our ideology, we tend to see the masculine as

the ideal, and women therefore tend to play the subordinate role as the 'other'. Hollinger further states that feminist theory is a political project where it tries to achieve social justice for women and thus aims to counteract the oppression and inequality for women as 'the others' of men (cf. 125). In other words, feminist theory wants to change the patriarchal world we live in where the main goal is gender equality. This relates to power in the way that in the patriarchal society, the power is held by men, and this is one of the things that feminists want to change. They want women to be able to hold power in the same terms as men. Who would hold power should be decided on social and intellectual terms, and not biological.

### 2.2.3. Ideology and power

James Kavanagh in the chapter "Ideology" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (1995) defines ideology as our way of understanding the world around us, and also understanding ourselves and our place in the society (cf. 309-310). This is a correct, but very general, definition. Terry Eagleton, on the other hand, takes this further and claims that ideology is political as well, and it can make people act in a certain way. In his book *Ideology: An Introduction* (2007) he claims that it is impossible to find just one definition of what ideology is as it has a whole range of useful meanings. He lists a number of different definitions, among them are "ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power", "the conclusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality" and "the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality" (1-2). Starting with the latter we could say that our ideologies influence how we see the world and come from how we are raised and educated. This definition is quite similar to Kavanagh's and we could interpret this as ideology can be seen as a kind of a story that we have been told throughout our whole life of how we should behave in and organise the society. We see things as 'natural' or 'normal', even though they are not, it is merely how we are taught to see things.

Both novels repeatedly take up the concept of "ideology" as one of the main aspects and 'problems' we face in our own world. The way that both Atwood and Alderman are portraying this concept reveals to the reader that this is something that needs to change, and that it is something unnatural. Ideology is something that accompanies the creation of society, so what they warn against is the blind adherence to ideology and the natural acceptance of it as a 'given'. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Aunts are some of the highest-ranking women in Gilead who are responsible for the indoctrination of the handmaids. Even though they are called Aunts which sounds pleasant and familiar, they rather work as prison guards and have

the absolute control over the handmaids. The ideological significance of calling them Aunts would perhaps be that this title would appeal to someone closely related to you, but still as someone superior. By calling them Aunts, their behaviour towards the handmaids would perhaps not be seen as something too awful. During their training, the handmaids have to go through a lot of changes and learn to adapt to their new way of living, and many of the new adaptations would seem strange for them in the beginning, but they will learn to live by them eventually. “Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary” (Atwood 55). This is a good example of how ideology works. What seems ordinary or natural to us does not mean that it actually is ordinary or natural. It is something that we are taught to be and is something that can change. We learn to adapt ourselves within the society. The most benign and innocuous elements in the society hold the most potential for disseminating dangerous ideology. The quote above shows us that the ordinary can change, and also the dangers of these small changes can do to our ideology. By changing small, somewhat insignificant changes in our behaviour and in our life, can rapidly have major consequences in our ideology.

As we can see, this understanding of ideology complements James Kavanagh’s definition of ideology. A strong social regime uses this praxis of ideology as a means of having individuals within it conform freely because they perceive the system of representations that the ideology presents as natural. Ideology exists because of its function to transform and adjust social subjects. It does not make sense without the subject and the other way around. Kavanagh’s definition of ideology relates to *The Power* as, for example, in this case ideology teaches women that they need to pay attention and curb the space they take up because they are physically weaker than men. Women are taught through ideology that it is not safe to wander around in the streets alone in the dark. This has to do with freedom and women cannot be totally free in a patriarchal society because this is based on certain structures of power which again are based on the threat of physical violence. *The Power* naturalizes this kind of violence and physical power so that the women’s behaviour is attuned to certain understandings of what will happen if they do not. It also shows us how we naturalize the threat of violence in our own lives. It is not necessarily natural to be afraid of walking alone in the dark, but it has become naturalized in a patriarchal ideology. Both *The Power* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* make us question our own ideology as they make us think about if it really is natural to be afraid to walk alone in the dark. This may become clearer when, in *The Power*, the men need to be afraid of this because of their physical weakness, and we read that “there are parents telling their boys not to go out alone” (Alderman 21).



This compliments what Janine Shaw claims in her article “Gender and Violence: Feminist Theories, Deadly Economies and Damaging Discourse” (2017), that gender norms are shaped by the power structures and are central in feminist theories. Violence is linked to power and she states further that there is no act of violence that does not intersect with gender (cf. Shaw).

This can be understood as in a patriarchy violence is the firmament for power which is a problem also if we are dealing with a matriarchy. In this case, then, we see that by changing the ideology, one would also change the threat of violence for those who have the power.

James Kavanagh’s definition of ideology, however, is not the only definition that is useful here. Terry Eagleton’s view on ideology can be seen in feminist theories as well. As mentioned above, feminist theories resist the view on women as ‘the others’ and work against what we can call ideology in cultural texts. It has become the ideology that women are subordinate and that the white male is what we see as ‘natural’. In the chapter of “Power Politics: Power and Identity” in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006), Pilar Somacarrera talks about power as something that is invested within us and it is governmental, meaning that the laws and rules are dictating our behaviour and making us think in a certain way, and hence power becomes a part of our ideology. Similar to ideology, power is unstable and interchangeable when as Margaret Atwood sees power as something that diffuses all social relations rather than being imposed from above (cf. 43-45). Likewise, to have power is to have influence, both physically and mentally, on others and the state of power one has is the certainty and the threat of future reactions. This is what makes society possible as the power shapes our mindset and becomes a part of our ideology. Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is aware of the reactions and consequences of her actions, but she is nevertheless willing to go against the unstable power. This unstable power also refers to how the power women gained after the 1970s was unstable, and by this, Atwood shows us that feminists cannot rest now even though they have gained some power. Since the power is unstable, it can also be changed. Criminal actions within one form of ideology can twist the ideology as a result of these actions and can, then, also change the reactions and consequences.

Ideology refers to questions relating to power, not only to belief systems, and the most common answer is that ideology has to do with the legitimation of power of a dominant class or social group. This kind of dominant power may promote beliefs and values like-minded to it in order to legitimate itself. The power would naturalize and universalize such beliefs to make them seem self-evident and inevitable for the people. Such ‘mystification’ commonly “take[s] the form of making or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the concept of

ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions” (Eagleton 6). This is a question of power, influence and resources. The power creates a mythology of an external enemy which creates a reality that does not exist but rather establishes a truth that assumes that the others are mistaken. The ultimate goal for the authorities is to expand its own power and influence and to have control over its people.

As briefly mentioned above, the concept of ‘false consciousness’ plays a crucial role in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the article “Modules on Althusser” (2011), Dino Felluga talks about the earlier Marxist model of ideology that dealt with the term ‘false consciousness’, a false understanding of the way the world functions. Louis Althusser moves away from this and explains ideology as a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. In other words, it does not ‘reflect’ the real world, but rather, ‘represents’ the imaginary relationships of individuals to the real world. There is no real social order or political governance, they are only ideologies – an idea of how the society could be. It does not exist in a pure form, it is merely an idea (cf. Felluga).

This ‘false consciousness’ can be explained as the ideology creating ideas in our heads that are being naturalized, but actually are just narrated in our minds. This idea could for example in *The Handmaid’s Tale* be connected to how Offred gradually loses language to express who she is and what she stands for. By repetition and gradual coercion, her subjectivity and selfhood become smaller and she gains a ‘false consciousness’ in the sense that the relationship between the self and the world seems ‘natural’ when it is only imaginary – because the world is not this way in itself, but it has been made this way by the regime. This can be connected to the importance of language as well as Offred’s subject being reduced in her language because, as a handmaid, she cannot speak freely, expressing her thoughts and opinions. She can only speak the phrases handed out to the handmaids such as “blessed be the fruit” (Atwood 30) and “praise be” (31). These phrases enhance the system they are living in and therefore become a part of the ‘false consciousness’. Offred is stating that she becomes more and more unable to express herself which emphasizes the constant reduction of her subject. She becomes more and more unable to use the language (cf. 104). The relationship between ideology and language is a big topic in both novels, as shown above, and especially the idea of false consciousness. As Dino Felluga suggests

we are always within the ideology of our reliance on language to establish our ‘reality’: different ideologies are but different representations of our social and imaginary ‘reality’ not a representation of the real itself

As mentioned, one of the definitions of ideology according to Terry Eagleton, is “the conclusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality” (Eagleton 2). Our language helps us define the reality that we receive. The objective truth is unavailable to us because we are subjects who filter the truth through our own experiences, ideas of the world and values. The world becomes real to us with the help from language. We describe and interpret what happens around us in different ways, and our definition of the world and the reality therefore becomes something individual. Individuals then seek to engage in the exchange of thoughts and ideas, about their world and their societies, through visuals and more commonly, verbal communication – thus achieving some consensus – and this is resulting in “the World”. This world is never perfect, so ideas rise about how to either maintain the status quo or make some changes. These ideas are the different ideologies. This relates to the novels dealt with here, for instance *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where there are contradicting ideologies where, on the one side, the elite seeks to establish traditional values with men on the top, and Offred and some of the other handmaids seek to fight against this, creating a rebel group. The same aspect can be found within *The Power* whereas also here there are contradicting ideologies that become a part of the creation of unrest in the world. Women, for example, create their own republic that is only for them which is not well received from the rest of the world. In addition, the journalist Tunde finds some indications that things have been different in the past, but this was tried to be ridiculed and dismissed by other women – it could never have been like this.

However, Terry Eagleton suggests that ideology is not only a matter of language, but of discourse. It concerns the actual usages of language between people for the production of specific effects. You cannot decide if a statement is ideological without looking at it from its discursive context. Ideology is, then, less a matter of the

inherent linguistic properties of a pronouncement than a question of who is saying what to whom for what purposes. The general point is that exactly the same piece of language may be ideological in one context and not in another; ideology is a function of the relation of an utterance to its social context

(9)

In other words, a statement itself is not ideological, it is the social context around it and how you interpret the statement that makes it ideological. Bennett and Royle in the chapter on

“Ideology” in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2016) claim that the way we think and what we think about everything around us is a matter of language, and

ideology, the way that people think about their world, is produced and altered in and through language. Language changes, and even creates the social and political world in which we live. Ideology in that sense *is* language

(231)

We can see from this that ideology does not only point to how we view the world, as Kavanagh says, but is a tool used by forces or powers that want us to view the world in a specific way. This is something that Alderman and Atwood are acutely aware of, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

The following chapters will be an analysis of the novels and will address how Atwood and Alderman problematize ideology with a specific focus on language, gender roles and religion as tools of power in a patriarchal society. As part of my analysis, I will also pay specific attention to how different literary devices, such as narration and perspective, are used to emphasise the themes of the novels.

### Chapter 3: *The Handmaid's Tale*

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a narrative from a religious authoritarian regime where women are completely silenced. In the last section in the second edition of the novel called “The Backstory”, Margaret Atwood explains where she got the inspiration for the novel and why she chose to write this kind of literary work. In the novel, the USA has returned to 17<sup>th</sup> century roots and traditional Christian values. The society is ruled as a totalitarian regime which has an “interest in controlling women – especially their sexual activity and reproductive capacity” (Atwood 483). In this kind of society, the power is structured as a pyramid, “power concentrated at the apex controlling a large base of the powerless, with reproductive and other advantages hoarded by those at top” (483). The ones at the top of the pyramid control the rest of the members of the society. The way they do this is mainly through language and through the threat of violence. They show their power through language and are in charge of what people can communicate about and what to think. This will be explained further throughout this chapter.

In “Margaret Atwood’s dystopian visions: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006) by Coral Ann Howells, we see that the herstory that we are presented with in the form of Offred’s tale is historically ironic since Gilead wants to silence women. “Herstory” is a well-known feminist concept that according to the *Oxford References* means “history viewed from a female or specifically feminist perspective” (“Herstory”) and has its origin in the 1970s as a response to the first syllable in the word *history* where *his* is the male pronoun. Even though it is seen as historically ironic, the only thing that is left from this regime is this herstory. It is an ironic victory for women and is in some ways a failure since we also learn that the ones who find this story do not want it. This makes us aware that language as a tool of power is not only about who is able to speak, but also is a question about how language, or narratives, is received. It is about whether or not we respect the speaker. In this case, the speaker of the herstory is not respected and feminist speech has not been authoritative in the past, and we see that it is still not.

We also learn that the issue of language and power has always been crucial in the construction of dystopias (cf. Howells 165). This novel is no exception, and as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, language plays a crucial role in holding and maintaining power:

It is Offred's attempt to seize the language, to make it hers, which gives her narrative its appeal as one woman's story of resistance against patriarchal tyranny. By an irony of history, it is Offred the silenced Handmaid who becomes Gilead's principle historian when the oral "herstory" is published two hundred years later

(165)

We learn in the end of the novel that this is a story taped hundreds of years ago and is now used to understand how the beginning of the new era in Gilead was established. However, it also shows the ambivalent relationship to women's voices since these people are rather interested in hearing about the Commander's story and not a handmaid's. This shows us that the society is still patriarchal as they are still devaluing women and are still misogynistic. To tell about all the things she had to go through, the manipulation and subordination, Offred visualises the patriarchal order set in the society and what it does to the victims. She is showing how her world is turned upside down instantly, going from having a fulltime job, a family, and even the right to have her own money and property, to be withdrawn from all this in order to become a handmaid whose job is only to reproduce. This shows us, not only the power the patriarchy has, but also one of the warnings Atwood portrays, that women's fight against patriarchy is far from over.

Atwood is both being ironic and is warning us with the epilogue and with making us aware that herstory will always be viewed as a narrative which is of less worth than history. She is, then, showing us that language is not just language – it matters who is speaking and who is allowed to speak. It shows us that Atwood is aware of language being used as a tool of power and this is seen throughout the whole novel. This chapter aims to explore and explain the different ways Atwood has portrayed both language, ideology and feminism being used as tools of power.

### **3.1 Language as a tool of power**

Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it...maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it

(Atwood 209)

This quote can be seen in the novel and is also how Atwood defines politics which emphasises the aspect of the ascription of power, which, as Pilar Somacarrera says, can be rendered as “who inflicts violence on whom, both in the political and sexual domains” (Somacarrera 44). Violence, then, is associated with power, which was mentioned in literary review of this thesis. Violence in sexual domains can be seen in this novel during the ceremony where the handmaids are forced to have intercourse with the Commander. This is something that they do not do voluntarily but rather accept because they have no other choice. Violence in political domains is something that is crucial throughout the novel, which will be discussed further later in this chapter.

An authoritarian regime is based on violence, but the power in Gilead also lies in the language and the government’s control over it. The theme of language is incorporated throughout the novel, showing us both how the manipulation of it controls whole groups – especially women – but also how the lack of it affects the individual, with a particular focus on Offred’s sanity and ability to self-expression. It is not only her name that has to be removed, she is also no longer allowed to read and write, or have a proper conversation with anyone. It is only during the daily shopping trips with her partner that she is allowed to talk. The authorities have taught them acceptable phrases to use, and any deviation from this is forbidden. These phrases function as a way of controlling the handmaids and of giving them what looks like language on the surface, but which is not language as a tool for communication. Rather, it is a way of mimicking. George Orwell does something similar in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* with something he calls “newspeak”, where language is not primarily designed to communicate or inform, but to prevent communication and misinform. Byron Millard explains in his thesis *An examination of George Orwell’s Newspeak through politeness theory* (2011) that

newspeak has two primary principles on which it operates: parts of speech can be interchangeable in nearly all areas, and heavy regularity, bearing a few exceptions.... there is no need for both ‘real’ and ‘fake’ since the property of both terms is already within each of the terms, and consequently ‘authentic’ and ‘false’ would not exist because of redundancy issues

(27)

In other words, newspeak changes the meanings of words and concepts, and by doing this, the government controls people’s mindset. This is because people cannot think of something that

is not in their vocabulary. If they do not have the language to talk about changing the way the government is ruled, for example, they are not capable of thinking about it. The government does this, then, in order to minimize people's opportunities. Millard also explains that such praxes ensure that there are no fake messages from the government, because what they are saying is always true and real when people do not have the words for an alternative. He explains further that the root words that are used to describe abstract concepts are embedded in the beliefs distilled by the government so there is no alternative of thought. People only learn the relatable terms for their specific profession of discipline. By only allowing individuals to learn what they absolutely need, ambiguity is lessened, and the social isolationism ensures that they would not learn anything that would create interpretations (cf. 28-29). What he is saying here is that people only learn the vocabulary they need for their own profession which makes it harder for them to interact with other people. By holding them separated, it will become harder to find other alternatives to the state of affairs which will minimize the risk of rebellion.

These strategies can be related to *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the state also enforces a strict separation between people. For example, handmaids do not interact with the Marthas or the Wives. The government of Gilead separates the citizens and divides them into groups in order to maintain control. By giving the handmaids a handful of accepted phrases to use in conversations, the government manages to control their mindset. As seen with George Orwell's newspeak, people who are not allowed to speak what is on their mind will eventually also stop thinking about it. When you are not able to express your thoughts and opinions, you will, in time, stop thinking about it because you are alone with them, and when you do not get acceptance or agreement, you would probably start questioning if it is really true or real what you are thinking. Or, at least, that is the idea behind this praxis. These phrases in *The Handmaid's Tale*, then, is not a way of communication, but rather a way of controlling.

A typical conversation between the handmaids would be "'Blessed be the fruit', she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. 'May the Lord open', I answer, the accepted response" (Atwood 30) and "'Under His Eye', she says. The right farewell. 'Under His Eye', I reply" (70) These kinds of limited conversations will also prevent the formation of a friendship and alliance because "we aren't supposed to form friendships, loyalties, among one another" (434). In addition, the shopping partners also work as spies: "The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (30). This is an example of how the authorities use language as a means of control as we saw in the aforementioned newspeak as well as the language is not used to inform or communicate, but to control and for surveillance purposes. In Madeleine Davies'



chapter “Margaret Atwood’s Female Bodies” in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006), she tells that “the recurrent emphasis on erasure and void becomes conjoined with ideas relating to incarceration and surveillance in Atwood’s writing of the female body” (62). Living in a patriarchal society, women have been trained in self-surveillance and also surveillance of other women. They learn to see themselves and women in general through men’s eyes, thereby becoming “accidental policemen of the very power structure that excludes them” (62). This can be seen in the quote from the novel above where the handmaids work as spies for each other. In other words, surveillance is not just present in the control of language, but also in how women monitor each other.

Associated with the government’s separation of citizens and language used to authorize rather than to interface, we could look at Mahshid Namjoo’s paper on “Language as a sign of power in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2019), where he talks about the relationship between discourse, meaning written or spoken communication, and language. He explains that discourse is made by language and that it “depends on the time and place in which it is made” (87). Further, he explains that “there are different internal and external factors that not only shape but also control language as one of the most significant signs of power” (88). The people of the Gileadean society are divided according to biological sex, and females are the subordinated ones. Especially the ones at the bottom of the hierarchy, the handmaids, are the ones who suffer the most. When they have been deprived of the right to speak freely, they are also “ignored in an indirect way in both social and political scenes” (89). The consequences of this is losing “free access to the linguistic domain and their self-confidence, which has been undermined by language” (89). The reason for undermining their language is the potential dangers to the government because a person may gain the opportunity to challenge the dominant structure in the society, and also renewing the situation and to resist. The relationship between language and social hierarchy seems to be an internal one in this novel in which members of the society have been socially determined to use a special language. The way they are talking is a direct result of their social training, such as the Red Centre for the handmaids. Their talking is also a way to see where they are placed in the society, for example the lower you are on the rank, the more restricted is the language you are allowed to use. Moreover, Namjoo states that

Offred tried to depict her society within the framework of discourse, and also criticize the double-standard of social hierarchy in which the system of language is not equally distributed. She thinks that the language can be free from those power boundaries.

However, in reality, the type of language and the way she uses it show something else; the language as the apparatus of power aims at suppressing women in society

(89)

Namjoo explicates that it is not only the handmaids who are trapped in a strict language structure, but also women of higher rank (cf. 89-90). For example, the Wife, Serena Joy, was once a person who made speeches dedicated to the patriarchal power system, and we get to know that her speeches were about how women should stay home and not work, but Serena did not do this herself, however. She wanted women to stay home and supported the patriarchy, but one could question if the outcome of this went as planned and if she really thought things through because

she doesn't make speeches any more. She has become 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 word

(Atwood 72)

She was the representative of words, but now, she too has been silenced. This indicates “the hypocritical aspect of language in manipulating the minds of others, especially those who are not capable of taking any steps against power relations” (Namjoo 90). After the establishment of the new society in Gilead, Serena Joy's power has been withdrawn from her, and even though she is in a position of higher rank because she is married to a Commander, she has become powerless too. From this we can see that the strict language structure involves all women, and not only the handmaids. The division in the hierarchy is shown through the language and discourse and it shows what the lack of language can do to the ones on the bottom. The irony here is that Serena Joy was able to advocate for women not working and staying home because of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. This gave women a voice to speak their minds. She eventually got what she wanted – the patriarchy – but the structure that she was speaking on behalf of, silenced her. Her voice was heard, and this voice was what silenced her in the end.

The power of language becomes even more clear when the Commander and Offred are playing Scrabble together during their secret meetings. During these meetings we see the way the authorities use language to regulate thought, which is previously mentioned earlier in this chapter. A couple of times, she sneaks into his office in the evening without the Wife

knowing, where they are playing Scrabble together. On the surface, it might seem like this is her initiative, but he is the one who has the power to make her come or not. She does not have much of a choice than doing what she is told, so it is really not her initiative at all. By playing this forbidden game, however, Offred soon notices how much knowledge she has lost during these last couple of years where she has been a handmaid. When she is only allowed to use certain specific phrases, she has eventually lost her own language, which becomes known when playing this game,

it was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten, a language  
having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world

(Atwood 239)

It is then she notices how much power language has on you, and also how the lack of it will do to your own identity. In Christopher Jin Wen Koo's paper "How, and for what effect, does Margaret Atwood present power structures in *The Handmaid's Tale*?" (n.d.), he explains that this game of Scrabble also shows that even one fraction of a second of reading is a luxury for Offred: "This is freedom, an eye blink of it. Limp, I spell, Gorge. What a luxury" (Atwood 149). It also shows that the restriction put upon language can be overcome by manipulating power through sexual means. When language is forbidden it becomes a sexual object itself, and it breaks, then, with the totalitarian and becomes an act of rebellion. Language also becomes a means for trading, as after some time, Offred is using the Commander's attraction to her to her own advantage and starts to ask for some small favours. Further, Offred explains her satisfaction over playing the game by comparing it with "candies, made of peppermint" (149). In this way, it may help the readers to realise how converted any bit of freedom and power is within this strict society, and to an extent, help justify why she is willing to trade her body in return for these privileges (cf. Koo 4-5).

During these secret sessions, she once also gets the chance to write something: "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains" (Atwood 289). To have the power to speak freely and also the access to read and write will make you in the control of those who are not. This becomes more clarified when she says "he has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once" (138). To be able to use our language is something most of us are taking for granted. It is fundamental to look at the difference between those who have a voice and are able to use their language, and those who are not when it comes to who is having the power. What it means

that language is powerful can also be viewed as who has the power to be heard. For example, in this novel, women would not be heard, simply because they are women. They do not have the power to be heard, and therefore also, not the power of speaking as well. In this way, we see that through language it becomes clear who has the power and who does not.

### 3.2 Ideology as a tool of power

Language is not just a way of having power, but also functions as an ideological tool. As seen in the previous chapter, language is strongly connected with ideology and comes in many forms. James Kavanagh claims that ideology is about how we understand the world around us and our role in it, while Terry Eagleton, on the other hand, claims that ideology is about to make people act in a certain way and by this, ideology becomes political. Examples of both of these definitions on ideology can be found in *The Handmaid's Tale*. An ideology is not something that is determined, but rather changeable. The government in the city of Gilead wants to “return to traditional values” (Atwood 9) meaning that they have withdrawn women’s right to hold property and jobs. This is a euphemism which is a way of disguising language so that it seems like something else than what it really is. The word “traditional” means, according to *The Cambridge Dictionary*, “following or belonging to the customs or ways of behaving that have continued in a group of people or society for a long time without changing” (“Traditional”). This definition can be seen as ideological, because it is something that is established and has become “the normal thing to do” or “just the way we are doing it”. A traditional way of doing something does not mean that it is the natural way of doing it, but a way that time and culture have conditioned us into thinking of as natural. The government is consequently able to state that “All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm” (Atwood 339).

The word “norm” is defined by *The Cambridge Dictionary* as “an accepted standard or a way of behaving or doing things that most people agree with” (“Norm”). However, in relation to “nature’s norm”, the accepted way of behaving according to nature could for instance be that men and women behave differently, yet both behaviours are acceptable as they differ in nature. Returning to nature’s norm, as the government of Gilead has done, would imply that men and women return to their earlier purposes of life, meaning women staying at home, birthing and taking care of children, whilst men work and earn a livelihood for the family. The government prefers that women stay at home where “they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace” (Atwood 339). In other words, the government is stating that

women are not equal to men and are subjected to them. Women should only be concerned about their “biological destinies” and let men focus on every other matter. Women should not possess the right to decide what happens in society nor have a say in it. The government is thereby moving towards a regime where women should have no rights, no voice, and should only exist as subordinates to men. Furthermore, the government is also moving towards an anti-feminist regime as the statements they are uttering to support their beliefs and values show tendencies of anti-feminism when they claim that such a way of ruling society is natural and traditional. They are attempting to create a better world, and Gilead is the first city to fall under this rule. However, as stated in the novel: “better never means better for everyone...it always means worse, for some” (325), or, as the Commander puts it: “you can’t make an omelette without breaking the eggs” (325). The ruling power of Gilead are creating better lives for themselves in search for privileges and status, whilst the opportunities and possibilities for the lower class suffer. In a dystopian society, there is such a large gap between the different social classes, which in turn ensures that social mobility is impossible. This lack of opportunity for the lower social classes further ensures that the elite social class can continue this way of ruling. Atwood warns that this phenomenon can occur to anyone in any society. Wealth and social benefits will increase for a few people, which in turn creates a further social divide between the rich and the poor. The poor, or the ones at the bottom of the social hierarchy, will have fewer opportunities than the elite social class. Tendencies such as these happen in our own society today and this is what Atwood is warning against. Any changes that occur in society will never be in the best interest for all, someone must always suffer from these changes.

However, when living in a dystopian society like this that Atwood illustrates, it will always be the hardest for the ones who live during the changes. Future generations would not get a feeling that something is not right because they would not have an alternative for it. There are the people at the bottom of the hierarchy, in this case the handmaids, who will suffer the most:

You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts

(181)

At the end of the novel, it becomes clear that this story is from the early era of Gilead, which means that Offred was the part of the transitioning generation. For her and the rest of the society, there were many changes happening in a short amount of time. Most of them had to, involuntarily, leave everything they own and knew behind in order to stay alive in this new society. “For the generations that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better...your daughters will have greater freedom” (250). Even though this new way of ruling a society is not merely ideal, the generations to come would not know how it used to be, so for them this society will be considered as normal. The way Aunt Lydia uses the word “freedom”, however, is ironic as the freedom she is referring to is more an imprisonment. This can be related to newspeak where words are getting new meanings and for the readers it sounds like irony, but it would be naturalized in Gilead within a few years. This kind of freedom is a contrast to the kind of freedom Offred’s mother is referring to and is fighting for.

We see this recognition of ideology from Offred when she reminisces back to her former life: “Humanity is so adaptable ... truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations” (416), Offred says. When looking back on her former life, all the things that were considered normal back then are seen as quite unusual and strange now, as for example, the simple thing as a woman having a job,

all those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing. Now it’s like remembering the paper money, when they still had that

(267)

Also, the freedom to do almost anything you want is something that is considered as abnormal in this new society where they had so little of it:

It’s strange to remember how we used to think, as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we were free to shape and reshape forever the ever-expanding perimeters of our lives

(350)

Earlier, Offred was able to go wherever she wanted, do whatever and be whoever. Now everything is laid out for her; what to do, whom she can talk to, what to talk about and even

her clothes. Her freedom is restricted to a bare minimum and it is just something that she needs to accept. But “freedom, like everything else, is relative” (357).

This can be connected with feminism as they are fighting for freedom. What we see here, however, is a totalitarian regime based on strict and extreme patriarchal views. Rather than going forward in the right direction to eventually get rid of the patriarchy, we see a reversal. What Atwood is presenting here sounds more like a society from hundreds of years ago rather in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it is supposed to be. This may seem shocking for the readers how quickly everything can change, and how much of the fight feminism has put upon can easily be gone again. What Atwood is trying to say here is that feminism’s work and fight against patriarchy is never complete. We always have to be vigilant in order to not lose what we have worked so hard for. This can be seen in the discussion between Offred and her mother when her mother says, “you young people don’t appreciate things” (188). This implicates that she thinks that the younger generation of women take their rights for granted and appear as naive. She is a feminist activist who spends a lot of her time demonstrating in the streets for women’s rights and wants her daughter to continue this fight because, as mentioned, the fight for equality is never complete.

Offred’s freedom is, as mentioned, restricted to the level that she does not have access to anything other than what is laid out for her. However, before the ceremony, she and the rest of the household are allowed to watch the news. This is one of the ideological ways the government operates to make people act in a certain way. They use propaganda to make the members of the society act according to their directives. This shows us the ideological aspect of using language as a tool of power. For example, by only showing the victories on the news and not the defeats, it can make the people who are watching think that this may be something for the better nevertheless.

This is a powerful way to get through to people because they are showing that this is something that works and will be a positive change for the society in the long run. But one thing to consider would be, as Offred states is

who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none

(127)

She has a strategy to try to read “beneath it”, she knows that this is an ideological tool, but she also knows that she might not be able to work against it. This ideological tool has been used by a lot of totalitarian regimes, and it both has to do with control of information and with brainwashing in the sense that you end up both believing and disbelieving at the same time. The government manipulates the information in order to influence the public’s opinion. This may lead to a brainwashed society where the members will start to believe what they are being told because they would not have access to anything else. This will eventually change their view on the matter and can be related to Orwell’s newspeak, which is mentioned earlier in this chapter. One cannot know what is true based on what you see, but also, as she stated, everything is better than nothing. If there would be no news, there would also be no way of knowing what is going on in the world. When women are no longer allowed to read, and especially the handmaids who only are allowed to talk with limited conversation topics, watching the news will become crucial.

According to the article “The Gilead Mirrors Christian Fundamentalism” (2018) by Mackenzie Konkin, the characteristics of Gilead resemble the goals of some Christian Fundamentalist movements today, even though the novel is presented as imagined, fictional dystopian society. She further states that Gilead follows an extremist Christian theology where the order is based on the literal fundamentalist interpretation of the Old Testament. Fundamentalists reject diversity and plural identity within a society and advocate a return to patriarchal authority, like it was described in the Old Testament. The fact that women wear the same clothing that shows which class they belong to and are stripped of their names, is a connection to the New Christian Right Movement where women’s autonomy and choice for contraception is limited. She further explains that when Gilead is created, the progress women have worked so hard for the last decades such as voting, occupational rights, access to abortion and contraception, are reversed. The parallels between this novel and Christian Fundamentalist movements shine a light on some real issues that happen today by imagining their outcome in the future (cf. Konkin). This may be one of the reasons that Atwood decided to focus on religion rather than politics such as Orwell, because she wants to show how things were about to develop into in the real world and the dangers that come with it. She shows us that religion, similarly to ideology, is a kind of narrative that is used as a means of power and wants to make the readers aware of it.

Gilead is built upon the values from the Old Testament and the fact that the ones who have the word also have the power relates to what St. Paul explicitly stated that women should be obedient: “*Blessed are the silent*” (Atwood 138). Women’s role is only to “*be*



*fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*” (138). This is a quote from one of the usual stories taken from the Bible that the Commander is reading to his household before the ceremony. The entire society is built on a religious narrative and they are not only silencing women, but all other perspectives and voices that exist. They are silencing those aspects of religion that go against their ideas, e.g. the doctrines of Christ. People must not get access to other stories because they must not know that there is something else out there. The religion here is the truth, the only truth, and everything else is false. It is only the government that owns this truth and has access to it. Due to this, one of its main tasks is to prevent the rest from getting access to it. The ones who are critical to this narrative have to be silenced in order for the government to maintain control. This can be seen as a comparison to ideology, as this, as well as in religion, is a kind of narrative, speaking of the ‘natural truth’, and this silencing also becomes a tool for absolute power. As Pilar Somacarrera states, and as Atwood herself has remarked: “the aim of absolute power is to silence *the voice*, to abolish the words, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power” (Somacarrera 51). As mentioned above, the people in power will always have the remaining voice which implicates how much language, and thus ideology, functions as a tool of power.

### **3.3 Eradication of individual identity as a tool of power**

The literary review briefly mentioned the state of ‘false consciousness’ resulting from the lack of language. However, this ‘false consciousness’ can also be seen through the handmaids’ eradication of their individual identities. ‘False consciousness’ can be understood as the way ideology creates in our mind that eventually will be naturalized. This can for example be seen in the routines the handmaids have been establishing. The daily shopping trips and the monthly ceremonies have become routinized and a normalization which show us how this ‘false consciousness’ works. Another example is Aunt Lydia who seems to truly believe in Gilead and its righteousness, and can thus be seen as part of the institutionalized communication of the ‘false consciousness’ in Gilead. Through this naturalization of the new way of living, they are quickly losing their own identity along with it.

In the novel, there are not only the handmaids who have a common term for their group. We also have the ‘Aunts’, ‘Wives’ and ‘Marthas’. The ‘Aunts’, can be related to, as mentioned in the previous chapter, something that is familiar and closely related even though they function as prison guards. The association of this name suggests a function of

manipulating the handmaids in the interest of the dominant powers. The 'Wives' may be called this as they are only there as the wife of their commander. Other than being married to a man of the elite, they do not have any power, and function as 'the other' of their husbands. 'Marthas' are the group of household servants and is a name taken from the Bible. They are an entire class of women who devote themselves to housework, performed solely in the service of men. Most importantly, we have the 'Handmaids' who function as concubines who have a slave status. By separating all the women into groups associated to their task in the society, the government structurally remove their individual identity.

Another aspect that helps on the eradication of the individual self is the removal of the handmaids' real names, which is one of the first things that happens after becoming a handmaid. Offred, the main character, got the title "Offred" meaning "Of Fred", implicating the Commander she serves. With this loss of her real name, she automatically begins to lose touch with her former life and identity. The goal of this law provided by the government is to get rid of each individual's identity and also show their insignificance to men.

In order to stay sane and not lose her own identity entirely, Offred spends her time reminiscing back to her former life when she is alone in her room. Although, we as readers never get to know Offred's real name, this is something that is often caught up in her mind as a desperate need to not lose herself completely: "I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (Atwood 152) because "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden" (129-130). This implicates the importance of how one's name is to oneself. Your name is a part of your identity – who you are – and by losing it means to lose a part of yourself as well.

Throughout the novel, however, it seems like she is more and more willing to 'give up' and accept her new life here in Gilead: "My name is Offred now, and here is where I live. Live in the present, make the most of it, it's all you've got" (221). She is accepting her new name, but it is unsure if this is because she thinks she cannot get out of it or if it is a form of survival and defence mechanism. In the end, after she gets to know that her shopping partner is either gone or dead, she says:

I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power

(414)

She is willing to do everything in order to live and she now understands how much power the government has on her. When Atwood refuses Offred to have her own name, she makes her more vulnerable and insignificant as an individual. She is just a small piece in the game, and nothing else. She has been stripped of everything that makes her *her*.

To have a name is a symbolic essence within a society, and in H. Edward Deluzain's article "Names and Personal identity" (1996), he explains that "this bestowal of name and identity is a kind of symbolic contract between the society and the individual" (Deluzain). When you give someone a name, society confirms their existence and acknowledges its responsibilities. Giving a name will also differentiate you from others and society will be able to deal with your individual needs and feelings. He further explains that

through the name, the individual becomes part of the history of the society, and, because of the name, his or her deeds will exist separate from the deeds of others

(Deluzain)

One's name, then, plays a huge role when it comes to the relationship between you as an individual and your place in the society. When your name is removed, like in this novel, you will also lose your voice and place in the society, and you will eventually become dehumanized. Instead of having your own identity, you will rather just be one among many, one that can easily be replaced. Getting rid of the names of the handmaids is a powerful tool the government of Gilead uses in order to dehumanize them, and this also signals that they are seen as objects or a property for others and not individuals. When Offred loses her name, she also starts losing herself and the way she views herself changes. She is not her own person any longer, she is just a tool for someone else, an object to be used. What Atwood does when she refuses to let Offred have a name of her own is dehumanizing which is a means of power. Losing your name will eventually weaken your identity, and this will result in a weakening in ambitions, dreams and potential rebellious intentions. Offred will be objectified and oppressed due to the loss of her name.

What is significant to notice, however, is the name of the Wife – Serena Joy. Firstly, because this is one of the few names that we get to know throughout the novel, but also the meaning of the name. "Serena" can be associated with "serenity" which according to the *Cambridge Dictionary* means "calm" or "peaceful" ("Serenity"), but it can also mean according to *The Free Dictionary*: "a disposition free from stress or emotion" ("Serenity").

She was speaking on behalf of the patriarchy and her name was used in the transitional phase of the establishment of Gilead. A name as “Joy” will let people associate it with positivity and happiness. This could be crucial in order to make people positive to this establishment or at least accepting that is going to happen. However, her character does not seem to fit with the name as she is seen as a cold person with no empathy. As Charlotte Templin explains in her article “Names and Naming Tell an Archetypal Story in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (1993), Serena Joy is a character that is everything but serenity and joy. Her name also originates from an early Christian saint and this fact provides an irony since Serena Joy is a cruel and vindictive woman (cf. 151). Even though the name provides a contradiction to her character, it would also may work as a benefit for her mission. This shows how important a name is and how it constitutes an identity. A name can have a lot of different purposes besides being just what you are called, as we see here with Serena Joy. It can say a lot about your personality, but it can also be a contradiction. In any case, a name is important for your identity, so when being forced to lose your name, you will eventually lose yourself as well.

### **3.4 Feminism as a tool of power**

Feminism is the belief in social, political and economic equality between men and women. Feminists work for women’s rights in the society and fights against the patriarchal notion of men at the top of the hierarchy. It can be seen, like religion, as a narrative in ideology. This comes clear when, even though she is forced to be silenced, Offred succeeds in making her story survive. Feminism as a tool of power has to do with why the novel was written in the first place. It is a way of fighting back on power regimes which indicates that there is always a kind of rebellion which give the readers hope. In her previously mentioned chapter, Coral Ann Howells explains that Offred

also resorts to tell other women’s stories within her own, creating the impression of a multi-voiced narrative which undermines Gilead’s myth of women’s silence and submissiveness. In this way, she also presents a critical analysis of North American feminism since the 1960s, from the Women’s Liberation Movement of her mother’s generation to the rise of the New Right and Christian fundamentalism of the late 1970s and 80s, represented here by the Commanders’ Wives and the Aunts

This shows us not only that there is hope for women in Gilead as they are working together and not really silenced, but it also shows us one of the reasons for why the novel was written. It presents events that happened in our real world and shows the feminism's fight that has been going on for many years.

*The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a response to the second wave feminism and Atwood's criticism of it. Atwood is a feminist, but she warns us against an extreme feminist ideology. In her thesis, *Women disunited: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as a critique of feminism* (2008), Alanna A. Callaway explains that we can see hints of criticism of the feminist subgroup Separatism in this novel. This group contains a tendency to encourage resentment between the sexes, and we see that when Offred's single mother explains that

I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a women's strategy for making other women

(Atwood 121)

Callaway explains further that this marks a disdain for the male sex and merely reversed the extant social attitudes between the sexes, without offering any possible solutions to the issue of inequality between genders (cf. Callaway 18-19). She further explains that the so-called Radical Feminism is what Atwood is most concerned about whereas these kinds of feminists worried about the effects of women's oppression under the patriarchal social order. They wanted to create awareness of the desperate needs of women through the identification of 'women's issues' such as reproductive rights, pornography legislation, sexuality and equality within relationships (cf. 19-20). This novel is

Atwood's exploration of these central dilemmas of Radical Feminism, which provides the catalyst for the backlash scenario envisioned by Atwood in her creation of the dystopian society of Gilead

(25)

What we see here is that even though feminism is important, Atwood is warning us about the extreme cases from it.

Feminism could also be connected with storytelling as they both are aspects within ideology and also function as tools for freedom. This shows us that ideology is not necessarily something bad, it is just a matter of the level of extremity. One of the reasons Offred decides to tell her story could be because, like Bennett and Royle explain in their chapter “Narrative” in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2016), that “storytelling is often used as an ‘oppositional’ practice, a practice of resistance used by the weak against the strong” (59). To tell her story could be a way of rebellion against the new order and as they further explain “to tell a story is to exercise power” (59). This is her only way to maintain some power and stay true to herself. To stay “true to yourself” often means you do not live by someone else’s standards or rules, or that you do not care what others are thinking of you. Offred living in a totalitarian regime would perhaps stay true to herself by letting her be herself and tell her own stories when she is alone in her room. As she cannot refuse to obey the government’s standards and rules, her only way is to not let her identity vanish completely, and she does this by telling these stories. During the night, when she is alone in her room, she can reminisce back to her former life and tell her story. Here, she is able to regain her identity, rebel and give herself a time of freedom. This is a hopeful element, especially for feminists. The fight against patriarchy is not over yet, there is still a chance, even in this extreme patriarchal society as Gilead, as long as she is able to tell her story. When doing this, there is a chance to be heard, by someone, sometime, as we see at the end of the novel. As Coral Ann Howells explains in *The Handmaid’s Tale (York Notes Advanced)* (1998), it is through Offred’s stories that we as readers get a clear evidence that this tale is “a woman’s narrative of resistance and survival within a system of rigid behavioural controls” (20). It is her only way to survive in this strict regime, and her only way to resist the eradication of her own identity. It is not only her own story she tells us, but also those of many of the important female figures in her life as well. Through Offred, we get to learn about her mother, her best friend Moira, and some of the other handmaids. When she tells the stories of other silenced women, she contradicts Gilead’s claim to “absolute mastery and its myth of female submissiveness” (80). She tells the stories on behalf of the rest of the women trapped in this totalitarian regime and in this can be seen as a feminist tool in fighting against the patriarchal society. Even though women are suppressed and have been withdrawn their rights, they still have their voices and stories to tell. The survival of Offred’s stories confirms this as although she has been silenced, her story survives.

One important aspect to notice, moreover, is how the novel is divided into sections of Day and Night. It is only during the night Offred has the ability to tell her stories. It is in the

'Night' sections that we get to learn Offred as a person and we gain a sense of her as a powerful person with a history because as she states "the night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet... The night is my time out. Where should I go? Somewhere good (Atwood 47). This is referring to the long tradition for women telling their stories during the night. It signals that their tales do not have space in the patriarchal sphere of the daytime and that their speech is, in some way, subversive. This tradition goes way back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the story of *One Thousand and One Nights* was first told. Shahrazad was a woman who managed to escape death by telling the king stories every night. She enticed the king to let her live yet another day so he can hear the rest of the story the next night. As Meriam Helal explains in her article "One Thousand and One Nights: Shahrazad, the Traditional feminist" (2017), Shahrazad is able to take control over her own destiny and that of other women as well. Her ability to save herself and many women indicates a heroine who proves to be her own saviour (cf. Helal). This implicates how storytelling has become crucial in women's fight for survival, but also the fact that it only occurs at night. In Marina Warner's book *Stranger Magic* (2012), she explains that Shahrazad started to tell her sister a story and continued until dawn breaks because then "speaking was no longer permitted" (2). This compliments what is stated above that women's stories do not have a place during the day in a patriarchal society. Warner further states that these profane stories can only continue in the darkness of night, and Shahrazad can wind the vengeful ruler into an exchange of confidence between women. He is placed in the position of the male eavesdropper in women's knowledge, tantalised into discovering more about the great complexities of human psychology in response to the vicissitudes of fate (cf. 2). This reveals the power Shahrazad has over the Sultan with her stories, and by making him interested in learning more, her storytelling becomes her saviour in the end. This compliments what Bennett and Royle claimed that storytelling becomes a way of exercising power, and thus shows us the power in language.

Offred's story, however, indicates that she is an unreliable narrator, and this is important to bear in mind when reading it. A narrator is the one who tells the story, according to *Britannica*, and in this story, Offred can be seen as an unreliable narrator, one who makes incorrect conclusions and assumptions about what really happened ("Narrator"). In addition, it could be crucial to understand the difference between 'story' and 'discourse' as Bennet and Royle further talk about in their aforementioned chapter. They explain that the story involves the events which the narrator would like us to believe happened, while discourse, on the other hand, involves how the stories got told and the organization of the *telling* (cf. 57-58). In this

way, we may read the story in a different way and we learn that we cannot trust our own language or our own narration of events. We are not able to know what really happened in the establishment of Gilead since we only hear about Offred's point of view and her subjective truth. Offred is stating that “this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction.... it’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact” (Atwood 208). Coral Ann Howells further explains in her notes that Offred’s narrative is actually an oral one and her telling is a reconstruction after events have happened, and because of this, she is not always a trustworthy narrator. As she states, memory is like language and is not entirely reliable when it comes to reconstructing reality (cf. Howells 81). We cannot entirely trust Offred’s narrative since memories are unreliable, and hence it becomes difficult for us readers to really know what happened.

Offred further explains that “when I get out of here. If I’m ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction too” (Atwood 208). This sets us to the end of the novel when we come to learn that the story was recorded a few hundred years ago and is now used to understand what happened in the beginning of this new era. These people have only access to Offred’s story and her version of what happened and this may be problematic in order to really understand what really was going on at the time. Offred being an unreliable narrator also implicates feminist aspects since she refuses to be included in the discourse. She is a character with her own mind and opinions and can therefore not be controlled by this new regime. Her narrative is chaotic and rebels against the order. This way of rebelling is a feminist way of fighting back against the patriarchy and represents hope.

This chapter has shown how Atwood has included language, ideology, and feminism as tools of holding and maintaining power in the totalitarian regime of Gilead. Within this extreme patriarchal society, women, and especially handmaids, have lost all their rights and by having the control over the language, the government also have the ability to control their mindset, and thus changing the ideology. The eradication of individual identity is also something that is crucial throughout the novel, and we learn that the longer Offred stays in this society, the more she is losing herself which makes it clear the amount of control the authorities has. Throughout the novel, the narration and perspective have been clarified as crucial. When we only read the story from one person’s perspective, and thus from an unreliable narrator, we cannot really know what actually happens. This shows us the importance of perspective and also the important role narration has in telling a story.



## Chapter 4: *The Power*

*The Power* is a feminist dystopian novel which was first published in 2016. It was the first science fiction novel to receive the Baileys prize for women's fiction and has been described by *The Guardian* as a page-turning thriller which has received massive response from its readers, and the paper further states that "Atwood 'adopted' the north London author in a mentoring scheme for writers (Kean). This collaboration between Alderman and Atwood is interesting to look at when reading their novels. Atwood has contributed to some inputs in Alderman's novel, so the similarity between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* is no coincidence. This chapter will provide an investigation of the questions that the novel asks; what is power, who has it and how do you get?"

The novel opens with an epigraph taken from the Bible, which gives us a very clear idea of some of the themes that Alderman will raise. The epigraph is about the people's need for a king, for someone to rule over you. The 'king' can be seen as every kind of power, as we will see further in this chapter. It can either be religion, information and language, or violence. 'King' equals power and power comes in many forms, and despite which form it is, it will always rule over you.

As a whole, *The Power* opens and closes with a frame narrative. According to *Britannica*, a "frame narrative" can be defined as a story within a story ("Frame Narrative"). This literary technique is used to provide readers with a context about the main narrative. This main narrative offers multiple perspectives within the story which gives the readers more information about the characters. The frame narrative calls attention to how the story is told and allows the writer to create a context for how the story should be interpreted. The novel starts and ends with an exchange of letters between Neil and Naomi. Neil has just finished a manuscript and wants Naomi's opinion on it. The manuscript is about what happened five thousand years ago and is the story that we are presented with in the novel which is called *The Power – A historical novel*. The prologue and epilogue do something to the readers' expectations and challenges regarding ideology, the truth and genders. It connects with the reality because the story is written as historical. It instructs how to read the story, but the instruction is also considered ironic as it is characterized as prejudiced.

This framing narrative corresponds to *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the epilogue reveals to the readers that the main body of the novel is in fact a collection of tapes. The actual body is narrated by a woman, but her story is thus presented by a man which means

that she has no authority over her own story. It reveals to the readers that the main body should be read as historical fiction of what happened around the time Gilead was established and the epilogue is set in a distant future. This is similar to the epilogue of *The Power* where the exchange of letters also suggests that the novel should be read as an historical overview of something that happened a long time ago. What is controversial with this epilogue, however, is how the main body of the novel is perceived by Naomi and the tone between her and Neil. The first thing that may shock the readers in the epilogue is the statement “a world run by men would be more kind, gentler, more moving and naturally nurturing” (Alderman 332). This contrasts with the current stereotypical gender roles which see men as strong and women as nurturing (see 2.2.1 of this thesis). The opening frame narrative gives us an idea that ideas of gender have changed. Neil strikes the reader as insecure, tentative and gentle, and wants Naomi’s opinion on the story he has written before he can publish it. Naomi, on the other hand, seems confident and has a condescending tone. How these characters address each other is something we as readers recognize, but at the same time it is something unfamiliar as the way we normally view men and women is not imbedded here. Naomi appears to be excited to read the story, and especially about male soldiers. In the ending frame narrative, however, she is more sceptical as she is not sure that the story is historically correct as there is no evidence that there have ever been male soldiers and a society ruled by men. With the frame narrative, Alderman wants to achieve a greater understanding of how we view gender, and also the relationship between physical and structural power when showing us that a power structure based on the threat of violence will always corrupt no matter if it is women or men at the top.

The structure of this frame narrative, however, highlights some of the consequences of how a society’s story is told. Neil reveals how important perspective can be in creating history. Alderman indicates that history can be seen as a branch of power because how a story is told can shape how a society remembers its history and how this can alter the way people think about the present. This is also the most important way in which this frame narrative relates itself to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. We see this clearly in the epilogue when Neil is stating that

people don’t believe it because it doesn’t fit with what they already think. The way we think about our past informs what we think is possible today. If we keep on repeating the same old line about the past when there’s clear evidence that not all civilizations had the same ideas as us...we’re denying that anything can change. This is the trouble with history. You can’t see what’s not there

The last sentence is also something that is worth paying attention to as it denotes a criticism of how patriarchal history presupposes one objective, historical truth. Both Alderman and Atwood problematize how this “truth” and “power” largely become one and the same in terms of history. We can only access the history that has been told, so the question will be who is telling this history, who is allowed to tell their truth and who is not. This is something that will be discussed further later in this chapter. In Alderman, we can see that Naomi seems to be quite sceptical when Neil puts forth a different perspective than what history has taught them of what happened around this time. This can suggest a criticism of how history has mainly been written by and about men. We lack the female perspective from history that results in a false or skewed image of what has really happened in the past. This idea is supported by Peter Waterman in his article “Hidden from Herstory: Women, Feminism and New Global Solidarity” (1993), where he explains that although the women’s movement has long been active, it is difficult to find theoretical articles on the historical or contemporary form of feminist internationalism (cf. WS-83). He further states that a number of works by men make only passing references to gender, women’s struggles and feminist theory. A gender-sensitive theory which would identify what is specific to that of women, according to him, is needed (cf. WS-93). This is why we cannot trust the history in a complete manner as it lacks the perspective of women, or the herstory, and we, then, are only able to access a delineation of it.

The novel ends with Naomi asking Neil whether he should publish it in a woman’s name. This addresses, as Sally C. S. Brooks writes in her thesis *The War of the Sexes: Power Hierarchy and Gendered Oppression in Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale and Alderman’s The Power* (2019), how “the patriarchal gender hierarchy is still reflected in how writers are acknowledged” (36), and criticizes the society habitual perception of the male as the default gender. Naomi is stating that “every book you write is assessed as part of ‘men’s literature’” (Alderman 338-339), thus pointing to something that women have had to deal with for a long time in our own society where they have not been acknowledged for their writing simply because they are women. Throughout history, female writers have had to publish their works under male pseudonyms for different reasons. One example is the Brontë sisters who published their famous novels under men’s names because, as Erin Nyborg said in her article “Elena Ferrante, Charlotte Brontë and how anonymity protects against female writing

stereotypes” (2016), “their novels examined subject matter which was ‘unfeminine’” (Nyborg). However, Nyborg further states that the Brontës’ manner of writing soon revealed their female authorship. For example, in *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s emotions and psychology gave away that it was not a man who wrote the novel as men tend to not be too concerned with emotions. This reveals the struggle women have had to face for many decades in the literary world, and how hard it has been to publish their work because they are women. Naomi’s last quote can, then, be seen as a criticism on any kind of structure that judges someone based on gender, sex or prejudice.

As mentioned, the novel also provides the reader with an epigraph with a passage from 1 Samuel 8 in the Bible, which, as Sally Brooks says in her thesis, tells the story of how the people of Israel wanted a king despite the warnings from Samuel. She states that this passage serves to establish religion as the fundamental subject for the readers to consider throughout the novel. It “calls attention to the dangerous relationship between power and religion and religious justification of the female oppressive gender dynamic that historically has followed” (Brooks 24). This entails that women have throughout history been oppressed on religious means which reveals the danger relationship between power and religion. It shows how much power that lays in religion and how religion can influence our beliefs and behaviour. This is clearly shown throughout the novel where the character Mother Eve uses religion to influence her followers and makes her the most powerful human in the world.

This is quite similar to *The Handmaid’s Tale* as this novel also provides a Biblical epigraph that represents the foundation of a religion ideology on which the Republic of Gilead is founded. Already here we see how religion has influenced both novels. By reciting passages from the Bible, what is done in the society will be justified as morally because it is built on the beliefs that occur in the Bible. To include Biblical passages in the beginning of the novel sets a tone for the rest of the novel. As for *The Power*, the passage from Samuel reveals how religion is incorporated in the power structures and how the ‘king’ can be interpreted as a metaphor for power.

In addition to religious aspects, Alderman problematizes the way in which gender and language are connected with power and patriarchy. The patriarchal society use language as a tool to uphold and maintain their dominance over females. She asks whether it is possible to envision a world where power is not determined on gender and a power structure that is not based on the threat of violence like it is in the patriarchal society. The novel touches upon a lot of different issues regarding language as a tool for power, gender roles and ideology and all of these are intertwined. This chapter will, therefore, be divided into the four main

characters as these, in their own way, deal with these issues. They each play a significant role in the upcoming revolution and these characters are Tunde, a Nigerian journalist; Allie, a teenager who creates her own religion after killing her abusive foster-father; Margot, a mayor in New England and Roxy, the daughter of a British mafia boss. They each provide a different exploration of how this new kind of power in women changes the power dynamic in the world, and this chapter aims to investigate and discuss how physical power can expand into economic, religious and political influence on others, and what role gender has in this.

#### **4.1 Tunde**

Tunde is a journalist who travels around and seeks information in order to tell the world what happens. Alderman is using him as a symbol for how information and language can be used as tools of power, and she problematizes this in how we are receiving this information. We will see in this subchapter that information is ideological and how Tunde is used to portray this.

Technology is an integral part of the novel's storytelling as stories about the newly explored power within women are spread via the internet. Tunde was one of the first who recorded and uploaded videos online about women using their new power and made a living out of it. "It is this video which, when he puts it online, starts the business of the Day of the Girls" (Alderman 17). "The Day of the Girls" refers to the women's revolution when getting this electrical power. Tunde's contribution, by uploading these videos, plays a huge role in the revolution's upcoming. This rapid access to the news has partially contributed to radicalizing the rise of women and expanding their popularity. His recording and posting show the advantage, and perhaps also the disadvantage, with the globalized world. From every corner of the world, anyone with access to the internet is able to look up the news and be inspired and influenced. This ensues a possible danger as girls and women catch up on what others do and start implementing it themselves, and men come together in forums to plan a resistance and counterattacks. One could question if he did not start showing the world what women were now capable of, this revolution would not have escalated to be this extreme and this shows some of the issues we would have to deal with today.

We see that technology and information function to create this "Day of the Girls", which means that there is power in information. This is something that women do not have access to in Gilead and the communication between the handmaids lays on a bare minimum. In this novel, however, communication is widely used to reach out to as many as possible in

order to expand women's power and this emphasizes how language, information and technology can be used as tools for power. The use of the internet to communicate with the rest of the world also provides a wider range of what the truth is. As discussed in the previous chapter, women in Gilead could not access any information as they were not allowed to read. It is only the government who owns and has access to this information, and its main task is to prevent the rest of the society from approaching it. This is a huge contrast to *The Power* where information is all over the internet and is available for anyone to acknowledge. This can both be deliberating and problematic as it brings in the question of who is allowed to find the truth. The ones who upload information on the internet also control what will be available for us, and can, then, select for themselves what information to give us. This is one way the internet can challenge and problematize the truth, because we only have access to what that is given to us. "Truth" can be defined as, according to *Britannica*, the set of beliefs and propositions that are said, "in ordinary discourse, to agree with the facts or to state what is the case" and "people need the truth about the world in order to thrive" ("Truth"). The problem of 'fake news' is also something that occurred when the internet arrived. In Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie's article "The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online" (2017), they talk about that the truth is no longer dictated by the authorities, but is rather networked by peers, which reveals that for every fact there will be a counter fact which will result in confusion for most people. It is getting harder to know what the truth is as there are so many facts, many misleading, available for everyone (cf. Anderson & Rainie). What we read will also be interpreted in different ways, which may result in a disagreement of what the truth is. What is true and correct is governed by our perceptions that are again governed by those who have access to it. Also, when there is a great deal of information available, it is impossible to verify everything, so it rather falls on a consensus of what is right which will eventually become the truth. The question, then, will be who can identify the truth when there is so much available for us? The answer would be, as this thesis shows, the ones in power.

Tunde's uploading on the internet also has personal consequences. Due to his videos showing women tearing down buildings, fighting against the police and burning down whole cities, "they call him a gender-traitor" (Alderman 171) as he risks his own safety to tell the stories of women. He makes their stories heard by posting his videos on YouTube and selling them to CNN. This is similar to Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where she, too, wants her story to be told (cf. Atwood 410). However, when Tunde sent off some clips about how men were treated, he only received rejections, "Sorry, Tunde, we're going to pass on this. Great reporting, pix excellent, not a story we can sell in right now" (Alderman 240). People were

simply not interested in the men's stories, similarly to the epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale* where the ones who discovered Offred's story were not satisfied and would have rather listened to the story of the Commander or other men of importance. This can be related to the fact that language used as a tool of power is not only about who is able to or is allowed to speak, but also about who is getting heard.

Language, as we learned in the previous chapter, is related to ideology, and as Mojgan Abshavi and Zaman Kargozari explain in their article "The Discourse of Gender and Power in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*" (2020) the novel also "depicts the damage caused by a social system that tries, at least by language, to define everything" (820). "Social system" here can be interpreted as the ones who have the power. The ones in power are the ones who can define what is normal in a society, and everyone else would be forced to go along with it. This shows the relationship between language and ideology as the elite decides what is normal and uses language to pass it on. According to Karl Thompson's article "What is Normal?" (2018) the concept of "normal" can be defined as any behaviour which is seen as usual, expected or conforms to a pre-existing standard. Normal behaviour can thus be interpreted as the behaviour that is expected of humans in any given society (cf. Thompson). For example, the language that is normally used in patriarchal society changed after women got their electrical power and turned the society into matriarchal.

Language can thus be seen in the gender essentialism and performativity. We expect men and women to speak in different ways. When Tunde is attending a party to document what is happening there, he comes across a male waiter who was shocked by one of the women. He was "crying a little now, from the shock and the shame and the fear and the humiliation and the pain" (Alderman 239). Tunde recognizes these feelings as he, too, has felt humiliated by being shocked before and he writes in his notes:

at first we did not speak our hurt because it was not manly. Now we do not speak it because we are afraid and ashamed and alone without hope, each of us alone. It is hard to know when the first became the second

(239)

The feeling of being overpowered by women is not something that men are used to as they are used to be the stronger sex. That is why it is not 'manly' to cry about the pain women give them. As Edward H. Thompson Jr. states in his article "Measurement of Masculinity Ideologies: A (Critical) Review" (2015), this has to do with masculine ideologies. This can be

interpreted as the individual's internalization and endorsement of cultural belief systems about the male gender and masculinity and is based on cultural ideologies, and not individual (cf. 116). Through culture, men are taught not to show emotions and to be strong. However, when men turn into the being the weaker sex, the ideology of what is manly changes. In this way, Alderman turns feminine expectations into masculine. This is a literary technique that is widely used throughout the novel. She talks about men the way men have talked about women. This can for example be seen in the incident where a waiter starts crying after being shocked (cf. Alderman 239). According to the essentialism, a man is expected to not show any weakness, and by crying in front of others as the waiter does here, he is, then, striking against this expectation. He is also striking against the gender performative as he does not perform his gender that is culturally determined.

The difference in the expectations between men and women can be found in language as well. In Deborah Cameron's article "Ideology and Language" (2006), it is clear that signs and words stand for ideas, and language is the means for conveying these ideas. This process is "underwritten by a sort of social contract, whereby speakers of a given language agree to make the same signs stand for the same ideas" (143). She further states that dominance would be achieved through the ability to naturalize words, imposing an illusory unity and denying the reality of continual struggle over the language (cf. 144). This compliments what Abshavi and Kargozari said in their article about a social system that defines everything by language and the possible dangers that may accompany it. As we saw in the previous chapters of this thesis about ideology being a kind of a story we have grown up with, a story that tells us how to behave and our role in society, this also works with language as well. Cameron is telling us that beliefs about how children acquire language, or the different language between men and women, tells us something about how language is conceptualized, and also how childhood or gender is conceptualized (cf. Cameron 146-147). In other words, the language we teach our children, helps shape them as persons, and also forge their place in society. We for example speak differently to boys and girls and this will affect them later in life in terms of how they see themselves and they will behave accordingly. The way we speak to people and what we speak about will eventually contribute to people's perception of themselves. This can be seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well, where the women are constantly being suppressed via language which results in a lower risk for independent thinking and loss of individuality and identity. This can also be related to George Orwell's newspeak, which was discussed in the previous chapter, because if you are constantly exposed to a certain language you will eventually start to believe in it and behave accordingly.



Further in Abshavi and Kargozari's research, they show that *The Power* is a novel loved by feminists, not because the future Alderman portrays, but because "she slaps one with their own privilege" (Abshavi & Kargozari 819). For example, suddenly men are not safe to walk alone in the dark, interaction between men and women is now based on female supremacy and men's constant fear of being attacked. By making men the weaker sex and thus further exposed as victims may shock the readers as this would be something unusual for us. However, this fear continually occurs in women in our own society today, and they further say that this is why feminism is needed because women are now aware of the horrible states the power structure would be in and an awareness of their privileges will appear (cf. 819).

Alderman explores modern conflicts and links them to the freedom of women in the public sphere. It has been argued by Abshavi & Kargozari that this public sphere has helped institutionalize the idea of women as the weaker sex and feminine individuality and it is absorbed by the generalization of this idea. Women has often been seen as victims and such victimization is commonly found in feminist dystopias and they explain how women's social roles have been affected by power structures where men are regarded as the dominant gender. In this novel, victimization is regarded as the struggle for survival. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, on the other hand, this would be related to Offred's continuing attempts to stay sane and not lose her own identity and individuality entirely. In *The Power*, the acquisition of the electrical power becomes their way of surviving and fighting against the social reality. This also relates to women's subordination in societies in the Western part of the world and the roles they play in accepting subordination (cf. 821). Living in a patriarchal society also would lead to imprisonment for women in terms of the restraints that they place on themselves. It could be seen as an ideological imprisonment because it becomes a part of the received idea of normality. Women know they cannot go out at night because they are physically weaker than men and can be exposed to violence. They know that they cannot dress in a certain way because this can lead to rape. Women, then, have had to moderate their behaviour in terms of feeling safe. Women are expected to speak in a certain way as they are subordinated to men. The literary technique Alderman portrays by turning this lack of freedom to men makes the readers question these aspects. For example, Tunde no longer has the freedom to walk freely in the streets as he does now "for the first time today on the road I was afraid" (Alderman 263). Women can now with their electrical power easily overpower him. This relates to the question regarding who has the power, or freedom, and why?

Besides losing the freedom to walk freely, men also lose most of their rights and privileges. Different laws are established that say "men are no longer permitted to drive

cars...to own businesses...to gather together...without a woman present” (Alderman 243), and that they “must have his passport and other official documents stamped with the name of his female guardian” (243). In other words, men’s freedom and autonomy is now strictly limited, which is similar to the laws that apply to women in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. As Brooks states in her thesis, the style in *The Handmaid’s Tale* gives an insight to the reader a state of powerlessness, whilst the shift in focalisation in *The Power* gives a greater emphasis on the characters who experience the temptation of possessing power. Brooks further states that how out of reach such power normally is for women is underlined by how they continually compare their strength and physical power with the biological advantage men used to have. This emphasis calls attention to the normalcy of the patriarchal power hierarchy and societal dependence thereof (cf. Brooks 41). Women are used to being subordinates in a patriarchal society which leads them to compare their new strength to men’s. This kind of society has existed for such a long time that its normalcy is still embedded within women even after getting their power. It further shows how strong this normalcy is, that women are considered the weaker sex in a patriarchy and are socially dependant to men.

## 4.2 Allie

Another main character in the novel is Allie who runs away after killing her abusive foster-father and ends up in a convent for girls run by nuns. She renames herself Eve and the voice inside her head says, “good choice, the first of women” (Alderman 42). Allie is a character who, above all, shows the important role that religion can have in building structures of power. Alderman pays a lot of attention to religion as a power tool, something that we can see already in the epigraph.

She is able to perform miracles and quickly gets a lot of followers across the world. Like Tunde, she actively uses the internet to reach out to as many as possible. She convinces her followers that God is within her and she is sent to save all the women. Whenever she preaches, she tells the others to “document everything. Stream it if you can. Put it online” (117). In this way, she is able to convert a great majority of women across the world and create what she calls the online religion. She quickly grows into being the most important religious figure in the world. This shows the large role religion plays in *The Power* and it is used to frame the novel. This religious inspiration is similar to *The Handmaid’s Tale* as the whole novel is built upon the belief of going back to traditional Christian values. Here, every controversial and extreme measure the government makes is justified through religion. This

shows us, as aforementioned, how much power there is in religion when everything can be justified by the Bible. Religion functions as ideological as it is used by the authorities to justify its oppression as something God-given and inevitable, and in this way keeps them in power. Religion can also create a ‘false consciousness’ as it teaches that everything done within the society is God’s will.

*The Power* emphasizes the “influence religious justification of female subjugation has had, and still has, on patriarchal societies and the danger of a belief in prescribed behaviour by a higher power” (Brooks 24). It comes clear in the novel that religion is used to achieve political aims as Allie, now Mother Eve, uses religion to become the leader of the world. By imagining the religious influence on the foundation of a new matriarchal society, Alderman successfully draws attention to the still embedded gender ideology within Christianity in Western society (cf. 24). This can be seen in the epigraph as well as it problematizes the people’s need for a king, for someone to rule over you and to have power over you. In this novel, Allie, or religion in general, can be seen as this king. She becomes the ruler of the world, and instead of the Father or God, Alderman gives us Mother Eve. She does not use Allie to make the world a better place, but rather to mirror our own world and to show us how patriarchy is like which will give us a new light on patriarchy. Alderman does not want to create a better world or give us an alternative, she is portraying the exact same world, but with women at top instead.

By the end of the novel, Allie wants to start a global war and “bomb the world back to the stone age” (Alderman 313), and

there will be five thousand years of rebuilding, five thousand years where the only thing that matters is: can you hurt more, can you do more damage, can you instil fear?  
And then the women will win

(313)

She is determined that at some point women will win and that is her ultimate goal throughout the novel. She underscores Alderman’s argument about religion and faith, that both are powerful sources, but can also be easily manipulated. She manipulates the majority of women around the world that she is sent by God and her followers believe in her. She, under the name of Mother Eve, becomes a global figure and demonstrates how female figures have become more prominent in religion.

### 4.3 Margot

Margot is a character who can be seen as someone who is the king based on violence. She is the mayor of a small town of New England. After the power first makes its appearance, her political career quickly rises. Despite trying to prevent this new change from spreading and trying to stop it, like everybody else does, she rather accepts this change happening and starts to think of solutions. Most notably are the NorthStar Girls Camps which originally are intended to help the girls learn to control their power, but soon turn into military training camps. Margot can be viewed as a symbol of the feminists' fight against patriarchy. At the office, she is deliberately patronized by her co-worker Daniel, who continually challenges her patience and knowledge. After getting her own power, her attitude in the office changes as well. She knows now that she is stronger than the rest of them and this gives her a boost of confidence. "It doesn't matter that she shouldn't, that she never would. What matters is that she could, if she wanted. The power to hurt is a kind of wealth" (Alderman 71). This draws attention back to what has been discussed in the literary review of this thesis where Janine Shaw in her article "Gender and Violence: Feminist Theories, Deadly Economics and Damaging Discourse" (2017) claims that violence is linked to power. The ability to hurt others plays a strong role in who is having the power (cf. Shaw). Margot serves as an example of how violence can lead to political power and how that power is ultimately corrosive. This becomes even more clear after attending a talk show with Daniel during the election for governor where she accidentally shocks him. The viewers notice this happening and think "you know what, though, she's strong. She'd show them" (Alderman 169). This results in her being elected for governor instead of Daniel.

Despite being a symbol for the radical feminists' fight against patriarchy, Margot can also be seen as an example for how women have been subjugated. Women's subjugation is shown through the expectation of silence. When the testing of the electrical power came into her work, Margot noticed that this test would not be hard at all as "she has always known exactly how to be silent...it's a wonder they've found any adult women at all with this thing" (69). As a woman, she has, just like all the women in the world, learned how to be silent, how to not resist and just cope with everything that comes. The test is just like the issues women have had to deal with for centuries, to cope with the pain and not showing their emotions. Therefore, it was not hard for her to hide her powers and pass the test. After more and more women get their electrical power and climb their way up to the top of the hierarchy, men's voices become more and more silent. The higher up women get and become more dominant,

the further down men fall and become obedient. In the end of the novel, we see women talk about “‘Just like a man’, she says, ‘does not know how to be silent, thinks we always want to hear what *he* has to say, always talking talking talking, interrupting his better’” (229). When the novel comes to an end, we see that men are now silenced, just the way women were before their power came in. Ida Aaskov Dolmer’s article “Would the world really be a better place with women in charge? A literary analysis of Naomi Alderman’s *The Power*” (2018) explains that such kinds of statements are examples of what the discourse contemporary Western feminism is trying to deconstruct due to the support of an idea of the inequality in men and women (cf. Dolmer). Here in this novel, however, women come with such statements and not men, which introduces a notion that women can be just as vicious as men when they have the power. It becomes clear that this novel is not just about empowering women, but more about the corruptive nature of power, and it also shows us our own society in a new light, because it helps us to understand the workings of power in terms of gender.

This statement also complements what was discussed in the previous chapter about the relationship between power and language. The ones who have the power also have the language. The ability and allowance to speak and be heard lies with the ones who have the power. In a patriarchal society, women are silenced, and this will indicate that men are naturally silenced in this matriarchal society. We as readers still find this hard, though, to acknowledge this silence for men as we are strongly concerned with patriarchy. This relates to the epilogue when Neil writes in her letter to Naomi that “people don’t believe it because it doesn’t fit with that they already think” (Alderman 335). This can be referred to ideology as well as ideology is something that we are used to and what we find ‘normal’. We are used to men being dominant and women being silent and this results in our disbelief towards this twist in power hierarchy.

Ideology also deals with, as mentioned earlier, normality. After the electrical power emerged in the majority of women across the world, everyone who did not have it would be considered abnormal and an outsider. Margot’s daughter Jocelyn has trouble with her power and they try everything to fix it because “all she really wants is to be normal” (206). This works for men as well as “it’s better with a man who can’t do it. It’s more normal anyway” (208). This new normality appears quickly and completely changes the ideology in the world. This shows us that ideology is not stable, but rather interchangeable, and also how normality can be ideological. Alderman problematizes normality in this way in order to present to the readers that although something would appear to be normal, it is not normal in its own sense, it is just what we have learned it to be. The questions about normality has also been discussed

in relation to Atwood as well where the government of Gilead wants to return to traditional values. Traditional does not necessarily mean that it is the right or normal thing to do, but rather has become to be considered as normal throughout time because that is just the way people are used to doing it. Both Alderman and Atwood problematizes this normality to portray the possible dangers to get along with the normality without looking into possible changes.

#### **4.4 Roxy**

Roxy is the first character we get to know in the novel. She is one of the youngest and also one of the strongest women getting the power. Roxy and her mother are attacked in the first scene of the novel where her mother eventually gets killed. This act of violence occurs before the electrical power has emerged, at a point where men are still the stronger sex and the society is still patriarchal. At this time, it was considered dangerous for girls and women to walk alone in the dark as they were physically weaker. This threat of violence quickly vanishes when the power starts to emerge. Now, men are the ones who should not wander alone. More and more men are being raped, beaten up and murdered, and “this is not what happens to a man. Except now it is” (Alderman 195).

The novel constantly reverses stereotypical gender roles and socially accepted inequality. According to the stereotypical gender roles, women are more nurturing and caring, and less violent. This is one of the reasons why women have stated that a world directed by them would be a good and peaceful place to live in. As Abshavi and Kargozari mention in their article, “cases of violence and rape would collapse – they are a symptom of a male dominated society” (Abshavi & Kargozari 820). This novel, however, shows that this is not the case. After women get their electric power, they eventually take over the political, social and economic power as well. Having absolute power corrupts no matter if you are a man or a woman. No matter which is the dominant gender, it will always have consequences for the subordinate. Sally Brooks supports this in her thesis when stating that “the rise of power in women brought about no more equality between the sexes than our patriarchal society has” (Brooks 43). This comes clear when we investigate the character development of the president of the new established country Bessapara, Tatiana. Her desire for power does not end and this is what kills her at the end. She can be seen as “a symbol of how power touched everyone and how our conceptualisation of power sustains the dynamic of the oppressor versus the oppressed” (43). This shows us that this not just an indication that power corrupts, but also a

way for Alderman to make us aware of some of the harmful consequences of power connected to sex and gender which have been allowed to go on for so long that they have become normalized.

When the ideology changes, the stereotypical gender roles change with it:

Boys dressing as girls to seem more powerful. Girls dressing as boys to shake off the meaning of the power, or to leap on the unsuspecting world in the sheep's clothing

(Alderman 70)

What we have used to associate with girls and boys is now reversed and is not the same any longer. Boys walking around in girls' clothing in order to look more powerful, is not something we consider as 'normal' in our own society. Not only does this portray a shift in what we expect in girls and boys, but also shows us how quickly things can change, and how much would be affected by one small change in the ideology. In Judith Butler's essay (1988), that was introduced in the literary review, she talks about Simone deBeauvoir who claims that 'woman' is rather a historical idea than a natural fact and to be a woman is to have become a woman, to "compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically possibility" (522). To be a woman is not something biological or natural, but rather socially or culturally determined. Gender is, then, something that is performed through our behaviour and appearance. When boys start to dress up as girls in order to look more powerful, they, then, perform gender in a different way than what we normally expect which results in a reversal of the stereotypical gender performativity.

As Veronica Hollinger explains in her chapter "Feminist Theory and Science Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), the concept of defamiliarization is much associated with the science fiction genre. This is something that is seen throughout this whole novel whereas Alderman is defamiliarizing the stereotypical gender roles which so many women writers has done before her. Within the science fiction genre, Hollinger explains that women writers have often undermined

our readerly tendencies to naturalize certain aspects of human nature and human experience as 'essentially feminine' or as 'essentially masculine'; it resists any too-

easy conflation of the sexed body with the cultural determined gendered behaviours that are imposed upon that body

(130)

This novel constantly does this when portraying a world where women are dominant and are physically stronger than men. Alderman contradicts with what is seen as essentially feminine or masculine and shows us that gender behaviours are not something that is imposed in the body, but is rather culturally determined. This contradiction to the stereotypical gender roles is something that has become more used after 1970s. As Helen Merrick explains in her chapter “Gender in Science Fiction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), this period marks a high point in science fiction’s engagement with gender and the feminist works that were published after this time

disrupt the perceived ‘naturalness’ of gender, and locate the operation and proliferation of the more harmful effects of the gendered order deep within the political and cultural institutions of contemporary society

(248)

When it comes to the stereotypical gender roles, it can also be useful to mention gender discourse as well. Ida Dolmer explains in her article that by giving men this electrical power, as some of them have, Alderman is building up a gender discourse and tears it apart again by introducing characters who resist this discourse. Alderman, then, by doing this, highlights the absurdity of contemporary Western gender discourse. She shows the problem in the system and the arbitrariness of gender made visible as the result of social construction (cf. Dolmer). Roxy’s older brothers were supposed to take over the family business as this was a job for strong men. However, after it becomes known that Roxy is the strongest one in the family, and thus one of the strongest in the world, she was the one who inherited the business after her father’s retirement. However, her older brother Darrell, along with their father, steals Roxy’s power and implants it into himself. This can be seen as an example of the aforementioned gender discourse as he actively goes against the notion that the power only belongs to women and it is stated that “he’s not a man in women’s clothing. He’s one of them, as strong as them, as capable” (Alderman 302). By doing this, he deconstructs the gender binary and illustrates that a gender identity is not determined by biology but is rather an active



choice we make (cf. Dolmer).

In order to understand feminist readings, such knowledge of what gender identity is, becomes crucial. This chapter has shown how the understanding of gender and thus gender roles can be reversed and how they are not natural in themselves, but rather constructed by ideology and the society. *The Power* also shows us, through a criticism on patriarchy, how gender does not matter when it comes to who has the power – it will always corrupt, no matter who has it. Violence also play a crucial role as a generator and tool for upholding power in this novel. It reveals that a social structure based on violence will always be destructive and saturates each of the characters' relationship – either on a micro or macro level. This kind of society will always be harmful, whether it is patriarchal or matriarchal. What Alderman warns us against in her novel is, then, that the fight against such power structures is not over and the victims of these kinds of social structures can easily be men, as she shows us through her matriarchy, and it thus reveals that it destructs all of us, and not just women.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has examined how the feminist dystopian novels *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Power* by Naomi Alderman problematize patriarchy by emphasising the different tools that are used to uphold and maintain power. The thesis focalises on violence and ideology, including language, religion and gender roles. It has further discussed how power always corrupts in societies based on the threat of violence.

Patriarchy is both concrete and abstract as ideological. The use of power in a patriarchal society will always take place in a framework of ideology. The concept of ideology can also be understood, as this thesis has shown, in what we consider as 'normal' or natural'. Nothing is normal in itself, but the normality is something we have learned throughout our lives. The novels have shown us that ideology is not stable and they use this concept to warn against our natural acceptance of it as something 'given'.

Language is related to ideology and has played a crucial role in both novels as a tool of power. The lack of communication and information in the Republic of Gilead is especially seen in the conversation between the handmaids. The government has given them certain acceptable phrases to use and any deviation from it is forbidden, which, as seen with George Orwell's newspeak, is done for the government to maintain absolute control over their mindset. Language also has to do with information and is seen through the propaganda that the government exercises. This lack of information and restricted language put upon the handmaids show us how much power that lays in language. When your language is restricted to a bare minimum, it will eventually result in an eradication of your own identity as well as you become unable to express yourself. The consequence of this will be a society based on separate groups and not individuals with their own identity, and the risk of rebellion is, then, minimised. This becomes an effective way for the government to uphold and maintain control over its people. Language and information are also seen in *The Power*, but in a quite different way. Here, information is widely spread over the internet making everyone around the world aware of what is happening and what other women do, which influences the viewers in doing the same. Mother of Eve, or Allie as her real name is, also uses the internet to spread out her preaches and to get more followers to convert to her new religion. This does not only reveal how much power that lays in information, but also shows the effectiveness and possible dangers with internet when information is quickly spread on a global scale, in addition to the large amount of it making it difficult to filter out what is true and what is not. We can understand from this that language, and thus, information, can be used as a tool of power,

either restricting the use of it as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, or to spread messages and expanding the number of followers in *The Power*.

It has also been clear that religion has played a crucial role in both novels. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, religion is used to justify why and how the establishment of Gilead has taken place and also in the way it treats women. The religion is used to advocate gender norms that upholds the notion of women's subordination to men. Many of the practises have been based directly from passages from the Bible, which emphasises how religion has influenced Gilead. *The Power*, on the other hand, uses religion in a different way where Allie has renamed herself Mother Eve and becomes the face of the new online religion. She explains that she is sent from God to save all the women which makes her more powerful. As mentioned in the thesis, religion helps create a 'false consciousness' as everything is explained as the will of God, making it more difficult to question the surroundings. This makes the novel's attention to religion relevant today as religion still plays a major role in people's lives.

As a critique of this justification, the novels call attention to the effectiveness of societal gender norms or gender roles. This is especially seen in *The Power* when it refutes the myth of women being tender and nurturing, and women at the top of the hierarchy would not make the world a better place and the inequality between the sexes will be as severe as it is in our own patriarchal society. We have also seen that the gender roles have been a part of the ideological notion where women have had to restrict their behaviour and their freedom due to the threat of violence. This makes us aware about the relationship between physical and structural power, and that a power structure based on the threat of violence, such as patriarchy, will always be harmful for the oppressed.

This thesis has also been trying to discuss the feminist aspects the novels portray. Even though Alderman is showing us that a matriarchal world would not be better than a patriarchal, she is still considered as a feminist as she explicitly presents the struggles women have had, and still have, to deal with in our own society, only with men as targets. She criticises ideological notions with, for example, women's fear of walking alone in the dark due to the threat of violence, and also through the oppression of women, their inequality to men and their restricted freedom. The novel's epilogue additionally reveals the difficulty women have struggled with for years when trying to publish their work under their own name. The novel ends with the quote by Naomi, asking Neil whether or not he has "considered publishing this book under a woman's name?" (Alderman 339), which emphasises the statement mentioned above. *The Handmaid's Tale* also offers some aspects of feminism, and

feminism as a tool of power is one of the reasons of why the novel was written in the first place. It functions as a narrative in ideology and shows that nothing is stable, even not power, which gives the readers hope in the fight against the patriarchal society. Even when forced to be silenced, Offred succeeds in making her story survive, and thus the story of other women as well, which can be seen as a small victory. *The Handmaid's Tale* also functions as a response to the second wave of feminism, especially shown in Offred's mother's participation in demonstrations about pornography and abortion rights. Her discussion with Offred reveals that the next generations cannot stop the feminists' fight. Both novels criticize the patriarchy and the ideology around us, and within the genre of dystopian novels, they function to warn the readers about the future and they comment on the aspects that are being taken for granted as an ideological construction.

As mentioned, Offred's success in telling her story can be seen as a feminist aspect in a society where women are silenced. This reveals the importance of narrative and narration, not only in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but in *The Power* as well. Both novels have embedded a form of 'historical proof' within their frame narrative that makes the readers interpreting the story in a certain way. Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* can be understood as an unreliable narrator because she draws on incorrect conclusions and assumptions of what really happened. She slips back and forth from present to past, and it sometimes becomes difficult for the reader to understand where we are in the timeline. Memories about the past are also not always trustworthy, and since we only see the establishment of Gilead through Offred's perspective, we cannot really know how it really was. Offred is the only narrator of the story, which gives us a single-minded view, while in *The Power*, on the other hand, the narration is divided into multiple characters. The chapters focalise on each of the characters telling about their experiences. However, they do not tell their stories themselves, as the story is a manuscript written by the male author Neil, which is revealed through the prologue and epilogue. *The Power* allows for more diverse perspectives, and gives us a broader understanding of the story and what really happened compared to the single perspective offered by Offred.

The aim of the thesis has been to investigate how different tools of power are incorporated in the two feminist dystopian novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* and how power works, both within ourselves as an ideological notion, and also the exterior power, meaning how the government uses its power to control its people. The novels function as a warning about the future and presents how the society would be like if we do not make any changes any time soon. They both bring up various forms of women's oppression in a

patriarchal society and criticize the imbedded ideology incorporated in it. Atwood and Alderman shows us through their works that the fight against patriarchy is not over yet, and we need to continue the fight. They show us that a power structure based on violence always corrupts and will be destructive, and by overturning these kinds of structures will benefit humanity as whole. Through the representation that ideology is something that is not stable, and that feminism is a kind of narrative within ideology, they reveal to the readers that there is still hope.

There are a lot of other interesting aspects in these two novels that are worth mentioning but were not able to fit in to this thesis. One possibility for further research could be to have a broader discussion on the genre of the novels, such as on regarding whether or not the genre of dystopia has become more relevant in today's society as it can help us think about possible scenarios and can be an eye-opener to how our world functions in the present moment. The genre thus offers a broader understanding on characteristics shown in our own society which is one of the reasons why it has increased in popularity in the last couple of years. Reading dystopian fiction can, then, help us create a better future as it makes us aware of the issues in our contemporary society which can lead us to changing them for the better. Some of the issues that this genre raise are government and technological control, environmental destruction, survival and loss of individualism – which are all imbedded in these two novels investigated in this thesis. A deeper investigation on how *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* incorporate these issues could be an interesting aspect.

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