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GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN FEMINIST DYSTOPIA:
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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**Gender Performativity in Feminist Dystopia:
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

**Feminist Distopyada Toplumsal Cinsiyet Performatifliđi:
Margaret Atwood'un *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü***

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ABSTRACT

The main theme of this thesis is the performative basis of the gender roles in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. By taking Butler's theory of performativity in gender debates as the main theory for this thesis, I will examine the critiques against canonical assumptions of feminism, which adopts a modernist idea of universality with essentialist assumptions, ignoring the performative and plural dimensions in gendered situations. By categorizing Butler as a postmodern feminist theorist, I will show how Butler argues against the universalist and essentialist binary concepts such as male and female or man and woman, since these concepts result in exclusion and marginalization of the non-normative identities. Thus, she aims to create a new understanding of feminism and subject, which will consist of excluded individuals with a pluralist perspective. With the theory of performativity, Butler redefines gender as the norm and argues that, rather than representation, we construct social reality. In this thesis, I will apply Butler's theory to Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* which can be taken as an example for a feminist dystopian fiction, that shows the performative constructions of gender identities.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Feminism, Performativity, Dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*

ÖZET

Bu tezin ana teması, Margaret Atwood'un *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü* isimli eserindeki toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin performatif temelidir. Butler'ın toplumsal cinsiyet tartışmalarında performatiflik teorisini bu tez için ana teori olarak alarak, modernist bir evrensellik fikrini özcü varsayımlarla benimseyen, toplumsal olarak cinsiyetlendirilmiş kimliklerde performatif ve çoğul boyutları görmezden gelen feminizmin kanonik varsayımlarına yönelik eleştirilerini inceleyeceğim. Butler'ı postmodern feminist teorisyen olarak sınıflandırarak, erkek ve kadın gibi evrenselci ve özcü ikili kavramlara karşı olan tartışmasını sunacağım, çünkü bu kavramlar normatif olmayan kimliklerin dışlanması ve marjinalleştirilmesi ile sonuçlanmaktadır. Böylelikle, Butler çoğulcu bir bakış açısıyla dışlanmış bireylerden oluşacak yeni bir feminizm ve özne anlayışı oluşturmayı hedeflemektedir. Butler, performatiflik teorisiyle toplumsal cinsiyeti norm olarak yeniden tanımlar ve temsilden ziyade sosyal gerçekliği inşa ettiğimizi iddia eder. Bu tezde, Butler'ın teorisini, Atwood'un toplumsal cinsiyet kimliklerinin performatif inşalarını gösteren feminist distopik bir kurguya örnek alınabilecek *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü* adlı romanı ile ilişkilendireceğim.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER: Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Feminizm, Performatiflik, Distopya, *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü*

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian fiction describing an isolated order in which fertile healthy women are made mere properties for reproduction in the Gilead Republic caste system, where women are assigned to give birth as service for the senior families, who cannot have children. Gilead is ruled by an oppressive regime with a patriarchal system. In this system, women are harshly marginalized. If they say words or do actions against the norms imposed by Gilead, they are sentenced to harsh punishment or death. With predetermined roles and uniforms, women's identities are also extremely standardized. The social caste system in Gilead follows the suppressive regulations of gender roles to make women deprived of their freedom. In chapter 1, this thesis begins by examining the effects of oppressive and sexist policies of Gilead on the individuals and how its totalitarian policies form a unified society. Basically, I will try to analyse the gendered identities of the characters fictionalized in Gilead.

Gender is a concept that cannot determine the position of men and women with the biological characteristics of individuals, yet it is attributed to sexes by society and traditions. "Gender is socially constructed and a result of sociocultural influences throughout an individual's development."¹ While sex refers to biology, gender refers to the meaning attributed to the male and female by society. Gender includes the social differences beyond biological differences. Biological male and female traits are seen as innate characteristics, whereas masculinity and femininity are built by society. In the context of the notion of gender, biological difference is transformed into social difference. Thus, different social identities are constructed for men and women and they create gender identities with the normative values. With the normative principles

¹ Jamie A. Gruman, Frank W. Schneider and Larry M. Coutts, *Applied Social Psychology: Understanding and Addressing Social and Practical Problems*, (CA: Sage Publications, 2005).

of femininity and masculinity, social expectations are imposed on individuals through various roles. The thoughts, attitudes and behaviours of both women and men are shaped according to these expectations, and individuals form their gender identities accordingly. Gender identity allows the formation of behaviour patterns and norms, and defines the roles of femininity and masculinity. Thus, social normative structures related to the role of women and men are significant factors in the formation of gender identity.

The social processes involved in both the formation and the maintenance of identity are determined by the social structure. Conversely, the identities produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness and social structure react upon the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or even reshaping it.²

All kinds of social codes, traditions, beliefs and discourses attributed to being female or male are the elements that build the individual's gender identities. For this reason, Judith Butler suggests understanding gender as a norm regarding femininity and masculinity. Our gender identity is not something that exists within us as something we express and reflect. On the contrary, it is an identity acquired over time through the stylized repetition of actions. Butler calls this acquirement as the performativity of gender. Butler's concept of performativity suggests that we construct social reality rather than representing it. According to this, meaning is reconstructed in a different way each time through performativity. Butler applies this performativity to gender. Accordingly, gender is a performative practice, and prohibitions and norms form the gendered subjects.

Hence, the thesis will also focus on the performativity of individuals through gender-based identity construction. In the light of Butler's theory, I will examine the

² Peter Ludwig Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, (England: Penguin Books, 1991), 194.

gender issues in Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. In order to determine the conceptual basis of the issues, it is useful to explain some individual and social situations that function in the construction of gender and the notions that express these situations.

The main things to be considered about the notions are gender identity, social norms, gender and sex. As these notions problematize the representation of women, I will also introduce a brief history of feminist movements. The reason is that the problem of representation mirrors the historical facts about the oppression of women. Afterwards, I will introduce the feminist movements together with the corresponding theoretical works, I will trace the marks of the feminist aspects in the novel. As one of the main debates of feminism, I intend to clarify some of the dichotomies such as gender and biological sex, male and female, culture and nature. To understand these dualities, it is necessary to analyse how and in what way the biology of male and female is interpreted by society, and how gender identity is constructed and reconstructed in a continuous process of social interpretation.

In terms of reflecting gender identity construction and gender issues, I will examine the genre feminist dystopia. The feminist dystopia, which emerged at the end of the twentieth century, is the narrative that puts women in the focus and criticizes the male-dominated order. I will explore the place of the gender debates in feminist dystopia and introduce the elements that make the novel dystopian. In the novel, we see a dystopian universe, in which fertility rates decrease due to the environmental disasters, and children are born unhealthy, and with physical disabilities. In this world, women are regarded as commodities that have lost all their rights, gaining a status in the society only with their fertility. As a feminist dystopia, the novel emphasizes the inequalities in society, the oppression of women, and yet the need for liberating change. We can then ask how this need triggers the characters to resist against the sexist policies to change the order. I will question whether the feminist dystopia provides a form of

resistance as the genre enables us to imagine an alternative reality, where women are not stuck in their traditional roles of inequality.

Dystopia is fed by utopia the fears and hopes of life itself. Dystopian writing images a society that is formed on false and twisted perceptions of societal conceptions. Characters find themselves in dangerous situations due to the dominance and formation of the masculine dystopia in which they are doomed to live and suffer. This formation of a society affects the characters' progress. Therefore, it is seen that the projection of female protagonists in dystopias reform gradually from past to the present time in literature in a positive way.³

Thus, the dystopian society shown in the novel, on the one hand, displays critical approaches, on the other hand, suggests examples of social and political creativity through successful resistance and alternative society. This position allows the novel to be considered as an idea of better society shaped by a feminist approach against totalitarian societies created by the excessive patriarchy. I will ask how an alternative reality is possible, what the feminist dystopia aims at and in what ways this novel is a feminist dystopia.

In chapter 2, I will refer to Butler's theory of performativity to understand the reason for the resistance of the characters against gender norms. With this theory, I will point out that the characters actually just perform the roles assigned to them. The main characters mirror the notion of performativity in a way that they represent gendered acts. I will analyse how this theory is embodied in the novel and how the characters symbolize it. In this sense, this thesis mainly reveals the notion of gender performativity by the way of the main characters with the question of how gender is constituted and perceived. Does the society or sex determine the traits of these characters? Which one prevails over their identity? These questions lead us to Judith

³ Gökçe Doğan Şaltan, *The Representation of Women in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Dystopias*, (MA Thesis, Istanbul University, 2019), 7.

Butler's criticism on gender roles imposed by the society. She supports the fact that one cannot simply 'be' a man or woman but a performer as they play a key role as stereotypes reflecting the societal norms. By challenging societal norms, she intends to redefine gender and feminism, criticizing the constraints of feminism. Therefore, her attempt to deconstruct the classical views of feminism is regarded "as a provocative intervention to feminist theory and one of the basic texts of queer theory."⁴ According to Butler, the classical view causes to exclude people who are not regarded as subjects and who do not meet the expectations of being a subject in the heteronormative plane. Therefore, Butler explores the possibility of a feminist discussion without owning universal concepts such as "subject" and "representation".

Butler, who criticizes the classical understanding of feminism, proposes an alternative path with her theory. I will evaluate to what extent Butler's understanding of feminism provides a solution to her criticism. In chapter 3, I will examine Butler's broader and critical understanding of feminism. Criticizing classical feminism, Butler questions the idea of universality in feminism. She argues against the universal category of woman and suggests that "the universal conception of a person (...) is displaced as a point of departure for a social theory of gender by those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts."⁵ Contrary to classical feminism, Butler, who wants to bring also ethnic, religious and sexual identities into the forefront; for this reason I will interpret Butler's position as a postmodern feminist view. According to this view, taking a universal basis on gender causes ignoring many other differences. As the postmodernist view has a critical attitude towards categorization and homogenization, I will apply this approach to the novel which critically focuses on an

⁴ Büşra Çınar, "A Performative View of Gender Roles: Judith Butler", *International Journal of Media Culture and Literature Year*, 2018, 54.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 10.

attempt to make the society standard and uniform. In this way, I will point out the elements that make the novel a postmodern feminist novel.

Overall, via the interpretation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, my thesis aims to show how oppressive gender roles rely on performative acts, rather than essentialist definitions, and how such performativity opens possibilities of resistance for the liberation of women with feminist perspectives.

CHAPTER ONE

GENDER DEFINITIONS IN THE GENRE OF FEMINIST DYSTOPIA: MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Sex does not only have a definition on a biological basis referring to the biological features. For the individual, sex begins to gain meaning as a social category from the first years of life. The bodily difference expressed as biological sex is also related to gender. Then, we can ask how to define gender differences in society? Are the differences between men and women regulated physically or socially? In fact, this question is where we question the definition of gender categorized as masculinity and femininity. As a result of the categorization, gender difference as the binary of man and woman represents also inequality and discrimination. Feminists claim that there is an ambiguity in gender differences, and they question the views on gender roles as natural and unchangeable. They criticize mostly not the biological differences themselves but the social effects of gender differences in social relationships.

In this chapter, I will introduce different views on feminist perspectives, and gender issues in the feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which narrates a dystopian society with gender discriminations due to power differences in gender relations. Gender issues in feminist dystopia will be indeed the core theme of this chapter. Herein, I will also focus on the concept of feminist dystopia in reference to gender-based social relationships. Under the heading of dystopia, I will discuss the following questions: What are the characteristics of dystopia and how can we associate this genre on the basis of gender in the novel? The main reason for incorporating *The Handmaid's Tale* into the feminist dystopia with the basis of gender is the use of fertile women as Handmaids in the novel. Within the gender-based dystopia, not only women but also men who are not high-ranking are subjected to a lot of violations due to gender discriminations.

Along with the gender-based definitions, I will examine how feminist dystopia forms a basis in “the Gileadan society” where oppressive regulations dominate over gender relations. The most prominent features of dystopian societies are the destruction of democracy, the spread of the totalitarian order, the deterioration of the ecological balance, and the endangerment of the human generation with the increase of diseases, especially infertility. Women are regarded as a marginal group with strictly defined gender roles. From a feminist perspective, I will focus on the structures of power and oppression in the Gilead regime, and the mechanisms of resistance against it. I will also introduce the feminist aspects together with the reasons why feminist dystopia is categorized as a genre in this novel. This chapter tries to clarify the role of the novel for discussing gender issues under three questions: How do we examine this novel as an example of feminist dystopia? How does this novel relate to gender definitions? How can we interpret this novel as a feminist novel?

1.1. GENDER DEFINITIONS WITH FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Diverse authors of feminist theory have questioned common values and oppressive social norms regarding the issues of the patriarchal community with the strict gender roles. Specifically in the 1960s and the 1970s, the development of feminism gained acceleration in every field of life such as politics, work, family, culture and so on. Three waves which scholars and feminists categorized as social movements played crucial role. Actually, the feminist movements were separated by three waves, starting from 1792. Yet, the first wave of feminism became evident in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it was about fighting for the freedoms and equality for women in the political representation, especially for the right of voting. One of the prominent names of this period is Mary Wollstonecraft and her work is *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In line with the demands of this work, the content of the first wave was affected. About Wollstonecraft, González states:

... been the first woman thinker in posing the issue of women's subordination in terms of gender, or, so to speak, in using gender as a category of analysis, thus suspending patriarchal discourses on the essential and immanent weakness of female subjectivity and rationality.⁶

While maintaining the demands of the first wave, the “second wave” of feminism which claimed for women's position to be at the forefront not only in political representation but in all areas, especially in public space, such as in having equal existence and visibility in education and workplace. The second wave, in the 1960s, became more concerned with revealing also the distinctions between women's sexuality and fertility in order to liberate women from the strict roles of motherhood at home and lead them more towards workplace. The third-wave feminism, also while maintaining the main demands of the previous waves, raised further critical questions in the early 1990s as a reaction against the practices of second-wave feminism. These practices were related to a universal understanding of femininity. The third wave movement argued that women's issues are diverse due to the differences of race, religion, class and sexual orientation among women.

Overall, during these waves, the awareness of women's movement created an echo in everywhere. The activities like festivities and marches gave a rise and had an impact on the studies of women in intellectual field and encouraged women to write more about women. With the increase in the participation of women in the intellectual field, discussions and analyses on gender roles also increased. Debates on whether gender roles are based on sex or society have been raised. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, questioning gender roles in society: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”⁷ The reason is that biology does not specify a

⁶ Matilde Martín González, “Mary Wollstonecraft and ‘The Vindication of The Rights of Woman’: Postmodern Feminism vs. Masculine Enlightenment”, *Atlantis* 19, no. 2, 177–83, 1997, 180. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41055470>.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier, (United States: Vintage Books, 2011), 283.

woman. Her role is obtained from the patriarchal society. A woman is not born inactive, secondary and insignificant, but all the pressures in the outside world have come together to try to make her that way. Thus, in Beauvoir, we find an approach defining gender difference with social structure rather than biological structure, i.e., an understanding of social difference of gender instead of biological difference of sex.

The term *sex* refers to the biological aspect of being male or female. The term *gender* refers to the meanings and expectations that society and culture impose on being a woman or a man. The definition of gender also includes the social definition of men and women because it determines men and women's position and behaviour in society. In this sense, the concept of gender is society-based. The basic premises that exist in the formation of gender are cultural factors beyond the biological sex. Individuals defined as men and women have gained an identity with the roles imposed by the society with a set of duties and responsibilities assigned to them, and have started to live in a socio-cultural reality based on physical determinants. As the feminist sociologist Ann Oakley, who incorporated the concept of gender into sociology, introduces the anthropologists' reports about defining gender in different cultures in *Sex, Gender and Society* published in 1972:

Every society uses biological sex as a criterion for the ascription of gender, but, beyond that simple starting point, no two cultures would agree completely on what distinguishes one gender from the other. Needless to say, every society believes that its own definitions of gender correspond to the biological duality of sex. Culturally, therefore, one finds the same biological distinctions between male and female co-existing with great variations in gender roles.⁸

Societal expectations about behaviour assumed appropriate for a gender member do not refer to physical attributes that make men or women different from one another. Instead, they refer to socially constructed characteristics about masculinity and

⁸ Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society*, (United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 115.

femininity. Humans are born with a male or a female sex, however, they grow up by learning to be a girl or a boy in the framework of the socialization process and the roles that society expects specific to their gender. After being labelled as a girl or boy by the society, children begin to learn and acquire the cultural meanings of gender. The cultural meanings of gender are seen as gender roles. Behaviours regarded as acceptable for a man are called masculine, and behaviours regarded as acceptable for women are called feminine. As Stone suggests:

If one satisfies social expectations about what is appropriate for female (or male) individuals, then one is feminine (or masculine). So we can also say that gender consists of social ideas and expectations about what femininity and masculinity consist in, or about what traits someone must display in order to count as feminine and masculine. These ideas about femininity and masculinity are organised by a higher-level expectation that feminine and masculine behaviours and traits are appropriate, respectively, for members of the female and male sex. There is a higher-level expectation that females should be feminine, males masculine.⁹

While the concept of sex is mostly explained with biological approaches, the concept of gender is accepted as a category of social status that determines the roles of the individual. However, the gender difference is attributed by some views to the biological characteristics of the body. At this point, the issue of gender-related attitudes and behaviours makes us question indeed the nature vs culture dichotomy. Paglia states that innate structural features are effective in shaping gender-related behaviours as Paglia considers gender and sexual identities as a subset of nature. Paglia, who does not ignore the effect of the social structure, nevertheless argues that nature is still dominant, states that women and men are under the pressure of their natural beings. In general, nature plays an important role in shaping attitudes related to gender.¹⁰ About

⁹ Alison Stone, *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*, (United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2007), 30.

¹⁰ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 13-15.

the sex/gender distinction, Alison Jaggar suggests: “there is no line between nature [sex] and culture [gender].”¹¹ To Jaggar, it is irrational to state that social regulation is not impacted by biology. Taking human as nature, Jaggar questions where bodily reality is placed against the claim of social structure from a feminist perspective. Sex coming from birth and forming on biological differences, is interpreted depending on the culture existing in the society over time, and the expectations of the society from women and men are shaped accordingly. We are classified as male or female, and society has some expectations from us due to our embodied existence according to these categories. However, the concept of the natural body and natural 'gender' itself becomes questionable if we accept the body as a cultural condition.

If it is essential to examine the formation of gender roles in the individual life process, the basic questions are: How do gender roles develop? How is it related to sex? People are socialized to perform the gender roles that correlate to the biological sex (for example, by behaving in ways accepted appropriate for their gender). Considering sex and gender duality, there are many views on which theorists argue. For example, in response to the arguments distinguishing gender from sex, Butler claims that sex is also assigned by gender at birth. Butler's views are interpreted as deconstructing and distinct as she expresses that gender and sex are essentially separate and are both constructed by culture.

In order to examine the place of women in society and gender roles, and to raise awareness by revealing and analysing them, I will discuss the feminist dystopia as a literary basis. To understand the purpose of feminist dystopia, I will explain that the movement encourages writings that criticize gender roles and patriarchal order. First of all, I will clarify what the definition of feminist dystopia is, when it emerges. Then, I will explain how dystopia contains hopelessness and hope at the same time, through

¹¹ Alison Jagar, "Human Biology in Feminist Theory: Sexual Equality Reconsidered", in Carol C. Gould (ed.) *Beyond Domination: New Perspectives on Women and Philosophy*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1984), 21-42.

the main character Offred, and analyse how she turns her hopeless story into a story of resistance.

1.2. GENDER DEFINITIONS IN FEMINIST DYSTOPIA

To lay the foundation for the analysis, this section intends to clarify the term female-focused ‘dystopia’ in the literary context and introduces the elements of feminist dystopia in the novel. The word *dystopia* was firstly used by John Stuart Mill in 1868 when he criticized British policies in parliament. With this speech, the journey of dystopia continues until today. Mill took the concept as *a bad place* and stated so in his political speech:

It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or caco-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favor is too bad to be practicable.¹²

The etymology of the concept gives us clues about the definition of this genre. Dystopia is derived from the combination of the Greek prefix “*dys-* (bad)” and the word “*topos* (place)” and means “bad place”. Thus, it appears in many subgenres of literature and is used to highlight the socio-economic, political, technological problems of society.

Regarding the social issues, feminist literature has developed with the influence of the second wave women's movement, leading towards the third way with the gay liberation movement (and later the LGBTIQ+ movement), ecological problems and struggles, and other social developments since the 1960s. With this development, in

¹² John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XXVIII – Public and Parliamentary Speeches Part I* November 1850 –ed. Bruce L. Kinzer and John L. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 88, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/mill-the-collected-works-of-john-stuart-mill-volume-xxviii-public-andparliamentary-speeches-part-i>.

feminist dystopias, the concept of androgyny meaning that bodies are sexually, physically, spiritually and socially similar or that both sexes are carried in the same body, has taken an important place in the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, women writers write many utopias and dystopias about anarchist, socialist, ecologist, matriarchal, lesbian, androgynous/queer societies that criticize the patriarchal order. Among the best-known authors in the genre are Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree Jr, Monique Wittig, Sally Miller Gearharts, and Suzy McKee Charnas. In feminist dystopias, there are worlds in which the patriarchal system is sharpened; women are kept away from the social/political sphere, their bodies are controlled; oppression, discrimination and violence prevail; thus, inviting the reader to struggle with patriarchal structures in real life. Feminist dystopian literary works are written with the aim of bringing up issues concerning gender-based inequalities in society through new linguistic expressions, original terms, and subtext references.

Dystopian novels take a significant place in the literature; they provide us with new ways to examine social issues such as oppressive social rules, scarcity, political opinions, power and religious oppression, patriarchy, disasters and likewise. On the one hand, the genre stands for a danger for the future in general. On the other hand, it also imposes hope for the future. The reason is that every struggle is worth striving for a good result. The concepts of hope and fear are intertwined in dystopias because of the intention of changing the situation for a better world. The possibility of escaping from such a horrible world gives the literary characters power of struggle and the situation turns into hope whenever characters take an action. As Martin-Lucas defined:

[...] although dystopia is most often considered a pessimistic and depressive mode of writing, this is in fact a genre of hope: after all, there is life beyond

the apocalypse and, even more importantly, dystopic fiction's cautionary tales signal the ways to prevent it happening.¹³

Dystopic works aim to wake readers on time and warn that if this wake-up call is not heeded, it will be late. As Atwood states, "Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it."¹⁴ Considering that literary works bear the traces of the period they are written, feminist dystopias the author's point of view and the events of the period. While determining how the individual and society will be positioned and how the political union will be organized in the society of the future, the author is impacted by the political mechanisms and social and economic relations of the period. For instance, Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in West Berlin in 1984, when the Berlin wall was not yet demolished. She tells about those years:

The Soviet empire was still strongly in place, and was not to crumble for another five years. Every Sunday the East German Air Force made sonic booms to remind us of how close they were. During my visits to several countries behind the Iron Curtain — Czechoslovakia, East Germany — I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing. So did the repurposed buildings. "This used to belong to . . . but then they disappeared." I heard such stories many times.¹⁵

It is an involuntary expression of her portraying such a future, writing a dystopia, under the influence of the period in which she lived. Raffaella Baccolini states: "Only by

¹³ Belen Martin-Lucas, "Dystopic Urbanities Civilian Cyborgs in Trans Canadian Speculative Fictions", *Literature and the Global City: Reshaping the English Canadian Imaginary*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 69.

¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 66.

¹⁵ Eleni Kalorkoti, "Margaret Atwood on What *The Handmaid's Tale* Means in the Age of Trump", *The New York Times*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html>

considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape such a dark future”.¹⁶ Thus, this genre is viewed as a powerful method to forewarn the probable danger and create awareness for people to take a precaution. Keith Booker also defines the genre in *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*:

...literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. Dystopian literature generally also constitutes of a critique of existing social conditions or political systems.¹⁷

As an example of social conditions, the futuristic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* introduces a criticism for patriarchy regarding the women as inferior positions as if they are fertile machines. In this context, my focus will be based on how feminist dystopia enables us to observe female empowerment although women are faced difficulties. The reason is that this situation reveals the struggle and power of women as Anton states: “It is important to highlight the fact that they are dystopias, because this genre has moved the novel to extreme situations which clearly show how female characters achieve power in order to survive in suppressive worlds.”¹⁸ The price for women's survival in such a terrible world is to subject and admit being marginalized and otherhood. “It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something bom.”¹⁹

Categorized as a feminist dystopia, the work focuses on the oppression of women who can give birth to the population policies of the dominant regime and

¹⁶ Rafaella Baccolini, “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction”, PMLA, (119), 2004, 520. Access: 21 May 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486067>

¹⁷ Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁸ Anton Leire Martin, *Female Empowerment in Feminist Dystopias and Young Adults' Literature*, (MA Thesis, Universidad De La Rioja, 2018), 31.

¹⁹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 49.

deprivation of their freedom. For instance, Atwood creates a terrible dystopia in a world which environmental pollution devastates nature, women lose all power and become a slave. They are slaves in terms of being a baby making machine, an incubator, an object. In feminist dystopias, in the face of patriarchy, women's individuality is taken away, and women only bear children to survive for the state. They do not have the right to have a voice over their own bodies. In the totalitarian world order, which is entirely dominated by men, three roles are assigned to women: If they can give birth, they are sent to the wealthy families who cannot have a child. If their reproductive organs do not function, they will be sent to the colonies where they work with hard-labour, or they will be sent to the place of Jezebel where are used as prostitutes if they do not obey to the rules. The right to choose these roles is given to government. The slightest opposition will result in torture and death. Feminist dystopia mirrors the patriarchal order's tendency to violence in such uses of women's bodies. In the next section, I will introduce the elements that make the novel dystopian, and how I relate these elements with the novel from a feminist perspective.

1.3. DYSTOPIC ASPECTS OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* WITH FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

In this section, the novel as a dystopic fiction will be the focal point in the light of power, oppression, the relationship between individual and society and other related concepts. I will trace bad, sick or abnormal conditions which eventually give rise to a dystopian society as the definition of dystopia:

In dystopian works, a world is created where there are frightening and restrictive regimes, where people survive in difficult conditions, where

oppression, violence, disease, pollution and poverty are represented and individual freedoms are eliminated.²⁰

I will introduce several themes make the novel dystopian according to its definition. The main ones are the social hierarchy and the regime of repression and other features revolving around the characters. The notions of power and oppression are also important factors to regard the novel as dystopia. Accordingly, these factors are highly mentioned and defined in the academic studies. According to Foucault:

Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiply of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; [and] as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengths or reverses them.²¹

As Deacon states: “One of the most salient characteristics of Foucault’s understanding of modern disciplinary networks of power is that they constitute individuals as subjects; but far from denying subjects’ capacity to think and act freely and to resist, relations of power make critique, agency and resistance possible.”²² Foucault did not consider power only as a mechanism produced by the state.

We can also talk about oppression at the point where there are intimidating and restrictive regimes, people continue their lives under difficult conditions, and individual freedoms are constrained. Especially, women deal with the oppression and fear that emerged in the Gilead’s society with the take-over of the country's theocratic rules in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This totalitarian state has control mechanisms based on the dictatorial ideologies, gender inequality and oppression. The rules point out the

²⁰ Ejder Çelik, “Social Fiction in Dystopian Novel”, *Journal of Sociology Research*, 18 (1), 2015, 58-79.

²¹ Michel Foucault, Meaghan Morris, and Paul Patton, *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, (Sydney, Australia: Feral Publications, 1979), 89.

²² Roger Deacon, "Strategies of Governance Michel Foucault on Power", *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 92 (1998): 113-48. Accessed May 15, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41802104>.

effect of the constraints on social life, the inability of the society to resist against oppression and cruelty, and how the oppressive regime reproduces itself with its power. In a regime where oppression is so severe, besides the fact that women do not have the right to speak their own word, the insignificance and the secondary status of women are fixed by law. In this sense, Offred's realization of oppression, rebuilding of herself despite the mechanisms of power, and regaining her freedom in an organized structure change the direction of the novel.

Based on this framework, the novel can be evaluated with the themes of oppression, power and resistance. In the novel, power is exercised first on the female body. There is a decrease in birth rates and an increase in infertility due to the environmental problems, and accordingly, the population in the upper structure in the caste system is endangered. As a result, it appears that the female body is dominated by the regime. The state governs people's lives through the use of power on female body, and uses the female body for its own purpose and interest. It approaches the human body as a machine. This approach encompasses all policies involving the representation of the body, how many children to bear, and population and family planning. As a result, social norms become more and more important than the legal system, especially for women.

Contrary to the meaning attributed to women by social norms, the definition of woman is not just the product of a gender categorization. This definition is affected by many social, economic, religious and political elements of the cultural phenomena of societies. In order to analyse this dystopian novel, which also examines the individual's resistance to society, or the conflict between individual values and social values, it is essential to analyse the society's perception of women. Society and social theories should be reconstructed by revealing the prejudices of existing theories one by one in order to improve the situation of women, who are regarded as objects trapped by social meanings in the novel. At this point, the dystopian society gives an opportunity to question the understanding of management, the patriarchal social order and the theories

the government have created in the name of women. This understanding of order generally results in the suppression of women.

Women's oppression is the result of a historical development and cultural phenomena of societies. In order to understand what feminism is, which is defined as a way of defending a doctrine that aims expanding women's role and rights in society, we need to know the position of women in social history. One of the important aims of this part of the study is to reveal the social reflection of feminism in women's novels. Particularly in the dystopic novel society, the desire for a subjective and free identity for women, their struggle with the patriarchal system, and their suppression by the dominant culture are all revealed even if the way society is governed is surrounded by the strictest rules. The rules are based on the violation of private life, interfering with the smallest behaviour of every individual in society, their daily choices, the decisions they make, as in Gilead. This is the way women are forever excluded from the real world. As Hintringer stated:

Dystopian governments often take the liberty of intruding into the most private aspects of its citizens' lives, thus creating the impression of having to be on alert constantly. It is this inability to go about privacy that constitutes the real notion of terror here – the feeling of never being able to escape, the all-consuming helplessness that intrudes is what eventually breaks the mind of the majority of dystopian citizens.²³

Overall, in this section, I tried to show how a dystopian society exercises power and oppression through regulating gender relations. In the section 1.1, I attempted first to define gender concepts. I introduced various feminist perspectives on these definitions. I introduced how Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir and other major feminist theorists dealt with the concepts of gender and gender differences. About

²³ Michaela Hintringer. *Dystopian Regimes in Suzanne Collins' The Hunger Games and George Orwell's 1984*, (Vienna: Universitat Wien, 2011), 12.

gender differences, I discussed the society's point of view on women and compared the impact of biological and social issues on the definition of gender. I introduced opposing views of the feminist theorists on the nature vs. culture dichotomy, and the feminist movements before focusing on the feminist dystopia in literature. I explained how the movements had an impact on feminist literature in general. In the section 1.2, I focused more on the definition and the aim of dystopia. Then, in the section 2.3, I tried to clarify how the dystopia genre exists in *The Handmaid's Tale* with a feminist perspective. The purpose of the discussion in 1.3 was to examine the dystopic and feminist aspects in *The Handmaid's Tale*. I revealed how necessary conditions for the existence of feminist dystopia are created; for instance, how Gilead sets an example as a male-dominated, theocratic, and totalitarian society. Here, I referred to Foucault's concepts of power and oppression, which are significant themes of dystopia in the novel. Yet, along with these themes, I also pointed at the position of women in their struggle for existence and resistance in all circumstances of surveillance with strict rules.

In order to question gender categories and to understand the resistance of women in feminist dystopia, in the next chapter, I will refer to Butler's approach to the dichotomy of nature and culture. Considering the characters in the novel, they are all expected to perform in line with the expectation of society in Gilead. We see that the characters actually perform the gender roles at the highest level of rigidity and yet develop their position of resistance together with these performances. Hence, to analyse such a point of performativity, I believe that Butler's performativity theory will make individuals' resistance to these expectations more understandable. According to this theory, we are assigned a gender category at birth, and a set of expectations for that gender follow. Men and women take on roles as performances by the imposition of society. Individuals have sexual identities that they have acquired over the years. In Chapter 2, I will discuss how the theory is embodied in *The Handmaid's Tale* after discussing Butler's views on defining gender and sex. Eventually, I will point towards the possibilities of resistance that the characters create.

CHAPTER TWO

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

I will analyse Butler's term, *performativity* at the forefront under this chapter. It is essential to be clear about the definition of performativity as I will examine how the term relates to *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the preface of the book *Gender Trouble*, Butler defines performativity as “not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.”²⁴ Claiming that gender is an act, Butler emphasizes that only because the category of man and woman is marked as gender, one has to pretend to construct an identity instead of representing one's reality. She suggests that cultural norms reproduce limited categories such as masculine and feminine and attempts to denaturalize gender roles.

Along with the definition of performativity, I will indicate the focal points of the theory imposed on individuals by the society of Gilead and individuals' resistance against the norms. I will also analyse the journey of loss of their identities as the society evolves into a totalitarian regime. I intend to clarify the regime's effort to standardize individuals through symbols, such as dressing according to the category they belong to and losing even their names. In the system of Gilead, which is more difficult for women, their existence depends only on their ability to give birth. Thus, I will also examine the performativity assigned to individuals through motherhood and sexuality. Motherhood is not a choice for women, but a struggle for survival. In this struggle, we question the situation: are our bodies gendered or biological? It is important and necessary to understand the context in which Judith Butler's performative theory takes

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 15.

place in *The Handmaid's Tale* about gender and sex. About the distinction, Butler suggests:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.²⁵

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women perform “a set of repeated acts” as the state carry out masculine laws. They are regarded as the Handmaids that government plans to raise fertility. As Gilead is ruled by a dystopian totalitarian society, the government take control the way of women’s behaviours, ideas and appearances. They neglect women’s independence and rights in a gender-based social caste system. Gilead, which symbolizes suppression for women, is ruled by law of conservative regime and this totalitarian regime puts a limit to the individuals’ freedom to decide, specifically for women. The Handmaids perform the roles assigned to them in order to survive. As Butler’s definition for performativity, the gendered subject comes into being by applying to a set of prohibitions, limits and norms. Thus, these actions form the core of the characters about how to behave, dress and talk. In here, there is actually no identity. I will introduce the construction of the characters' identities and approaches to the concepts of sexuality and motherhood. Also, I will refer to Foucault’s concept of biopolitics to help us understand better how power system impacts on individuals’ bodies and lives.

The questions under this chapter are: What does Butler's theory point to? How do we justify this theory in the novel? What are the gender issues in the novel besides

²⁵ Ibid., 43.

this theory? In the light of these questions, I will examine the extent to which the characters in the novel adapt to the term performativity. Also, I will introduce Butler's views on gender and sex. According to Butler, there is no difference between sex and gender. One is not a justification for the other. There is only gender as a performative practice. According to Butler, the performativity that establishes gender also ensures us to overturn it. In this sense, I will discuss how Butler's theory intends to overturn gender roles and leads a way for us to analyse the Handmaid's resistance against the social norms.

2.1. THE NOTION OF PERFORMATIVITY IN JUDITH BUTLER

Judith Butler's studies revealing the performative structure of gender form the theoretical basis of the thesis. In order to examine how Butler's gender theory proposes performativity as an alternative path to feminism, it is necessary to outline Butler's gender theory. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler starts by criticizing the exclusionary attitude of the categorical approach through feminism. Butler dealt with the categorization to define the subject by transforming into representation in gender studies. According to Butler, since the woman is not a permanent and consistent entity as a subject, representations fall into the mistake of an approach that restricts the subject. In order to be accepted as a "subject", the necessity of complying with the criteria of political and linguistic determination has led to the criticism of feminism in itself. That's why Butler asks: "Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? And is not such a reification precisely contrary to feminist aims?"²⁶ Here, Butler criticizes feminism for contradicting itself. Also, she questions the subject as a representation: "Perhaps, paradoxically, "representation" will be shown to make sense

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

for feminism only when the subject of “women” is nowhere presumed.”²⁷ Therefore, Butler's feminism is a feminism in which basic concepts such as the subject and gender are questioned.

Butler does not attribute any natural or necessary essence to gender. She explains gender as a type of social performance without referring to a biological essence. This claim does not reveal that the anatomical or the biological are unnatural. What is meant is that we need to see the bodily difference, which is expressed as biological sex, is actually determined by the social one. She points out the fact that sex is a cultural construct as much as gender, and perhaps even from the very beginning, sex itself is gender, so the distinction may be a misconception. Butler does not distinguish between sex and gender, arguing that what is called sex is nothing but gender. She discusses gender categories and avoids fixing sexuality to a certain core. She opposes the regulative categories of sexuality. Butler rejects “naturally” ascribed categories, legitimizing the binary understanding of gender. Accordingly, she suggests that there are not only two categories as male and female. Butler regards sex not as an expression of what a person is, but as what a person does. It is a constantly changing situation that is shaped as a result of many structural and environmental factors. For this reason, Butler questions what sex or gender is and whether they were defined before:

Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence

²⁷ Ibid., 9.

that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.²⁸

Butler does not set sex apart from gender as she considers gender as a mechanism that establishes sexes. While drawing attention to the distinction, she also examines the historicity of gender. Butler emphasizes time in the construction of gender categories, arguing that gender and sex do not exist prior to discourse. According to her, gender is established over time through language and discourses. She develops her claim that gender is performative in the context of historical process. Butler says that the existence of gender depends on actions and repetitions over time. For Butler, repeated acts are meaningful practices. These practices constitute the starting point for the construction of both gender and sex. Thus, performativity is always derived from a reference to a preceding norm or set of norms. What we think of as an internal feature in ourselves is actually our production with bodily performative actions.

If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.²⁹

While explaining the performative theory, it is also necessary to emphasize the difference between Butler's performative and performance. Butler distinguishes between performance that presupposes the existence of the subject and performativity that does not. Performance indicates that what is performed exists before it is performed. What is emphasized in the performative is that the performed is never the same as the pre-existing and something new is constantly performed even if it refers to the past. This is why Butler says that gender is performative. In this way, she

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

²⁹ Ibid., 180.

emphasizes that there is no essence and truth about gender. In other words, the idea that performative practices constitute the subject reflects the ambiguity of the subject's continuous construction and boundaries. For Butler, performativity is not something the subject does, but a process where the subject is constructed through repetition. Noting the variable construction and temporality, Butler states: "My argument is that there need not be a "doer behind the deed," but that the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler, 1999, 181)³⁰. That is, gender performativity is the repetition or process that makes the subject. What Butler refers to as the subject is not an individual, but a linguistic and bodily structure that continues to be established and is reconstituted with performative repetitions.

In relation to Butler's theory of performativity, I will interpret the body as a means of production and the effort to gain the individual and social independence for the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the next section. In the novel, the social structure is based on biological rules. Individuals are not given the opportunity to choose other than the "biological" roles assigned to them. What they must do to survive is to be an obedient Handmaid. In Gilead, they are divided into the categories as those who are able to give birth and those who cannot. They are forced to play the roles assigned to them in a regime where their names are not even mentioned. They only pretend as if they have their own identities. At this point, in Butler's terms, we can say that gender, rather than biological rules, constitutes an identity for them through norms and prohibitions.

³⁰ Ibid., 181.

2.2. BUTLER'S NOTION OF PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, a totalitarian patriarchal system is established in Gilead, and a new moral understanding commodifies women and their bodies. This system ignores their wishes, thoughts and identities. Reconstructed moral rules determine the place of each woman in the social hierarchy, the house they live in, the clothes they wear and even their sexuality. In social relations based on hierarchy, the production and maintenance of gender norms play an important role. According to Butler, continuity and consistency are two elements that hold an important place in identity construction. She suggests that it is wrong to think that there is an identity before gender identity. It is therefore more appropriate for Butler to speak of gender identity rather than identity. Butler thinks that some socially constructed regulatory practices and norms constitute identity. In the same way, gender and sex are some of these norms creating gender identities in Gilead.

Gilead critiques gender essentialism by portraying the consequence of an exaggerated enforcement of it in a fictional society. As a result of the enforced gender norms, gender as a performance 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.”³¹

As society produces norms, the categorization causes to the loss of identity in the novel. They have a new name by adding the suffix -of from the names of the commanders they serve. Thus, they are asked to forget their identities and old lives. If the characters do not follow the instructions of the regime, they are excluded from the society. For instance, Offred symbolizes a marginal figure because of her rebellion for

³¹ Anette Kirkvik, *Gender Performativity in The Handmaid's Tale and The Hunger Games*, (MA Thesis, The Arctic University of Norway, 2015), 25.

attributed roles. Through her illicit meetings with the Commander and her sexual and romantic relationship with Nick, she defies the system of oppression, and finds solace and tries to regain her identity through Nick. Offred's effort to hold on to her identity before the regime is not related to the norms of society. She tries to find her own meaning and not to forget who she is. Her struggle not to lose her hope is intelligible as she states: "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light. There must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from, on the television?"³² As Offred is a representative leading figure for female empowerment, she challenges for the societal norms. At this point, we can refer to Butler's idea that resistance is in seeking recognition:

Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. In other words, within subjection the price of existence is subordination.³³

In Gilead, identities are created through some duties and roles that women are supposed to perform; this way they belong to certain categories according to their duties and roles in the system. As the Handmaids are fertile, they are detained by the commanders to bear children. Wives of commanders are not fertile, but they are at the top of the inter-female hierarchy. They are only responsible for the organization of household chores. The women, called "Marthas", are servants in the houses of the commanders. They are not fertile, but they are found suitable for domestic responsibilities. The reason is that they are considered to have a moral life as they obey

³² Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 74.

³³ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 20.

all strict rules in Gilead. Women who do not belong to any of these three social groups, or who do not want to participate, have to work by cleaning toxic wastes in the colonies or in the brothels called Jezebel. In this regard, society gives complete freedom to men while women are oppressed with social norms and described as immoral unless they obey the sexist policies. As Beauvoir states:

Patriarchal civilization condemned woman to chastity; the right of man to relieve his sexual desires is more or less openly recognized, whereas woman is confined within marriage: for her the act of the flesh, if not sanctified by the code, by a sacrament, is a fault, a fall, a defeat, a weakness; she is obliged to defend her virtue, her honor.³⁴

Some categorical terms used in the novel such as “containers”, “two-legged wombs”, and “ambulatory chalices” support the idea that the regime gives women an identity as Handmaids who are supposed to achieve only the goal to give birth in their world. Therefore, the attribute that society imposes on women is essentially motherhood. Women's roles are shaped by their childbearing potential. Categorizing them as mothers and non-mothers drags the system into a vicious circle. When women are evaluated only by means of their productivity they are regarded as nothing more than objects rather than subjects in patriarchal authority. It enables us to suggest that it is not biology or sex but gender as a system of oppression with repetitive actions that forms the identity. Because of abusing and oppressive factors, “the sense of gender reality” is created in Gilead. Indeed, in Butler’s terms, repetitive actions play determinant roles for their identity, which do not reflect any reality.

The roles of women from different classes in Gilead, such as giving birth to children, being a mother, being a good wife, and being responsible for housework are social roles assumed to belong to women in all patriarchal societies. Other roles, such

³⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier, (United States: Vintage Books, 2011), 444.

as participating in the political administration, working, getting equal education with men, and being a chauffeur belong to men in Gilead. “All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing.”³⁵ New regulators' interpretations about old and new life are based on arguments about the "nature" of men and women. “Those years were just an anomaly, historically speaking, the Commander said. Just a fluke. All we've done is return things to Nature's norm.”³⁶ In the new system they try to normalize, they reproduce the norms and expect women to simply perform "by nature". The performativity of gender is clearly presented as an act that power names and regulates, not the subjects themselves. Butler emphasizes that the inequality between men and women is not natural as if it is between pre-existing subjects, but result of social power structures. According to Butler, the idea that gender is a cultural interpretation of sex corresponding to nature causes distinctions between gender identities and sexual orientations such as normal, natural, and deviant.³⁷ These distinctions indeed are results of a hierarchical relationship between gender and sexual orientations. Thus, forms of exclusion are produced just like the exclusion of women with the emphasis on male-female nature in the novel. That is why Butler rejects any hierarchical categorization, fixation, and normative imposition.

2.3. GENDER ISSUES IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

The world Atwood describes is a hell of which soil is laden with chemical poisons, of which air and water have been lethal by radiation. This is the universe where the world is polluted and fertility rates are low because of the environmental factors.

³⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 10.

Children are born with unhealthy and physical disabilities. Women gain a status in society only with their fertility and provide "reproduction". They become commodities that have been deprived of all their rights. They are prohibited from reading and writing. Women find themselves in the middle of a deep nothingness. They are defined as beings who have no name, thought, self, will, feelings and desires, but have "a womb between their two legs". All realities of women in life depend on the discourses of men in the novel. They become mere objects. They are detached from all human values, even from their formerly lives and titles. Not only Handmaids, but all women have been withdrawn from their living spaces, restricted and pushed to the position of the other sex. With all its atmosphere and elements, it is a hopeless world.

Regarding the other sex, the novel begins with a religious reference to the position of women in society. The Biblical example in *The Handmaid's Tale* is directly referred by Margaret Atwood. The Republic of Gilead is founded on Christian bases; biblical expressions are discoursed in every aspect of daily life as the framework of Gileadean society.

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said unto Jacob, 'Give me children or else I die.' And she said, 'Behold my maid, Bilhah. Go unto her and she shall bear upon my knees so that I might also have children by her.' And she gave him Bilhah, their Handmaid, to wife, and Jacob went unto her.³⁸

When the extremely conservative administration system named Gilead takes over the country, the tension, pressure and fear emerge. The system expresses the effect of the culture of fear on social life. We can observe the inability of society to resist the oppression and cruelty, and how the repressive system reproduces itself. The victims of the system, which includes religious oppression and fear, were mostly women. That is why the concept of gender is taken into account in the analysis of social phenomena

³⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 88.

in the novel. There is also a representation of a group of women trying to exist and gain concepts such as rights, equality and dignity. They are regarded as a marginal group in the context of gender roles. In this respect, I will analyze the novel shaping around two parts. In the first part, Offred is taken by the Republic of Gilead and given to a family as a Handmaid. This part is the process of domination of the system over women. At this stage, the regime begins to take over her, too. For instance, she encounters some women tourists without uniforms while walking together with Ofglen and says:

I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom.³⁹

In the second part, Offred notices the pressure and wants to resist against the rules. This is the process where Offred opposes the system and gains her independence. For instance, she wants to have some dialogues to remind herself that she has a voice although the handmaids are forbidden to talk. It indicates that she tries to rebuild her own self. "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (Atwood, 69). At the end of this part, Offred completes her journey in obtaining herself, her identity, and position that does not require a confinement for her freedom in a patriarchal society. It is the period when the Republic of Gilead collapses and becomes a mere research topic.

Generally, in such dystopic novels, we encounter women who are only programmed to give birth and pushed under the caste system in a world with an excessive population. They are controlled by the restricted laws of the system. For instance, the women do not even have control over their own children in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Their only function is to deliver the child to the Commander's family

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

because "their reproductive potential becomes their means of survival" (Billy 3). Otherwise, their end will result in death. The societal rules assume it's the women's fault if they don't have children. In other words, the society regards women as their own criminals in the novel. For instance, after a Handmaid telling her incident of being raped, Aunt Helena utters the following striking words:

But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.

Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.

Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.

She did. She did. She did.

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson.⁴⁰

Some tools of the regime that protect, legalize and maintain the system have been produced. The other female groups categorized such as the Wives and the Aunts are also among the tools. These two groups are subject to all the sexist policies of the regime and they work for the continuation of the system. Aunt Lydia talks to Offred: "For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. She said: Because they won't want things they can't have."⁴¹ For this purpose, the Aunts make pressure on the Handmaids. For instance, they are assigned to educate the Handmaids according to the norms of social morality. In doing so, they glorify motherhood. One of the prominent concepts in such patriarchal societies is always the role of motherhood. This situation causes the Wives of the Commanders, who cannot give birth due to fertility, to feel jealous and see themselves as inadequate. Actually, this is the reason why the Wives oppress the Handmaids, as well. The jealousy towards

⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁴¹ Ibid., 81.

the Handmaids ends with pressure and the punishment of the Handmaids. During the Commander's sexual intercourse with the Handmaid, the Wife says: "This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus the product."⁴² In fact, the Wives do not define themselves as the leader of the process because they cannot become a mother.

By examining the motherhood, gender roles and identities, I will introduce gender issues in *The Handmaid's Tale* under two sections. In the section of 2.3.1, I will first introduce how society alienates women from themselves. To construct a new uniformed identity, the society must first make women forget their old identity. This construction caused the women's loss of individuality through some performative practices. The key practices of this social construction are motherhood and sexuality. The roles of motherhood and sexual service imposed by the society cause women to adapt to their roles in the regime. In the section of 2.3.2, I will explain the commodification of the female body through motherhood. Also, I will refer to Foucault's concept of biopolitics from a feminist perspective with the biopolitics of fertility and reproduction. Fertility and reproduction are strongly regulated in Gilead. The reproductive policies of the regime are directly related to the control of female body. I will explain how the "biopolitics" of reproduction effect the women in the regime of Gilead, and in this way, reproduce the women's otherness.

2.3.1. Loss of Individuality through Social Construction

In this section, I will introduce some essential practices, such as clothing and naming, which shape the social status of women, and how these practices symbolize the loss of the women's individualities and identities in *The Handmaids' Tale*. The Gilead government draws its strength from weakening and silencing women in order

⁴² Ibid., 94.

to carry out the regime's aim which is based on increasing productivity. Women are restricted by the social impositions of the theocratic order, which makes them subordinate. The regime prohibits women from even their own thinking. They destroy the women's identities by confiscating their assets, simplifying them and governing the language they use. The Handmaids are prohibited to say even their own names. Thus, the effort to obtain an identity is the symbol of every woman's struggle to exist in the society. Anton states:

The first one is to find out if the main character is female or male; if she is a female we should continue by defining if she is a character expected to perform 'female duties', as well as if there is an oppressive figure. The last question would be to analyse if the girl has defined her own identity by the end of the novel.⁴³

The identity of the main character Offred is not recognized; in Gilead, where even revealing the names of people is banned. Indeed, her name is assigned to her by Gilead, too. Considering it as a male-dominated society, Gilead's assignation of the names to women results in loss of their identity with the possessive preposition: *Of Fred*. It is uttered by herself in the chapter 14: "My name isn't Offred; I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter."⁴⁴ We can observe that even women's talking with each other is prohibited: "They learned to lip read, [their] heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way [they] exchanged names from bed to bed: Elma. Janine. Delores. Moira. June."⁴⁵ The prohibition of talking freely and being

⁴³ Leire Martin Anton. *Female Empowerment in Feminist Dystopias and Young Adults' Literature*, (MA Thesis, Universidad De La Rioja, 2018), 20.

⁴⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 84.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

forced to use only a standard vocabulary are also examples of the oppressive regulation of language, which forms the basis of thought that grounds of the individual identity.

Another example for destroying women's individuality in the novel is the dress code. The choice of their clothing and colours is based on the status and the class they are in. Their outfits indeed reveal the hierarchical structure of Gilead, in which, even the colour of the dress is used as a way of control. Women have to wear in accordance with their duties. For instance, Aunts' clothes are dark green, calling for militarism because they are responsible for the Handmaids' education. The Handmaids are supposed to wear white bonnets for their head, they have to wear long and red dress which has to cover all body. The red dress symbolizes their mission as a fertile machine and the white bonnets represent their innocence. Offred states:

Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen.⁴⁶

Offred explains her first impression about another Handmaid's appearance as "a shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket."⁴⁷ The bonnets and wings' shape function to hide their faces and disconnect them from the world. This is the way women are alienated from the self and the world, where their clothing and dress colours reflect the existence of a system that controls every aspect of their lives. With every inch of their body, this dress code reminds them who they are in the system of Gilead.

Offred implies that the desire for sameness among the handmaids stems from the government's wish to mass Offred and other women into this one unvarying category. Within this category, this is no room for deviation or

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 25.

individual identity, and this is depicted by the identical red women walking together.⁴⁸

All these symbolic elements bring about the question of how identity is related to the gender acts. For example, to dress in red colour is an act to symbolize fertility, yet it is not an act of a free subject, it is an act, which is gendered by the biopolitical system of Gilead, as it imposes a role of motherhood on women. As seen in the women's position in Gilead, identities are all formed by gendered acts. Butler states: "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity."⁴⁹ She suggests that gender is also an identity category. That is why identity depends on being suitable to the normative structure of gender. In the novel, Gilead applies to the controlling policies by limiting each individual to the same norms under one identity. Thus, we can observe that individuals are transformed from a person into a "thing" by being cut off from their identity and old life. The only meaning of their social identity is motherhood. In the next section, I will explain further how Gilead objectifies the female body with the phenomenon of motherhood, which is seen as a social function, along with the reference to Foucault's concept of biopolitics.

2.3.2. Motherhood and Sexuality

Motherhood is used as a means of taking the power from women and make them serve to the growth in the population in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Also, it serves as a boundary element as it sets a boundary between the female body and the male body.

⁴⁸ Karla Roland, *The Symbolic Power of Red in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, (MA Thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2013), 9.

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 174.

In Gilead, giving birth prevails over women's restricted life and is described as a way of proving their existence in the patriarchal construction. Known as the Handmaids, their only mission is to provide children for the barren females of the upper class. The fact that women's purpose of existence is only to give birth reveals that women are victims in the system. As much as they produce, they are nothing more than objects used for the service to their missions. Yet, giving birth or being pregnant is the only act that makes them feel valuable.

There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved... 'Showoff' a voice hisses, and this is true. A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out, doesn't have to go shopping... she could stay at her house.⁵⁰

Women are valued only with their fertility while their secondary position is fixed by laws. This position is given only to Handmaids on the grounds that they might be infertile. According to the norms, men cannot be infertile and the barrenness is only related to women. "There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law."⁵¹ Furthermore, there is a totalitarian regime that nourishes this norm and there is no judicial system against it. It reveals that the dominance relation is established over the female body with the mechanisms the regime creates. Also, there are some social classes that sustain the regime. The Handmaids, Wives (non-fertile women), Commanders (husbands), Aunts (educators), Soldiers and Eyes (secret police) are included in this system with a hierarchical and fixed structure of control. These control

⁵⁰ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 35.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

mechanisms of this system are greatly effective because they are created through oppressive management and policies.

As one of these policies, women in the age of childbearing are classified as "slave girls", that is the Handmaids, in order to ensure that they provide children to socioeconomically high-level families. When the Handmaids serve this goal, Aunts say to the Handmaids: "Now you have respect. You have protection, you can fulfil your biological destinies in peace. Children. What else is there to live for?"⁵² We can make an observation from the point of view of the Aunts, too, that women do not have a function other than motherhood. Described as "productive wombs", the Handmaids are obliged monthly to have a sexual intercourse with the Commanders in the presence of the Wives who hold the bodies of the Handmaids during the intercourse. Their bodies are used like a carrier of a baby between the Husbands and the Wives. If the pregnancy happens, they are supposed to give their baby with the birth ceremony to the family of the Commander Husband and Wife. After birth, the biological mother and the baby are not separated for just several months so that the Handmaids feed the baby. Afterwards, the Handmaids are sent to another family, to give birth to that family, who cannot have children. This system keeps producing families and constitutes balance in the population of wealthy families. As long as a Handmaid is able to give a birth, her status maintains in the system as woman. "After that she'll be transferred, to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward."⁵³ This situation also impacts on the way women perceive and define themselves. Their point of view towards themselves changes, too. Offred interprets this change metaphorically with her own body:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now

⁵² Ibid., 90.

⁵³ Ibid., 88.

the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.⁵⁴

The Handmaids' Tale, which I aim to interpret in this section as a text about the objectification of the female body for reproduction, can also be considered as an example of "biopolitical dystopia". At this point, we can refer to Foucault's concept of biopolitics in the relation to the novel. Foucault defines bio-power as a system which "made possible the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes."⁵⁵ The concept of bio-power, which expresses the transformation of the human body by power, is applied to the female body with the policy of increasing population in the novel. In Gilead, men take over the dominance in public spaces, and the female body is completely shaped to ensure the continuation of the lineage and society. That's why determining female sexuality and regulating the fertility is purely a matter of power with its social and political aspects. Gilead's regime uses the female body to dominate the population with its repressive reproductive policies indeed in the biopolitical framework. Women's freedoms are restricted by various bio-power policies. Reproduction is the focus of society, which ranks women according to their fertility in social life. Women who manage to conceive in Gilead are considered valuable public property held under special government protection. In fact, this protection is about the biopolitics' system as the power keeps the individuals alive for political investment to the female body. The power takes care of fertile women so that women can give a birth for the reproductive policies.

The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of

⁵⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I-An Introduction*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 141.

violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order.⁵⁶

Thus, giving to birth is reduced to a job. This job confines women to the private sphere. Systematic rape, which is carried out with a kind of reproductive ritual, is told to them with a sense of duty. This sense transforms women's lives into purely biological life. Their lives bear no trace of their personalities and identities. Thus, women are gendered by the power system. Offred states that they are tasked as only carriers suitable for childbearing: “We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category.”⁵⁷ The power suggests a justification for the intervention to women's body. In doing so, bio-power regards women as an object rather than a subject and a carrier rather than an owner of a child.

2.3.2.1. Diverse Motherhoods

In this section, I will examine the concept of motherhood from different perspectives by introducing more characters in the novel. They are faced with the attribution of the role of being a mother and being forced into it, too. The Handmaids aren't the only ones assigned roles in the Republic of Gilead. There are also the other characters such as Moira, Ofglen and Serena as the Wife of the Commander who are also assigned certain gender roles by the male-dominated regime. Each of these characters is positioned differently, and therefore, certain differences stand out when examined with the concept of motherhood. Thus, the concept of motherhood finds a

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Translated by Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage, 1995), 26.

⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 95.

different meaning in each of them. I will introduce Moira and Offglen standing in a place where feminist politics can be produced. These two characters are seen as threats to gendered system, for which they are thought to be incompatible with the motherhood. I will analyse them as the characters who are out of the social norms, and therefore, a threat to the order with their own contradictory ideas against impositions. Also, we encounter the character of Serena, who is also associated with this role but has a diametrically opposite view with Moira and Offglen as she keeps up with this order. Serena embraces the mission and identity that the society has built for her. With this mission, she resorts to motherhood, which is a key point to her salvation. I will clarify how this order makes her both the victim and privileged over the lower-class women.

By emphasizing the privileges that motherhood can offer to women, the argument of "the greatness of motherhood" is invoked, but the power tends to view motherhood as a central element of male domination over women, a form of control, subjugation, and even slavery. The concept *motherhood* has been reduced to an object and turned into a tool in the production of diversity, which is the condition of the regime's politics. While implementing an elite population increase policy, the position of women as the instrument of childbirth reinforces the form of domination of men over women. Women's bodies are reduced to tools, their emotions are dulled, and the system turns them into slaves, even though the systematic rapes in Gilead are tried to be covered with sacred discourses about reproduction. Rape, forced pregnancy and forced motherhood turn birth into a weapon of death and leave biological mothers and newborns at risk of being excluded from the public sphere. "The monthly rape 'Ceremony' [which] follows the scriptural 'and she shall bear upon my knees,' and grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ildney Cavalcanti, "Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias", *Utopian Studies* 11.2 (2000), 152-181.

Through this way, the Handmaids are forced to become pregnant by a kind of breeding ritual held under the supervision of the Commanders' Wives. After the birth, the biological mother is not considered as a legal mother, and she spends time for only several months to feed the baby. Then, the baby is delivered to the Commander's Wife. This process gives a reason for the general high tension between the Handmaids' and Wives. For instance, Offred does not like Serena Joy "because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all."⁵⁹

Serena Joy, as the Commander's Wife and the landlady of Offred's house, once a famous television personality and singer, has become increasingly conservative and support the views that confine women to the private sphere. Offred talks about her transformation process: "She doesn't make speeches anymore. 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."⁶⁰ Once a rebellious and intellectual woman, she turns into a housewife in the new world order, the helper and benefactor of the regime, where she is seen as nothing more than a womb to give birth. Offred tells Serena Joy's speeches about women: "Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all."⁶¹ Serena seems like someone, who has accepted her new role in a society by stating that those who cannot give birth as "defeated women losing their sexuality."⁶² She adopts the role assigned by the totalitarian and oppressive regime by getting the only title as the Wife of the Commander. With this title, she is expected to contribute to the elite population by having children. The expectation of her

⁵⁹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 111.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 35.

motherhood is based on this order. Thus, motherhood for Serena is a role that she must undertake to maintain the order by gaining a legal status.

Unlike Serena, there are several characters who are in resistance by not accepting their roles. Firstly, Moira, who is on the margins of the established order in order to gain her independent identity, breaks her ties with the reality defined by the patriarchal and sexist regime, and suspends the social restrictions. Moira is also captured as a Handmaid and expected to give birth; however, she manages to escape. She finds her salvation by being a prostitute in a place that used to be a hotel and now turns into a nightclub. She is sent there on the grounds that she poses a threat to sex. Moira, who is a radical feminist, can say that she is a lesbian without hesitation, even if the word lesbian is one of the forbidden words. It means that she rejects the heteronormative Gilead values—male-female sexual interactions. Moira, who can drink, use drugs or smoke whenever she wants, is still happy with her situation. According to her, this is also freedom. At least that's what appears to be the most autonomous option for her in the society. Offred states: “Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman.”⁶³ In this respect, Moira represents women's resistance in Gilead. Moreover, she is the only character who stands directly against the authority by making two successful escape attempts from the Red Center. The way she escapes - taking off her clothes and wearing an Aunt's uniform - symbolizes her refusal to Gilead attempting to identify her. She stands for an alternative to the submissive obedience and acceptance of the destiny adopted by Gilead.

The other rebellious character, as a member of a secret resistance organization founded against Gilead is Ofglen. A university professor in her previous life, Ofglen is judged to have committed sex treason as a lesbian when her relationship with one of the Marthas is revealed. After being judged with their mouths shut like Hannibal and their hands tied, her girlfriend is hanged in front of Ofglen's eyes. Martha is hanged to

⁶³ Ibid., 93.

death because she can't get pregnant, while Ofglen is not killed because she has a "fertile womb", and her clitoris is cut off as a punishment method. In order to be able to give birth again, Ofglen is deprived of only her sexual pleasure organ, without harming her reproductive organ. When any woman is able to give birth to a baby to the "holy family", to the "great nation", she is kept. However, if she is found to be in an anti-systemic attitude or leaves the house after a certain period of time without giving a birth, then another one takes her place. No trace remains of the woman who is gone/destroyed.

Overall, in these examples, we see that the female body becomes the instrument of the state's population policies and functions as a context that legitimizes male domination which enslaves women. Even who counts as a mother depends on the regime. All mothers are women, but only those who are morally and religiously "suitable" can hold the title of "mother" according to the most conservative and misogynistic criteria if they are not sterile. This understanding of suitability results in the strict enforcement of the sexist policies. It is striking that the oppression institutionalized by the new regime is not only against women, but also against homosexuals ("sexual traitors"), ethnic minorities, in short, all marginalized. The ignoring of all this diversity in the heteronormative order is an indication of the regime's essentialist and sexist policies. In the next chapter, I will examine the representation of these diverse identities in the novel through postmodern feminism. In this context, I will introduce Judith Butler's theory of the performativity which suggests to deconstruct the norms and supports a pluralistic understanding of social identity.

CHAPTER THREE
PERFORMATIVITY AND *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* IN THE
CONTEXT OF POST-MODERN FEMINIST THEORY

Feminist theory is a philosophical approach that allows us to see the existence of women's struggle within the cultural aspects such as language, art, philosophy and history etc. The theory associates postmodernism with a variety of feminist views which question unequal gender roles and refuse the social norms defined by the patriarchal society. Postmodern feminism is shaped by postmodern theory and practices. The basis of both postmodernist and feminist approaches is the critique of uniformity. Postmodernists argue that it is not possible for an indisputable and universal truth to exist. In the same way, postmodern feminist approaches criticize feminist approaches for ignoring women of different identities by focusing on the uniformed category of "women". According to postmodern feminism, a pluralistic understanding of social identity should be adopted instead of any universal categories of gender. In this context, I will introduce Judith Butler as a leading figure of queer theory, as Butler criticizes such universalist perspectives in feminism with a pluralistic approach that I find parallel with the postmodern approach. She suggests "performativity" as a new interpretation of feminism and redefines gender: "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized."⁶⁴ The analysis of gender construction will be based on Judith Butler's views from her postmodern perspectives. I will present how it is possible to explain Butler's suggestions by creating a "trouble" for other feminist views with postmodernity.

In the chapter 3, I try to interpret *The Handmaid's Tale* in regard to postmodern feminism to criticize and redefine the categorical norms. The characters in the novel

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Regulations Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 43.

are divided into the social categories; especially women are classified according to their fertility characteristics. So, their lives are constrained by the biological categories and are far from their own identities and choices. Some certain types of women such as the Handmaids, Aunts, Wives and Commanders are constructed. There is no place for individual thought or meaning in these categories. Social statuses are sharply categorized with uniformed definitions. We need to analyse the novel critically with the post-modern feminist theory to challenge the uniform definitions and categorizations in gender. As Bell and Klein state: “Post-modernism represents women by differences, not similarities, and the power of the representer is masked. Because it declines to identify domination in general and male domination in particular.”⁶⁵

Appealing to post-modern feminist theory, this chapter consists of four sections. In the first section, I introduce how and when the postmodern theory is formed. In the section of 3.2, I focus on the intersection of postmodernism and feminism. For the theoretical sources of this intersection, I refer to Daniel Bell, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and the historian Arnold Toynbee and their definition of postmodern feminist theory. To find the common ground between feminism and postmodernism will be the focus for the reading of postmodern and feminist theories. In the section of 3.3, I will re-introduce Judith Butler’s theory of the performativity in relation to the postmodern feminist theory. How does Butler’s theory differ from canonical feminists and approach postmodern theories? One reason I chose postmodern feminist theory is to understand performativity better, and the other is to understand feminist dystopia better. Then, I focus on the novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in the context of feminist dystopia. Feminist dystopias describe a male-dominated totalitarian order in which women's individuality is limited by oppressive rules. In the novel as a feminist dystopia, Atwood presents a society that portrays a terrifying life for women within a strict gender hierarchy. It is obvious that many women living in the Republic of Gilead

⁶⁵ Diane Bell, and Renate Klein, *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1996), 26.

are physically and mentally devoid of their freedom in the narration of the protagonist Offred. On the one hand, an unfair and unequal world is depicted, on the other hand, this world reminds that there is hope for change even for such a world. For this change, I will point out the struggle and resistance of the main character, Offred, because she rejects uniformed categories and definitions she is assigned by the regime. In the last section, I try to explain how it is possible for us to consider this novel as a post-modern feminist dystopia.

3.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism appeared initially in the fields of art, mostly in, fine arts and architecture. In time, it has become widespread in the fields of humanities and social science as well, such as literature, philosophy, sociology and cultural studies. It is characterized as “a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and new economic order.”⁶⁶ The reasons for the transition to postmodernism are the results of the problems that emerged with modernism. To discuss this transition process from modernism to postmodernism, it is necessary to talk about modernism, as postmodernism is based on the critical evaluation of the basic principles of modernism. Modernism, along with the Enlightenment Movement and the Industrial Revolution, is the symbol of progressive change in society. The fact that human being takes a central position, and the birth of the bourgeoisie are the examples of great social changes. This movement is also called a rebellion against the tradition. Modernism relies on rational thought and science for the advancement of humanity. Postmodernism opposes the modern rationality that mechanizes people by taking them under control. With the universalist approach of modernism, the behaviours, thoughts and feelings of individuals are also uniformed. Postmodernists problematize the claims for the

⁶⁶ Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and consumer society”, in H. Foster (Ed.) *Postmodern Culture*. (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 112.

universal reality and for an ultimate truth because they uniform and mechanize people. “For its defenders the postmodern is a liberating attitude that remains suspicious of any single foundation or ultimate position of truth.”⁶⁷ Postmodernists regard postmodernism as a long-term process of questioning, criticizing and revealing inadequacies of modernism. They reject the claim that a system of absolute and single truth can be the foundation of modernism. Postmodernists deny generalizations and adopt the approach of multiple meanings rather than a single meaning and truth.

In this section, I also seek to examine how postmodernism and the basic principles of postmodernism emerged in the light of some pioneering philosophers and critics such as Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard is one of the thinkers who used the term postmodernism the most, but we see the term used historically much earlier. Thus, it is initially necessary to explain its etymological origin. The term “postmodernism” is the word formed by combining the English prefix *post*, meaning "after" and the English word *modern*, meaning "contemporary". More commonly, it is defined as "beyond modernism". According to American cultural theorist Charles Alexander Jencks, postmodernism was used as a notion first by British artist John Watkins Chapman in the 1870s to describe a painting. He described the painting as “more modern” than French impressionism.⁶⁸ Starting from the 1940s and 1950s, in addition to postmodern painting, postmodern architecture and cinema, we see the use of the term also in philosophy, literature, politics and economy. Postmodernism has become more widespread also in studies on society. In 1917, the writer Rudolf Pannowitz used postmodernism to describe the collapse of values in contemporary European culture. The historian Arnold Toynbee used the notion of the postmodern age to periodize the decline of European civilization. In *A Study of History*, Toynbee claimed that the beginning of postmodern period was when World War II was over. The terrible destruction caused by the war has overturned the moral and ethical values of the

⁶⁷ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 182.

⁶⁸ Tong Li, *Research on the Philosophical Trends of Western Postmodernism*, (Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2003).

Western world. The culturally accepted worldview and understanding (which was then called “modern thought”) began to be questioned after the war resulted in the depression and disappointments. This destruction impacted on modern thoughts and the period was replaced by the process of postmodernity. The war caused people to question some notions such as rationality, freedom and universality and to search for new concepts. The sociologist Daniel Bell, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, followed a very similar path to Toynbee and said that the modern era ends after the war. Bell described this end as a transition from the modern age to a new age. Indeed, he put more emphasis on social analysis than theory. With the new era, he analyses the transformation in the economic structure, the rising new classes, the increasing role of knowledge and other characteristics of post-industrial society.

Jean Baudrillard also analyses the transition from modernity to postmodernity in line with a historical outline. Firstly, the claim that social realities has come to an end is the main issue that leads Baudrillard to discuss postmodernism. He argues that the understanding of reality created by modernists leads to hesitations about what is real and what is fake. He calls these hesitations as hyper-reality, as a break for closing one era and opening another and claims that this “hyper-reality” emerged where ideologies and meaning have ended. The mechanisms of representation regarding modernism no longer exist. Baudrillard indicates the disappearance of signs of modernity for the transition of the periods. He considers the transition period as the collapse of the subjects who are oppressed and standardized under the pressure of the modern world:

The end of labor. The end of production. The end of political economy. The end of the signifier/signified dialectic which facilitates the accumulation of knowledge and of meaning, the linear syntagma of cumulative discourse. And at the same time, the end simultaneously of the exchange value/use value dialectic which is the only thing that makes accumulation and social production possible. The end of linear dimension of discourse. The end of the

linear dimension of the commodity. The end of the classical era of the sign.
The end of the era of production.⁶⁹

This "end" discourse indicates the transition to postmodernism in history. For the transition, Baudrillard examines the production phenomenon in his studies. He explains the essence of the radical break between modern and postmodern societies. He puts the concept of simulation in relation to production in his argument. In this argument, in the consumer society which develops with modernism, individuals are taught to consume and they are made to believe that they always have to consume. For this reason, the concept of 'need' loses its meaning and individuals no longer consume to meet their vital needs, on the contrary, they live and work to consume. This consumption causes reality to disappear and create a simulation that does not reflect reality. As a postmodern philosopher, who declares the disappearance of truth and reality, Baudrillard actually criticizes this hyper-reality system with his way of thinking.

While some postmodernists like Baudrillard view the new historical period as a break, some postmodernists see the new age as liberation. For instance, Jean-François Lyotard as a leading figure introducing postmodernism into the social theory, marks the current state of knowledge. He explains his reason for using "postmodernism" in *The Postmodern Condition*: "The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word postmodern to describe that condition."⁷⁰ Lyotard introduces his questioning against established ideas in his work. Lyotard's philosophy is based on the transformation of science and knowledge from modernism to postmodernism. He questions how it is possible to have a narrative of the multitude that allows all kinds of differences to express themselves instead of the impositions of modernity. According to Lyotard, postmodernism is not

⁶⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, (London: Sage, 1993), 8.

⁷⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (The U.S.A: Manchester University Press, 2000), 13.

the rejection of modernity; it is rather a reinterpretation of modernity. Modernism is a narrative of change, innovation and progress in knowledge, science, art, philosophy and other fields. However, postmodernity, is the rejection of universal narratives in every field, especially in knowledge and science. He seeks the possibility of different narratives in thinking and expression with postmodernism. In this narrative, society is in constant progress as a structure that develops with changes in information and technology. Hence, he considers postmodernism as a path to freedom and the progress of the mind. For the postmodern view, in which differences are multiplied and there is no absolute center that allows the brain to progress. The postmodern view emphasizes individual existence and difference as it supports the freedom and autonomy of the individuals to determine and shape their own lives.

3.2. POSTMODERNISM AND FEMINISM

In this section, I will examine the relationship between postmodernism and feminism along with the characteristics of postmodern feminism. Also, I will refer to some leading theorists such as Mary Frug, Zillah Eisenstein and Simone de Beauvoir. Post-modernism and feminism in general have significant parallelisms in terms of a critical discourse they have developed for their practices. While postmodernism directs the critiques to the results of modern thinking in general, postmodern feminism focuses its critiques on a more specific area of modernism, that is, the modernism's universalist understanding of women. Postmodernist theory states that universal categories are not fixed but variable, feminist theory states that gender categories are not fixed but variable; hence they are parallel to each other in the critique of universalist categories. To examine the common points of postmodernism and feminism, it is crucial to review the development of postmodern feminism.

The emergence of postmodern feminism takes place around the 20th century. It has established itself a legal basis with *A Postmodern Feminist Legal Manifesto* written

by Mary Frug who is considered as the legal pioneer of postmodern feminist theory. She introduces a combination of feminism and postmodernism to indicate women's struggle in the social and political field. As a struggle for identity, Frug suggests plural notions of constructed social identity, rather than unitary notions of female sex and female gender identity. "The emergence of different feminisms has demonstrated that women stand in a multitude of places, depending on time and geographical location, on race, age, sexual preference, health, class."⁷¹ We can say that postmodern feminism, also called as the 3rd wave feminism movement, has the aim of developing a new social criticism about some concepts such as identity, subjectivity and gender. The subject, which is the focus of the modern world, has been replaced by multiple identities in postmodern feminism. In the postmodern period, the subject is no longer the center because there is no absolute center. Pluralist approaches are at the forefront instead of absolute conceptualizations. Fredric Jameson defines this period with "the death of the subject, the end of individuality, the eclipse of subjectivity in a new anonymity."⁷²

The perception of women in modern feminism is based on modernist categories and these categories are based on binaries such as male/female, active/passive, culture/nature, mind/body. Postmodern feminism tries to eliminate these dilemmas and constructed concepts. The reason is that binaries exclude plural differences and postmodern feminist thinkers believe in the understanding of a pluralistic policy for identities without excluding any individual differences. Postmodern feminists argue that the categorization of women under the influence of modernism is also problematic. They are against the universal category of woman being prominent, and against defining a uniformed definition for women. "A monist public sphere understanding in modernism prevents members of different social groups (women, workers, members of different races, gays, lesbians...) from developing discourses about their identities,

⁷¹ Mary Joe Frug, *A Postmodern Feminist Legal Manifesto (An Unfinished Draft)*, Harvard Law Review 105, no. 5 1045–75, 1992. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341520>.

⁷² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (The U.S.A: Duke University Press, 1991), 119.

interests and needs, thus increase inequalities.”⁷³ In other words, postmodern feminism argues that different ideas should be diversified and strengthened. As modernist thought ignores different identities of women, the main criticism of postmodern feminists is that modernism cannot save women from their situation of “otherness”.

Postmodern feminists take de Beauvoir’s understanding of otherness and turn it on its head. Woman is still the other; however, rather than interpreting this condition as something to be rejected, postmodern feminists embrace it. They claim woman’s otherness enables individual women to stand back and criticize the norms, values, and practices that the dominant male culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone, particularly those who live on its periphery. Thus, otherness, for all of its associations with being excluded, shunned, unwanted, abandoned, and marginalized, has its advantages. It is a way of existing that allows for change and difference. Women are not unitary selves, essences to be defined and then ossified. On the contrary, women are free spirits.⁷⁴

Beauvoir objects to perceiving women as the "other" of men. While describing woman, the word “woman” falls under a unified category as other of man. Thus, women are marginalized when they are categorized. "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute -- she is the Other."⁷⁵ Woman becomes the representative of the "other", who can confirm the opposite of the male identity as a rational thinking being. Here, it is obvious that men construct the women as the other in order to establish themselves as a subject and women as objects. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, as one of the most influential works in the

⁷³ Koroğlu, Cemile Zehra. “Critical Approaches to the Modern Public Sphere: A General Evaluation (Postmodernism, Feminism and Religion)”. *Turkish Studies*, 8(6), 2013, 448-449.

⁷⁴ Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought*, (Student Economy Edition: A More Comprehensive Introduction (4th ed.), Routledge, 2016),8, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429493836>.

⁷⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier, (United States: Vintage Books, 2011), 26.

feminist theory, analyses the ways in which woman are seen objects rather than subjects. The main question in *The Second Sex* is “why did women become the second gender?” She examines the objectification of women and seeks the possibility of women becoming subjects. Her thesis on the subject status of women is that each woman should define herself existentially by taking responsibility for her freedom regardless of the definitive norms of gender, class and age.

Postmodern feminists have also asked the question: “Why is woman the Other?”. However, postmodernists, like Tong find this question useful to turn the otherness into an advantage to argue for the differences of women to be recognized. The reason why women are seen as "other" is an important opportunity to question the existing patriarchal system for postmodern feminists. In the approach of postmodern feminism, differences such as race, class, gender, ethnicity are not seen as a reason to see women as others to be excluded and oppressed. The word *difference* is the key factor as a distinctive trait of postmodern feminism. In this approach, individual differences are welcome. According to the postmodernists, there are no universal truths about women; women have ethnic and local differences, too and these differences should be taken into account as well. Postmodernists call these differences as “polyphony” which means *pluralism*:

Postmodernist thought is attractive to various radical social formations in the 1960s with its approach that cares about polyphony. The radical aspect of postmodernism is often associated with the feminist critique of the concepts of sameness and hierarchy; because postmodernist epistemology values heterogeneity and represents a strong questioning against the concepts of monist "men" and "women."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Düriye Kozlu, “The Place of Women in the Post Modern Art after Modernism”, *Art-E Sanat Dergisi* 2 (3), 1-15, 2009, 9.

There cannot be one definition for women because there is not only one truth, but multiple truths for each individual in postmodern feminism. Eisenstein states: “There is no one body, only bodies, only differences, as well as pluralized conceptions of equality.”⁷⁷ This approach opposes universalism and criticizes uniform discourses. That is why, the postmodern feminist view, which insists on pluralism, opposes the duality that is the product of modernist thought of uniform gender categories. Postmodern feminism addresses everyday issues of men and women in real life, rather than abstract definitions and categorizations of men and women. Instead of the categorizations and discourses that create a dichotomy between men and women, postmodern feminists advocate equality for all. They are against the generalized discourses of feminism associated with modernism. The modern feminism supposes universality in gender, suggesting certain categories for male and female, grounding heterosexual relations.

The pluralistic understanding of postmodern feminists’ view questions the basis of gender. If we consider that individuals with a variety of identities belong to diverse groups, gender components also differ. Thus, it is not possible to reduce all women to a single gender definition. Judith Butler is one of the most prominent supporters of this argument for plurality in gender identities. Postmodern feminism's emphasis on plurality and differences corresponds to her theory of gender as well. Butler questions gender categories and avoids essentializing sexuality with the core characters. She suggests that feminism pursues a more pluralistic policy. In the next section, I will take Judith Butler as a post-modern feminist who embraces ideas of gender that include all women with diverse realities.

⁷⁷ Zillah Eisenstein, *The Female Body and the Law*, (London: University of California Press, 1988), 5.

3.3. JUDITH BUTLER AS A POST-MODERN FEMINIST

In this section, I try to interpret Judith Butler as one of the most critical and controversial theorists in postmodern feminism and queer theory. She takes a critical view of feminism. She draws attention to the points that classical feminism misses, and she opposes some of the basic theses of feminism. She criticizes the basic assumptions of feminism and opens the universal category of woman for discussion. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that the category of woman as a universal subject in feminism does not serve the purpose of emancipation because such a category is not enough to analyse all women's social and economic conditions. She criticizes universal and limited ideas of masculine and feminine sexuality in feminism because this limited perspective produces exclusionary gender norms as it relies on the gender binary. Basically, Butler criticizes the heterosexual point of view in feminism. Butler suggests that it is necessary to deconstruct these norms and reconstruct subjects.

To take the construction of the subject as a political problematic is not the same as doing away with the subject; to deconstruct the subject is not to negate or throw away the concept; on the contrary, deconstruction implies only that we suspend all commitments to that to which the term, "the subject," refers, and that we consider the linguistic functions it serves in the consolidation and concealment of authority. To deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term, like the subject, to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized.⁷⁸

Who is the "female subject" that modern feminism refers to, and does it really include in all women? Butler first questions the concept of the subject and examines the extent to which it consists of all women. She emphasizes that subjects cannot be defined as depending on a single essence, neither biologically nor socially. According

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 159.

to Butler, individuals become subjects through certain social norms and categories. As Foucault defines: “There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.”⁷⁹ The power influences social relations, regulates, normalizes, and constructs the subject. In the context of power and subject relations, Butler's postmodern thought consists of constructive criticisms on the function of social norms and regulators to produce subjects. Thus, a subject does not constitute discourses and practices, but discourses and practices create the subject by determining one's gender and sexuality. In line with Foucault's view, Butler argues that the heterosexual matrix, which includes social and cultural regulations, forms the basis of the universal category of women, which grounds the subject of feminism. That's why she claims that different femininity experiences, which are not included in the universal definition of women, are not accepted in the society because of exclusionary social norms. She thinks that attempts to theorize subjects by creating universal narratives lead to the exclusion of those who cannot be theorized.

What drives postmodern versions of this argument is the belief that the more firmly grounded or well-established the category of woman is, the more exclusive and oppressive it becomes. For example, a belief that the category of women creates a natural solidarity amongst more than half of the human population would not only be troublesome, but dangerous. It would ignore or discipline differences between women (race and class) and exclude those (e.g., lesbians and bisexuals).⁸⁰

Herein, the principle of plurality and difference is reflected in Butler's understanding of post-modernism. She makes a demand beyond the social norms, the

⁷⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Summer, 1982, 781.

⁸⁰ Peter Digereser, “Performativity Trouble: Postmodern Feminism and Essential Subjects”, *Political Research Quarterly* 47, no. 3, 1994, 655. <https://doi.org/10.2307/448847>.

categories of men and women and the limits of universal definition. Butler says that the scope of the norms should be expanded and any area of identity and subjectivity should be re-signified. For her, what needs to be done is not to define the female identity and not to determine the subject of feminism through this identity, but to deconstruct the gender identity by perverting the norms.

As an alternative to modern feminism, Butler suggests a new understanding of feminism. Butler's critique of subject categories in feminism is intertwined with her views that gendered identities are performative. She discusses the subject by arguing that the subject is constructed performatively. According to Butler, both "subject" and "gender" are performative. What makes gender and subject performative is the exclusion and the constant repetition of norms.

Judith Butler proposed the idea of performativity and a new theory of agenda arguing that gender needs to be seen as discursive construction, and a performance rather than a biological fact. And this sort of a concept also rejected the dualistic view of gender and also pointed towards the inseparability to the body from language and social norms.⁸¹

Butler's claim that gender is performative can be taken into consideration in the context of her postmodern thought. Because this claim is a way to subvert dominant gender norms. Butler regards subversion as making trouble. Making trouble about gender means making a chaos for those who are considered as excluded group in the heterosexist regulations. In doing so, it will be obvious that gender is neither a natural nor cultural substance, but that it is constructed through performative practices. Butler's subversion of the norms is "used in the service of both the denaturalization and re-idealization of heterosexual gender norms."⁸² As Butler opposes heterosexual gender

⁸¹Merin Simi Raj, *Postmodernism in Literature*, (MA Thesis, Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, 2009), 2.

⁸² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 125.

norms and the discourse of sexual difference, she seeks to reverse and reinterpret them more inclusively for multiple gender identities.

3.4. *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AS A POST-MODERN FEMINIST NOVEL

In this section, I take the postmodern feminism theory as a basic framework to interpret *The Handmaid's Tale*. The Gilead regime in the novel is against pluralistic understanding of gender as it aims to standardize individuals by assuming that there are fixed categories of gender. Postmodernist feminist theories, however, argue that some characteristics of people in the social relations, such as gender roles, are not fixed bases, but rather non-fixed categories. As non-fixed categories, postmodern feminists refuse stable categories of gender, hence, they do not accept established binary categories such as male and female. The postmodern feminist allows for a pluralistic understanding of gendered situations rather than assuming a single truth. We can now ask, to what extent the individual differences of the characters are allowed in the novel within the postmodern framework. By rejecting uniform ways of thinking, we see how postmodern feminist approach is paralleled with the critical analysis of the regime's effort to standardize individuals in the novel. By standardizing them, the government creates a "normalization society" that compels the individuals to act in accordance with the established norms and patterns. At this point, Offred's critical position in the novel draws our attention. I take Offred as the character, who thinks and acts like a postmodern feminist, who turns into a resister against the policies of the totalitarian government. I also see the traces of the women's liberation movement in the light of Offred and the resistance mechanisms developed against the regime. Thus, we can see how the conditions of Gilead can be turned into a possible ground for the resistance.

The policies of Gilead are based on some strict rules that reorganize the society to standardize it. This standardization is possible by depriving individuals, especially women, of their freedom about their speech, behaviour or experience of giving birth.

Even the dress code they are supposed to wear serves to the uniform model. The Handmaids are expected to adapt to this model by meeting expectations to survive. For instance, there is a wall by the river that sharply reminds them of these expectations. On the wall, there are many hanging corpses executed for being homosexual individuals as it is decided that they have committed a crime of treason against sex. There are also women executed for attempting to escape. The wall symbolizes a warning for people to keep the standard order. Yet, what Offred wants is a resistance against this order even at the cost of her own life. Even though the Aunt says “but after a time (...) it will become ordinary,”⁸³ Offred does not want to get used to the regime policies. She says that “I try to conjure, to raise my own spirits, from wherever they are. I need to remember what they look like. I try to hold them still behind my eyes, their faces, like pictures in an album.”⁸⁴ It is obvious that Offred needs to remind herself to gain resistance, individuality and independence at all costs.

The first breaking moment of Offred’s resistance is when she notices the Latin sentence that the previous Handmaid carved on the wall in the room Offred stays in. The words “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum”⁸⁵ are carved on the wall. Offred learns that the sentence means “Don't let the bastards crush you!” Offred learns that the Handmaid who wrote it hanged herself. The nameless Handmaid chooses suicide and leaves a suicide note for the new Handmaid. She implicitly advises to resist, fight and not to suffer from the same fate. For Offred, who is quietly living and obeying to the rules to survive, these words indicate the existence of hope for resistance. She expresses her resistant spirit that she feels like “a plant, set to trap me; such is the soil in which we grow. But I can't believe it; hope is rising in me, like sap in a tree.”⁸⁶ Offred's rebellious nature reminds her of her mother. Her mother is a figure from the past. She is a feminist-activist woman, who lives alone, and gives birth to a child without

⁸³ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 43.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

marriage. That's why, she spends her life alone. The reason is that she does not fit in with the universal definition of woman, which the society expects. Offred talks about her mother: "Sometimes she would cry. I was so lonely, she'd say. You have no idea how lonely I was. And I had friends, I was a lucky one, but I was lonely anyway."⁸⁷ We see how gender roles influence on the individuals' lives and make them feel excluded if they do not obey the norms. Yet still, her mother does not give up on trying to be the voice of all women. Offred remembers what her mother told her: "You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?"⁸⁸ She represents a generation that fights for their rights and freedom with the mentality of second wave feminism. Reflecting the generation clearly, the Aunt makes the Handmaids watch a video under the name of "unwomen" documentaries. While the speeches of women's rights defenders draw attention in the video, Offred notices her mother holding a banner with a large group behind her: "Freedom to choose. Every baby a wanted baby. Recapture our bodies. Do you believe a woman's place is on the kitchen table? Under the last sign there's a line drawing of a woman's body, lying on a table, blood dripping out of it."⁸⁹ Of course, all these words and feelings belong to the past, to the period before the coup. Offred compares the period of her mother's struggle and the period in which Offred lives now: "You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists."⁹⁰ Now let alone holding banners, women are now forbidden even to speak freely because of the new regime. Offred now understands her mother and acknowledges her to be right. "I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this."⁹¹ She recognizes pressure by thinking about the past before taking an action.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁹¹ Ibid., 126.

Offred begins to transform all these memories and thoughts into behaviour to resist the pressure. “Given our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps.”⁹² Offred develops her own forms of resistance. She enjoys doing something forbidden quietly because she knows “whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently.”⁹³ Based on this discourse, she involves in an underground organization of the group called Mayday against oppression. It is a movement started secretly by those want to overthrow the regime. Women who are exposed to similar pressures start the women's movement in order to raise their voices. Offred thinks that they have to be in unity. Because there is a "them" now. The involvement of Offred in this group can be given as an example of a collective struggle of women. With this struggle, Offred rejects the standardization that allows the regime to ensure obedience to the laws and to produce individuals who behave in accordance with the norms. The feeling of being included in a group makes her feel confident to destroy the duty and identity imposed on her by the society and to rebuild her own existence. While trying to live her own story, Offred is also telling it by reconstructing herself. She records her voice telling how life is in Gilead to be the voice of all Handmaids. She says that “If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.”⁹⁴ With a sudden flashforward from the year 2195, we encounter Professor Pieixoto who examines the records Offred kept years ago at a conference. While the professor is giving a conference on "The reference of the Handmaid's story with the identity problem", we see that Offred's story becomes the subject of a symposium. Thus, we can say that she manages to make herself a “subject” at the end of her struggle.

⁹² Ibid., 25.

⁹³ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 31.

CONCLUSION

This thesis intends to discuss gender issues in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* from postmodern feminist point of view. In order to analyse the issues in the novel, it is necessary to introduce some concepts and historical events first as the background. In the first chapter, I introduced how women's movements and gender debates have been shaped in the historical process. In this historical process, I analysed the definitions of gender and sex from various feminist perspectives and interpreted the relationship between them. Rather than the biological sex, I emphasized the impact of society on individuals and the expectation for gender roles. After giving some of the dualities assigned by the society and the definitions of gender categorized as male and female, I explained how categorization leads to inequality in society. What is meant by categorization is certain dualities such as man-woman, nature-culture and gender-sex. In this order in society, men are attributed as superior to women, culture to nature, and gender roles are assigned according to the sexes. Therefore, the conceptualized dualities imply that one takes a more passive role and is dependent on the other from a gender perspective. Woman is identified with nature and objectified in terms of her ability to reproduce. However, according to Butler, the dualities serve the hierarchical order and yet all dualities are interdependent, and therefore to privilege one half is a misinterpretation of reality. This reality has social consequences because it leads to the oppression and marginalization of the people.

Outside such patriarchal dualities, I paid attention to the feminist dystopia to observe the characters who are oppressed and marginalized as they fight for their own existences. In the light of such themes as oppression, power, resistance, and gender roles, I introduced the elements that enable us to characterize the novel as a feminist dystopia. Feminist dystopia forms a basis from literary point of view in the thesis and enables us to analyse the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which focuses on women living in the Republic of Gilead and depriving of their physical and mental freedom. This

genre functions as a mirror for warning about possible situations. These warnings are mainly about the criticism on the male-dominated order by putting women at the focal point. On the one hand, the genre asks us to imagine that society's problems lead to a disaster, which explores the most extreme possible consequences. On the other hand, it imposes the idea of another world and the struggle for it, because it actually calls to struggle against the patriarchal structures by showing future alternatives. In this sense, I explained how the struggle created by the possibility of alternatives turned into resistance. I tried to show how the feminist dystopia provides the form of resistance under Offred's leadership in the novel. She struggles to get rid of pressure by rebuilding her voice and identity even though those who have power in the regime impose severe sanctions on any resistance or rule violation. In order to observe the resistance of women in feminist dystopia and question gender categories, I referred to Butler's theory of performativity.

In chapter 2, I tried to explain Butler's theory of performativity and how this theory helps us to discuss the gender issues in the characters of the novel. After giving the definition of performativity, I introduced how the term relates to the novel and how the characters of the novel exhibit performative identities. As the theoretical basis of the thesis, Butler's performative theory intends to overturn gender roles and the categorical approaches in feminism. Through subversive performative practices, Butler aims to transform universal ideas, therefore, makes those who are not considered as subjects visible, and creates a new understanding of feminism that will include those who are not accepted as subjects. According to her, any categorization to define the subject produces exclusionary norms and confines the subject to male female categories. She rejects the categorizing dualities and claims that the individuals adapt by performing the identities attributed by society and are excluded if they do not obey these norms. Butler argues that in the male-female duality, gender and biological sex are not indeed essentially separate, and that the producer of this duality is gender. Butler questions sex and gender as an inseparable binary regardless if gender is natural, or if

it is something built through social, cultural and political factors. In other words, the sex of the individuals in the formation of the identity that they think they have is already gender.

Gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities, a process of interpreting the body, giving it cultural form. In other words, to be a woman is to become a woman; it is not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status, in which case one could be born a woman, but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities.⁹⁵

After discussing Butler's theory, I related it to the novel in terms of gender roles of the main characters' portrayals, which are formed through repetitive performative practices. Individuals maintain the right to live as long as they perform their roles in society. Otherwise, they are sentenced to torture or death. Women belonging to different classes have different duties with the strict rules. The dictated rules are that society should be uniform under some categories. These categories are the Handmaids, The Wives of commanders, Aunts and Marthas. In the Republic of Gilead, they are assigned certain gender roles by the male-dominated regime that controls everything. Thus, they all form gender identity through repetitive regulatory policies. By applying to the uniform human model, these policies make the society standard and ignore the existence of diversity and freedom. In a gender-based social system, standardization methods form their gender identity which is assumed as their original identity. According to Butler, the assumption that identity comes before gender is an illusion. As we can observe in the novel, the individuals get their identity by performing the roles given to them. Thus, gender identities are the result of normalization through norms and uniformization through repetitions. "The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations,

⁹⁵ Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex*", *Yale French Studies*, no. 72, 1986, 53 Accessed May 1, 2020.

destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’.⁹⁶ An example of this is the situation in Gilead where women are categorized as women and non-women, and their gender identities are functionalized as motherhood.

That societies reinforce the dominant paradigm of female motherhood is relatively clear. For Butler, however, this process of reiteration also creates the conditions for challenging the status quo. Motherhood emerges as a social institution that both reinforces and potentially subverts dominant gendered paradigms of family and society.⁹⁷

I explored the gender issues in accordance with the novel after analysing the performative practices associated with motherhood, universal gender identities and gender roles. In the last section of chapter 3, I divided the last section into two subjects to analyse gender issues further. These subjects are the loss of individuality through social construction and the concepts of motherhood and sexuality. I explained first how social constructions create gender identities by destroying the individuality as individual difference and how the Gilead’s regime destroys individual difference and preserves its power with a uniform human model instead. We can observe the social impositions on women to make them silent in every aspect, which is the point that strengthens the regime. Offred says “there’s hardly any point in my thinking, is there? I say. What I think doesn’t matter. Which is the only reason he can tell me things.”⁹⁸ Since they do not have a right in any field about themselves, the policy of the regime is getting stronger. The power belongs to the decision maker on the dress, speech, name and behaviour of women. I analysed that all realities of women are based on male discourse, and that the ultra-conservative system victimizes women the most. The

⁹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 187.

⁹⁷ Oh, Irene. *The Performativity of Motherhood: Embodying Theology and Political Agency*. (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 5.

⁹⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), 221.

subordination of women is felt in many parts of the system. For instance, in a society with a high rate of infertility, the possibility that men may be infertile is ignored, and the phenomenon of infertility creates the norm by attributing only to women. No rights are given except to allow women to spin the production mechanism wheel. In the section of motherhood and sexuality, I analysed the objectification of the female body by reproducing male dominant policies. As one of these policies, women are categorized as slave girls for giving birth to wealthy families for maintaining both gender and class-based hierarchy. Thus, the repressive mechanism is established over the female body. This mechanism also changes women's self-view, which is the purpose of this mechanism for women to adapt by normalizing it. The Aunts have a great role in this purpose. They put forward that the Handmaids actually fulfil their biological requirements as women and that the system protects them. However, as a leading figure, Offred is sceptical of this mechanism and fights for her individuality. I analysed her transition process to struggle for her rights in detail in the last chapter. But before, I examined the framework of postmodernism that theoretically grounded this struggle.

In chapter 3, I introduced initially theoretical framework of postmodernism. I gave a definition of postmodernism and analysed the factors that created how and when it emerged. Then, I listed the basic principles of postmodernism, the criticism of modernism and its reasons. In the mid-20th century, postmodernism, which developed against modernism, was influenced by the devastating outcome of the war. After the war, some concepts of modernism were criticized and replaced by a postmodern approach. Such concepts as universality, the absolute center and difference of the individuals were questioned. Unlike modernism, postmodernism criticizes universal and absolute truths and is open to all different views. Since postmodernism is against any category and universal generalizations, Thomas D. Docherty, in his work titled "Postmodernism: A Reader", referred to postmodernism as the view that "a specter is

roaming through Europe: The Postmodern"⁹⁹ and emphasized its ambiguity and open-endedness. The concepts associated with postmodernism are uncertainty, difference, ethnicity, sub-cultures, cultural pluralism, locality and originality. In the light of these concepts, I examined the intersection point with feminism. In terms of feminism, postmodernism provides a strong basis for criticizing the modernist masculine domination. First, I introduced the emergence of postmodern feminism and criticisms on modern feminism. Showing the parallel relationship between postmodernism and feminism, both approaches are based on the rejection of categorization and universal perspectives. Postmodern feminists oppose fixed categories such as women-men and nature-culture because in these binary oppositions, one side is attributed to the man as representing power and reason, while the other side is attributed to the woman as a secondary position. That's why they take pluralistic understanding view by criticizing the modern feminist's generalized discourses.

In the following section, I referred to Judith Butler as a postmodern feminist who adopts the pluralistic policy in gender. I examined Butler's criticisms on the classical feminism's approach as she believes it does not represent women of all ethnicities and classes. Feminism takes women as a category of universal subject. By questioning the concepts of subject and identity, Butler argues that feminism limits these concepts and creates exclusionary norms by categorizing them as male and female. When we take Butler a postmodernist, we can say that Butler suggests to deconstruct social norms that define and create subjects. According to Butler, a new approach should be developed to make a trouble for heterosexist gender norms. For her, gender and subject are constructed performatively. Herein, I explained that the concept of performativity plays an important role in the subject and identity stage of the individuals. I explained that the roles given by the society are performed by

⁹⁹ Paolo Portoghesi, "What is the Postmodern?" in Thomas Docherty (Ed.), *Postmodernism. A Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 208.

repeating and reproducing norms, and these norms are naturalized and attributed as gendered identity to the individuals.

In the final section, I analysed the postmodern feminist aspects of the novel in the lead of the main character Offred. The analysis focused especially on the character, Offred, who challenges traditional norms and struggles for being a free individual. As in the postmodern approach refusing universal definitions and standardization, Offred denies the requirements she is assigned to and goes against the regime's principles. Gilead's regime policy is aimed at classifying individuals according to their biological sex and standardizing the society. The regime makes the society standard and uniform by encompassing the female body in particular. Women are regarded as a reproduction property to maintain the order. Thus, I pointed out how postmodern feminism is in parallel with Offred's way of thinking against this order. Postmodern understanding is the thought represented by Offred because of her position against social norms, uniformization, a single truth, any impositions without questioning and dual categories such as men and women. Regarding the categorized dualities such as men and women, homosexual individuals are also executed in accordance with the established norms in Gilead. It is unacceptable to go beyond the norms in Gilead, which adopts universal dualities as a principle. Against these norms, I described how Offred opposes the way of life imposed on the individuals. This opposition is strengthened by Offred's participation in an underground organization called Mayday. I introduced Offred's process of becoming a rebellious and what drives Offred to resist against the norms and policies of Gilead. I also introduced Offred's mother as another rebel figure in the women's movement and as a feminist-activist woman representing the second wave feminism. She was excluded because she did not act in accordance with the norms of the society. From this point of view, we understand that social expectations and norms prevail in the lives of individuals, otherwise they cause exclusion.

Overall, my thesis applied post-modern feminist approach into analysing the notion of gender as a performative theory of Butler. Butler's theory is based on the

critique of modern feminism which takes a universal view neglecting individual differences. Butler suggests that universal categories such as male and female support the heteronormative order and norms. Thus, these categories indicate an exclusionary attitude as they do not qualify those who are considered non-normative as subjects. This position prompts Butler to propose a new approach to feminism and subject. With her theory of performativity, she raises discussion on feminism and suggests to reverse gender as a norm. She conceptually focuses on gender identity and the subject, and opposes the assumption that there is identity before discourse. Under this theoretical framework, I analysed *The Handmaid's Tale* and observed the characters regarding the concept of gender. Based on Butler's performative concept, I explained how the characters perform and acquire gender identity with the roles imposed on them by living with the norms. I clarified that Gilead maintains its power by continuing to reproduce uniform individuals with the policies shaped by the male-dominated order. I pointed out that this order mostly commodifies the female body by dominating it. In this respect, I analysed *The Handmaid's Tale* as the feminist dystopian fiction in which performativity grounds the gendered order.

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