

Maja M. Ćuk

Alfa BK univerzitet – Fakultet za strane jezike

maja.cuk@alfa.edu.rs

## LOVE AND FREEDOM IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND *THE TESTAMENTS*: THE DYSTOPIAN GENRE AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S WORKS

**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to analyse how the alarming circumstances in a dystopian society affect individuals in Margaret Atwood's novels The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments, by referencing Erich Fromm's views on love and symbiotic unions in The Art of Loving and Hannah Arendt's ideas on freedom and power in The Human Condition. The major protagonist Offred in The Handmaid's Tale is deprived of control of her own reproductive function and forcibly assigned to bear children for Commander Fred and his wife in an era of environmental pollution and severe restrictions of people's rights. The depiction of their household, Offred's strictly monitored tasks, the details about the indoctrination facility for the handmaids, the government-run brothel, and other settings vividly evoke an atmosphere of confinement and restriction. The circumstances and practices which hinder a sense of well-being, love and happiness, are also described in the sequel The Testaments, from the perspective of three different narrators. However, it is interesting that the younger generation of female protagonists in Margaret Atwood's last dystopian novel show the courage to interrupt the routine activities in the Republic of Gilead, stepping forward and taking action in order to create a space where freedom can emerge.*

**Keywords:** *human values, power relations, dystopian novels, speculative fiction, Margaret Atwood.*

### Introduction

In her critical essay on gender and globalization issues in Margaret Atwood's novels, Biljana Dojčinović has paraphrased Luce Irigaray's words "if we are to realize our goal of peaceful coexistence and of sustaining human life on the planet, we need to construct a way towards a civil community that respects and fosters difference".<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood's attempts to sensitize readers to various social

---

<sup>1</sup> Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, "Reading Gender and Globalization Issues in and out of M. Atwood Novels", in *Culture and Ideology: Canadian Perspectives*, eds. Jelena Novaković and Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2009, p. 245.

problems in her works seem to resonate with that view. She draws attention to polarization, social injustice, gender inequality and other social issues, “which are not only the disturbing social forces in a dystopian novel, but the reflection of our reality”.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the dystopian genre, it is interesting that Margaret Atwood’s protagonists “break through the traditional plots and characterization of dystopias and classics into their own story”<sup>3</sup> and differ from the characters in the typical dystopian works: “In classic dystopian novels, Huxley’s, Orwell’s and Burgess’s works, the major protagonist is usually a (white) Man, while female characters or members of other races are not given the role of ‘carriers’ of literary messages”.<sup>4</sup> However, Margaret Atwood as “a feminist postcolonialist”<sup>5</sup> gives voice to the silenced and “shifts the point of view to the unreliable, unprivileged and even highly unusual centres of consciousness and narration”.<sup>6</sup>

In her first dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the major protagonist is a woman named Offred who recounts the story about a fundamentalist theocratic dictatorship in the Republic of Gilead, where she is relegated to the lowest-ranking class of women. In a tumultuous era of dangerous political conflicts and serious environmental pollution, a radical political group “Sons of Jacob” has killed the president and most of Congress and reorganized the society using rigid and made-up interpretation of the Bible, instituting a new militarized, hierarchical model of social and religious fanaticism. The description of the households of the ruling class and the Rachel and Leah Centre, Handmaid’s monitored routes, and other bleak settings, highlight an atmosphere of confinement and restriction. People are controlled through the constructed places of surveillance and threat and those who do not submit to the new regime are severely punished and executed.

The same norms and practices are also depicted in the sequel *The Testaments*, from the perspective of the three different narrators: Aunt Lydia, who appears in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and Offred’s daughters. However, it is interesting that the younger generation of female protagonists in *The Testaments*, Agnes and Daisy, show the bravery to question the norms in the Republic of Gilead. They try to make a difference and pave the way towards freedom.

The aim of this paper is to analyse love and freedom in Margaret Atwood’s first and the last dystopian novels, by drawing from Erich Fromm’s views on the (im)mature forms of love and Hannah Arendt’s ideas on freedom and power.

<sup>2</sup> Maja Ćuk, Artea Panajotović, “MaddAddam Trilogy as a Historical Chronicle of the Silenced in a (Dystopian) Society”, *Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta u Prištini*, Kosovska Mitrovica, 2020, p. 208.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>5</sup> Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1993, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Maja Ćuk, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

### **The art of loving and human condition in *The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments***

In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm compares and contrasts mature love and the immature forms of love – symbiotic union(s). He claims:

In contrast to symbiotic union, mature *love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity*, one's individuality. Love is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity<sup>7</sup>.

Fromm identifies the particular elements, “common to all forms of love”<sup>8</sup>. These are care, responsibility, respect and knowledge.

In a mother's love for her child, we can see that love implies care and “the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love”<sup>9</sup>. Responsibility implies “to be able and ready to ‘respond’ “ to the needs of another human being.<sup>10</sup> According to Fromm, respect refers to “the concern that the other person should grow and unfold as he is”, so it implies “the absence of exploitation”<sup>11</sup>. He emphasizes the fact that: “I have to know the other person and myself objectively, in order to be able to see his reality, or rather, to overcome the illusions, the irrationally distorted picture I have of him”<sup>12</sup>.

In contrast to mature love, there are the passive forms of the symbiotic union – masochism, and the active form of symbiotic fusion – sadism. The two “immature forms of love” can be detected in behaviour of the members of the higher class in Gilead who react “in both the sadistic and the masochistic manner, usually towards different objects”<sup>13</sup>. In Fromm's view, the phenomenon is “not surprising to find”<sup>14</sup> and he provides an interesting example in history: “Hitler reacted primarily in a sadistic fashion towards people, but masochistically towards fate, history, the ‘higher power’ of nature”<sup>15</sup>. As our analysis will reveal, Commanders, their Wives, Aunts, etc. behave towards the Handmaids as the sadistic person from Fromm's theory who “commands, exploits, hurts, humiliates”, while “the masochistic person is commanded, exploited, hurt, humiliated”<sup>16</sup>. No one

---

<sup>7</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, London, Unwin Paperbacks, 1976, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

cares for, feels responsible for or respects the handmaids and their identities. They are all cast in the same mould and treated as the objects for the system's use.

It is interesting that Fromm claims that “respect exists only on the basis of freedom” and that “love is the child of freedom, never that of domination”<sup>17</sup>. His views are similar to Hannah Arendt's elaborations on freedom and political agency. Contrary to Hannah Arendt's views that each person is a unique individual who has a responsibility to react and participate in political matters, Offred does not exist as a person. As Arendt claims:

If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood.<sup>18</sup>

In the Republic of Gilead, women are subjugated to men and they are regarded as second-class citizens who are not allowed to read and write, apart from the Aunts. They are forbidden to express their opinions openly and they are not allowed to have a career or titles or to hold property. Therefore, they have no place in political decisions and intellectual life and they cannot do anything to improve their position in society.

According to Hannah Arendt, “in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of voice”.<sup>19</sup> The Handmaids are deprived of their individuality and autonomy and their personal rights are eroded. They lack sovereignty over their physical bodies, which are owned and controlled by the ruling class. However, as our analysis will reveal, the younger generation of female protagonists in *The Testaments* will succeed in raising questions and objections about the system attempting to dehumanize and disempower their gender. They show how action and speech “bind” people together,<sup>20</sup> and how “‘the web’ of human relationships”<sup>21</sup> can overcome obstacles and “cut across all boundaries”.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 175.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

### Love and freedom in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The freedom of all women in the Republic of Gilead is completely restricted and they are assigned to various classes. Similar to the circumstances in other Atwood's novels (*Alias Grace* or *The Heart Goes Last*), the whole of their personality is "virtual property of the state".<sup>23</sup> The Commander's Wife is the highest rank a woman can hold, although she has no real power. Aunts are inferior to the Wives, although they are allowed to be literate. They train and control the Handmaids. Marthas do the housekeeping. The Handmaids are reduced to "voiceless childbearing vessels, walking wombs, and consumer objects tossed aside in due time ignoring their human basic rights".<sup>24</sup> The name of a handmaid consists of the word "of" followed by the name of the handmaid's commander, so Offred is not the narrator's real name: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden".<sup>25</sup> She is typified as the possession of Commander Fred and she is just one of the women in the household whom the Commander looks over "as if taking inventory".<sup>26</sup> She can leave the house only on shopping trips, so she is "a virtual prisoner in her Commander's house",<sup>27</sup> as Coral Ann Howells points out. The Eyes, Gilead's secret police, watch her every public move.

Offred is "forced to a life of utter passivity and submissiveness"<sup>28</sup> and her state-mandated duty is to conceive a child during a bizarre process when she is having sexual intercourse with the Commander while his Wife sits behind her, holding her hands:

What's going on in this room, under Serena Joy's silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena.<sup>29</sup>

The Commander also does not seem to enjoy the strange act of copulation and he behaves "like a man who has other things on his mind" and "if he's somewhere else".<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Sergej Macura, "The Construction of Feminine Identity in *Alias Grace*", in *Culture and Ideology: Canadian Perspectives*, eds. Jelena Novaković and Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2009, p. 239.

<sup>24</sup> Gökçenaz Gayret, " 'Walking wombs': Loss of Individuality and Self-alienation in *The Handmaid's Tale*", *Kafkas University Journal of Social Sciences*, Autumn 2019, Additional number 2, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, London, Vintage, 1996, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 166.

<sup>28</sup> J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Designs in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, p. 139.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, London, Vintage, 1996, p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Offred would never believe that she could be “touched again, in love or desire”,<sup>31</sup> until she unexpectedly meets Nick, Commander Fred’s gardener and chauffeur, in her room. During the encounter, they only exchange a kiss and push each other away, before Nick informs her that the Commander has asked her to come to see him in his office.

Ever since that night, Offred begins visiting the Commander regularly. She is confused at the beginning, because his needs have been obscure to her: “He didn’t touch me much, except for that one obligatory kiss. No pawing, no heavy breathing, none of that; it would have been out of place, somehow, for him as well as for me”.<sup>32</sup> They only play the game Scrabble, which is a forbidden activity, considering the fact that any kind of reading is forbidden to women. During their subsequent meetings, the Commander also lets her look at the old magazine and even gives her a hand lotion. Therefore, her impression of the next ceremony is different, because she starts to have a peculiar and more personal relationship with the Commander. She starts to feel shy around him. Although the Commander has probably initiated the relationship with Offred because he is lonely and estranged from his wife, his attention makes her feel alive again:

But even so, and stupidly enough, I’m happier than I was before. It’s something to do, for one thing. Something to fill the time, at night, instead of sitting alone in my room. It’s something else to think about. I don’t love the Commander or anything like it, but he’s of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow.

And I for him. To him I’m no longer merely a usable body. To him I’m not just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven – to be crude – minus the bun. To him I am not merely empty.<sup>33</sup>

He has almost revealed that there is something between them at the moment, because he has reached his hand up as if to touch her face during the next Ceremony.

They mention and discuss love during a conversation where the Commander is trying to explain the advantages of the system and asks her about her opinion of the current circumstances. The Creators of Gilead assassinated the president and members of Congress and launched a coup, claiming that they were taking power temporarily for a higher cause – to reduce pornography, prostitution and violence against women, and so forth. He argues hypocritically that the new social order ultimately offers women more respect and safety than the old, pre-Gilead society offered them:

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.162–163.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement. Now, tell me. You're an intelligent person, I like to hear what you think. What did we overlook?

Love, I said.

Love said the Commander. What kind of love?

Falling in love, I said.

The Commander looked at me with his candid boy's eyes. Oh yes, he said. I've read the magazines, that's what they were pushing, wasn't it? But look at the stats, my dear. Was it really worth it, falling in love? Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better.<sup>34</sup>

There is no demand for real love in The Republic of Gilead, and the members of the ruling class behave like automatons who "cannot love".<sup>35</sup>

One night the Commander has required Offred to put on a costume and takes her out to an unofficially permitted "club" where officers, senior officials and trade delegations are having fun with "working girls".<sup>36</sup> She sees her friend Moira working there as a prostitute. The Commander and Offred make love in a room above the place and she feigns passion. She is aware of the fact that "he is not an unkind man"<sup>37</sup> and that, under other circumstances, she even likes him. However, she is not physically attracted to him: "Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how. Let's get this over with or you'll be here all night".<sup>38</sup>

A character in the novel who plays a more significant romantic interest is Nick. At first, she feels shame about the sexual desire she experiences for him and she hopes that her partner, Luke, would "understand".<sup>39</sup> The Commander's Wife had a plan to persuade Offred to spend a night with Nick and pass the child off as the Commander's, considering the fact that he is probably infertile. After her first visit to his room, at Serena's suggestion, they continue to meet frequently without anyone's knowledge. Their affair has all the conventional characteristics of a love story and possibly even a happy ending. He is "a dark angel" who tells her that the Eyes who are coming to take her in a van are Mayday.<sup>40</sup>

Contrary to her friend Moira who has been always striving for freedom, Offred has never taken any overt action against the oppressive regime to liberate herself. Her reluctance to react demonstrates the fact that an oppressive system

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 227–228.

<sup>35</sup> Erich Fromm 1976, p. 75.

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

like the Republic of Gilead can destroy most people's ability to resist it. At the end of her story, she yields to her destiny:

The van waits in the driveway, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.

And so I step up, into the darkness within, or else the light.<sup>41</sup>

As Tatjana Bijelić claims, the handmaids' "inability, or unwillingness, to perpetuate their mothers' fight for gender equality leads to a complete loss of female identity".<sup>42</sup> However, Offred's daughters, instructed by Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments*, will refuse to accept compliance and they will reject their roles as victims.

### Love and freedom in *The Testaments*

In *The Testaments*, women are also kept under strict vigilance. The Handmaids and the daughters of the Commanders are supervised by the Aunts who are giving speeches extolling Gilead's beliefs that women should be subservient to men and solely concerned with producing children. The circumstances are presented and depicted from the three different perspectives:

The novel picks up 15 or 16 years after Offred disappears to an unknown fate at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*. There are three narrators, two of them young and idealistic, one of them old and endlessly cunning. The most compelling portrait of that of wickedness – of course it is. The story is driven and described by the infamous Aunt Lydia, and she is just as terrifying, in her astringency, as you would expect her to be.<sup>43</sup>

Aunt Lydia has been introduced as a hard-hearted woman fully aligned with the oppressive policies against female gender in *The Handmaid's Tale*. As a cog in the totalitarian machine, she openly declared that love held no value in the Republic of Gilead: "Love, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don't let me catch you at it. No mooning and June-ing around here, girls. Wagging her finger at us. Love is not the point".<sup>44</sup> However, *The Testaments* offers a slightly different view on this female protagonist that might change the reader's perception of her. In her conversation with Commander Judd, when he is interrogating and testing her for the position, they discuss her stance on love and her marital status:

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

<sup>42</sup> Tatjana Bijelić, "Feminist Mother, Silent Daughter: Motherline Discontinuities in Carol Shield's *Unless*", in *Culture and Ideology: Canadian Perspectives*, eds. Jelena Novaković and Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2009, p. 205.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Enright, "The Testaments by Margaret Atwood review – a dazzling follow-up to *The Handmaid's Tale*", *The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019 [28 April 2024]

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

"You've had lovers," he said. I wondered how he had found that out, and was slightly flattered that he'd bothered.

"Briefly," I said. "Several. No long-term successes." Had I ever been in love? I didn't think so. My experience with the men in my family had not encouraged trust.<sup>45</sup>

Commander Judd is trying to blackmail her with the information that might cause her trouble. Before the forced change of leadership in the country, she was a well educated woman and a judge. Apart from the fact that she was married and got divorced, she had an abortion, which might be considered as a serious crime by the authorities in The Republic of Gilead.

The illustration of the events after the coup and Aunt Lydia's story about her decision to become one of the four elite women who would control Gilead's women, serves as a stark reflection of the absurdities, injustices and violence in the new society. As one of three narrators in the novel, Aunt Lydia reveals the horrifying circumstances that led her to join the Aunts. She, her colleague and about forty other women, all of them judges, lawyers and doctors, were "being herded"<sup>46</sup> at a stadium. The women were humiliated, tortured, and even forced to kill each other, all to meet the expectations of the ruling class and ensure their own survival:

In addition to the ordeal by toilet, we'd been sleeping in our business attire, with no change of underwear. Some of us were past menopause, but others were not, so the smell of clotting blood was added to the sweat and tears and shit and puke. To breathe was to be nauseated.

They were reducing us to animals – to penned-up animals – to our animal nature. They were rubbing our noses in that nature. We were to consider ourselves subhuman.<sup>47</sup>

At one particular moment, she needs to shoot at her close colleague in order to confirm that she is loyal to the new system: "This was Commander Judd's test: fail it, and your commitment to the one true way would be voided. Pass it, and blood was on your hands".<sup>48</sup>

Aunt Lydia gives an account of her rise to power in a manuscript known as "The Ardua Hall Holograph". She has used her position to collect evidence against Gilead's authorities for years:

But there are three other reasons for my political longevity. First, the regime needs me. I control the women's side of their enterprise with an iron fist in a leather

---

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments*, London, Vintage, 2019, p. 170.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

glove in a woolen mitten, and I keep things orderly: like a harem eunuch, I am uniquely placed to do so.

Second, I know too much about the leaders – too much dirt – and they are uncertain as to what I may have done with it in the way of documentation. If they string me up, will that dirt somehow be leaked? They might well suspect I've taken backup precautions, and they would be right.<sup>49</sup>

Using her power and authority, as well as her manipulative tricks, she has contributed to the regime's downfall from within.

The day after her trial by murder in the stadium, Lydia was introduced to Elizabeth, Helena, and Vidala, the other Aunts. The rivalry between the four Aunts is present from the very beginning of their cooperation in the Republic of Gilead and the first meeting with Commander Judd: "Despite our pretense of amity, indeed of collegiality, the underlying currents of hostility were already building".<sup>50</sup> Their behavior demonstrate Erich Fromm's claim that "the essence of love is seen in a situation of collaboration".<sup>51</sup> They create and follow the rules of the new system to preserve their prestige and superiority, but they do not truly stand together against the same enemy.

Erich Fromm also asserts that "if an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love only others, he cannot love at all".<sup>52</sup> However, girls in schools in Gilead were trained that it is sinful to love and protect yourself. Their classes are infused with negative monologues about their evil nature. They have learned that they are "snares and enticements"<sup>53</sup> and that they have "smaller brains"<sup>54</sup> than men and that when their puberty starts they are no longer "precious flowers but much more dangerous creatures".<sup>55</sup> Writing materials "were not generally available in Gilead",<sup>56</sup> so the girls only learn to embroider and paint. Manners and customs, elementary gardening and the basics of interior decorating are also a few subjects for female students who are "studying to be married".<sup>57</sup>

The common belief in Gilead is that women are to blame if a man approaches them in an inappropriate way. That is why Agnes, the second narrator who has presented her point of view in the chapters entitled "Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A", does not know how she should react in an unpleasant situation at the dentist's. Her step-mother intentionally sends her to Dr. Grove's office alone:

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>51</sup> Erich Fromm, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>53</sup> Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

“She’d done it on purpose, so I would have my breast pinched and the polluting item thrust in front of me. She had wanted me to be defiled”.<sup>58</sup> It was widely known that Dr. Grove was touching and abusing girls, yet no one took action because everybody agreed that he was the best dentist. After the death of her mother Tabitha, Commander’s Kyle first wife who had adopted her, the girl lost her protectress and a loving figure. Her step-mother Paula wants to remove Agnes from their house by arranging her marriage with Commander Judd. Considering the fact that the high-ranking officer is a pedophile whose Wives “have a habit of dying”,<sup>59</sup> the prospect of marriage would not be the best option for her. The second wife of Commander Kyle “was moving or discarding one thing at a time”<sup>60</sup> in the house in a subtle way and she is proud to become the mother of Ofkyle’s baby, unmindful of the handmaid’s plight. During one of the numerous tea parties for the other Wives, Agnes has noticed that none of the women were interested in what was going on in Ofkyle’s head, “they were only interested in her belly”.<sup>61</sup>

Familiar with the fact that “after each respectable period of mourning, he has let it be known that he is in the market for another child bride”,<sup>62</sup> Aunt Lydia helps Agnes to break off the betrothal with Commander Judd and find peace in Ardua Hall. Her best friend Becka has also lived there after her failed suicide attempt, which was a way of escaping from the inappropriate treatment in Dr. Grove’s household. Although Aunt Lydia’s working methods have proven morally wrong and she has contributed to suffering and even deaths of a lot of people, she was loved and respected by Agnes as a motherly figure: “Aunt Lydia had been a mother of sorts, although a harsh one”<sup>63</sup>.

Becka cordially helps Agnes with her tasks, which are assigned to a Suppliant, and warns her against “Corrections”.<sup>64</sup> After they both learned to read and write, the girls have identified and discussed the portions of Scripture which do not overlap with the doctrines they had been taught in their school. They have realized that the regime distorts the religious context to justify their policies and stifle women:

“They want God to be only one thing,” she said. “They leave things out. It says in the Bible we’re in God’s image, male and female both. You’ll see, when the Aunts let you read it.”

Don’t say such things, Becka,” I said. “Aunt Vidala – she’d think it was heresy.”  
“I can say them to you, Agnes,” she said. “I’d trust you with my life.”<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

Furthermore, Agnes has also realized that the Aunts derived their power by collecting other people's secrets in the particular files.

Agnes's life changes course when her sister Daisy appears there. At the time of their meeting, Agnes and Becca are the Aunts – Aunt Victoria and Aunt Immortelle. They all become accomplices in Aunt Lydia's plan to crush the system in Gilead. Becca is ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of her friends. Although she might have survived in the water cistern, she drowned herself because she does not want "to live in any of the ways that are allowed"<sup>66</sup> in the Republic of Gilead. Strange as it may seem, she has decided that her ability to choose and have agency over her life is more important than her death.

Agnes and Daisy do not understand each other at the beginning, but they connect during their daring adventure and perilous journey from Gilead to Canada:

"I would just like to say that I'm grateful for you in my life," I told her. "I'm happy you are my sister."

"I am too, she said. After a minute she asked, "Do you think we'll ever see our mother?"

I have faith that we will."

"Do you think she'll like us?"

"She will love us," I said to soothe her. "And we will love her".

"Just because people are related to you doesn't mean you love them," she murmured.

"Love is a discipline, like prayer," I said. "I'd like to pray for you, so you will feel better."<sup>67</sup>

Agnes's sister Daisy has also lost people who protected her and whom she considered to be her parents. She was growing up in a more liberal and more supportive environment in Canada, although the relationship with her "parents" who were the secret agents was distant. After their death, she finds out that she is Baby Nicole, a child that had attained legendary status after being smuggled from Gilead to Canada. Before her arrival at Ardua Hall, Daisy had been trained in particular skills, self-defence and praying, by a group of Mayday operatives, because they believed that she had the best chance to enter Gilead. The aim of her "mission" was to retrieve particular top-secret documents. It is interesting that she needed to get a tattoo with a leitmotif and words "love" and "God" on her left forearm<sup>68</sup>, where Aunt Lydia implanted a chip containing important information that will be revealed when Agnes and Daisy escape. The two sisters left Gilead dressed as Pearl Girls, met a Mayday agent, left Gileadian waters on Captain Mishimengo's boat *Nelly J. Banks*, and reached the coast of Canada in the inflatable. They had to row, because the motor broke down:

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

“We were rowing and rowing. We each had an oar. I’d never been in a boat before so I didn’t know how to do it. I felt weak and tired and my arms were cramping with the pain.”<sup>69</sup>

In the end, more important than Daisy’s successful mission was the relationship she started with her sister which gave them both new energy and a restored sense of belonging:

It was really close. We almost kicked the bucket. We could have been swept out with the tide and ended up in South America, but more likely picked up by Gilead and strung up on the Wall. I’m so proud of Agnes – after that night she was really my sister. She kept on going even though she was at the end.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, in *The Testaments*, the theme of love extends beyond romantic love to encompass sisterly love and family love. The notion that they would meet their mother gave the special strength to the girls to conquer all challenges.

Contemplating on the concept of power, Hannah Arendt points out that “while strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse”.<sup>71</sup> The scholar puts great emphasis on people’s willingness to be truly committed to each other and to work together in order to achieve that particular goal. Agnes and Daisy have joined together to achieve a higher purpose with genuine intentions and their deeds, as Arendt would explain that her words “are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities”.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, alliances between the Aunts, Aunt Lydia and Commander Judd are not based on trust, friendship and familial bonds. The tyranny of the authorities in Gilead can be described as an “attempt to substitute violence for power”.<sup>73</sup> Offred’s daughters and their friends have ignited positive change in the world around them with their “rowing” to freedom and have proven that even in the darkest moments, love and unity can prevail.

## Conclusion

Through Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novels, we are reminded of the enduring power of literature to illuminate the human condition and transcend the constraints of literary genres, reality and fiction. As our analysis has revealed, Margaret Atwood has illustrated the forms of “mature” and “immature love” and she has shown that, while love has the potential to uplift and inspire, it can also be perverted and corrupted by human frailty. The two “immature forms of

---

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

<sup>71</sup> Hannah Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

love” – masochism and sadism can be detected in behavior of the members of the higher class in Gilead who react “in both the sadistic and the masochistic manner, towards different objects”<sup>74</sup> – primarily in a sadistic fashion towards the handmaids, but masochistically towards their ideology and the Bible, which they interpret in their own way. On the other hand, Agnes and Daisy, as well as Becca, have shown the basic principles of love – care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. The portrayal of friendship and familiar ties among these characters emphasizes the importance of human connection and action in times of adversity.

In the stories of the narrators in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*, the Republic of Gilead has been exposed as a dreadful place, unscrupulously governed by the authorities who seem to care for themselves, being oblivious to the disturbing circumstances in the system. The individuals have been conscripted into serving the regime, stripped of any opportunity for personal agency. Similar to the initiatives in her other dystopian novels, the original concept of the Sons of Jacob “has degenerated into an inhuman social experiment where ‘subjects’ are classified and regulated, treated as commodities, ‘colonized’ and ‘devoured’ by the system or influential people in the ruling class”.<sup>75</sup> Although Offred has never undertaken any activity against maltreatment and abuse of the regime in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, her daughters have acted positively and decisively to resolve the problems that caused trouble to their mother in the sequel of the novel. The younger generation of female protagonists in *The Testaments* have shown that each person is a unique individual with her views and values and that individual responsibility is particularly important in the context of totalitarianism. Through her dystopian novels, Margaret Atwood reminds us to re-examine the values and behavior in our societies and to ponder the question of love and freedom.

## REFERENCES

Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, London, Vintage, 1996.

Atwood, Margaret, *The Testaments*, London, Vintage, 2019.

Bijelić, Tatjana, “Feminist Mother, Silent Daughter: Motherline Discontinuities in Carol Shield’s *Unless*”, in: *Culture and Ideology: Canadian Perspectives*, eds. Jelena Novaković and Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2009, str. 201–206.

<sup>74</sup> Erich Fromm, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>75</sup> Maja Ćuk and Tijana Parezanović, “Will the heart ‘go last’ in the future? Alienating Spaces in Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Fiction”, *Godišnjak Filozofskog fakulteta u Novom Sadu*, 49 (1), 2024, str. 168.

Bouson, J. Brooks, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Designs in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.

Ćuk, Maja, Panajotović, Artea, “MaddAddam Trilogy as a Historical Chronicle of the Silenced in a (Dystopian) Society,” *Kosovska Mitrovica, Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta u Prištini*, 2020, str. 193–210.

Ćuk, Maja, and Tijana Parezanović, “Will the heart ‘go last’ in the future? Alienating Spaces in Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Fiction,” *Godišnjak Filozofskog fakulteta u Novom Sadu*, 49 (1), 2024, str. 155–170.

Dojčinović-Nešić, Biljana, “Reading Gender and Globalization Issues in and out of M. Atwood Novels”, in: *Culture and Ideology: Canadian Perspectives*, eds. Jelena Novaković and Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, Faculty of Philology of Belgrade, 2009, str. 243–250.

Enright, Anne, “The Testaments by Margaret Atwood review – a dazzling follow-up to *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” *The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/10/the-testaments-by-margaret-atwood-review>. Приступљено 28. априла 2024.

Gayret, Gökçenaz, “ ‘Walking wombs’: Loss of Individuality and Self-alienation in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, *Kafkas University Journal of Social Sciences*, Autumn 2019, Additional number 2, str. 103–121.

Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, London, Unwin Paperbacks, 1976.

Howells, Coral Ann, *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Macura, Sergej, “The Construction of Feminine Identity in *Alias Grace*”, in: *Culture and Ideology: Canadian Perspectives*, eds. Jelena Novaković and Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, Belgrade, Faculty of Philology, 2009, str. 237–242.

Wilson, Sharon Rose, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1993.

Maја M. Ćuk

ЉУБАВ И СЛОБОДА У РОМАНИМА СЛУШКИЊИНА ПРИЧА И СВЕДОЧАНСТВА:  
ДИСТОПИЈСКИ ЖАНР И ДЕЛА МАРГАРЕТ ЕТВУД  
(Резиме)

Ослањајући се на виђења Ериха Фрома и Хане Арент о љубави и слободи, у овом раду се преиспитује како узнемиравајуће околности у дистопијском друштву утичу на односе и понашања главних протагониста у романима Маргарет Етвуд *Слушкињина прича* и *Сведочанства*. У *Слушкињиној причи*, пратимо исповест главне јунакиње Фредовице којој је додељена позиција слушкиње, тј. жене која привилегованом друштвеном слоју обезбеђује потомство у новом, тоталитарном режиму где су људска права угрожена на застрашујући начин, а еколошко загађење је оставило озбиљне последице. Интеракција међу мушкарцима и женама различитих

класа, манипулативне технике и методе застрашивања подређених појединаца од надређених, бизарни ритуали и чудне праксе, одражавају атмосферу страха и обесправљености. Такви облици маргинализације и мизогиније, али у другачијој временској равни, описани су и у наставку *Сведочанства*, из угла три различита приповедача: тетка Лидије и Фредовициних ћерки. Међутим, занимљиво је да млађа генерација протагонисткиња у последњем дистопијском роману Маргарет Етвуд, Агнес и Дејзи, заједно са својим пријатељицама, показује храброст да дестабилизује бескрупулозне и нехумане друштвене праксе. Њихови поступци доказују да се везама заснованим на правим вредностима и искреним емоцијама може савладати свака препрека.

**Кључне речи:** људске вредности, односи моћи, дистопијски романи, спекулативна проза, Маргарет Етвуд.

Примљено 27. фебруара 2025, прихваћено за објављивање 9. јуна 2025. године.