INTERNALIZING SEXISM THROUGH LANGUAGE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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Abstract: *Despite significant strides toward gender equality, patriarchal structures continue to perpetuate discrimination against women, often in subtle and insidious ways. One such mechanism is internalized sexism, a psychological phenomenon in which women adopt and propagate sexist beliefs and attitudes among themselves. Drawing on foundational research by American psychologist Steve Bearman, which posits that the internal absorption and reinforcement of discriminatory messages by women is done through daily conversations, which often contain linguistic patterns that reinforce sexist ideologies, but also on feminist theorist Luce Irigaray's views on language, this presentation explores the phenomenon of internalized sexism through the lens of language in Margaret Atwood's* The Handmaid's Tale*. Starting from the premise that language functions as a key vector for the internalization of sexism, especially in totalitarian societies like Gilead, where prescribed speech and ritualized expressions facilitate psychological conditioning, this presentation will examine the linguistic behaviour of female characters in Atwood's novel, in order to find out to what extent the repeated use of specific phrases and constrained discourse norms lead to the normalization and acceptance of patriarchal values, and in what way language reinforces internalized sexism, contributing to the endurance of gender inequality within and beyond fictional contexts.*

Keywords: *feminist dystopian fiction; internalized sexism; language; self-oppression; patriarchal system.*

Introduction

During the almost two centuries since the beginning of the modern feminist movement, two antithetical phenomena have been a constant recurrence throughout the history of feminism: the empowerment and the disenfranchisement of women. Paradoxically, both the extension and the restriction of women's rights have developed concurrently. As Deborah Cameron aptly observes, while overt forms of discrimination against women may have diminished, they have evolved into more covert and complex manifestations (Cameron 3). Consequently, patriarchal structures continue to operate in Western societies, both overtly and covertly, thereby impeding progress toward gender equality. Thus, the need for a shift in perspective is called for, in order to keep pace with the contemporary reconfigurations of patriarchy. While external forces of oppression may exert less power than before, a look at internal forces of discrimination, through the lens of psychology, reveals that, in an unconscious manner, women themselves contribute greatly to their own oppression, in an act of unconscious complicity

with the patriarchal system. Responsible for this phenomenon is a psychological mechanism, known as internalized sexism, which involves the uncritical assimilation and reproduction of sexist ideas, attitudes, and behaviour towards oneself and towards other women (Bearman, Amrhein 195). While this psychological mechanism is known by several designations, including "internalized misogyny", the term "internalized sexism" is preferred, in order to align with the distinction between sexism and misogyny, drawn by Kate Manne. According to Manne, "misogyny" refers to the act of hating women, which means that the term is emotionally charged, while "sexism" incorporates the reasons and justifications behind this hate (Manne 78). As psychologist Steve Bearman proves in his study entitled "The Fabric of Internalized Sexism", language is one of the means by which the internalization of sexism occurs, indirectly leading to women becoming complicit in the oppressive system (Bearman, Korobov, Thorne 36).

From this point of view, Margaret Atwood's dystopian fiction provides a compelling site for examining the mechanisms through which internalized sexism is produced and sustained. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), female characters engage in antagonistic dynamics that encourage competition, mutual invalidation and derogation, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating the broader oppressive system. Considering the relationship between language and internalized sexism, this article will analyse how female characters perpetuate sexism through linguistic internalization, arguing that language in Atwood's Gilead operates as a tool of internalized sexism, shaping female complicity through discourse control. In order to do so, the first part of the article will deal with the theoretical framework behind the process of internalizing sexism, while also discussing the psychological process of adopting oppressive ideologies. Next, we will examine the historical link between sexism and language, starting from the male bias in language, identified by Dale Spender in 1980, continuing with the overt and covert forms of linguistic sexism discussed by Sarah Mills twenty years later, and to Deborah Cameron's 2024 deficit model, which fosters the policing of women's language, on the quest for gender equality. Subsequently, the issue of language in totalitarian societies will also be addressed, based on the theoretical reflections of Magda Stroinska. The second part of the article will argue that language is a mechanism of indoctrination in Atwood's Gilead, by analysing recurring Gileadean phrases, in order to show that repetition fosters normalization and obedience. Furthermore, we will also examine the link between discourse control and female complicity, arguing that restrictive language encourages women to unconsciously enforce these norms on themselves and on other women. Through the lens of internalized sexism, the analysis of these recurring phrases will reflect the connection between language and gender-role conditioning, highlighting the social learning

process of sexist discourse, while also showing how the practices of internalized sexism are manifested in the behaviour and identity of the female characters.

Internalization of Sexism

Three decades of research in psychology conducted on the negative behaviour that women exhibit towards other women and even towards themselves have revealed that the internalization of sexism and misogyny is one of the culprits standing behind this situation. But is it sexism or misogyny that women internalize? While they are often used interchangeably, which is not quite correct, the terms carry different implications. As previously mentioned, Kate Manne distinguishes between "sexism" and "misogyny", when she identifies the different drives behind the two concepts: while sexism represents the ideology behind female discrimination, based on the premise of women's so-called inferiority to men, misogyny is the actual enforcement of discrimination, based on sexist ideology and its direct consequence (Manne 78). Analysing female misogyny, philosopher Berit Brogaard concludes that the reason behind women's hatred of women is the refusal of some women to comply to the standard form of the feminine ideal, on the one hand, and the alleged inferiority of women to men, on the other (Brogaard 53). These two reasons are embedded in sexist ideology, which proves that, while both sexism and misogyny can be internalized, sexism remains the root of all evil.

Sexism is commonly understood as discrimination or prejudicial treatment based on sex or gender, with women disproportionately targeted. In theory, if such discrimination were evenly applied, it would suggest that both women and men are biologically unsuited for certain roles. In practice, however, sexism overwhelmingly positions women as inferior, reinforcing a hierarchy that privileges men. As Robert Smith notes in *Encyclopaedia of African-American Politics* (2003), sexist behaviour is predominantly enacted by men seeking to maintain their social and institutional authority (Smith 1191). Consequently, sexism functions as a mechanism for preserving male dominance and legitimizing an unequal relationship between the sexes, in which men assert themselves as the primary holders of power. At first glance, sexism seems to be openly hostile towards women. However, sexism is actually more nuanced, also possessing covert forms of discriminating women, disguised behind the positivity of protection.

In 1996, social psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske introduced the theory of ambivalent sexism in their landmark article "The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism." Their framework provides a thorough understanding of gender-based prejudice by distinguishing between two interlocking forms of sexism: hostile and benevolent. Both forms reinforce traditional gender hierarchies, though they

operate through different affective tones. Hostile sexism expresses overt antagonism toward women who resist or threaten male dominance, including feminists or career-oriented women. Benevolent sexism, by contrast, adopts a seemingly positive and protective attitude by idealizing women who conform to traditional roles such as caregivers or homemakers (Glick, Fiske 491). In reality, just like hostile sexism, benevolent sexism positions women in an inferior role, whether framed as childlike, biologically vulnerable, or sexually regulated by men. Moreover, this alleged inferiority is rationalized through attitudes that appear benevolent yet serve to restrict women's autonomy. Seemingly protective behaviour may strip women of agency, limit access to equal opportunities, or justify the regulation of their bodies under the guise of safety or morality.

While both overt and covert forms of female discrimination describe an imbalanced power rapport between men and women, with men being the discriminators and women the discriminated, one must not fall into the trap that women are incapable of sexist discrimination; gender-based discrimination can be inter-gendered as well as intra-gendered. Research in evolutionary psychology confirms that women are fully capable of direct and indirect aggression, competition, and hostility toward members of their own gender. The issue, then, becomes whether such behaviour can also be considered sexist. The concept of internalization offers a compelling explanation. Both misogyny and sexism can be absorbed internally through a process described by the APA Dictionary of Psychology as the nonconscious adoption of the characteristics, beliefs, feelings, or attitudes of others until they become integrated into one's own self-concept[1]. In this sense, internalized misogyny signifies the nonconscious acceptance of negative views about women, including contempt or hostility toward one's own gender. Because misogyny functions as the punitive arm of patriarchy, internalized misogyny can manifest in harmful actions directed at women, ranging from social exclusion to overt violence. Similarly, internalized sexism refers to the unconscious acceptance of sexist ideologies that are not inherently one's own, but rather imposed by dominant cultural norms. Once internalized, these beliefs can lead women to justify or perpetuate behaviour and social arrangements that maintain male authority and female subordination. Thus, women are not only capable of reproducing sexist actions but may do so while perceiving those actions as natural, justified, or even beneficial.

According to psychologist Steve Bearman, sexism stands on three pillars, which he identifies as institutionalized sexism, interpersonal sexism, and internalized sexism (Bearman, Amrhein 192). While institutionalized sexism refers to discriminatory laws against women, such as those established

[1] https://dictionary.apa.org/internalization

in Gilead, and is, therefore, an overt form of sexist discrimination, interpersonal sexism is an indirect form, found in day-to-day conversations, especially among women. Internalized sexism is defined as the process in which women appropriate sexist practices and circulate them among other women, without being directly forced to do so by the presence of men and stems as a direct consequence of the former two types of sexism (Bearman, Korobov, Thorne 11). Therefore, internalized sexism is both the result and the promoter of sexism. The internalization of sexism occurs through gender-role conditioning, also known as gender-role socialization, the mechanism by which individuals learn to conform to gender expectations associated with their biological sex (Bearman, Amrhein 195). This conditioning operates through systems of reward and punishment: behaviours that align with traditional gender norms, such as strength and assertiveness in men or sensitivity and compliance in women, are rewarded with approval, acceptance, and social inclusion, whereas deviations from these norms invite exclusion, humiliation, or even violence (Bearman, Amrhein 196). Over time, individuals internalize these norms, performing their gender roles automatically and perceiving them as natural rather than socially imposed (Bearmna, Amrhein 197).

Although gender-role conditioning affects both sexes, it disadvantages women more profoundly, since the female role is typically defined by submission and dependency (Bearman, Amrhein 197). Strikingly, much of this conditioning is carried out by other women (Bearman, Amrhein 198). Bearman suggests that this dynamic often stems from a protective impulse: older or more experienced women, believing they are shielding younger women from patriarchal punishment, encourage conformity to sexist expectations. This process mirrors Glick and Fiske's notion of benevolent sexism, in which seemingly well-intentioned attitudes reinforce gender inequality through paternalistic care. However, unlike Glick and Fiske's framework, here women themselves act as agents of sexist transmission. Internalization is thus facilitated by trust and intimacy; sexist ideas are more readily absorbed when they come from respected or affectionate female figures whose motives appear nurturing. These figures, often mothers, teachers, or mentors, wield subtle authority and emotional influence, making their guidance difficult to question. Despite good intentions, such women inadvertently uphold the patriarchal structure by encouraging compliance with it. Furthermore, Bearman, Korobov, and Thorne demonstrate that this dynamic is not limited to hierarchical relationships. Acts of internalized sexism also occur in interactions between women of similar status, such as friends or peers (Bearman, Korobov, Thorne 15). In these cases, language itself becomes the primary vehicle of internalization, transmitting and reinforcing sexist assumptions through everyday conversation. Thus, sexism

sustains itself not only through overt oppression but also through normalized communicative patterns that women themselves reproduce and perpetuate.

Bearman identifies six key practices through which gender-role conditioning produces internalized sexism: powerlessness, objectification, loss of self, invalidation, derogation, and competition (Bearman, Amrhein 199). *Powerlessness* arises from the belief that women are inherently less capable than men, a perception reinforced by the systematic transfer of power to men. This leads women to adopt submissive or passive behaviours as strategies of self-preservation, since open resistance often entails social or physical risk (Bearman, Amrhein 200). Although reclaiming power is theoretically possible through anger directed at the source of oppression, psychological research shows that this anger is frequently displaced onto other women, undermining collective resistance (Bearman, Amrhein 202). *Objectification*, as defined by Fredrickson and Roberts in "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks" (1997), occurs when women internalize an external observer's gaze, perceiving their bodies primarily through how they appear to others (Fredrickson, Roberts 173). This self-surveillance often leads to depersonalization and diminished agency (Bearman and Amrhein 205). *Loss of self* manifests when women neglect their own needs and desires in favour of serving others, a tendency rooted in their social conditioning as caregivers. This may include older women advising younger ones to sacrifice ambitions in pursuit of traditional roles, such as marriage (Bearman, Amrhein 208). *Invalidation* happens when women dismiss their own thoughts and emotions, especially when these deviate from patriarchal norms.

By relinquishing authority to others, often men, women suppress their autonomy and devalue nonconforming perspectives. This mechanism also operates horizontally, as women invalidate one another for failing to perform prescribed gender roles (Bearman, Amrhein 212). *Derogation* involves the use of criticism as a tool of gender-role enforcement: women are censured for being either too assertive or insufficiently assertive, too sexual or not sexual enough. Finally, *competition* emerges when women direct frustration over patriarchal constraints toward one another rather than the system itself, blaming other women for limited opportunities and resources (Bearman and Amrhein 199). Through these six mechanisms, patriarchal power reproduces itself not only externally through institutions but also internally within women's psyches and relationships. Internalized sexism thus transforms structural inequality into personal self-regulation, making systemic oppression appear as individual inadequacy. In "The Fabric of Internalized Sexism" (2009), Bearman, Korobov, and Thorne investigate how women contribute to and perpetuate sexist ideologies through every-day conversational practices, particularly in same-gender peer interactions.

By analysing dialogues between pairs of women, the researchers identify recurring discursive patterns that reflect the aforementioned six practices which lead to internalized sexism. Through seemingly harmless exchanges, women reinforce notions of female inadequacy, rivalry, and self-objectification, thereby sustaining structures of inequality on an interpersonal level. The study emphasizes that internalization is not an immediate process but develops gradually through repetitive, everyday interactions. Even minor expressions of self-deprecation, competition, or objectification accumulate over time, shaping women's perceptions of themselves and of one another (Bearman, Korobov, Thorne 36). Ultimately, Bearman, Korobov, and Thorne demonstrate that mundane conversation functions as a powerful site of social conditioning. The normalization of subtle sexist practices, especially in female-to-female dialogue, renders sexism self-perpetuating, as it becomes woven into the very "fabric" of communication, reinforcing powerlessness and eroding solidarity among women.

Sexism and Language

The efficiency with which sexism is internalized through language should come as no surprise, since the relationship between sexism and language has been scrutinized by feminist literature for decades, for its extraordinary capability of reinforcing sexist and oppressive ideologies. As Luce Irigaray examined the binary opposition between male and female language, she demonstrated that women's subordination is reinforced by the androcentric structure of linguistic systems. Irigaray critiques "phallocentric" or "phallocratic" language (Irigaray 68), arguing that Western discourse privileges male subjectivity and excludes authentic female experience, which leaves women with two apparent choices: to remain silent or to imitate the phallocentric model. Later, Dale Spender argues that language not only reflects reality but actively constructs and limits it, shaping how individuals perceive and categorize the world. Because language was historically created and systematized by men, both men and women have learned to interpret reality through a patriarchal linguistic framework (Spender 3). Consequently, language, though seemingly neutral, is inherently male-centred, allowing women to speak only through terms defined by men (Spender 12).

As Luce Irigaray observes, language represents women as "the other" (Irigaray 21), filtering female subjectivity through androcentric discourse. Spender argues that women's silence arises from fear of social punishment for deviating from patriarchal norms (Irigaray 57–58). Silence thus becomes a survival strategy, yet paradoxically reinforces male authority by leaving patriarchal "truths" unchallenged. To Sarah Mills, sexism is not merely a linguistic issue but a discursive and contextual one and often operates indirectly. She identifies several forms through which indirect sexism persists:

humour, presuppositions, conflicting messages, scripts and metaphors, collocations, and androcentric perspectives (Mills 22). In each case, discriminatory assumptions are concealed beneath ostensibly neutral or playful communication. Thus, even within a supposedly egalitarian linguistic landscape, sexism survives in coded, normalized, and often humorous forms that sustain patriarchal values while concealing their operation beneath the guise of ordinary discourse.

Linguist Deborah Cameron argues that despite apparent social progress, old gender inequalities persist because both sexism and misogyny have evolved to adapt to contemporary discourse (Cameron 3). Sexism often co-opts the vocabulary of feminism and empowerment, subverting its meaning to perpetuate patriarchal norms (Cameron 1). Cameron identifies this as a form of indirect sexism, in which patriarchal ideology is masked by the language of liberation. Such linguistic strategies maintain gender hierarchies while appearing progressive, thus making sexism more insidious and difficult to challenge. Moreover, she argues that women themselves have begun to internalize these evolving discourses, policing their own speech and behaviour in response to the contradictory pressures created by sexism and misogyny (Cameron12).

Language and Oppressive Systems

The psychologists and linguists discussed above demonstrate that language possesses the capacity to reinforce and sustain sexist ideologies. This insight can be extended beyond sexism to encompass other forms of systemic oppression. Drawing on the work of Polish linguist Magda Stroinska, who examined the role of language in totalitarian regimes, it becomes clear that linguistic power extends far beyond the mere dissemination of biased or propagandistic messages. According to Stroinska, language does not only transmit ideology, it actively constructs virtual realities, shaping perceptions of truth and even determining who or what is granted or denied existence (Stroinska, "Forbidden Reality" 121). In a totalitarian regime two realities, and, consequently, two kinds of discourses emerge. There is the *forbidden reality* of the former world, along with its *oldspeak*, as Stroinska calls it, referencing to George Orwell's famous dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and a new, *fictitious reality*, constructed by means of a new language, made to eliminate any trace of the old, forbidden reality ("Forbidden Reality" 121). The aim of this new language is to regulate individuals' perception of reality through the strategic manipulation of linguistic expression, which extends beyond communication; it reshapes cognition itself, since thought is contingent upon the words available to express it.

When language determines what can be said, it simultaneously dictates what can be conceived. Moreover, *newspeak* is often stilted and formulaic,

leaves very little space for multiple meanings and is in line with the rhetoric of the party. In this way, control over language becomes control over perception, imagination, and ultimately, reality, a principle that resonates deeply with Atwood's depiction of Gilead, where linguistic regulation functions as an instrument of ideological domination. However, the forbidden reality and its language do not disappear completely, they simply cannot be communicated in the public sphere. Therefore, both realities and both languages coexist. Polish linguist Michal Glowinski identifies this phenomenon as *disglossia*, referring to the fact that people living in totalitarian regimes become fluent both in ordinary language, and in *newspeak* (Glowisnki qtd in Stroinska 125). He also argues that these languages are mutually exclusive, one does not communicate using the new language in private environments, and cannot take the risk of using the old language in order to reflect the newly constructed reality. (Glowinski qtd in Stroinska 123). This shows the intentional nature of language use, as one intentionally chooses the language that is proper to the reality one wants to express. In this way language becomes a form of resistance. However, by emphasizing the creative and even magical power of language, Stroinska demonstrates that prolonged exposure to propagandistic language can alter the image of reality in people's minds ("Forbidden Reality" 123), making them internalize the fictitious reality. Moreover, Stroinska argues that the linguistic legacy of totalitarian propaganda has survived the collapse of the oppressive regime (Stroinska, "The Linguistic Legacy" 39). By analyzing political discourse in post-communist Poland, Stroinska reveals that, although distancing themselves from their totalitarian past, politicians continue to employ its linguistic patterns ("The Linguistic Legacy" 39). This proves that word indeed shapes thought, as the survival of a communist mindset beyond the regime's collapse confirms the formative power of language, whose prescribed narratives continue to govern thought long after their political origins have vanished.

Internalized Sexism in Gilead

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* Gilead is the virtual reality constructed through terror and language. Gilead's *newspeak* not only reflects the new social and political order, but is also the tool that continuously constructs and maintains the new oppressive regime. Typical of the totalitarian regimes that Magda Stroinska refers to, the new language spoken in Gilead is mechanical, stripped of profound meaning, and far sparser than the language spoken before. Gileadean *newspeak* is made up of a handful of phrases that are continuously repeated throughout the interactions of the characters, replacing common words and phrases that are typical of the forbidden reality, in order to eliminate it. As a result, the ubiquitous "Praise be" is used instead of "Thank you", in order to express gratitude, while "Blessed day" is a revised

greeting form, as is "Under His Eye", which underlines the idea of surveillance, both from God and the state. Also commonly used are "Blessed be the fruit", with its corresponding response "May the Lord open", which emphasize the importance of fertility in Gilead's dystopian society, and which, along with "We've been sent good weather", and the response "Which I receive with joy", is the only permitted form of small-talk allowed among Handmaids. Since these interactions are limited in the use of language, the rest is literally silence.

This silence, however, especially on behalf of the female characters, is not as much an inner-imposed form of resistance, as it is an externally imposed form of oppression. Women are required to be silent in Gilead in their interactions with men, because of their inferiority to them, otherwise they face punishment. Their silence is a means of survival. However, they also choose silence in their interactions with other women, for fear of being betrayed by them. Therefore, as a survival mechanism, Atwood's female characters either stay silent out of fear of the regime and out of suspicion of other women, or they engage in the limited language available to them. Furthermore, Offred's interior monologue in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which stands for the forbidden reality set against the use of the prescribed phrases of Gilead, can be interpreted as a form of disglossia. Offred engages in interactions using the language descriptive of the new, fictitious reality, but also intentionally does not let go of the old language, reminiscent of the forbidden reality, which she does not communicate publicly. In fact, she has no possibility of doing so, which forces her to retort to silent meditation. Thus, *oldspeak* becomes both a form of resisting fictitious reality, in other words, a form of dissidence, but also a means of keeping the memory of the forbidden reality alive.

Beyond its role as a tool for imposing new realities through propaganda in totalitarian regimes, language also facilitates the internalization of various forms of oppression, among which the internalization of sexism is particularly evident in Atwood's dystopias. The prescribed phrases typical of Gileadean *newspeak* are highly reflective of the six practices of internalization of sexism identified by psychologist Steve Bearman. Moreover, although the language of Gilead is common to each and every one of its residents, in what the Handmaids are concerned, the majority of the Gileadean discourse is delivered by the Aunts, especially by Aunt Lydia. She perfectly fits into the profile sketched by Bearman for the elderly female authority figure that enforces gender-role conditioning through the six practices, ultimately leading to the internalization of sexism.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia's direct interactions with the Handmaids are marked by oppressive and especially sexist behaviour, not only through the physical force with which she directly expresses her authority over "her girls", but also through her discourse, highly charged with sexist

messages, which indirectly propagate the internalization of sexism among the Handmaids, under the guise of protection. "Women were not protected then" (Atwood 30) is the thought that Offred conjures up in her mind, followed by all the safety rules she used to adhere to in the old world. However, the phrase that Offred thinks about is most probably not the result of her own cognition, but a sentence implanted by Aunt Lydia, her reeducation sessions with the Handmaids. Lydia is indeed a tool of state propaganda, who, in the absence of media, broadcasts propagandistic messages meant to create the virtual reality of Gilead, eliminating the forbidden reality of what was before, while also altering the perceived reality in the consciousness of the Handmaids. A particularly illustrative scene occurs when Offred recalls the Handmaids being shown films portraying pornography, violence against women, and abortion, followed by Lydia's emotionally charged speech: "Consider the alternatives [...] You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then" (Atwood 124). Through the use of bits and pieces of the old reality, powered by emotional language, Lydia masterfully constructs virtual reality, along with the premises for the Handmaids to accept and internalize it. Just like in the case of the elderly female figure of authority, who enforces sexist practices onto younger women with the justification of protecting them from male discrimination, Lydia justifies the sexist nature of the new reality and of her behaviour, by saying and even genuinely believing that she acts in their best interest. Lydia not only propagates sexism, which is ultimately internalized by the Handmaids, she has internalized sexism herself.

The six practices of internalized sexism identified by Steve Bearman are easily recognizable in Aunt Lydia's discourse, as well as in the prescribed phrases commonly used in Gilead. Lydia tells the Handmaids that they "are being given freedom from" (Atwood 30), which can be interpreted as a form of powerlessness, the limiting belief that women have about themselves and of other women, that they are inherently weak and incapable. Lydia's line reflects powerlessness, because the type of freedom that she is talking about has been given to the Handmaids by someone who presumably has greater power. In contrast, the Handmaids have limited power, which makes them unable to choose between freedom to and freedom from by themselves. They must appreciate the only type of freedom they have been given. Moreover, freedom from is much more limiting than freedom to, because the former enables passive, submissive behaviour, as opposed to the latter which encourages agency and choice. Furthermore, any attempt at reclaiming power or freedom to is met with punishment, so the Handmaids accept their powerlessness, as a strategy of self-preservation.

Objectification, which is the consequence of women's socialization into internalizing "an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" (Fredrickson, Roberts 173), often leading to

depersonalization through self-objectification (Bearman Amrhein 205), can be identified in the prescribed phrases "Blessed be the fruit"/"May the Lord open", which more than accentuating the obsession of Gilead with fertility, emphasizes the reduction of women to bodies or reproductive vessels. The purpose of the Handmaids becomes physical and symbolic, rather than personal or intellectual. The repeated use of these two lines, especially among the Handmaids, leads to a form of self-objectification, in which they see themselves and other Handmaids as valuable only through their fertility. Aunt Lydia strengthens the internalizing power of these lines through her discourse, when she tells the Handmaids that "modesty is invisibility [...] To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be [...] penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" (Atwood 35). Even though fertility is the ultimate objective, it cannot occur in any circumstance. While Lydia's words seem to resonate with the idea that the male gaze sexualizes and objectifies women, her way of saving her "girls" from the male gaze is yet another form of depersonalization: they must become invisible. Being impenetrable does not translate to "being strong", but to not being sexually penetrated, which underlines the Handmaid's lack of control over their bodies. In other words, before men have the chance of objectifying these women, Lydia depersonalizes them first, while also infantilizing them. Tied to depersonalization is also when Lydia says that "the Republic of Gilead [...] knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (Atwood 29). While there are many possible readings to this line, it can also be interpreted as loss of self, which is when women sacrifice or fail to recognize their own needs and desires, or when they place the needs of others on top of their own. Gilead is boundless both in the physical, geographical sense, but also in the sense that it stretches far beyond the limits of personal space and individuality, replacing the consciousness of the Handmaids, along with their needs and desires, with the needs and doctrines of Gilead.

Invalidation, which is when women disregard their or other women's feelings and thoughts, especially when they do not match male standards, and derogation, which is when women use criticism as a form of gender-role policing, go hand in hand and are depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* not only in the discourse of the Aunts, but also in the phrases that the Handmaids are forced to repeat during Testifying, a ritual in which they confess to what Gilead considers heinous acts, such as abortions. During such a session, Janine testifies that she had an abortion after having been gang-raped as a teenager (Atwood 77). Not only does Offred meet her confession with the suspicion of it being fabricated, which is a clear form of invalidation, but she also engages, along with the other Handmaids, under the guidance of Aunt Helena, in what can be considered derogation, by repeating phrases that blame Janine both for the abortion and for having been raped:

> *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison.
> *Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.
> *She* did, *she* did, *she* did.
> Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?
> Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson* (Atwood 78).

Moreover, the fact that Janine "burst into tears" (78) does not move Offred and she assumed that neither of the other Handmaids are moved by the sight. Offred considers Janine's vulnerability "disgusting" and adds:

> None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her.
> Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby.
> We meant it, which is the bad part (Atwood 78).

Offred's unwillingness to identify with Janine, although both of them belong to the same oppressed group, mirrors the theory of internalized oppression, and the behaviour of members of oppressed groups, who refuse to identify with their peers, and direct their anger at them. According to psychologist E.J.R. David, oppressed individuals often exhibit unexpected behaviour towards their own group and towards their oppressors, in the sense that they will sooner try to identify with the oppressor, because they possess power, and will misdirect their anger of being oppressed towards their own group (David 13). Calling Janine a crybaby is a way of trying to reclaim power by proxy, through the act of mimicking the acts of the oppressor. The fact that Offred admits to "meaning it", proves that she had, to a certain extent, already internalized oppression in general, and sexism specifically.

Competition, the sixth practice that leads to the internalization of sexism, in which women are encouraged to view each other as rivals for power, male approval, or social status, is present throughout the novel in the relationships between the Handmaids. Through her discourse, Lydia encourages the sense of competition, by emphasizing the scarcity of fertility, and the value of those women that are capable of it: "A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls" (Atwood 120). While she appears to be considering the Handmaids as valuable, she actually refers to their fertility, and consequently, only those who manage to have a healthy baby enjoy higher status among the Handmaids. This is unconsciously picked up by the Handmaids, and therefore internalized, which is reflected in scenes such as the one in which they meet a pregnant Janine at the store:

> 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 (Atwood 32).

The fragment implies the idea of competition through the image of the flag on a hilltop, which can be interpreted as the end of a race, in which the fastest breeding Handmaid has a chance at survival. The Handmaids exhibit feelings of envy towards the fertility of their peers, but also of desire to have access to that sort of privilege. However, the privilege is an illusion, because their fertility and the delivering of a healthy baby does not improve their lives in any way, only extends their survival. But, the seeds of competition having been planted and competition internalized, the Handmaids will continue to feel envious on one another, even though the race has no finish line.

Conclusion

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood imagines a regime in which language functions not merely as a medium of control but also as the very substance of oppression. Gilead's linguistic system, the formulaic greetings, ritualized blessings, and imposed silences, embody what Magda Stroinska describes as the totalitarian manipulation of language to construct new, virtual realities. The repetitive use of prescribed phrases, such as "Praise be," "Blessed be the fruit," or "Under His Eye," narrows the field of expression until only sanctioned meanings remain. This repetition transforms language into ritual, and ritual into belief, thereby answering the first research question: the constant reiteration of limited discourse normalizes patriarchal values by embedding them into daily communication, making subordination sound sacred and inevitable. Over time, words that once concealed domination come to signify virtue, piety, and protection, blurring the boundary between faith and obedience. Atwood's linguistic dystopia also demonstrates how language internalizes sexism, ensuring the endurance of gender inequality even in the absence of overt coercion.

Drawing on Steve Bearman's framework, the novel reveals that Gilead's newspeak enacts all six practices of internalized sexism: powerlessness, objectification, loss of self, invalidation, derogation, and competition. Aunt Lydia's discourse exemplifies this process, as she redefines submission as safety and dependency as virtue. Her rhetoric mirrors the mechanisms of internalized sexism identified in psychological theory, namely, conditioning women to see compliance as self-preservation, and rivalry as empowerment. Thus, language becomes both the instrument and the internalization of patriarchal power, shaping thought until oppression feels self-elected. The contrast between Gilead's public discourse and the private thoughts of Offred (but also Aunt Lydia's writings in *The Testaments*) underscores Atwood's central warning: control of language is control of consciousness. Offred's inner monologue and Lydia's secret journal preserve fragments of oldspeak, a forbidden linguistic space where independent thought and female experience survive. These acts of covert narration expose the

possibility of resistance through linguistic remembrance. Through writing, the women recover agency over meaning, countering the silencing force of Gilead's prescribed speech. Ultimately, Atwood's dystopia illustrate that the endurance of patriarchal systems depends not only on institutional violence but also on the psychological consent produced by language. The repeated use of constrained discourse embeds domination into habit and identity, while internalized sexism ensures its self-replication across generations. In Atwood's world, as in our own, to reclaim language is to reclaim the capacity to think freely and to resist collectively. Thus, the struggle for linguistic liberation becomes synonymous with the struggle for gender equality and human integrity.

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