

# Margaret Atwood's the Testaments: Sequel as Feminist Revision of the Handmaid's Tale?

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Sveučilište u Rijeci

Odsjek za anglistiku

Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

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## INTRODUCTION

Feminism as women's struggle for equal rights has been an ongoing process in American society which has faced backlash periodically. However, the backlash against feminism has not always been direct, and has taken different shapes in the U.S. media, most notably in the 1980s following the emancipatory success of second wave feminism in the USA in terms of work rights and women's bodily autonomy, the most notable example of the latter being the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court's ruling that granted the right to abortion (popularly known as *Row vs. Wade*). Both the aggressive direct response and the indirect undermining of women's rights were imaginatively used and described in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The novel indicated the dangerous possibility of easily stripping women of their hardly won rights which were here lost due to the mass passivity. In her follow-up novel *The Testaments* (2019), Atwood explores the fight against the totalitarian patriarchal regime described in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the female protagonists' fight for their freedom and ability to dictate the course of their lives. *The Testaments* is a much more action-orientated novel, while *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on the personal experiences and opinions of one woman who grew up and lived under the influence of a postfeminist cultural climate that enabled the rise of Gilead, the totalitarian theocracy described in the novel. This thesis will explore the relationship between the two novels in such a way that the sequel will be read as a feminist revision of *The Handmaid's Tale* which was written at a time when postfeminism was widespread in American society. *The Testaments* could serve as a warning about the consequences of postfeminism, while *The Handmaid's Tale* directly describes how deep postfeminism was rooted, not only in the society, but also in the individual.

When talking about feminism and its relationship to Margaret Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, it should be noted that both novels describe the notion of postfeminism. *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the mind and views of one woman who lost her rights due to her passivity, but also the passivity of all women in this imagined postfeminist timeframe when it came to fighting for women's rights. On the other hand, *The Testaments* shows three different perspectives and opinions about feminism, as well as an active fight to regain the rights women had lost due to their passivity in the past. To successfully present *The Testaments* as a feminist revision of *The Handmaid's Tale*, first the term postfeminism and its meaning must be discussed.

The term postfeminism first emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in various cultural, academic, and political contexts, especially in popular journalism and media (Genz & Brabon 1). The prefix *post* was the cause of numerous debates about its meaning. 'Postfeminism' was first used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after women got the right to vote due to the suffrage movement (Genz & Brabon 10). The term was originally created by Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* in 1985 in an attempt to separate "liberal" and "radical" feminism (Kavka 29). The "liberal" feminism implied the notion of equality between men and women, while the goal of "radical" feminism was to dismantle patriarchy instead of adjusting to it. This was seen as an attack on male identity which is founded in patriarchy, even though the "radical" variant of feminism was opposed to the patriarchal system, not to men. At that time, the prefix 'post' signified the evolution and development of the feminist movement, which sadly achieved far less than it was meant to due to both the First and Second World Wars. Due to the development of the permanent war economy, feminism was used as a weapon to trap the working class on a pretence of gender equality (Rowbotham n.p.). Women got their rights and gender equality was achieved only to serve as a reason for mass exploitation of workers, as women took over most of the predominately or completely male roles and jobs during the war time. However, after the wars this notion positively influenced the growth of capitalist society, and hence, American women gained the right to vote and the obligation to work and be useful to democracy; all this while being paid less than men and balancing their work and home obligations.

The second wave of feminism started in the 1960s and was defined by the fight against sexism in the workplace as well as a fight to access contraception and other methods of birth control. These were followed by a period often described as postfeminism. When the second wave of feminism lost its place in the limelight, after the feminist activists were able to achieve some of their goals, postfeminism appeared as a backlash against feminism. It was implied by the media and overall culture of American society of that time that the era of feminism was over since it was no longer needed. Women who continued the fight were referred to as radical men-haters whose only aim was to oppress men and their traditional role in patriarchal society. Even though this was far from the truth, media's widespread representation of feminism as an outdated and radical movement was exactly what pushed many young girls and women away from it. They were focusing on their careers, balancing home and work life and living their freedom. Their focus completely shifted, which was the perfect foundation for a society in which feminism would no longer be relevant or even exist. This would then allow those in

power (which are predominately men) to take away women's rights slowly but surely. Therefore, postfeminism could be interpreted as a cyclical process which begins after the very organised and structured fight for women's rights and freedoms (Genz & Brabon 11). This would also place postfeminism as parallel or equal to the third wave of feminism, which put an emphasis on bodily self-expression and the possibility to choose a highly sexualized lifestyle (Gill & Scharff 118). The media was supporting the anti-feminist backlash in the form of postfeminism, contributing to the dismantling and diminishing of the successes of the second wave of feminism.

The 'post' in postfeminism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 2000s is often understood to imply the end of feminism or a perception that feminism is 'out-of-date', i.e., claiming that the time of feminism has passed, and it is no longer needed. This description was largely promoted by media and its patriarchal propaganda which benefited men who were in power. Postfeminism, in this context, is a process that undermined and disputed the gains of the feminist activists from the 1970s and 1980s (Tasker & Negra 27). However, when defining postfeminism, context must also be considered. Postfeminism exists both as a media "buzzword" and as an academic and theoretical term which did not have the same meaning, and so it has an aura usually characterized by many contradictions (Genz & Brabon 5). Postfeminism in the academic sphere encourages feminism to "develop an understanding of its own historicity" (Grenz & Brabon 13). It contributes to an understanding of second wave feminism's historical background and describes the position of feminism in relation to women's liberation (Grenz & Brabon 11). Moreover, if post-feminism is considered as a "rupture" from feminism, it can also be interpreted as a liberation from old and constraining conditions and a beginning of new developments (Grenz & Brabon 13). On the other hand, postfeminism as a cultural media phenomenon, or a "buzzword", gives the word postfeminism a different connotation. In this sense, postfeminism is an act of a ritualistic denunciation of second wave feminism (Grenz & Brabon 18). This characterization of postfeminism has negatively impacted the academic understanding of the term, undermining its importance in the description of history and development of feminism in American society.

For the analysis of *The Testaments* as a feminist revision of *The Handmaid's Tale* the term post-feminism (with a hyphen) will be used in the context of 'post' meaning that feminism has ended and indicated a shift from the second wave feminism in the 1970s and the 1980s. Postfeminism, in this sense, is based on the cultural climate that was strongly influenced by Christianity, especially Evangelical Christianity in the US, and the paradigms of

commercialized family values (Negra 6). It thrives on anxiety about ageing, the promotion of stereotypical female types (“good girls”, “gold-diggers”, “spinsters”, “sluts”, etc.) (Negra 10), and the notion of happiness which could be achieved only by renouncing your professional life and independence to raise a family with ‘a good man’. This also serves as evidence of the heteronormative social and cultural climate of postfeminism. The only way to achieve complete self-actualisation for women in this scenario was through a heterosexual relationship which resulted in offspring. If women did not comply with this practice, they would be bombarded by the images of and stereotypes about old ‘hags’, making them feel obligated to want this type of life for themselves, to conform to the patriarchal view about family and its values and roles, or risk being almost excluded from the social scene and deal with loneliness it brings.



## 1. THE HANDMAID'S TALE

*The Handmaid's Tale* is Atwood's most well-known novel, published in 1985. It relays the oral history of the handmaid Offred, who lives in an oppressive theocratic regime, and is being used for her body (Tolan 144). The story of *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in Gilead, a part of (now) former United States. This new country has laws under which women are considered the property of men – they are not allowed to vote, read, or possess money. The women who grew up and lived in the US are now violently indoctrinated to abide by these new laws. The main concern of Gilead is successful pregnancies since there was a dramatic decline in the birth rate due to pollution and radiation. A lot of pregnancies result in “Unbabies” – infants affected with serious birth defects. This makes fertile women very valuable and determines their station in life and different levels of privilege or hardships: most fertile women are assigned as ‘Handmaids’ to the infertile married couples consisting of ‘Wives’ and the socially prominent ‘Commanders’.

Wives belong to the highest-ranking categories of women in Gilead. They are married to the Commanders or Sons of Jacob – a group of men who staged an attack on Congress and American president, blamed it on terrorists and introduced a state of emergency while suspending the Constitution. They took over the country with minimal effort and are now in charge of the new country that is Gilead. They also wrote the laws of Gilead; they constructed its society and enforced new values. Wives are dressed in blue, and they belong to the ruling class. However, if childless they are deemed to be infertile even though it might be the Commanders who are infertile because in Gilead it is not possible for a man not be able to produce a child. Every ruling class household has a Martha. These are women who are dressed in green and work as domestic servants, upholding the traditional practices and values of domestic living. Outside households there are Aunts. These are older, unmarried women, dressed in brown, who agree with the way Gilead is organized and enforce the will of the God on Handmaids. In other words, they are the ones who educate Handmaids on their new positions in the society, often by using cattle prods or mutilation.

Lastly, Handmaids are women who have broken the rules of Gilead before it was even formed, by committing a “gender crime” or violating social law. The Handmaids wear red, the colour of blood and shame. However, they are saved from the horrible fate of being sent to the

Colonies to clean toxic waste because they are fertile. They are given “the opportunity” to repent for their sins by being used as surrogates for the Wives. They must endure state sanctioned rape – ‘The Ceremony’, inspired by a biblical story of Jacob and Rachel, which happens once a month during the Handmaid’s fertile days. In this Ceremony, the Wife holds the Handmaid’s hands while she lays symbolically between her legs. Then, The Commander enters and rapes the Handmaid who is to be still and pray to God that she becomes pregnant and by giving birth repents for her sins.

The inspiration for this novel was drawn from the real-life, contemporary, political systems, with the emphasis on struggles that women had to endure before gaining their rights, or are still enduring even though the fight has supposedly achieved the goal of equality. In an interview during her visit to the University of Toronto in 2019, Atwood spoke about events that influenced her writing. Atwood was reunited with her early epigraphs and newspaper clippings from the time when she was writing *The Handmaid’s Tale*. These clippings were the background for the novel. Numerous articles and headlines such as ‘Women forced to have babies’ and ‘Conservatives are out to get the women’s movement. They wish to attack birth control and voluntary sterilization. Their eventual target is to wipe out the women’s movement.’, ‘Catholics say cult taking over’, and ‘Birth dearth is a deliberate myth. The super-patriotic, hyper-capitalists running America these days are deciding that we must do "it" more often... We’re not breeding fast enough to keep ahead of the dirty commies and dusky third-worlders.’ really portrayed the social climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Atwood further explains that she did not need to do any research to obtain this information since this type of media was easily accessible. Moreover, she emphasizes that she collected these articles and clippings to serve as proof that she did not make up the problems in her novels, but rather she put the problems of women’s rights in contemporary society at the centre of the plot (Penguin Books UK).

The novel itself opens with the Biblical quotation from Genesis 30:1-3 which indicates the importance of children, suggests the natural destiny of every woman to be a mother and raises the issue of women’s subordination to men (Stein 61). It puts the question of fertility into the limelight of the story itself, putting an emphasis on the process of conceiving and bearing children. However, it is very obvious who has the power in the process that involves one man and two women who desperately want to bring a child to this world. The reasons for this desire vary between the participants of the process. Commanders want a child to continue their legacy, to have an offspring because it is a means to gain more power, to ensure that their

name will continue and that their impact and power will not disappear, especially if that child is also a boy. For Wives, having a child is a way to achieve social status, a way to prove that they are a successful woman who takes care not only of her household and husband, but of a child. Their desire is rooted in the need to give their lives a meaning, to achieve the identity of being a mother. For Handmaids, the desire for a child comes out of sheer desperation. If they get pregnant, monthly Ceremonies, i.e. state sanctioned rape, would stop. Pregnant Handmaids would be treated better and would be deemed as useful and therefore not be sent to the Colonies to die.

Atwood here eerily points to the closeness between utopia to dystopia: the only thing separating them is the perspective of the characters in the story. Each of the characters is showcased in a very limiting and dehumanizing way – they are put in frames (Stein 57). These frames are actually roles which each of them must play in theocratic patriarchal society. The Wives must be graceful and obedient to their husbands, the Marthas must be hardworking and subservient, the Handmaids must conceive a child, the Commanders must lead and protect traditional values. Some frames seem preferable to others, especially the position of a Commander over all the rest, but all of them restrict people in some way. Of course, the restrictions of personal freedom and suffering of Handmaids compared to Commanders or Wives is far worse, and for some, i.e. the Commanders in power who established Gilead, this dystopia might seem like a utopia, which is exactly why Atwood wrote this novel.

The reality of Gilead is not so far-fetched from our possible reality. The foundation on which Gilead started, the distorted Christianity that favoured their black and white perspective about good and bad, of right and wrong, is still present in today's contemporary society. This is where the actual danger lies, and it is much closer than previously believed. For example, the switch to card payments that in the novel enables the Sons of Jacob to freeze and control all of women's assets and hence take away their liberty is eerily akin to the switch from cash to contactless payments that has become more prominent during the pandemic, just as the global political turn to the right has already resulted in the overturning of Roe vs. Wade in the USA along the loss of some other gender-based rights. In such a political climate, it is possible for a diminishment of women's (and minority) rights and extremism to prevail in an instant, just as Gilead prevailed and kidnapped the women from their "normal" social roles into Gilead's 'new normal' in such a quick and seemingly effortless way.

## 1.1. Controlling women

The main concept of Gilead is the ability to overpower and control women, to make them submit and soundlessly follow rules. “The key aspects of women’s oppression are the attempted control over female bodies (sexual and reproductive) and female labour” (Whelehan 225). Gilead was in the making before the government was overthrown, but since women were too preoccupied with their “choices and freedom”, they noticed the danger far too late. In the novel, the freedom and the ability to make choices were illuminated in a postfeminist light. Women were very concerned with their sexual and love life, wanting to find the love of their life, and adapting their appearance and presenting themselves in a way that would help them successfully achieve that goal. “*Falling in love, we said; I fell for him. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely.*” (Atwood 233). Women chose to ignore the danger that was around them, they did not react until that danger reached them. By then it was too late, since they were left with only two options: submit or die. “Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bath up you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew.” (62). Turning a blind eye was the wrong move to make, the passivity that was born as an answer to the feminist activism of the 1970s was the main cause of the success of Gilead. “We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, You have to work at it.” (62).

However, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the new rules that were to be followed and that discriminated against women, were reinforced by other women in most cases. Here the notion of sisterhood was inverted, manipulated, and proven to be a great asset in controlling women. The thing that connected them in a modern society, the thing that defined the experience of being a woman, was now the thing that benefited their oppression: “Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew” (30). The collective sisterhood was now under the rule of patriarchy, but this notion happened before the creation of Gilead. This was directly inspired by the shift towards postfeminism in late 1970s and early 1980s North America.

After the second wave, feminism started to be a dirty word in some social circles (Genz & Brabon 35). The idea of sisterhood was abandoned since this new postfeminist society and

women were too individualistic to work for goals that did not relate to them personally. They were too busy building a career, finding love and indulging in consumerism that was also based on the male gaze and patriarchy (Gill & Scharff 204) and only stood as a pretence of liberty (Tolan 164). Women wanted to appear younger, to appear successful, to be desired. They wanted to find a true connection, but this lifestyle did not offer that. This is the premise on which Atwood builds her female protagonists' response to Gilead: the power of Gilead rested also on its idea of sisterhood, which influenced women in such a great measure. They were not alone anymore, they belonged. On the other hand, the gap between different groups was bigger than ever before: "Maybe it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose. But I envy the Commander's Wife for her knitting. (...) Why does she envy me?" (19). By separating women and giving roles to one group which the other could not fulfil (for example, The Wives, who could not get pregnant, were so envious of The Handmaids while The Handmaids envied the freedom that Wives had), the system ensured that no bonds between groups of women could be forged. Those bonds, that true sisterhood across different groups, would become the crucial point for starting a rebellion against the dictatorship that is Gilead.

The Aunts were used very wisely by the system to reinforce the new way of life. They were put in a position of power even greater than The Wives – they could read. The Aunts were the first responders to girls who were thought to be ruined by liberal ways and who could only be saved from this shameful and sinful life by entering Gilead and accepting its values and traditional way of life. However, they still acknowledged the necessity to protect and talk about danger that men can be for women, especially regarding sexual abuse and assaults outside of marriage: "They can't help it, she said, God made them that way, but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries." (51). Nevertheless, the reasoning behind the causes of sexual violence is again against women. Young girls are taught that they are responsible for men's behaviour since men have urges that they cannot control. According to Gilead and its education, women do not have such sexual urges and must try their best not to "provoke" men and their sexual side. This provocation is often just their existence and their youth. Therefore, women are to blame if they get sexually assaulted since they taunt men and are the only responsible party if something were to happen. Victim-blaming is a common response to sexual assault in the patriarchal context. The assaulted often "asked for it" or "deserved it" due to the way they dressed or were somewhere at a certain time. The blame is shifted onto the victims, which are mostly women, since men are excused and are not guilty of just indulging in their manly sexual urges. This response to rape takes away all power from

the victims, making them feel shame and often resulting in their not reporting the assault to the authorities – thus protecting the image of the attacker and enabling him to try and do it again.

The Aunts, especially Aunt Lydia, were the main force behind the brainwashing and remodelling the perspective of The Handmaids through fear and violence. They created a new culture for women, one which was based on patriarchy and fear. Aunt Lydia was responsible for The Handmaids and their ‘re-education’ at the Red Center where they were trained to fulfil their new roles in society. She is a strong promotor of Gilead values. Her interpretation of the Bible is very dangerous, only preaching those passages that support the regime. Lydia distorts religion and the messages from the Bible to shame The Handmaids for their ‘sins’ and does not hesitate to harm them both physically and psychologically. She is complicit with the regime and promotes the injustices that Gilead has imposed on women. Aunt Lydia blamed women’s choices for the lack of children and the anarchy that was happening before Gilead. To make The Handmaids, who were so very precious, safe, she claims that the choices had to be taken away: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it.” (30). By taking away the freedom, and the names, Gilead completely dehumanized The Handmaids, who were now serving only as valuable vessels for bringing children into this world, and whose destiny it was to die if they failed or would not comply (Tolan 161).

## **1.2. Offred**

Offred, The Handmaid who narrates her world to the reader, is the one from whose perspective Gilead is described and perceived in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred is deprived of her own name, and she is given a name that defines her in relation to her Commander Fred – she is ‘of Fred’. Offred is hence stripped of her identity, she is no longer an individual and unique person. Instead, she is defined by her function in men’s lives who are supposed to be the centre of her identity. This leaves no place for a woman’s narrative in the society of Gilead and could suggest a critical hint at the patriarchy in contemporary society as well, where women are defined by the last names of men – their fathers and later their husbands (Howells 126). Through this process of retelling, Offred reclaims her private space and her mind, her identity,

and her femininity which is exploited and molested. She separates her private from her public self to stay sane: “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 born.” (72). Offred remains in the feminine spaces in which women are able to express themselves, but those spaces are much reduced and are just her thoughts, her mind (Howells 127). When she is in a public space, i.e., in the presence of another person, be that Aunt Lydia, The Wife, The Commander or even other Handmaids, Offred plays her part in the society. That part is something from which she cannot escape, it is a constant reminder of her reduced circumstances: from the clothes she has to wear to the way in which she is spoken to: “There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood.” (15).

On the other hand, while Offred does rebel privately in her own mind when she has the possibility to do something to change her unfavourable position in society, she is very passive and afraid. This can be traced back to her relationship with her mother who was a second wave feminist activist. Since a generational shift happened, and Offred is aware of the feminist shift, she is focused on other things, on a more individualistic approach to life and societal problems. This attitude, according to Genz & Brabon, defined the era of postfeminism (3), and Atwood seems to imply a critique of such an attitude. In the novel, this misunderstanding of what feminism is, and what the fight is about, created the passivity in the younger generation, which is expressed in Offred’s behaviour. Offred is a fictional product of 1970s feminism, and she must deal with the backlash in this dystopian society (Kołodziejuk 68). Offred, like much of the postfeminist daughters, resents her mother for her activism and for her “abandonment”. Their relationship beautifully showcases late 20<sup>th</sup> century women’s problem of dealing with childcare and a career, and the struggle to balance both. Unlike her mother, Offred wanted to be a mother, she wanted to create a family with a man and was willing to sacrifice some parts of herself for it: she was willing to surrender to her lover Luke (Kołodziejuk 72).

Later in Gilead, Offred is in a need of companionship, of emotional connection. She seeks her refuge in Nick, the Commander’s driver. She is willing to risk her safety for a couple of stolen moments, unlike when it comes to her fight against the regime; that fight almost always just resides in her mind, not in her actions. “I hunger to touch something, other than

cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch.” (17). It is a very natural and primal need to search for comfort and safety, and Offred does it by finding a man on whom she believes she can depend. Unlike Ofglen, who is a member of the resistance force Mayday, Offred risks her life only to be able to continue meeting with Nick. “Down past the fisheye on the hall wall, I can see my white shape, of tenced body, hair down my back like a mane, my eyes gleaming. I like this. I am doing something, on my own.” (104).

However, this can also be read as a way in which she empowers herself. By breaking the rules of Gilead she breaks the rules not only in her mind but in her flesh itself. She takes back her sexuality, she takes back the power over her own reproductive system, and she takes back the power and the ability to experience pleasure. It is another expression of her rebellion against her oppressor, by taking back the thing they value the most about her, the only thing that makes her valuable – her uterus. What must be noted is why she feels the need to express her rebellion in this way, why she depends on another man like she so easily depended on Luke when Gilead was in the process of establishing itself. It is not only her way to empower herself – Offred surrenders her power to Nick in a way a woman in postfeminist society gives up her career and her professional life to please a man. “Each time I would expect him to be gone; or worse, I would expect him to say I could not come in. He might say he wasn't going to break any more rules, put his neck in the noose, for my sake. Or even worse, tell me that he was no longer interested.” (276). The thought of being undesirable is more jarring than the possibility of getting caught. To lose the connection which she has with Nick, even though it is not clear if it is genuine or just a means of her own private rebellion, is something that Offred fears. She desires to be wanted by a man, to feel loved and not trapped and alone.

Moreover, Offred's rebellion can be compared to that of Ofglen – another Handmaid who belongs to the resistance, i.e. Mayday. Unlike Offred, Ofglen is very active in the process of systematic rebellion against Gilead; she makes difficult choices and constantly puts herself in danger by trying to help dismantle Gilead. She is vocal about her thoughts and activism with Offred, even though talking against values of Gilead can be deadly. On the other hand, Offred's rebellion is still very passive and more expressed on a personal and private level – in her thoughts and opinions, and private actions within the household. Once again, Offred embodies the postfeminist woman who is not inclined to fight for her rights in a very vocal and public way, while Ofglen can be described as a feminist activist who is willing to sacrifice everything for her freedom.



## 2. THE TESTAMENTS

*The Testaments* is Atwood's follow-up to *The Handmaid's Tale* published in 2019. It matches the realities of the late 2010s regarding the changing perspective on feminism and postfeminism (Gheorgiu & Praisler 89). *The Testaments* really puts the emphasis on the postfeminist notions in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is especially visible in the relationship between Offred and her mother, the reality of rejecting feminist activism by women born and coming of age in the postfeminist era, since they were so independent and achieved the goal of having the freedom to exercise their rights. *The Testaments* consists of three separate first-person testimonies – that of Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima, and Daisy.

The first narrator is Aunt Lydia, who expresses her thoughts in a manuscript known as 'The Ardua Hall Holograph'. Lydia was introduced in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where she seemed very much aligned with Gilead and its values. However, her manuscript unravels the truth about how she became an Aunt. She was faced with two options – to go to the Colonies and die or help the regime with 're-education' of The Handmaids; and Lydia chose life. Despite the way she joined Gilead, she suffers psychologically from the consequences of her actions. She does not think of herself as innocent and is aware that she can do terrible things to other people. She was one of the four leading Aunts under Commander Judd, and she can use her power which comes from this position to gather evidence against Gilead and Sons of Jacob. Lydia plots the downfall of the regime from within, including Agnes and Daisy in her plan.

The second narrative is that of Agnes Jemima, a girl who grew up in Gilead in a ruling class family. Agnes lives with her emotionally distant father and his second wife Paula. She is very anxious about her future as she fears men since they have abused her in the past, but she is pressured to marry, even though she is a teenager. To escape this fate, Aunt Lydia helps Agnes to join the Aunts and take a vow of celibacy. When she comes to Ardua Hall, Agnes is reunited with her friend Becka. As a part of their training, they learn how to read and write and, consequently, start to see how Gilead misuses the Bible to its advantage.

The third narrator, Daisy, grew up in Canada. Her parents have kept her pretty isolated and forbidden her to participate in protests against human rights violations in Gilead. On her sixteenth birthday, her parents were killed, and Daisy became aware of the truth about her identity: she is the famous Baby Nicole who had been smuggled from Gilead by her mother who served as a Handmaid. The three narratives finally converge when Daisy, now going by

Jade, enters Gilead with the help of Mayday and Garret, on a secret mission to retrieve top-secret documents. When Jade arrives in Ardua Hall, Aunt Lydia places her in the same apartment as Agnes and Becca. Lydia includes Jade in her plans, implants a chip with the documents into her arm and reveals to both Agnes and Jade that they are actually half-sisters – they have the same mother who appeared in the first novel as the protagonist, i.e. Offred. Despite many dangers and obstacles, the sisters manage to escape to Canada with the document, where they are reunited with their mother.

*The Testaments* goes into more detail when portraying the women's positions in the society that is Gilead. It shows different perspectives, different social standings, and different states of mind of the characters, all the while connecting them to the postfeminist movement, feminism, and anti-feminism. The three narrators could be read as the representations of these movements. Daisy is the embodiment of feminism: she is willing to fight for her rights and she does not conform to imposed rules. Agnes, who grew up in Gilead, is the embodiment of postfeminism; she is obedient and concerned with things that Gilead deems important for women, or at least that is what she was supposed to be concerned with. However, she starts her own rebellion, which only grows further after meeting Daisy. The third representation is Aunt Lydia. She was forced to take the role of an Aunt, but in the context of society which is Gilead, Lydia can only be described as an anti-feminist. She forces other women to obey the rules, tortures them and brainwashes them for the gain of the patriarchy. *The Testaments* thus explores the power that women have over other women, and how that power is only obtained by a submission to the "natural masculine order" which was a result of extreme dehumanization and violence (Gheorgiu & Praisler 92). The novel also explores the power of brainwashing and propaganda when shaping the younger generation and their opinions. Moreover, it also describes the process in which the younger generation can free themselves from this propaganda and submission and harness the power to develop opinions and perspectives while staying true to themselves. That power is obtained by actively fighting for one's rights and learning how to think critically about the society and not just passively agreeing with its ways and ignoring the dangers and problems which for the time being are influencing someone else.

## 2.1. 'Enslavement by liberation'

*The Testaments* depicts the ways in which slavery can be hidden under the proclamation of liberation and how this can then be used when it comes to overpowering a certain group, in this case, women. This liberation comes together with extreme violence. To make women submit, especially during the establishing of Gilead, violence and dehumanization were used to achieve this submission and make women nothing more than a tool for reproduction or a tool that assists in this process (Labudová 98).

Furthermore, Gilead was salvaging women who 'lost their way' and traditional values by taking the burden of choice from them. This way women were 'liberated' and could devote their lives to 'a greater purpose' – having children. Same thing, although with less intensity, was happening in the postfeminist culture of American society. Women were able to choose what kind of life they wanted; to choose whether they wanted to settle down and have children or not. However, because of media and its highlighting the importance of having a family, many women felt like they would never achieve fulfilment without having children. As Susan Faludi suggests, it is at the times when American women were so blessed by choice, so free, that they were made to feel great pain, lonelier than ever and very unhappy (2). The only possible conclusion offered by the mainstream media was that women were enslaved by their own liberation, by the vastness of choices that were in front of them. This is depicted in the novel through Aunt Lydia's monologue: "To pass the time I berated myself. Stupid, stupid, stupid: I'd believed all that claptrap about life, liberty, democracy, and the rights of the individual I'd soaked up at law school." (116). In this line, Lydia expresses regret about ever thinking that she had a choice. In reality, she was preoccupied by creating the perfect professional life and feeling independent. However, she was blind to the danger that was hiding right beneath the societal norms: the danger of women becoming enslaved. In a similar way, Lydia's experience has been shared by American women in a postfeminist society. In a way similar to what Faludi describes in *Backlash*, women were too preoccupied with their personal matters and felt safe enough that, in their minds, even the possibility of taking away all those rights that women fought for in the second wave feminism was impossible and so no one thought that there was a need to keep fighting (52).

Atwood also illustrates how this enslavement was much simpler when it came to the young minds of girls who knew nothing but Gilead. From an early age, the girls were told that

they were lucky because they did not have the capacity to decide for themselves, and that others (The Aunts, The Wives and The Commanders) would make these hard choices for them: “‘We and your fathers and mothers will choose your husbands wisely for you when the time comes,’ Aunt Estée would say. ‘So you don't need to be afraid. Just learn your lessons and trust your elders to do what is best, and everything will unfold as it should. I will pray for it.’” (10).

However, women who previously had an ability to choose were faced with the consequences of their choices, and the reality that they were slaves of their decisions (Labudová 102): “‘I made choices for, and then, having made them, I had fewer choices. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I took the one most travelled by. It was littered with corpses, as such roads are. But as you will have noticed, my own corpse is not among them.’” (66). These are Lydia’s thoughts on becoming an Aunt. She explains that she did it because she did not want to die, but she is also aware of all the pain that she had caused after that choice. Even though she appears to have more freedom and power than Handmaids, or even the Wives, she did not really choose her own fate – she was forced to choose between life and death. The false hope of choice was an empty promise, both in the real world and in Gilead. Women were given the ability to choose by men, and men could always take that ability away: “‘It was always a cruelty to promise them equality,’ he said, ‘since by their nature they can never achieve it. We have already begun the merciful task of lowering their expectations.’” (175). Even though men and women were equal before, they were not truly equal. The society was only better at masking the inequalities and differences, while Gilead put them all out in the open.

## **2.2. Brainwashing and propaganda**

The propaganda and brainwashing of women to make them fit in the society that is Gilead appears in the novel on two levels, i.e., between two generations. The first generation includes women like Aunt Lydia who had experienced life in a society before and other than Gilead, but now reinforce this new way of life (or at least play a big part in reinforcing it). The second, younger, generation is represented through the character called Shunammite, Agnes’s friend and her foil in terms of attitudes and life-altering decisions, who was born in Gilead and to whom that society is her normal society, it is all that she knows.

### 2.2.1. Aunt Lydia

The Aunts were presented as the caretakers and defenders of women, especially of young girls from influential families, and The Handmaids. These women, The Aunts, were used by men who had real power, to make other women submit. They thought that they were helping other women, that they were protecting them from a far greater danger. However, this was only the evidence of their brainwashing, deeply rooted internalized misogyny and a patriarchal way of thinking which not only badly influenced and corrupted their minds, but also the minds of the younger generation that was looking up to and listening to these women. The Aunts themselves went through traumatic events and were presented with impossible choice – to decide to help Gilead and become Aunts, or to die.

I heard screaming and sobbing. Some of the women leapt to their feet, shouting – I could not make out the words – but were quickly silenced by being hit on the backs of their heads with butts of guns. There were no repeated blows: one sufficed. Again, the aim was good: these men were trained. We were to see but not to speak: the message was clear. But why? If they were going to kill us all, why this display? (118)

This instance happened at the very establishment of Gilead, when all of the educated older women were kidnapped and collected together in a stadium – amongst them was Aunt Lydia. Here these women were starved, beaten and killed in order to intimidate them and “educate” them about the new order in society. The women who did not die accepted the role of Aunts. They became the weapons of Gilead. By traumatising them and brainwashing them in a similar manner to how Offred and other Handmaids were treated in the first novel, the Commanders ensured that they had women on their side. Women who were traumatised, scared for their lives and willing to submit and do whatever to try to survive while having a false pretence of power over others.

Another danger of the false sense of power is the misuse of that power to satisfy one's ego, which we can see when Aunt Lydia discusses the statue put up in her honour: “As a group of statuary it's not a great success: too crowded. I would have preferred more emphasis on myself.” (4). Moreover, this perspective also shows the deeply rooted belief that what she is doing and has done, was also for her own personal gain; by helping Gilead she grew as a person and did things for her own personal gain. However, Lydia is also aware of the monstrosities she has done for Gilead, how she essentially betrayed her own gender: “What sort of people could be on the side of Gilead and not be some kind of monsters? Especially female people.”

(46). Since Lydia was reduced to an animal when she was first captured, the dehumanisation of that moment has stayed with her and in her work as an Aunt: “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.” (143). From that moment onward she had no choice, only the one between survival and death.

### **2.2.2. Shunammite**

Another example of enslavement can be observed in a different character - that of Shunammite. She was a young girl who had no choices since birth, just like all the young women of Gilead. Her education revolved around simple house chores, but also served as a way of brainwashing these young girls into unquestionable compliance with the society of Gilead: “That was a talent women had because of their special brains, which were not hard and focused like the brains of men, but soft and damp and warm and enveloping, like... like what? She didn't finish the sentence. Like mud in the sun, I thought. That's what was inside my head: warmed-up mud.” (87-88). The beliefs about marriage and motherhood were highly encouraged by all of the people who surrounded these young girls, in the same manner that, according to Genz & Brabob, a postfeminist woman was bombarded by constant images of happy married women who completed their destiny of becoming a mother (23).

The young girls of Gilead were thought to worry only about one thing – how to be a good wife. Marriage and motherhood were of the uttermost importance and the centre of their existence. They existed to become Wives, to obey and take care of their husbands and household and to bear and raise healthy children. A prime example of this brainwashing from an early age is the girl Shunammite. Her beliefs and desires were completely dependent on her environment, and she was conditioned to want things that were asked of her, without understanding what really lies behind these things: “She wanted a widower of about forty who hadn't loved his first Wife all that much and had no children, and was high-ranking and handsome.” (161/162). Her desires and her choices were never her own. Unlike Shunammite, Agnes is very scared of her future marriage. She does not want to get married. She is terrified of men and their urges and her inability to stop them from hurting her since she is to be blamed for taunting them. Agnes and Shunammite were raised in the same environment and were

brainwashed by the same propaganda, but their reactions are not similar. While Shunammite adapts her desires and beliefs to fit those of Gilead, Agnes is rebelling internally and feels an aversion to this way of life. Shunammite's actions and behaviour are based on the thought that if she follows the societal rules, she will be safe and able to climb the social ladder. However, due to her reduced experience and information about how the society of Gilead actually works, which is intentional and a part of her training and conditioning to be a good and obedient Wife, Shunammite puts herself in serious danger by desiring a good match for her husband, i.e., Commander Judd. He is one of the most powerful Commanders, but he is notoriously known for the fact that his previous wives died very young, not long after they are married. By desiring this, or rather by being conditioned to desire this marriage, Shunammite wishes to achieve safety and a respectable position (which is almost impossible to achieve in Gilead), not even allowing herself to see the truth when she is directly confronted with it.

### **2.3. The intrusion on women's bodies**

The control over women's bodies and the intrusion on women's bodies that is part of it is a familiar process of taking away women's rights, and the novel makes ample use of it. That is the fastest and the easiest way to control women: "Judd – according to the Limpkin material – was of the opinion from the outset that the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves." (316). As Quran & Desvalini point out, the patriarchal notion that women's bodies belong to men, to their husbands, reflects the view of men as the holders of primary authority over women's bodies (Quran & Desvalini 370). The control of women's bodies could be described in multiple ways: ones that will be described in more detail are the control of pregnancy, abortion, and the violent intrusion in the form of rape.

### 2.3.1. Pregnancy

Pregnancy in Gilead is considered a blessed state, a state that defines the female gender, gives them power but also is the main cause of their enslavement. Similarly, in postfeminist USA and its neoliberalism, which is presented as concerned with individual freedom of choice and democracy, pregnancy is the ultimate goal of women's lives (Gill & Scharff 22). Pregnancy and motherhood are celebrated publicly, both in Gilead and in the contemporary society. However, this idea of a public maternal identity is another way to control women, to make them believe that they are a less of a woman if they do not fulfil their 'natural destiny' of bearing offspring (Gill & Scharff 22). These notions are pushed upon women from childhood, just like Agnes and Becca were constantly reminded how they needed to become mothers in order to achieve fulfilment as women: "We'd been prepared for such things at school – Aunt Vidala had presented a series of embarrassing illustrated lectures that were supposed to inform us about a woman's role and duty in regard to her body – a married woman's role – but they had not been very informative or reassuring." (82) However, this reminder was not only tied to their education. Young girls were taught and reminded that getting married and fulfilling their natural destiny to become mothers were of uttermost importance, and pregnancy was a constant goal for the whole society. Pregnancy was celebrated and something that made women resent each other: "A coming of baby shed lustre on everyone connected with it. It was as if a golden haze had enveloped our house, and the haze got brighter and more golden as time passed." (94) Pregnancy represented power; it gave women limited and temporary power over other not yet pregnant women, and a feeling of safety and satisfaction that came from the success of achieving their duty – a duty which they were brainwashed to possess.



### 2.3.2. Abortion

The question of abortion is very relevant, both in the books and in reality. In the novels, abortion is seen as a grave sin, since it is believed in Gilead that life begins during the process of conception. A similar trend of controlling women's reproductive organs on a basis of saving the foetus is very much relevant in the contemporary American discourse as well. Just recently, on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022, Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade ruling in a 6-3 vote. This ruling was the basis for establishing a constitutional right to abortion. By overturning the nationwide right to abortion, i.e. making abortion illegal after 15 weeks of pregnancy, the Supreme Court took away the rights to bodily autonomy from millions of American women (Delaney n.p.). It is a reminder of Atwood's warning in her novels of how easy it is to control women by reducing them to their reproductive organs, and Faludi's warning about the dangers of passivity in *Backlash*, where she stated that the battle over women's reproductive freedom was initiated because it is the most efficient way of controlling women (Faludi 411). Women who were supporting the right to abort in the 1990s and the early 2000s, but it could be said even more today, were called killers, "whores" and "sluts", since they could not be controlled and were openly exercising their sexual freedoms and sexual independence (Faludi 411). In reality, women were only exercising their bodily autonomy – their right to choose to do whatever they wanted to do with their bodies. Fundamentalists who believed that life starts at conception and were against abortions did not support this autonomy, and therefore tried to shame these women by using derogatory terms. On a bigger scale, it was not a question of sexual freedom, but of the freedom of choice regarding termination of pregnancy and autonomy over one's body and reproductive organs.

The unspoken problem behind the question about abortion was that men lost their "rightful place" as the dominant, decision-making gender. Women gained the ability to regulate their reproductive system, a right that was fought for and obtained by the second wave activists. However, these reproductive rights were met with clear opposition from anti-feminist activists. As Faludi describes, the reasons for the opposing male anti-feminist perspective was rooted in the statement that by having a choice, by being pro-choice, women were doing violence to marriage and the role of a man in it (412).

Women also became much more independent in their decisions when to have children. In the postfeminist America, women were exercising their sexual freedoms and focusing on their professional lives, which delayed the thoughts and decision when to start a family.

Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, before the formation of Gilead, birth rates were extremely low, and women were delaying their pregnancies to their middle age. However, Gilead solved all of these issues by simply taking away the choices: the choice of a husband, the choice of appropriate age when to marry, the choice of wanting children, because one, as a woman, must want children. In *The Testaments* we find a world in which anti-feminist policies of the postfeminist era, discussed by Faludi in *Backlash*, are put to practice while at the same time the official propaganda presents these as not hostile to women's rights. The right to choose is portrayed by these anti-abortion leaders as the source of women's misery and the easiest and simplest way to spare women of this misery would be to remove the choice itself.

### **2.3.3. Rape**

In Gilead, rape was justified as means of conceiving children, as a powerful part of The Ceremony in which all parties participated "willingly" with a higher purpose of creating new life. However, in *The Testaments*, another kind of rape is portrayed. It is done by a dentist, who rapes his own daughter and his young patients: "I didn't know what to do. Should I take hold of his hand and move it off my breast? Would it cause even more burning last to break forth? Should I try to get away?" (96). The episode confirms that women in Gilead, without regard of their social status or age, are continuously victims of sexual violence which only deepens their fear of marriage and men (Kołodziejuk 82). This citation illustrates young Gilead women's lack of knowledge about their bodies, about their rights, about the act of rape. It was frowned upon even in Gilead if it was the illegal not state sanctioned rape, leading these young girls to stay silent. The stigma surrounding it, much like in society of today, has led these girls to suffer in private, even though other women were aware of it: "'I should have gone with you," she said. "But he's the best dentist. Everyone agrees." She knew. Or she suspected. She was warning me not to say anything. That was the kind of coded language they used. Or should I say: that we all used." (98).

## 2.4. Objectification of young girls

Objectification of female bodies, and in particular that of a young virginal female body, has been present for a long time in Western societies. In a patriarchal society that is Gilead (but also in the contemporary society), men's opinions have a stronger credibility and power than that of a woman (Quran & Desvalini 371). This also influences the standards of beauty that is expected of a woman to uphold. This imbalance of power between the genders is connected to the objectification of women. They are perceived as an object that is desirable and must be obtained, and then as a possession which is to serve and bring pleasure to its owner – the man.

*The Testaments* portrays this obsession with youth and its purity. All the arranged weddings are between mere children and much older Commanders who have all of the power. It is disturbing to examine the relationships in those marriages, especially on the example of Commander Kyle, whose wives die rather suddenly and unexpectedly after the marriage and his only focus is to find a new, younger wife.

Moreover, the girls are taught to fear the boys and their predatory looks: “There were swings in one of the parks, but because of our skirts, which might be blown up by the wind and then looked into, we were not to think of taking such a liberty as a swing. Only boys could taste that freedom; only they could swoop and soar; only they could be airborne. I have still never been on a swing. It remains one of my wishes.” (16). Their gender stops them from doing even the simplest things because they are in the constant danger of objectification and sexualisation:

The man eyes that were always roaming here and there like the eyes of tigers, though searchlight eyes, needed to be shielded from the alluring and indeed blinding power of us- of our shapely or skinny or fat legs, of our graceful or knobbly or sausage arms, of our peachy or blotchy skins, of our entwining curls of shining hair or our coarse unruly pelts or our straw-like wispy braids, it did not matter. (9/10).

The girls are in a moral panic about their sexuality (Gill & Scharff 134), since they are objects of sexual desire, something that is impure, wrong and a sin. They are to be blamed for provoking men by just existing near them, they are the only ones who bear the burden of moral and physical purity, even though it is not in their power to stop this objectification and premature sexualization.

Gilead prides itself on deeply rooted Christian morals and the society is very adamant that girls must follow these morals: “You were not supposed to preen yourself on your good

looks, it was not modest, or take any notice of the good looks of other people. Though we girls knew the truth: that it was better to be pretty than ugly.” (11). In other words, the girls are aware that they are being objectified and that their beauty is a plus in their social standing. The upholding of a narrow and restrictive definition of beauty in society reinforces the burden of “lookism” on women and girls from a very young age (Gill & Scharff 37). In the contemporary society, this leads to unhealthy image obsessions, body dysmorphia and potentially harmful beauty procedures (Gill & Scharff 37). The young girls of Gilead do experience these things, but not to such an extent since they cannot fully discover or express their sexuality even later in life due to the shameful connotation that goes along with it.

Both Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* and Agnes in *The Testaments* are aware of this burden of “lookism”, and it could be compared on these two characters from different generations; Offred, who lived in postfeminist society before Gilead, and Agnes, for whom Gilead is all that she knows. Offred experienced the more sexual side of it, since she was objectified as a grown woman: “As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire.” (103). On the other hand, the premature objectification and sexualization caused Agnes (and other girls) to fear men and marriage. Offred misses the ability to express her beauty and sexuality, while Agnes and the other girls are taught to fear it and be ashamed of it while simultaneously dealing with the constant objectification and a sense of danger from the male gaze which is always upon them.

## **2.5. A crisis of masculinity**

One of the main reasons for the backlash against the second wave feminism and for its consequent transformation into postfeminism is the changed role of masculinity and changed balance of power between men and women. According to anti-feminists, women became “so powerful” that they no longer needed men. Their independence was seen as a threat to patriarchal values and tradition since men’s identity is tied to being the family breadwinner. Therefore, men entered a sort of crisis (Faludi 76). Just like patriarchy influences women and their perception of themselves, men are under its influence as well. The crisis of masculinity and the fight to establish masculinity as a powerful and dominant notion, works with the idea

of women returning to their socially imposed version of femininity, i.e., going back to passivity and blind obedience.

Two questions arise: why are men so intimidated by female independence, and how is the equality of women tied to the loss of male identity? Traditionally, male identity is defined by being capable of looking after their families, by having a (usually financially) dependant woman and a family. That is the way in which successful masculinity is judged in a patriarchal society. The most important characteristic is not being a good businessman or a leader, it is being “a good provider for his own family” (Faludi 79). The anti-feminist stance on feminism therefore usually portrays feminism as a threat to the family itself, and it is usually justified by stating that this process of women’s independence challenges men’s ability to be a good provider. Hence, the society, which is patriarchal, has shifted into a new “pro-family” strategy in its fight against women’s freedom. However, due to the global economy and high costs of living in a capitalist society, women are not prevented from earning money. The balance between women’s independence and subordination to men which patriarchy demands can be achieved by letting women work and shifting their focus and identity to the family itself. This is best achieved through women who fight for families, who fight against feminist progress and therefore, keep the men out of the female sphere (Faludi 251).

Atwood builds *The Handmaid’s Tale* on this anti-feminist backlash in the US media, creating the narrative in which Gilead Commanders use the same tactic of turning women against women, empowering The Aunts and letting them take care of “female business” with The Wives, The Handmaids, and their daughters. This empowerment of The Aunts (no matter how insignificant it really is on the grander scale of things in society) enabled them to make their voices heard. It actually empowered them to take initiative and separate themselves from feminine passivity – something that The Handmaids were unable to do. This puts Aunts above other women, giving them the ability to see justice as they please, as long as it helps Gilead in its cause – oppress women and reduce them to the roles of wives and mothers only. However, all it took was a change of belief and perspective in women who had a little bit of power, as seen in the example of Aunt Lydia, to completely break the system of inequality and be the catalysts for a new-born rebellion against the system in which a woman could never have more power of influence than a man.

## 2.6. Regaining power

The theme shared by *The Testaments* and *The Handmaid's Tale* is the empowerment of female characters who, through their own experiences, realise the importance of the fight for their rights. This awareness is depicted differently, however, and could be said to compare and contrast postfeminist to feminist ideas of the self, and the difference between an individual's rebellion against the rules and its limits versus organized struggle against oppression. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred regains the power over her body by indulging in a sexual relationship with Nick. When it comes to her enslavement, she fights it in thought only. Offred stays true to herself, makes her own private inner world that withstands all the abuse that she receives daily. The strength of her mind and the motivation to see her child again are the things that keep her going, even though her own rebellion is only in the privacy of her mind. However, her own true liberation will depend on the success of the Mayday operation – in other words, on an organised struggle. Offred alone cannot liberate herself. Her personal rebellion is not enough. It takes an organised effort to change a system or to rebuild a society with its values; that is how Gilead was established – by collective effort. Therefore, the Commanders know about the danger of a group of people with a collective goal, and they try to separate the oppressed and make them each other's spies to ensure that rebellion does not happen. The only way to successfully fight this regime is through an organised rebellion against it; this is what Mayday represents. It brings people together under the same goal and promise of freedom, and ultimately, their actions and rescue operations cause much damage to the stability of Gilead.

In contrast to Offred, the example of Agnes and Becca in *The Testaments* further explores the notion of retrieving one's power by accessing new information and knowledge which leads to a new set of beliefs and perspectives and involvement in an organised rebellion. Both Agnes and Becca were living in the constant fear of their futures and men that they eventually had to marry: "Becca did not seem to hear her. 'I will never, ever get married,' she murmured, almost to herself. 'Yes, you will,' said Shunammite. 'Everyone does.' 'No, they don't,' said Becca, but only to me." (80) They escaped this fate by starting to study at Ardua Halls, under Lydia's protection. There, the girls had access to knowledge, they were allowed to learn how to read and write. This allowed them to think critically of Gilead's imposed rules, as well as of the values that Gilead promoted: "'They want God to be only one thing," she said. "They leave things out. It says in the Bible we're in the Gods image, male and female both. You'll see, when the Aunts let you read it.'" (295). However, Shunammite had a different

approach to securing her safety. Instead of having a small rebellion, like Agnes and Becca did, Shunammite thinks that her safety lies in following the rules and being a dutiful follower of the regime. Her fear turns into an arrogant display of her opinions that are heavily influenced by her education and conditioning, which were so limited in order to make her compliant – something that obviously served its purpose. On the other hand, when Agnes and Becca acquire new knowledge about their society and religion after beginning their training at Ardua Halls, they develop new opinions, which Shunammite is unable to do since she is kept in the dark. After gaining this knowledge, Agnes and Becca meet Daisy/Jade who turns out to be the famous stolen Baby Nicole.

Daisy regains her power in a different way. She grew up in Canada, and while she did not grow up under an oppressive system, she struggles with her identity and part in society. Daisy feels that she does not belong, she does not completely fit in with her peers and she is rather rebellious. This notion is reinforced after realising the truth about her parents and learning that she comes from Gilead: “That birthday was the day that I discovered that I was a fraud.” (39) Gilead is a part of her, a part that she just recently discovered – prior to this discovery she had been dismissive of Gilead and its women, especially the ‘Pearl Girls’ – the missionaries that Gilead sent to Canada to recruit converts (44). However, she wants to help Gilead women in reduced circumstances. Daisy matures and develops as a feminist after abandoning her judgmental stance toward the women of Gilead who are helping the system of oppression. Daisy becomes aware why the women of Gilead act in this way only when she is able to experience their struggles and their lives up close in Gilead. She becomes aware of how much these women had to sacrifice, how much they had to endure, and how much the society they live in had broken them in order to get them to comply: “How can I have behaved so badly, so cruelly, so stupidly? you will ask. You yourself would never have done such things! But you yourself will never have had to.” (Atwood 403). She takes on another name – Jade, a precious stone that signifies “purity and serenity” as well as “wisdom gathered in tranquillity” (Kołodziejuk 81) to symbolise her strength and her readiness to fight for women’s rights: “I should choose another name, he said. People might be looking for a Daisy, and I certainly couldn't be Nicole. So I said I'd be Jade. I wanted something harder than a flower.” (Atwood 204).

The meeting of Agnes and Daisy gives courage to both to be able to reach the final stage of dismantling the patriarchy (Kołodziejuk 81). They take an active part in the resistance and fight against Gilead. They know what they want and are willing to risk their lives to achieve

their goals. As she is learning to read and brothing her views, Agnes is worried about losing her femininity and becoming more like a man: “Was my soft, muddy brain hardening? Was I becoming stony, steely, pitiless? Was I exchanging my caring and pliable woman’s nature for an imperfect copy of a sharp-edged and ruthless man’s nature?” (328) Her training, along with Daisy’s opinions and different behaviour, causes a change in Agnes.

As Georghiu & Praisler suggest, Daisy helps Agnes to reshape her passive femininity into her strength, which pushes the feminist wave throughout Gilead (88). Agnes knows how to act in Gilead. She knows that she must perform her part to stay safe, and after realising how oppressed and unfair her position is, and after her decision to help destroy Gilead, she plays a key part in the rebellion and the operation of getting the documents to Mayday. However, there is one key distinction between these characters, and that is their thoughts on the notion of motherhood. Agnes has lived under the constant pressure of thinking about becoming a wife and mother. She was a slave to the idea of motherhood, while Daisy was not under constant pressure and fear of fulfilling the role of a mother by society and could actually think and behave like a young teenager. While Agnes was able to see the danger of marriage for women in Gilead and has managed to evade it, Shunammite, who was in similar circumstances as Agnes, sees marriage as her salvation and an opportunity to rise in society. They react differently, but they both act out of fear for their safety, which they feel on a daily basis, something that Daisy did not feel until she got involved with the rebellion. The only influence of patriarchy that can be related to Daisy is her dependence on Garret at the start of her journey. Both Agnes and Daisy find their strength outside of this patriarchal thought, Agnes when she rejects the societal norm of marriage and Daisy when she no longer depends on Garret’s help.



## CONCLUSION

The complex position of women and their rights in a patriarchal society influenced the narratives of these two novels. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we encounter a more private and intimate understanding of the injustice that women experience. Offred shares her thoughts on feminism and postfeminism as a private rebellion against an oppressive regime. In *The Testaments*, the notions of feminism, postfeminism and anti-feminism are shown using the examples of the three narrators: Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy, who come together to sabotage and dismantle Gilead from within. While *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a comment on how easy it is to take away rights from women who had stopped the feminist fight, *The Testaments* gives an example of taking back that power through activism and collective fight against anti-feminist thought.

Moreover, both novels also serve as a warning – a warning that displays how easy it could be to deprive women of their basic rights and needs. A warning that indicates the dangers that are present in society today - like restricting abortion rights, objectifying women from a very early age and taking advantage of young women's insecurities. These are all the things that have already happened in the past and that keep happening. Just recently, American women lost their constitutional right to abortion. The Supreme Court made this decision rather easily and the public could not have done anything to stop it. The possibility for this to happen was established during Trump's presidency, when he appointed three judges to The Supreme Court, which all voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade* (Quinitchett n.p.). It happened in a manner similar to the one that Atwood described in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Now only those that are financially able to travel to states that still allow abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy will be able to get it. However, this "loophole" is also being addressed by the right-wing governors of some states (Castillo n.p.). For example, lawmakers of the state of Missouri tried to enact a law to stop abortion related travel. This law, which is still pending, would enforce abortion restrictions through civil lawsuits if the abortion is administered outside the state of origin. If this law entered into force, the lawsuit would be filed not only against the person who wanted an abortion, but also against people who helped that person in any capacity. Moreover, women with less financial ability will not be able to travel at all, which will surely lead to illegal and dangerous abortions and a rise in the mental health issues and domestic violence. By saying that this protects the rights of a foetus while doing little to aid young mothers and children in the social care system is very hypocritical. Therefore, this ruling is predominantly an attack on

women's reproductive rights, an attack on their freedoms and autonomy of their bodies. In addition, there is a further danger in this overruling: it could lead to a domino effect of overruling a number of other civil rights that have been protected for decades, like the right for same sex marriages. This highlights the importance not only of feminism, but above all of intersectional feminism – feminism that is inclusive. The concept of intersectional feminism aims to "de-marginalize the voices of minority women and articulate different forms of inequality" (Giorgi 2). It strives to create solidarity between different groups that fight for the same thing, but not by erasing the separate struggles of the groups. For example, feminism cannot ignore the fact that in American society, African American women frequently face greater challenges to equality than white women, just as *The Handmaids* face greater challenges than *The Marthas*. It is critical for feminist organisations to recognise these differences and not solely focus on gender equality. There needs to be an intersectional recognition amongst the groups (Giorgi 3), which will make it easier to understand the inequality in its entirety and will ultimately help the collective fight for women's rights.

In the current political climate, it is important to emphasize the dangers that are very relevant to feminist progress, but also remember the past experiences in order to not repeat them. This is the reason why feminism must have activists who must be present in the society and its discourse as long as it takes for the fight for women's rights to be truly over. Atwood's books present a fictional warning that women sadly still cannot feel safe about their rights and must be aware that those rights could be taken away rather easily. Just like Offred and her peers lost their rights, it is possible for that to really happen in contemporary society as well; and just like Agnes and Daisy felt hopeless until they started to fight for themselves and their rights, women must not stop fighting. The only way to stop regimes like Gilead from happening, and the only way for women to ensure their rights, is to continue the fight that has been going on for centuries in order to achieve and maintain equality.

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## MARGARET ATWOOD'S 'THE TESTAMENTS': SEQUEL AS FEMINIST REVISION OF 'THE HANDMAID'S TALE'?: SUMMARY AND KEY WORDS

Feminism as women's struggle for equal rights has been an ongoing process in American society which has faced backlash periodically. However, the backlash against feminism has not always been direct, and has taken different shapes in the U.S. media. Both the aggressive direct response and the indirect undermining of women's rights were imaginatively used and described in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and its follow-up novel *The Testaments* (2019). *The Handmaid's Tale* indicated the dangerous possibility of easily stripping women of their hardly won rights which were here lost due to the mass passivity, while *The Testaments* explores the fight against the totalitarian patriarchal regime described in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This thesis will explore the relationship between the two novels in such a way that the sequel will be read as a feminist revision of *The Handmaid's Tale* which was written at a time when postfeminism was widespread in American society. *The Testaments* could serve as a warning about the consequences of postfeminism, while *The Handmaid's Tale* directly describes how deeply postfeminism was rooted, not only in society, but also in the individual, and highlights the importance of organised struggle against totalitarian ideas and regimes.

**Key words:** feminism, postfeminism, anti-feminism, women's rights, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*

## **MARGARET ATWOOD: SVJEDOČANSTVA: NASTAVAK KAO FEMINISTIČKA REVIZIJA SLUŠKINJINE PRIČE?: SAŽETAK I KLJUČNE RIJEČI**

Feminizam kao ženska borba za ostvarivanje jednakih prava je kontinuirani proces u američkom društvu koji povremeno doživljava otpor. Međutim, otpor prema feminizmu nije uvijek bio izravan te se u američkim medijima pojavljivao u različitim oblicima. Agresivne i izravne reakcije kao i neizravno narušavanje prava žena su maštovito upotrijebljene i opisane u romanu Margaret Atwood *Sluškinjina priča* (1985.) i njegovom nastavku *Svjedočanstva* (2019.). *Sluškinjina priča* je ukazala na opasnu mogućnost lakog oduzimanja prava žena, za koje su se jedva izborile, zbog masovne pasivnosti. *Svjedočanstva* zamišljaju borbu protiv totalitarnog režima koji je opisan u *Sluškinjinoj priči*. Ovaj rad istražuje odnos između dva romana tako da se nastavak smatra feminističkom revizijom *Sluškinjine priče* koja je napisana u vrijeme kada je postfeminizam bio rasprostranjen u američkom društvu. *Svjedočanstva* bi mogla poslužiti kao upozorenje o posljedicama postfeminizma, dok *Sluškinjina priča* izravno opisuje koliko je duboko postfeminizam ukorijenjen, ne samo u društvu, nego i u pojedincu, te ističe važnost organiziranog otpora protiv totalitarnih ideja i režima.

**Ključne riječi:** feminizam, postfeminizam, anti-feminizam, prava žena, *Sluškinjina priča*, *Svjedočanstva*