

Beatrix Kiss

University of Debrecen, Hungary

2020, Vol. 17 (1), 57-66(164)

revije.ff.uni-lj.si/elope

<https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.17.1.57-66>

UDC: 821.111(71).09-31Atwood M.:141.72

Elimination of Gender Equality in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the elimination of equality in *The Handmaid's Tale* in four areas, called the "4Ds": distinction, dependence, division and dominance. Distinction is a biological point of view in which the Handmaids' fertility becomes the foundation of their victimization. Dependence analyzes turning fertility into their obligation, integrating Foucault's "socialization of procreative behavior," leading to dependence on men. Division entails the physical division of Gilead into subgroups – Handmaids, Wives, etc. – along with the mental division created by distrust among people, harnessed to forestall rebellion. The last area, Dominance, connects the previous areas. Judith Butler's idea that "the body is a variable boundary," shows that the political power over the Handmaids' bodies equals dominance over society and the future, too. The article ends with the conclusion that destruction of women's rights eventually erases the notion of "woman."

Keywords: gender equality; division of labour; gender segregation; oppression; patriarchy; the body; women's rights; Margaret Atwood

Odprava enakosti spolov v *Deklina zgodbi* Margaret Atwood

POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava odpravo enakosti v *Deklina zgodbi* na štirih področjih, imenovanih »štirje D-ji«: drugačnost (distinction), odvisnost (dependence), delitev (division) in prevlada (dominance). Drugačnost je biološki vidik, po katerem plodnost Dekel postane razlog za njihovo viktimizacijo. Odvisnost plodnost spremeni v njihovo obvezo, ki vključuje Foucaultovo »socializacijo prokreativnega vedenja« in povzroča odvisnost od moških. Delitev označuje fizično ločitev Gileada na podskupine – Dekle, Žene itn. – vključno z miselno delitvijo, ki zbujata nezaupanje med ljudmi in preprečuje upor. Zadnje področje, prevlada, povezuje prej naštetá področja. Misel Judith Butler, da je »telo spremenljiva meja«, kaže, da politična moč nad telesi Dekel pomeni prevlado nad družbo in tudi prihodnostjo. Prispevek ugotavlja, da uničenje pravic žensk na koncu povzroči izbris pojma »ženska«.

Gljučne besede: enakost spolov; delitev dela; ločitev po spolu; zatiranje; patriarhat; telo; pravice žensk; Margaret Atwood

1 Introduction

“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” (Atwood 2017, 66). These words from Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* effectively articulate what being a woman means in this 20th-century dystopia. Since its publication in 1985, the novel has been examined again and again, with critics attempting to unpack all the motifs, symbols, hidden messages and layers Atwood created. For example, Patricia F. Goldblatt has worked on how the novel (re)constructs its protagonist, Deborah Hooker on how the narration of the story uses the tools of orality, and the list could go on.

The aim of this article is to propose a new analytical perspective on this well-known and oft-analyzed novel by anatomizing its depiction of Gilead’s gradual elimination of any possibility of gender equality. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, *gender equality* means “the act of treating women and men equally,” but this seems a vague definition because of the blanks between the words, which give rise to with many questions. In their book *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan summarize the major issues in the ongoing debates surrounding equality, asking whether equality is measured by opportunity or outcome, whether biological differences determine equality status, and whether women need to adopt “masculine norms” to achieve equality (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 38).

All these questions are raised in Atwood’s novel – some more prominently than others, but each circles around the main point of this article: where and how can people treat each other equally? The answer to this question is a complex one and much previous research has suggested a simplified version: gender equality can be investigated in the private and the public spheres. Notwithstanding the fact that these aspects have also different sub-fields, I believe they are worth a closer look.

Descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes have been negotiated between society and literature for centuries. Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows this exchange in action. The way women and men should and do behave draws a line between the two genders, especially by binding women to the private sphere and men to the public. Essentially this is what the 19th-century social order handed over to the 20th century, feeding successive waves of feminism and leading to today’s society where women and men have the same rights and similar opportunities – in Western societies. The historical struggle for gender equality occupies this article only indirectly; it arises only in connection with the mirroring effect Atwood uses in this novel.

The best-known issue in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is women’s oppression by and subordination to the new patriarchal society built by the Commanders; this subordination is justified on the basis of the problem of human infertility in Gilead. However, this newly established oppression cannot have been implemented in Gilead overnight. To examine and analyze the small steps leading to the elimination of gender equality in Gileadean society, I posit four stages, called the ‘Four D-s,’ through which women’s position is returned to where it was in the 19th century or earlier. These ‘Four D-s’ are Distinction; Dependence; Division and Dominance, but since gender equality is a complex matter, these four parts will exhibit

overlap and interconnection. Moreover, the factors affecting them cannot be analyzed on their own but only in relation to one another.

2 The “4 Ds”

2.1 Distinction

The first field is *distinction* according to gender differentiation. Distinction takes various forms in the novel, but the key that joins them is the body. The concept of the body within gender studies “can be grouped into three broadly defined categories: the body as nature, the body as socially constructed, and embodiment” (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 6). All these categories can be found in Atwood’s novel, but at this point I will reflect mostly on the body as nature, since the other two aspects will appear later in the other D stages.

As Shulamith Firestone has pointed out, the most distinctive characteristic separating women and men is biological difference: the capacity to conceive, carry a child and breastfeed it. Her study *The Dialectic Of Sex* analyzes the sex class that is constructed on the edge of political power, the natural body and the history of the oppression of women – overall, how sex discrimination works and how it could be changed. Her answer for this ongoing question is that to destroy inequality, we need to first eliminate this biological difference, perhaps by the use of advanced scientific methods, for example, the fertilization of eggs by sperm and growing fetuses in artificial wombs. Radical for their time (1970), Firestone’s ideas have become commonplace in the 21st century and would have rendered Handmaids – and indeed, the ritualized and sexual Ceremony – unnecessary.

However, in Atwood’s novel such scientific methods as are available fail to help the population overcome the falling birth rate; consequently, biological difference cannot be eliminated but instead is overemphasized by the gradual assemblage of all fertile women. Establishing a new social order becomes inevitable; if Gilead is to survive, the new society requires a new approach to female fertility. In the 1970s, Alice Rossi identified the key position of biological difference in the gender equality issue, arguing that women’s superiority at caring for children meant that “equality between the sexes should not be achieved through women devolving childcare responsibilities to others, rather, equality should be achieved through securing proper societal recognition for women’s distinctive, biologically rooted childcare abilities” (discussed in Sayers 1982, 148–9). Or, as the French feminist writers Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have established, women’s bodies (praised and valorised) could become a special source of women’s empowerment (see Tong 1998; Whitford 1991). These approaches show clearly that biological differences need not preclude gender equality and they make it undeniable that the Commanders’ plan was not just to save society from extinction but also to recreate covertly a strong patriarchy where women are dependent on men. This was achieved by taking natural differences of female and male bodies, strongly foregrounding these, and erecting an impenetrable wall between genders, with no recognition that gender could be other than binary.

However, that patriarchal mentality is not the only way in which *The Handmaid’s Tale* separates men and women. Next to the biological differentiation there is also the social construction of

the body. Instead of emphasizing the similarities between sexes to bridge their inequality, the novel negates these similarities. For theorists Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin, it is biology that “constrains socialisation practices, making it possible for culture only to minimise, rather than eliminate, the effects of natural biological differences between women and men” (quoted in Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 8). R. W. Connell identified some of the cultural practices that could act to negate similarities between the bodies of women and men. This negation can be done – and is done in *The Handmaid’s Tale* – for example, by means of the clothing, or the overemphasis on prescriptive gender stereotypes (Connell 1987).

Atwood revealed in her Introduction to a 2017 edition of the novel that her idea of clothing for the Handmaids came from mid-Victorian costume and from nuns; however, the description of women’s dress in the novel also bears a resemblance to 13th-century French fashion. In that era women wore simple, loose dresses, widening from the breast to the ankles, and mostly of one color – especially among servants – that bore the owner’s crest, with the addition of a bonnet that followed strictly the form of the head, hiding their braided hair under it (Demanovszky 1979, 73–73). The narrator describes the Handmaids’ clothing as follows: “[e]verything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full” (Atwood 2017, 8). The Marthas, meanwhile, wear “dull green, like a surgeon’s gown of the time before. The dress is much like mine in shape, long and concealing” (Atwood 2017, 9). These characteristics ensure the differentiation of women from men by one glance at their clothing, while also returning women to a past when they had fewer legal rights. As for the symbolism of the dresses, Atwood wrote in the 2017 Introduction that “[t]he modesty costumes worn by the women of Gilead are derived from Western religious iconography – the Wives wear the blue of purity, from the Virgin Mary, the Handmaids wear red, from the blood of parturition but also from Mary Magdalene. Also, red is easier to see if you happen to be fleeing” (Atwood 2017, XIII). Despite Atwood’s cynical final remark, this suggests that she chose female costumes in Gilead to reflect fundamentalist essentialism – which is the foundation of the Commanders’ new order.

Prior to the creation of the Republic of Gilead, Offred’s society had already demolished most prescriptive stereotypes; the new leadership, therefore, could not merely put women in old-fashioned clothes and expect them to behave according to the Gileadean ideal. “Boys and girls learn their social roles appropriate to their sexes, as this is marked by their body, through social interaction with successfully socialised adults and immersion in sex-typed culture, and reinforcements,” says Helen Weinreich, continuing Maccoby and Jacklin’s idea. Moreover, these scholars argue that it “is suggested within sex-role theory that gender inequalities can be reduced through altering socialisation into sex-roles, via, for example, non-sexist childrearing practices” (quoted in Pilcher and Whelehan 2004, 7–8). Atwood’s recent sequel, *The Testaments*, offers a close look at the targeted upbringing of girls in Gilead, as Offred’s daughter is reared within a Commander’s home. In the opposite of “non-sexist childrearing practices,” Gileadean society prescribes domestic craft for daughters and prohibits reading, deepening the inequalities between women and men that were evident in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Such inequality then triggers the mirroring action of eventual female empowerment. The Handmaids in the Red Centre are forbidden to show

confidence, to look anyone in the eye, or to speak without permission; even when allowed to speak, they can only use formulaic quasi-biblical phrases (e.g. “Praise be”). In short, their new social role after the mandatory brainwashing is to “[j]ust do your duty in silence” (Atwood 2017, 223). Although the uniforms and sex-based behavior might not be seen as major a gender issue as reproduction, it is important to highlight these minor aspects, not least because even seemingly superficial agents speak to gender inequality.

Why is it fundamental to use this body-based differentiation as the starting point of equality elimination? Because, as Firestone stated, “the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor at the origins of class” (Firestone 1979, 9). This natural difference, compounded by social construction, leads to women’s being dependence on men, a condition which takes this article to the second stage of the ‘4 Ds’.

2.2 Dependence

As has been established, the basis for Gilead’s new political order is the problem of barrenness – plus Gilead’s leaders’ peculiar interpretation of the Bible – which leads to the full abuse of those few women who can have children. This idea resonates with what Michel Foucault calls “a socialization of procreative behavior” (Foucault 1979, 104), which he explains as a “political socialization achieved through the ‘responsibilization’ of couples with regard to the social body as a whole” (Foucault 1979, 105). This idea suggests that the entire society is dependent on the Handmaids, which could lead to their being atop the hierarchy, eventually creating a new matriarchy. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Aunt Lydia, too, tries to make the Handmaids see how important they are by saying “[y]ours is a position of honor” (Atwood 2017, 13), the cynicism of which only becomes evident in *The Testaments* when Aunt Lydia is revealed as a non-believing double agent.

The potential for matriarchy was also suggested in the first “D” with the consideration of Cixous and Irigaray’s approach. However, these were not the only theorists to propose the idea of matriarchy. For example, Sara Ruddick wrote about how feminine values (maternal and caring) should be considered as qualities that need centering, to replace ‘masculine’ values (Ruddick 1997). Although the Commanders do employ some centering, since Gilead is strongly dependent on the Handmaids’ capacity, instead of “projecting their [women’s] values into political life as a legitimate basis for women’s citizenship” (Lister 1997, 95), they bind the Handmaids – along with other women in society – to their most important responsibility, assuring reproduction, thus binding them to the “protection” of the private sphere, while simultaneously excluding them from the public sphere. At this point we reach a historically familiar scenario common even in Western society prior to first-wave feminism.

First-wave feminism was a key factor in the improvement of women’s status, but during the 20th century, dependence on men in patriarchal society was not entirely eradicated. As Sylvia Walby argues – mostly talking about Britain in the 20th century – patriarchy merely shifted from the private form to the public, that is, from women being dependent on men in the family to women being dependent on men because of limited participation in the public sphere (Walby 1990, 201). Dependence on men is not the invention of Atwood’s novels nor of 19th-century patriarchy, because woman as property goes back to a much older idea.

The fundamental significance of the social contract – based on writings by theorists such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau – is undoubted, but Carole Pateman draws attention to the fact that the original social contract “is a sexual as well as a social contract; it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal – that is, the contract establishes men’s political right over women – and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women’s bodies” (Pateman 1988, 2). Female dependence was thus a deep-rooted issue before the literary creation of Gilead. What makes the dependence in Atwood’s novel into a totalitarian plan to eliminate equality, is that women are restricted to the private sphere once again, which becomes the legal “territory” of the Commanders, where women exist only to be exploited in every aspect of life, as follows:

- a) *economically*, since the Marthas are forced to run the household and do everything that is necessary for the Handmaids, such as feeding and bathing. Even the handmaid herself can be considered as a job to ‘do’, as Offred states, “To them I am a household chore, one among many” (Atwood 2017, 48);
- b) *emotionally*; for example, the Wives are required to be part of the Ceremony and watch the entire sexual act but say nothing against it, even though one of them, Serena Joy, clearly shows loathing “as if the touch of my [i.e. Offred’s] flesh sickens and contaminates her” (Atwood 2017, 96). This leads the narrator to question which of them suffers most, the Wife or the Handmaid;
- c) *sexually*, when the Commanders give the unwanted Unwomen the chance either to go to the distant Colonies – and starve to death – or to become Jezebels, who are basically prostitutes, whose existence allows the Gilead elite to abuse their power by breaking the very rules they have established;
- d) *biologically*, by using the Handmaids against their will as living vessels for reproduction in chosen families, without taking into consideration that they are human beings, not machines.

All these forms of exploitation happen simultaneously, until eventually women have no area in their lives where men are not their superiors and where they are not told what to do or be. This extreme coercion of women into oppression leads into the third D, which is the division of society and also of the self.

2.3 Division

The most visible area for the elimination of gender equality is the societal division into multiple sectors. Women and men form the most basic division – as demonstrated in the first D – then comes the duality of the public and private spheres, where men have full authority in the public sphere and only slightly less in the private sphere. As in the previous point, the dependence of women is a result of their severe restriction to the private sphere. However, even in this sphere where women should have some individuality, they are not an undivided female mass. They are divided into newly established social classes and given their own territories, with certain responsibilities and illusory rights.

Previously, I have pointed out the various ways in which women are exploited – economically, emotionally, sexually and biologically – and following this division, we can distinguish the Wives, the Marthas, the Handmaids, the Jezebels and the Econowives, all of whom have their own functions. For example, the “garden is the domain of the Commander’s Wife. [...] Many of the Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (Atwood 2017, 12). The Marthas, meanwhile, are responsible for the household chores, the cooking and cleaning. The Handmaids’ have but one job: to give birth to the Commanders’ children. Originally, as Heidi Hartmann states, the “domestic division of labour [...] acts to weaken women’s position in the labour market” (Hartmann 1982, 448), since dividing an already divided position reduces women’s rights and strength to almost nothing in Gilead.

Nevertheless, we cannot analyze this division without paying attention to one of the most interesting groups, the Jezebels. Their group is a mixture of the old society and the new, as they are “working girls [...] from the old times” who “couldn’t be assimilated” (Atwood 2017, 239). Here Atwood is playing on the slang term for prostitute, but Gilead also groups them with other women who could have been considered inferior to the new order, such as sociologists, lawyers, or women in executive positions, all of them oppressed by the new law of Gilead, while allowing Commanders to break their own rules. In the sequel, *The Testaments*, Atwood aligns even Aunt Lydia quite closely to this group; as an educated professional who had worked as a family court judge and was thus used to power, she could threaten Gilead and so is coerced into collaboration with the power structure.

These groups represent the novel’s constructed system of exploitation by fragmentation. This function-based division of women emerges clearly when the narrator talks about the ordinary women: “Econowives, they are called. These women are not divided into functions” (Atwood 2017, 24). In their functional unity, once the norm, they serve to highlight the issue of dehumanization of women. To explain this division, one could use the metaphor of a household gadget that is multifunctional: that is, all of today’s women, who do multiple things, and concomitantly enjoy multiple rights. When, however, the parts are disassembled both functionality and rights are impaired.

As Offred says, “In this house we all envy each other something” (Atwood 2017, 53). This envy is implicated in another form of division that I have named mental division. René Descartes in the 17th century stated that “the human mind and the human body are fundamentally distinct from one another” (although this ‘Cartesian dualism’ was later challenged by many philosophers and social theorists); it is thus understandable that Gilead’s system goes beyond physical segregation. Mental division, as I use the term, designates the serious distrust rooted in Gilead’s society and epitomized by the continuous surveillance by the Eyes, who report to the leadership. Being watched is not uncommon, so it does not necessarily lead to such distrust as in this novel. However, the difference arises from the fact that nobody knows who the Eyes are or when they are watching. The novel thus operationalizes the idea of the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham’s perfect prison layout. Nobody can trust anyone else, and the revelation in *The Testaments* of Aunt Lydia’s longstanding treachery confirms this truth. Consequently, people in Gilead are not simply physically divided into distinct groups but are fully alienated from one another, always thinking that “[t]he truth is she is my spy, as I am

hers” (Atwood 2017, 19), as Offred says. Everyone inside this new society is trapped in their own mental prison, wondering, “Perhaps he was merely being friendly. [...] Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye” (Atwood 2017, 18).

2.4 Dominance

Although I have defined dominance as the fourth D as part of my theoretical apparatus, dominance is not an entirely separate field when it comes to eliminating gender equality. Rather, it is an end product of the other three Ds. All the Ds are interconnected, but dominance plays a major part in the other three, because the others comprise ways leading to the dominance of men in the dystopian society. Judith Butler aptly touches on this dominance: “the body is not a ‘being’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler 1999, 177). The body is the embodiment of the self, and because of its permeability, power over it can shift easily. “What you must be, girl, is impenetrable,” Aunt Lydia instructs the Handmaids while their life is taken away from them and replaced by an existence governed by ritual penetration (Atwood 2017, 29).

In the novel, the Commanders have the political power to own a Handmaid, who is no more to them than a walking womb. This legal ownership eases their womb envy, which means that they want the only thing that women have but men do not and the only area in which women will always be superior to men. However, to save the nation from its demise, this new ownership needs to be that which has become normalized, and the Handmaids must accept that they are the only hope for Gilead. Considering the seriousness of the matter, and the importance of the Handmaids’ fertility, it becomes understandable that the Commanders’ creation of Handmaids was motivated not by oppression of women but by the necessity of survival. However, taking away their choice, the freedom to decide if and in what way they will be part of this new society, is what makes the Commanders oppressors. “We were a society dying [...] of too much choice” (Atwood 2017, 25), Offred confesses, referring to the society that preceded Gilead, offering a feeble explanation for Gilead’s radical actions. Placing women in distinct groups with restricted functions to serve the country is what created the ‘dual system theory’ in debates about patriarchy. As Pilcher and Whelehan write, “In some versions of dual system theory, capitalism and patriarchy are understood as interdependent, mutually accommodating systems of oppression, whereby both systems structure and benefit from women’s subordination” (2004, 94). Finally, these women are deprived of the only thing they were allowed and thus fully become the property of the dominant elite.

However, subsequent to the physical dominance which gives the Commanders and other leaders of Gilead the power to seize women’s property, the oppression evolves into dominance over the thoughts of women, especially in the case of the Handmaids. As they are taught by the Aunts, “There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of the anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from. Don’t underestimate it” (Atwood 2017, 24). By brainwashing them, making them believe that this condition is good for them and that suffering is for their benefit, both sides of the ‘Cartesian dualism,’ the mind and the body fall victim to totalitarian oppression.

We could argue that this brainwashing is merely a return to patriarchy, a modernized version of reality in previous centuries, but further consideration of how these women are demoralized, hurt and almost destroyed by the invasion of their bodies, reveals the crippling consequences of such dominance. By owning the bodies of fertile women, the male power elite in Gilead also own the entire reproductive capacity of the nation, which instantly confers on them authority over the future of not just their nation but possibly the human race.

3 Conclusion

I have anatomized the elimination of gender equality in four steps, starting from the overemphasis on the biological difference between men and women; continuing to the re-creation of female financial dependence on men; through the division of women's functions and powers; and, ultimately to a dominance so comprehensive that women would lack the will to contemplate independence, as the new slowly became the ordinary.

By the time the Commanders have fulfilled their plan to create Gilead, equality is no longer the sole casualty; this is the rationale behind the quotation at the beginning of this article, where Offred conceptualizes herself as a thing to be composed: "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" (Atwood 2017, 66). The proposed '4 Ds' comprise the intervening ways, overlapping areas that lead to the elimination of gender equality. They also form the starting points of something that goes beyond previous constructs of patriarchy. Since Offred considers herself as a construct, we understand that the notion of 'woman' has been erased from her mind – and from the minds of other women, who have internalized their objectification. Nevertheless, even such extreme erasure does not mark the end, because the elimination and objectification initiate an avalanche leading to a newly created sisterhood between alienated and oppressed women. This sisterhood would become the major motif in *The Testaments*. In relegating women to a debased position below even historical pre-liberation conditions, the Commanders fail to foresee the backlash against their oppression. Aunt Lydia's advice to novice – "Think of it as being in the army" (Atwood 2017, 16) – takes on renewed resonance in light of her role in the sequel, in which an army of sisters will reverse history and regain their freedom.

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