

Forms of Bullying against Women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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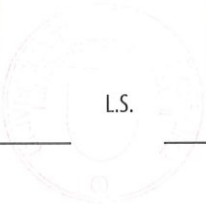
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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem šikany a viktimizace v románu Margaret Atwoodové *Příběh Služebnice*. Teoretická část popisuje teorii týkající se viktimizace, kterou Margaret Atwoodová popsala ve svém díle *Survival*. Dále jsou v teoretické části nadefinovány základní pojmy týkající se šikany. Analytická část se zabývá viktimizací konkrétních skupin žen popsaných v románu a jejich představitelkami. Konkrétněji se zaměřuje na postavy, které jsou oběťmi různých forem šikany a analyzuje, jak se mění jejich pozice oběti podle definice Atwoodové. Hlavním cílem práce je popsat formy šikany, jichž se fundamentalistická teokratická diktatura dopouští na ženách a analyzovat vývoj vybraných ženských postav z hlediska pozic oběti. Práce dochází k závěru, že žádná z vybraných ženských postav není schopna se od viktimizace osvobodit a dosáhnout tak čtvrté pozice oběti, jak ji definovala Atwoodová.

Klíčová slova: Margaret Atwoodová, šikana, viktimizace, viktimizace žen.

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis deals with the topic of bullying and victimization in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The theoretical part describes the theory of victimization, which Margaret Atwood described in her work *Survival*. Furthermore, the theoretical part defines the basic concepts related to bullying. The analytical part deals with the victimization of specific groups of women described in the novel and their representatives. More specifically, it focuses on characters who are victims of various forms of bullying and analyses how their positions of victims change according to Atwood's definition. The main goal of this work is to describe the forms of bullying that fundamentalist theocratic dictatorship commits against women and to analyse the development of selected female characters in terms of victim positions. The work concludes that none of the selected female characters is able to free herself from victimization and thus achieve the fourth position of the victim, as defined by Atwood.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, bullying, victimization, women victimization.

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's/Master's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9
I THEORY	11
1 THEORY	12
1.1 VICTIMIZATION AND BULLYING	12
1.1 FORMS OF BULLYING AND ITS IMPACT	13
1.3 BULLYING AND VICTIMIZATION IN ATWOOD'S MAJOR WORKS	17
II ANALYSIS	23
2 ANALYSIS	24
2.1 THE HANDMAIDS	24
2.1.1 Offred	25
2.1.2 Janine.....	31
2.3 OTHER CATEGORIES OF WOMEN IN GILEAD	35
2.3.1 The Aunts: Aunt Lydia.....	35
2.3.2 The Wives: Serena Joy.....	38
2.3.3 Unwomen: Offred's mother	40
CONCLUSION	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY	45

INTRODUCTION

Bullying and victimization are major themes in the “controversial, feminist dystopian novel”¹ *The Handmaid’s Tale* written by Margaret Atwood, an internationally significant writer, who is known for embracing social and political issues in her works. In her fiction, Atwood often addresses the gender imbalance connected with bullying and victimization against women. Through the female protagonists of her works, Atwood continuously opens space for women to speak and write about their experience.² The theory of victimization is covered in Atwood’s work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Here, Atwood analyses the principles on which Canadian literature is based. Due to its colonial history, Canada, according to Atwood, represents an oppressed minority, which is similar to the way how women are oppressed by men in the society.³

Moreover, in *Survival*, Atwood introduced her theory of four basic victim positions and describes how people perceive and act towards their victimization depending on which of the four basic victim positions they occupy. According to Atwood’s theory, the ultimate goal of all victims is to discover a method through which they will be able to end their victimization and free themselves, i.e. reach the fourth victim position. The characters in Atwood’s novels often experience some form of bullying and victimization, thus the typical behaviour patterns examined in Atwood’s theory may be observed in their stories.

The Handmaid’s Tale is a story of a female prisoner, the narrator Offred, a Handmaid, who lives in a totalitarian regime of Gilead. She illegally manages to record her narrative describing life in the dictatorship which was established within American borders. Women’s worth in Gilead is solely measured only by their ability to reproduce. Depending on their fertility, women are divided into several social groups. Each of them has a different purpose, but they all consist of victimized women. The fertile ones are the Handmaids, trained and guided by the Aunts. Handmaids are placed in a family of political power, consisting of a Commander and a Wife. The Wives are infertile, however, they make claim on the children of their Handmaids. In every household, there are Marthas – housekeepers. Poor infertile women are called Econowives and they are married to men with lower social position than Commanders. Old women are removed from the society completely, by being sent to work in the Colonies, where they clean toxic waste.

¹ Bloom, *Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*, 24.

² See Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, 17.

³ See Margaret Atwood, *Survival*, 45.

All the main characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* are women who are bullied and victimized by the political regime and the fundamentalist theocratic patriarchal society which they are part of. Atwood claimed, that the novel is "... a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime."⁴ Therefore, the aim of my thesis is to analyse what impact has the regime on women, to describe what forms of bullying the female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* undergo and most importantly, if they are able to free themselves from the role of a victim and thus end their victimization. The examination will include description of the specific forms of bullying and the development of their victim positions in regard to Atwood's theory.

The thesis is divided into two parts – the theoretical one and the practical one. The first part presents theoretical base on bullying as a psychological phenomenon, then it introduces Margaret Atwood's work with regard to the themes of bullying and victimization of women and finally, it describes her theory on the victimization which will be extensively used in the analytical part of my thesis. The second part analyses chosen female characters from *The Handmaid's Tale*. Each chapter begins with a short description of the particular social group, which is followed by an analysis of the main representative(s). Of these representatives, none of them reaches the fourth victim position, as defined by Atwood, and therefore proves incapable of successfully freeing themselves from their victimization.

⁴ Bloom, 77.

I. THEORY

1 THEORY

1.1 Victimization and Bullying

Although much is known about the phenomenon of bullying, it is problematic to define it. One of the first attempts to do so, was by Heinemann who described it as “an attack that occurs and subsides suddenly, by a group against an individual who deviates from the norm in some way(s).”⁵ Other definition, known originally from Olweus, claims bullying is “a systematic use of physical or mental aggression by one or more children against a peer.”⁶ Later, as further research was done, the aspects of motivation and power intention were added, for instance by Michael J. Boulton and Peter K. Smith in their *Bully/victim problems in middle-school children: Stability, self-perceived competence, peer perceptions and peer acceptance* study done in 1994, UK.⁷

However, certain elements were consensually marked as indicators of bullying, most importantly, bullying is understood as a form of aggression, including physical, verbal, psychological and relational acts, that are intentional. They occur repeatedly in a relationship and are characterized by power imbalance. Power imbalance means that the bully, whether a group or individual is in some way stronger than the victim.⁸

Generally, bullying is based on the intolerance towards others, because ‘the others’ are a part of a particular group, such as gender, race, age, religion, sexual orientation, ability and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, Monica J. Harris also claims that possible victims of bullying are also those, who differ from others by features evoking jealousy in their peer group. Superior skills or attractive looks are one of the reasons why somebody is excluded or intimidated, because he/she is a ‘threat’ to the group and therefore stands out.⁹

There are three common categorizations of victimization, which is a more general term including all kinds of violence and harassment against an individual or a group of people. These are as follows: direct abuse either physical or verbal and indirect verbal abuse, in a

⁵ Mischna, *Bullying*, 5.

⁶ Mischna, *Bullying*, 5.

⁷ Bosworth, 343

⁸ See Bosworth, 344

⁹ See Harris, *Bullying, Rejection & Peer Victimization*, 317.

form of e. g. rumours or/and social withdrawal.¹⁰ Apart from those, sub-types of victimization are described, these relate to sexual abuse or ethnic abuse. For more details about each, we may look at the definitions of forms of bullying.

1.1 Forms of Bullying and its Impact

According to National Centre Against Bullying, there are four basic forms of bullying or rather ways in which bullying is done. These are as follows:

- Physical bullying – a form of aggressive violent behaviour towards others including hitting, kicking, pushing or also damaging property. All these may cause short-term or long-term damage.
- Verbal bullying – this form includes insults, name calling, teasing, intimidation, homophobic or racist remarks, or any other verbal abuse. Verbal bullying may seem or start off as harmless, it can escalate to levels negatively affecting the target.
- Social bullying – also described as ‘covert bullying’. Compared with the previous form, social bullying is often harder to recognise and may be happening behind the victim’s back, without their consciousness. It is used to harm one’s reputation and/or cause humiliation. It includes lying and spreading rumours, negative facial or physical gestures, negative jokes, intended to cause embarrassment or humiliation of the victim, mimicking unkindly, encouraging others to exclude someone socially.
- Cyber bullying – this form of bullying happens through the usage of digital devices and technologies whether computers or smart phones, by sending harmful messages or creating shaming content on online platforms and social media.¹¹

Moreover, bullying is also described in the terms of ‘direct’ (e.g. physical violence such as kicking, hitting somebody or calling names) and ‘indirect’ bullying (e.g. spreading rumours and manipulating).¹² Direct bullying is linked with the victim’s presence during the act itself, whereas indirect bullying, which is usually in a form of social bullying, is less visible as the victim is not aware of the concrete reasons causing the resulting social exclusion within the victim’s group.

¹⁰ See, Volk, 575

¹¹ See Types of Bullying, National Centre Against Bullying

¹² See Murphy, *Dealing with Bullying*, 17.

All these forms of bullying may appear within a crime, therefore bullies may be prosecuted and such victimization usually impacts people's mental and/or physical health. Common physical reactions occur when a person is bullied, most expected is an increase of adrenalin levels in the body, increased heart rate, hyperventilation – a condition in which the victim breathes abnormally fast, shaking, tears, numbness or a feeling of being frozen. These may occur outright during the danger/abuse or in some cases, victims react physically after the danger has passed and the physical reactions may also reappear when the victim remembers the events.¹³

According to the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims and Crime, victims may go through shock, disbelief and denial, because they refuse to accept that they have been victimized at all. Other people react by anger or rage, blaming either the bully, the God or higher power, their own family, the justice system or even themselves. In other cases, anger is replaced or followed by fear, which may go to such extremes, that it affects victim's health and they should seek professional help. Other emotions victims often deal with are frustration and confusion, guilt, self-blame and in cases of sexual abuse, victims often feel shame and humiliation, describing the emotion as feeling 'dirty'. Most of the victims are also under great stress, which may cause difficulties with thinking clearly, keeping one's emotions under control or behaving appropriately according to conventions in certain social situations.¹⁴ The emotional and psychological behaviour of victims is also a subject of Margaret Atwood's theory which she describes in her book *Survival* (1972).

1.2 Margaret Atwood's Theory of Victimization

Margaret Atwood, an iconic Canadian author, is known as a poet, short story writer and most importantly, fiction writer who embraces social and political issues such as gender roles, division of power, environmental issues, bullying and victimization. She started her career in 1961 by publishing her first poetry collection *Double Persephone* and until now, she has remained a prolific writer till nowadays, writing apart from poetry, also fiction and non-fiction.

Apart from being a fiction author, she also writes non-fiction, most notably on Canadian literature and culture and the process of writing. Furthermore, she was the first writer who attempted to analyse and describe Canadian literature in her book *Survival: A Thematic*

¹³ See National Centre Against Bullying, *Types of Bullying*.

¹⁴ See Canadian Resource Centre for Victims and Crime, *The Impact of Victimization*.

Guide to Canadian Literature (1972). There, she introduced her theory of victimization, describing the behaviour and the process of people's behaviour and attitudes when trying to survive any form of bullying. Experiencing violence against oneself, bullying, victimization and survival are common themes of Atwood's novels, from her early novels, such as *Edible Woman* (1969) or *Surfacing* (1972), to mature works, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Cat's Eye* (1989).¹⁵

Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* was published in 1972 and became a great success. Atwood raised many important, yet unanswered questions. One of the main issues discussed in *Survival* is the problematic, rather non-existing, definition of the Canadian literature. Atwood claims that generally, all nations have their own significant literatures, which are characterized by repeating schemes, plots or scenarios. However, this was not true for Canadian literature.¹⁶

Atwood therefore created a guide which might be useful as a tool for students and teachers at high school, community colleges and universities who struggle when they are supposed to teach a subject they have never studied.¹⁷ Atwood claims that "Canada is essentially 'feminine' in a powerfully 'masculine' world",¹⁸ which can symbolize the mindset of the nation itself, connected with psychological failure and victimization. As well as being the tool in an academic literary field, the book also creates a metaphor of Canada as an 'oppressed minority' because of its colonial history, the similar way women are oppressed by men in society.¹⁹ Women succumbed to men is a very frequent phenomenon in Atwood's works, as she mentions in *Survival*, women in Canadian literature often suffer from 'Rapunzel syndrome' which describes how women are trapped in their own minds and bodies, which is caused by internalizing the social stereotypes around them, and how they wait for a man to come, rescue them, because as a 'weaker gender' they are not able to save themselves by their own.

Canadians had to fight for their independence and Atwood sees this issue as a universal one – everyone wants to feel powerful, not inferior and no one wants to be a victim.

¹⁵ See Wynne-Davies, *Margaret Atwood*, 11.

¹⁶ See Atwood, *Survival* 17.

¹⁷ See Atwood, *Survival* 17.

¹⁸ Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*, 3.

¹⁹ See Atwood, *Survival* 45.

Atwood interprets power politics as “who gets to do what to whom,”²⁰ so power is continuously divided in society, depending on many factors, such as social status or gender. This may be the reason why Atwood’s works are often considered as feminist. That statement is supported also by considering the important role of women’s bodies, feminine issues and women oppression in most of Atwood’s works. However, the author does not identify herself as a feminist writer, only because her the protagonists of her works tend to be women, she claims that: “Maybe it’s because I am a woman and therefore find it easier to write as one. Few male writers write all their books from the female point of view.”²¹ The central interest of Atwood’s works is therefore not to show how men bully and victimize women as individuals, but rather how women function in the whole patriarchal society.

These personal experiences – the position of her nation as a colony of England and the patriarchal society she lived in, inspired Atwood to create her theory of victimization, in which she described the four basic victim positions. Those can be also applied on the behavior of the protagonists in her novels. In my thesis I will benefit from the usage of this theory and I will use it to describe the outcomes of bullying in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

In the first position, victims deny their overall experience and pretend that certain obvious facts do not exist and suppress the idea of experiencing victimization. Unaware of the real sources of their oppression, the victims gain a false sense of power and superiority. Characters in the first victim position appear as the most powerful in Atwood’s novels, for example Peter in *The Edible Woman* or also Cordelia in *Cat’s Eye*.

People in the second position, acknowledge the fact of being victim, but they justify it as an act of Fate, Will of God, dictates of Biology or any other higher ‘invincible’ power against which is strongly inconvenient or rather impossible to fight. Subsequently, the victims refuse to accept their responsibility for their life and are imprisoned in the vicious circle of defining themselves as victims but refusing to take any action in order to change it.

Those in the third victim position not only acknowledge the fact of being a victim but they also reject their victim role. Finally, the real source of oppression is identified, and the anger is used against it, which leads to productive acts. Atwood describes this position as dynamic, since victims either successfully move to the fourth position or fail to change

²⁰ Somacarrera, *Power politics: power and identity*, 44.

²¹ Hancock, 195.

their situation and therefore victims might go back to the position two. This position is typical for most of Atwood's protagonists.

The fourth position symbolizes the ultimate goal that every victim should pursue. Those who are able to remove all cause of internal and external victimization become a creative non-victim.²²

Atwood emphasizes that her theory is rather suggestive, and the linearity is obligatory, characters may occupy more than one position at a time or/and skip another. She emphasizes the fourth position as being the one awakening the creativity within individuals through which they can express themselves and become free. That may happen for those, who never were victims at all or they are now the 'ex victims'. This whole process is also interpreted as the formation of a survivor, who once was a victim.²³ This transition can be applied to what it means to be a Canadian or a woman. To be a woman, therefore a victim in a patriarchal society is one of the major themes in Atwood's works.

Atwood claims that creating this scheme was based on her own experience with Canadian literature. One of the first impulses to the theory about victim positions came to Atwood's mind as she read *Canadian Short Stories* (1952) collected by Robert Weaver and Helen James. There, she noticed – not for the first time – many of the stories are about animals on the run, trying to survive. In *Survival* she mentions she was especially elated by James Reaney's *The Bully*. To support her idea that Canadian literature's dominant theme is truly the never-ending battle of surviving, whether it is against the wild nature or society, Atwood gives examples of plots of some literary works, for example: *The Titanic* by E. J. Pratt, Margaret Laurence's: *The Stone Angel* (1964) or *Communion* (1971) by Graeme Gibson.²⁴

1.3 Bullying and Victimization in Atwood's Major Works

As I emphasized in previous chapter, "victimization, especially for female protagonist is at the core of each Atwood's works."²⁵ Atwood's female characters, who are victims due to their gender, and must function in patriarchal society, become somehow cruel because of that.²⁶ When speaking about Atwood's novels and victimization, specifically victimization

²² See Atwood, *Survival*, 46.

²³ See Wisker, *Margaret Atwood* 18.

²⁴ See Atwood, *Survival*, Chapter 1.

²⁵ Soofasteira and Mirenayat, *Politics, violence, and victimization in Margaret Atwood's Selected Novels*, 88.

²⁶ See Soofastaei, Mirenayat, 15.

of women, the most significant works apart from *The Handmaid's Tale* are *Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972) and *Cat's Eye* (1988).

One of Atwood's frequent themes is the female body. As Davies says "Atwood's fictional female bodies become battlefields where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written onto female flesh"²⁷. This theme appears in one of her earliest novels *Edible Woman*, a story about 26-year-old Marian and her fiancé Peter. Marian is living under the pressure of society, refusing the version of herself as Peter's wife. Because she is unable to tell him that she would like to postpone the wedding, she dissociates from her body and loses the ability to eat. She feels victimized, suggesting that once a wife to Peter, she will no longer exist as herself. In fact, to demonstrate the feeling that Peter wants to consume her, she serves him a cake in a shape of her head as a break off of their relationship. After he leaves, Marian eats the cake herself.

Atwood wrote this novel, to raise the awareness about how young women are victimized by the romantic fiction, and she wanted this story to be an anti-romance, so it does not cause naive ideas about marriage.²⁸ Furthermore, the narrative situation changes in the course of the novel, alternating a first-person with a third-person narrative, which can be interpreted as an illustration of protagonist's detachment from reality (3rd person narrative) and her ability to regain control (1st person narrative).

In *Surfacing*, written in the same year as *Survival*, the unnamed female protagonist, is looking for her missing father in Canadian wilderness. In the past, she had suffered a trauma due to undergoing an unwanted abortion. Over time, the protagonist gradually realizes what really happened to her – she had a married lover, who persuaded her to have the abortion. Although trying to shut this devastating event out of her consciousness, by believing she once had a husband and a living child, the heroine becomes a dual character: half human, half animal. This may be recognized as position two of a victim – because although she is aware of being mentally bullied and pushed to kill her child, she does not blame the bully, but the doctors who ripped the baby out of her body.

Eventually the narrator loses her sanity, after seeing a dead child's body. She suppresses her humanity and starts to behave as a savage or an animal in wilderness. What drives

²⁷ Davies, *Margaret Atwood's female bodies*, 58.

²⁸ See Wisker, *Constraining the Feminine*, 37.

her back to sanity is hunger and physical exhaustion. When she sees her reflection in a mirror, she is finally able to admit to herself, that not only her lover was the one to blame, but also herself. She is symbolically reborn as Phoenix, refusing being a powerless victim anymore. At the end she is able to fix her damaged relationship and return to her boyfriend Joe. In this novel, similarly as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the victimizer is the society. The narrator's behavior may interpret the second victim position in Atwood's theory, because she suppresses her human guilty side and decides to release her animal's side which is innocent. After her gradual transformation to full animal behavior she is locked in the second victim position, until finally, she is able to reborn and become a non-victim and represents the fourth victim position.

Cat's Eye is a story about almost fifty-year-old Elaine who was a victim of bullying by her three close friends in the past. The story is portrayed by Elaine's flashbacks of her childhood, in which, due to the traumatic events, she alternates between the second and third victim position. Her major bully, Cordelia, is tortured by her father, although the novel does not cover many details, about her story, we may suppose that Cordelia's frustration and pain causes the urges to Elaine.

Consequently, Elaine uses her frustration from being bullied and victimized and relieves it on her own body. In the beginning her actions may seem innocent, like chewing her own hair, but later they become much more harmful. Eventually, later in life, Elaine is able to find her closure, later in her adulthood. Elaine's initially represents the second victim position; due to the fact she does not understand why she would deserve to be bullied. She has to come a long way, but eventually, she learns the actual bully is herself and she is ready to become free and reach the fourth position.

To sum up, when analyzing the recurring theme of victimization and bullying in Atwood's works, we may notice a certain development. Firstly, Atwood works display victimization of individual characters, such as in *Edible Woman*, *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*. In those novels, the victimization concerns women with a specific experience caused by circumstance that only the individual women were part of – the narrator's abortion in *Surfacing*, Elaine's friend group in *Cat's Eye*, or Marian's decision to get married. While in later novels she tends to portray victimization that affects the whole groups within a society, such as women in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

1.4 The Handmaid's Tale in the Context of Margaret Atwood's Works

The Handmaid's Tale was written in 1985, when Atwood resided in West Berlin. As she said in an interview for the *New York Times*, she experienced “the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information,”²⁹ which greatly influenced the writing of the novel. Not only the difficult times she was witnessing inspired her, when talking about the process of writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood often mentions ‘her hero’ George Orwell.³⁰ It was his timeless allegorical novella *Animal Farm* (1945) that ended up in Atwood's hands when she was nine year old. At first, she could not fully understand the allegorical meaning of it. “It was lying around the house, and I mistook it for a book about talking animals. I knew nothing about the kind of politics in the book.”³¹ Later, at high school she read Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* (1948) in which she sympathized with protagonist Winston Smith, as he was secretly writing his forbidden thoughts in a blank book. Similar to the character Winston Smith, Atwood felt uncertainty about writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, she was avoiding it since exploring the subjects she was planning on to in the novel, seemed a ‘risky venture’ because of the totalitarian regime.

However, Atwood did not let herself be consumed by fear, so she finished the book, despite the doubts as she wished to create a dystopian novel from female point of view. The novel represents a possible image of what consequence would the United States facing if the society would follow neo-conservative religious and political trends.³² The story takes places in year 2005, according to the clues in the novel (birth dates and ages of characters), where people live in totalitarian regime based on strict Puritan beliefs. The society is undergoing a fertility crisis and facing consequences of environmental catastrophes. Gilead, the imaginary territory where the story takes place, is geographically located in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The novel's central theme is a victimization of women as a whole group in the patriarchal society. Women's roles in the Gilead's society are assessed according to their ability to reproduce. They are “divided against each other, because of divided roles – wife, mistress/child-bearer, housekeepers, and the wives of the poor, Econowives.”³³ Mistresses – the Handmaids are put in a role of breeding machines, forced to have sexual intercourse with

²⁹ Atwood, *Margaret Atwood On What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in The Age of Trump*.

³⁰ See Atwood, *My hero: George Orwell by Margaret Atwood*.

³¹ Atwood, *My hero: George Orwell by Margaret Atwood*.

³² See Howells, *Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions*, 161.

³³ Wisker, *Margaret Atwood*, 87.

men as a service to the state, afterwards banned to take care of their own children and deprived of the right to have their own identity, by being given a new name and an obligatory attire. Their new names are derived from the Commander's name they serve. Commander's name is preceded by the preposition 'of' which openly states that the handmaids are no more than Commander's property. The process of assigning a Handmaid to a new family includes reading their file – which is another sign of degradation from a valuable human being to a property or a business commodity. Their file includes information about their personality, past job, education and family. Handmaids are also forbidden to read, control money and have jobs apart from those assigned to them. All that decreases women's human value as a group and they cannot participate in any political processes, they are controlled by men, and due to their gender, they must obey.

As Rigney says, the novel is also one of the author's profoundly political works, representing "confrontation with power and its universal forms: dictatorship, tyranny, torture and the reality of violence."³⁴ Aside from being a dystopic novel itself, it represents a fictive autobiography, written by one of the Handmaids, Offred. Only at the end the reader discovers the narrative was originally recorded, 200 years ago, on cassette tapes and long after Offred's had died was the story published. Offred did not only capture all the horrible events she went through herself, she also records other women's stories, women who were imprisoned and tortured in a system controlled by dictators and bullies. Considering this, we may observe women being the victims and analyse their positions according to Atwood's theory of victimization. This thesis will analyse the forms of bullying the female characters underwent and in what victim position it put them – how their positions changed and what mental and physical impact the bullying had. The sphere of victimization in *The Handmaid's Tale* is focused especially on the subject of patriarchal society. As Helen M. Buss says: "The constant lesson of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that, if we continue to behave as we do now, desperate men will arise with desperate solutions."³⁵ That means that although *The Handmaid's Tale* is a fiction, concepts of patriarchal society still exist today and the strict religious rules pursued in the novel are not imaginary either. The novel may serve as a warning to our modern society, about what consequences we might face if we do the same mistakes as characters in the book – if we allow environmental crisis to reach the point of affecting people's health and the population becomes infertile. Also, in September 2019, Atwood released a sequel to

³⁴ Rigney, *Margaret Atwood*, 104.

³⁵ Buss, *Maternity and Narrative Strategies in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, 87.

The Handmaid's Tale, The Testaments (2019). Readers should find out most of the inspiration used to construct Gilead, the rest is "...the world we've been living in."³⁶ That statement also agrees with the fact, that Atwood took a lot of inspiration not only from history, but from the current ongoing global environmental issues.

³⁶ Cain, Margaret Atwood announces *The Handmaid's Tale* sequel, *The Testaments*.

II. ANALYSIS

2 ANALYSIS

As stated before, bullying is a matter of power imbalance. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the major issue is the gender imbalance, demonstrated in Gilead's society, in which all women are victimized by men. In the novel we are offered an eye-witnessed testimony by one of the victims and the narrator of the story – Offred. The narration reflects her own personal story, but it speaks for many women which found themselves in a regime created by men who, in the past, were left with nothing to fight for, as sex and marriage were very easily obtainable.³⁷ Therefore, together with an ongoing fertility crisis, which needed a solution, men fully took over the governing and created a regime based on past religious beliefs, that divides women into different roles in which they shall serve the state. The hierarchy leads women to disunite and victimize each other, so the real victimizer and bully in the story is the whole society, the civilization itself. A society, in which political power is behold by the Commanders. These men live in a household with their Wives, servants called Marthas and an assigned Handmaid.

2.1 The Handmaids

Once the Republic of Gilead is established, the roles of women in society dramatically change. Those women who are still able to bear a child are forced to go to a facility which once was a gym, now it is called Rachel and Leah centre, but the women trained here, call it 'Red Centre' which is a colour that defines them, a symbol of fertility. Here, they are trained to become sexual servants for an infertile power couple, A Commander and his Wife. All these women – given the name of Handmaids, are stripped of their former identity, they are disunited from their families and their children are stolen and assigned to couples with higher social status. They are forced to accept a new name which highlights the fact that they are reduced to a form of property of their Commander. They are mentally abused by being lied to, constantly reminded that they are indeed lucky, because in Gilead, no man can hurt them, and they are protected. In reality, Handmaids are repetitively raped, during the glorified Ceremony by the Commander, so the paradox here is, they are protected from unwanted looks from men, but not from an unwanted sexual intercourse.

The Aunts – women who train and monitor the Handmaids, are those who pursue gratefulness upon them, for example by presenting them extremely brutal movies, which

³⁷ See Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 324.

show what things were happening before Gilead and which the Handmaids were saved from. In Aunt Lydia's words: they are 'given freedom from'³⁸. It is Aunt Lydia who the narrator mentions most frequently. She represents the first authority and bully that the future Handmaids must acquiesce. Aunt Lydia represents a true believer in the system, although her statements signify a certain hatred towards men too, she does encourage the 'girls' as she calls them, to strictly obey the rules and serve the state. According to her, being a Handmaid is a position of honour, in which one should be grateful.³⁹ Aunt Lydia does not see herself as a bully she is, but rather as someone practising greater good. Indeed, she is convinced women were more unfortunate in the time before Gilead was formed, because they were victimized by the fact, they were seen as sexual objects, portrayed in porn movies.⁴⁰ By this, some women may be manipulated to feel that they were truly saved and they should be grateful for being a part of the society in Gilead. She also addresses the vulgarity which make-up and revealing clothes expressed in the past. But in Gilead, all Handmaids look alike – with their red dresses and white wings, which serve to protect them to see and to be seen.

Women's reactions and attitudes to the situation vary, which shows that at least some of them do not succumb to brainwashing and manipulation of the regime. From the view of the narrator, there is a certain distrust, a tendency for meaningless conversations between them. They are under constant pressure, wondering what happened to their families, children and loved ones. Some find the courage to attempt to fight the regime and join the secret underground movement Mayday. They are those who refuse to give up and succumb to the pressure of the regime. From the perspective of Atwood's victim position theory, they are likely to be in the third victim position.

2.1.1 Offred

*"I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance."*⁴¹

The central character and the narrator Offred, as all the Handmaids, is a victim of physical, verbal and social bullying. In her narration she shares details about her life in Gilead, but also stories from the past and the circumstances that lead to her current situation. Throughout the novel, Offred is repeatedly bullied and victimized, but her victim position development is dynamic, as she develops as a character. Her task is not only to name her real victimizer

³⁸ The Handmaid's Tale, 39.

³⁹ See The Handmaid's Tale, 20.

⁴⁰ See The Handmaid's Tale, 183.

⁴¹ The Handmaid's Tale, 222.

and fight against being a victim – be in the fourth victim position, described in Atwood's theory, but she also fights for her literal physical and emotional survival.

We never truly learn her real name, though readers assumed Offred's name before Gilead was June. Recalling in her memories about the Red centre, Offred lists five names: "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June,"⁴² and only "June" never appears again, suggesting that this is her former name. Atwood said herself, it was never her intention to imply June is Offred's original name, but since it fits in the story she did not argue with the readers.⁴³

Together with her victim position and mindset it is also Offred's role that switches from a powerless victim of the patriarchal system in Gilead, "an alien environment that threatens her physical and psychological space"⁴⁴ to a brave woman who refuses to give in and still tirelessly fights for her freedom. In this chapter I will analyse the ways in which she is bullied and victimized. I will use Atwood's victim's positions theory and I will describe how Offred's position change according to the form of bullying that is done to her, what mental and also what physical reactions may be observed.

Overall, there is one complex way through Offred deals with the bullying she undergoes – her narrative. As Sharon Wilson observes: "Offred fights for her psychological and emotional survival as she tells her story. Her storytelling has a double purpose, for not only is it her counter-narrative to the social gospel of Gilead, but it is also her way to self-rehabilitation against the 'deadly brainwashing' of the totalitarian state."⁴⁵ Therefore it is clear, that Offred's secret and obviously illegal usage of a recorder to notch her story is a way to still remain who she is, to remind herself who she was and what is happening to her now. She also tries to distract herself, thinking about miscellaneous things, for instance, the meaning of the word 'chair'. By occupying her mind with thoughts about random objects, she escapes the harsh reality as well. "There are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself."⁴⁶ That signifies her ongoing mental battle, because of the circumstances, she is aware is might go fully insane.

Furthermore, Offred often recollects her memories of the life before Gilead goes back in the past in her mind, therefore we know quite a lot about her life before. She had a husband named Luke and a daughter, Hannah. Those, who she loves the most, occupy her memories most frequently. One of them is Offred's mother, an activist and a strong feminist, with

⁴² The Handmaid's Tale, 5.

⁴³ See Atwood, *Margaret Atwood on What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump*.

⁴⁴ Tolan, *Margaret Atwood*, 144.

⁴⁵ Wilson, *Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels*, 165.

⁴⁶ The Handmaid's Tale, 168

whom she had a complicated relationship. Yet somehow her mother was also a role model for her. Together with Offred's best friend Moira, her college roommate, her mother was capable of something that Offred cannot do at first – to rebel and revolt.

Offred's storytelling begins with a brief memory about being at the Red Centre, where, already at this point, she realized her opinions and thoughts do not carry any value, the only 'power' left was her female body, which is a typical phenomenon in Atwood's works as I mentioned in the chapter regarding Atwood's other works. Offred's realization relating to her body supports the idea of Daniel Barkass-Williamson, who says that patriarchal society often disposes any value of a woman, apart from her body as an economic or recreational worth. Speaking among the women is prohibited and exchanging information is dangerous, as the Aunts will not hesitate to punish them by electric cattle prods.⁴⁷ That signifies the first possible physical violence which the women undergo if they disobey the strict rules. However, regarding the Red Centre, no physical bullying that personally Offred was a victim of is mentioned. Perhaps there was no need for much of physical violence, because Offred suspects they all were put on some pill⁴⁸, to keep them calm.

The centre of all Offred's abasement she reports about, is the third household she comes to, since the previous attempts to provide the family with a child, failed. If she fails even this time, Offred will be sent to the Colonies, to work in terrible conditions, exposed to toxic waste, with high probability of premature death. When Offred speaks to Serena Joy – the Commander's wife, for the first time, she hears her voice sounding like a doll "that would talk if you pulled a string at the back."⁴⁹ Thus, Offred is well aware of her situation, that her value decreased to an object – a doll with a monotone voice. She also feels a lot of anger, which she knows exactly against whom she would like to use it.⁵⁰ Her awareness signifies that according to the Atwood's theory she is in the third victim position.

Offred often recollects her memories of the life before Gilead, she had a husband named Luke. Other frequent memory is devoted to Offred's mother, an activist and a strong feminist, with whom she had a complicated relationship. Yet somehow her mother was also a role model for her. Together with Offred's best friend Moira, her college roommate, her mother was capable of something that Offred cannot do at first – to rebel and revolt. It is there, in Offred's mind and memories, where she presents a minor sign of rebelling against

⁴⁷ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 4.

⁴⁸ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 109.

⁴⁹ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 25.

⁵⁰ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 74.

the regime, images of breaking the law, which suggests she is willing to get out of her victim position and become a non-victim but not openly. For example, even though owning a property of any kind is forbidden for her, she starts to call her room 'mine'⁵¹. While this may signify Offred is not a blind follower of the regime, she admits she lacks the strength to act and attempt to save herself, because the risk that saving her own life comes with, scares her.⁵²

Similarly, Offred decided to rather accept to be a victim when the general victimization of women under the Gilead regime began. The process of devaluating women began slowly, regarding the narrator there was no panic involved at the beginning. Offred did not realize she is a victim at first – which concords with the position one of Atwood's theory – when one denies the fact that s/he is a victim. There have been riots and marches, people were demonstrating against the political situation, including the narrator's mother. She was a feminist activist all her life, but Offred was not like her mother at all. She was scared and she chose not to attend the protests, opting rather for the more traditional gender role. "I didn't go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her... I started doing more housework, more baking."⁵³ So Offred chose to be in position two, she knew she was a victim – there have been computer searches, women were fired from their jobs without a reason, but she was too scared to take action and protest openly, therefore to fight against being a victim.

As was mentioned before, the core purpose of a Handmaid is to get pregnant and bear a child for the power couple a Handmaid serves to, because the couple is not able to do it themselves. The other choice is to go to the Colonies and face a certain death. During the ceremony – where the Commander has sexual intercourse with the body of a Handmaid while looking at his wife, Offred develops a strategy how to cope with the bizarre situation and its circumstances. She does what is typical for many of Atwood's characters – detaches her mind from her body, therefore she creates an image of not her being abused, but only her shell – her body, but not her. "One detaches oneself. One describes."⁵⁴ This is another sign of Offred's willpower to survive and maintain her sanity. "These are the tests, and I am sane. Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people one hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes."⁵⁵ After all, this demonstrates that despite not having

⁵¹ The Handmaid's Tale, 79.

⁵² See The Handmaid's Tale

⁵³ The Handmaid's Tale, 278.

⁵⁴ The Handmaid's Tale, 148.

⁵⁵ The Handmaid's Tale, 168.

enough courage in the beginning, Offred plans to act and fight against the oppression, she intends to get out of Gilead.⁵⁶

It is during the ceremonies when Offred feels the loathing from Commander's wife, Serena. Not only a victim of being raped – though voluntarily, but also a target of Serena's disgust. Although Serena does not yearn for a child, she does not dream about being a mother – or at least from what we know from the story, she is jealous, not because Offred is fertile and Serena is not, but it is rather the fact she does not enjoy having another woman in her house. Therefore, Offred does not represent a blessing, the only chance for Serena to have a child, but she is seen an object, a machine stealing someone's husband.

The relationship between Offred and the Commander is untypical. In order to make Offred's life more bearable, he requests to spend time alone with her, in his office, which is strictly against the rules. Eventually, Offred finds pleasure in spending time with her Commander. Although she might consider him as her biggest victimizer – he is the one raping her and he is a politically powerful man who created the regime Offred is a victim of – the Commander becomes Offred's interest. She stops to see him as an object of fear and gains a feeling of beholding power over him. This may hint, that Offred escapes the reality, because gaining a false feeling of power is typical for the first victim position.

Meanwhile, Serena Joy is perfectly aware of the potential infertility of her husband, she plans to get Offred pregnant in an illegal way (in Gilead regime), which would end the obligation of her husband to have sexual intercourse with Offred. Commander's driver Nick is supposed to involuntarily become the potential sperm donor. The narrator is under pressure to do what the wife is telling her to do, knowing it is illegal and that it will probably get her killed, if anyone finds out about it. The uncertainty of this act lies not only in the unsafety of having a child with someone else than her commander, but also in Nick's real position of the Gilead society.

Eventually, Offred realizes, she has no other choice than to agree to illegal sex with Nick. Considering the Commander's possible infertility, Offred knows that if she does not get pregnant with other man, she will be sent to the Colonies. Due to physical attraction between them, they continue to see each other, and their relationship becomes a source of Offred's mental power, a way to escape the reality. As Atwood herself said "...if the regime

⁵⁶ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 208.

forbids love affairs, then one of the rebellious things that you can do is have one”⁵⁷. This can be interpreted as Offred is entering the fourth victim position, since she finds a way of having a relationship based on real emotions, which is supposed to be forbidden for her.⁵⁸ On the other hand, as Michael Foley claims, the relationship took Offred’s mind away and it was “draining Offred of any rebelliousness she might have.”⁵⁹ He argues that Offred’s focus is shifted only to surviving and maintaining her relationship with Nick. She blocks any possible thoughts; she might have on pursuing to escape. One of the other Handmaids asked her to obtain information about the Commander, which initially Offred agreed to do, but again her lack of courage and fear of getting caught is greater than desire to act against the regime.⁶⁰

Being with Nick, evokes safety to Offred,⁶¹ which is a paradox, because she is aware of the consequences she would face – a certain death – if she got caught, but apparently as she says herself, she “is beyond caring”⁶². She then admits the obvious – at this point, she has no desire to escape, she is now used to her way of life, to the conditions she is in, ignoring how victimized and bullied by the system she really is. She has her routine, she found a certain comfort, she even looks forward to things as going shopping. Foley sums this up by claiming that “she feels shame in retrospect but also pride, because she wants Nick, not political freedom or escape.”⁶³ Towards the end of the story, Offred deals with the rage of Serena – she found out about Offred’s secret trip to Jezebel’s – a clandestine Gilead brothel where the Commander took her one night, therefore Serena knows about Offred’s secret relationship with the Commander.

In that moment Offred is sure her stay in this household is over and she will be punished. She starts to reflect on her choices, whether she might have done something- steal a knife or set the house on fire. But it is too late. At this point, the only way Offred manages to be in a non-victim fourth position is the fact that she successfully recorded her story, which was her overall strategy used to deal with bullying. As Weiss sums up “storytelling is Offred’s means of survival and resistance, reinforcing her identity and challenging those who would silence her.”⁶⁴ Her rebellious act of recording her version of events she is

⁵⁷ Weiss, *Offred’s Complicity and the Dystopian Tradition in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*, 122 – 123.

⁵⁸ See Foley, 56

⁵⁹ Weiss, 123.

⁶⁰ See Foley, *Basic Victim Positions and the Women in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*, 56.

⁶¹ *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 413.

⁶² *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 413.

⁶³ Foley, 56.

⁶⁴ Weiss, 1.

witnessing and conditions she lives in, is therefore a form of means to remain sane. Although purposely documenting information about Gilead in any form is banned for the Handmaids, “Offred asserts her right to tell her story”.⁶⁵ Her story – at least for her listeners – ends openly, we do not know if Offred managed to remain control of her own life and become an ex-victim. She might have been saved by the secret underground movement Mayday or she may have been transported to the Colonies.

Overall, most of the bullying which Offred personally undergoes is in the form of verbal and social bullying. Undoubtedly, there is the physical act of the sexual abuse during ceremonies, which is one of the most traumatizing experiences. However, Offred does not suffer physically, as much as mentally. The main source of her oppression is the human civilization as such and their constructed society she involuntarily became a part of. Despite all the harrowing conditions and circumstances – the enforced separation from her husband and daughter, the fact that Offred has no free will and no value other than to be a child bearer – Offred manages to fight for her literal and mental survival. She deals with a vast spectrum of emotions, in her mind she desires to fight against her situation, but eventually she gets used to her life in Gilead. She often feels shame regarding her decisions and finds them cowardly and selfish, but eventually it is the false feeling of safety she chooses, which she finds in her relationship with Nick.

Offred’s decisions demonstrates how life in a fear and uncertainty motivates people to find their ‘comfort zone’ in the undoubtably uncomfortable life conditions. Although Offred undeniably still loves her husband, the lack of human connection and oppression of the basic human rights, allows her to fall in love with Nick. Their relationship is what eventually brings her the illusion of safety. Not even the desire to see her daughter again and reunite with her husband motivates her to fight against the regime while she can and she never manages to free herself fully from her victimization.

2.1.2 Janine

Another important character from among the Handmaids is Janine, given the name of Offwarren, in Gilead. She represents a woman multiply victimized even before the repressive regime of Gilead. In comparison with Offred, Janine is not able to realize she is a victim. Most of the time she occupies the first victim position. At the Red Centre, she gains a false sense of power as she becomes a secret ally to the Aunts. This happens after she shares one

⁶⁵ Howells, *Science fiction in the Feminine: The Handmaid’s Tale*, 126

of her traumatic experiences: being a victim of a gang-rape when she was only fourteen.⁶⁶ While sharing this with other Handmaids, Janine is humiliated and verbally bullied, because the Handmaids are forced to point at her and chant that all that happened to her was “her fault”.⁶⁷ Janine does not defend herself, instead, she accepts her ‘guilt’ and the next session, she states that it was her own fault and she deserved to be a victim of an sexual assault. For that, Janine is praised, and Aunt Lydia sets her as an example for others. From that moment on, Janine accepts the role of the Aunt’s collaborator, which causes her feeling of ‘superiority’ among the other women.

Janine seems to be ‘a true believer’, she is brainwashed and does not show any signs of desire to rebel against the system. She wants to fulfil her task, and for that reason she illegally gets pregnant with a doctor. This may be compared to Offred’s agreement to get pregnant with Nick, but unlike Offred, Janine does not fight for her mental survival, since she is not aware of her real situation, she wants to just “live agreeably as possible”⁶⁸. Janine is fortunate enough to get pregnant, and it is at this point when the feeling, of being favoured and superior, relishes. She is celebrated by others, but also, she becomes an object of envy for other Handmaids and the wives. Janine behaves as a “show-off”⁶⁹, because even though she does not need to do any chores such as shopping during her pregnancy, she continues to go to the store, so others can see her, which is what suggests she is well aware of the jealousy she causes and enjoys it.

The Birth Day of Janine’s child is a positive highlight of the whole story. On this day, women seem to forget about their victimization, and they all gather in the expecting household to witness the miracle of a new life emerging. The Handmaids feel excited, smiling at each other, which is rather a rare thing in Gilead. The Handmaid, who is the biological mother, delivers the baby, but she is robbed of the first moments with the new-born. Instead, the Wife, who acts as if she is having actual labour pains is the one to hold the baby for the first time. Depriving the Handmaids the role of mothers escalates and is finalized after a few months, when they are not needed to breast-feed the child anymore and they are sent away from the household because their purpose of “two-legged wombs”⁷⁰ was fulfilled.

⁶⁶ See *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 111.

⁶⁷ *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 111.

⁶⁸ *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 180.

⁶⁹ *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 42.

⁷⁰ *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 212.

Unfortunately, Janine's daughter dies after some time. As a result, Janine blames herself for the baby's death, loses her sanity and thus we can detect she never leaves the first victim position. Unlike Offred, Janine's character does not develop, and she remains a victim the whole time and refuses to accept the reality she lives in. That demonstrates that even though the forms of bullying and circumstances she experiences are very similar to Offred's, due to the trauma she experienced in life before Gilead and after, including being forced to believe her victimization is her own fault, Janine's reaction is different and her ability to free herself from the first victim position defined by Atwood is impaired.

Overall, Janine was put in a difficult situation at the very beginning, because she collaborates with the Aunts. She is not favoured by her fellow Handmaids and is envied by them.

2.2 Moira

In contrast to Janine and also Offred, Moira, the narrator's best friend from college represents a rebellious personality, a dissenter who never hesitates to revolt. She too is supposed to become a Handmaid, but she never finishes her training at the Red Centre from where she manages to escape. From Offred's memories of the life before Gilead, Moira was a strong feminist and unlike Offred, she actively participated in protesting against the ongoing changes in the regime. She was a symbol of courage to Offred, which only underlines Offred's own cowardice. From the first tentative beginnings of Gilead, Moira's attitude signifies she is in the third victim position – she clearly sees what is going on, the beginning of women's devaluation happening, but unlike Offred, she is not terrified, but rather braced to face it and fight against it.

Her unhesitating courage, bordering with recklessness lets her plan an escape from the Red Centre from the very beginning. The first time, she collects the drugs they are given every day, and eventually she swallows them all at once, so an ambulance must come for her – which she thinks getting to a different building will be her chance to run away. However, Moira is brought back, put into a room used as former Science Lab and there, she is physically tortured, the Guards beat her feet with steel cables, leaving Moira limping for weeks, unable to even fit her own feet into her shoes. The Handmaids are told to remember their feet and hands are “not essential”⁷¹, therefore no one cares if the outcomes of such

⁷¹ The Handmaid's Tale, 143.

physical warnings are going to cause permanent damage. However, Moira is not stopped by this and she still is determined to fight for freedom. In her mind, she still knows she is not going to remain in the Red Centre. When she helps to calm down hysterical Janine, she tells the other Handmaids what they must do when she is no longer there.⁷² She is not frightened of the risks, she is willing to do what it takes to set herself free, which she achieves in the second attempt. She physically attacks an Aunt, ties her down, steals her clothes and disguised as an Aunt herself, she successfully, thanks to her mental power, escapes from the Red Centre. In Offred's words, "...she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman."⁷³ Offred describes Moira as the Handmaids' "fantasy"⁷⁴, with her courage frightening to other Handmaids. Moira's escape as an organized resistance hints that in Gilead, Moira reaches the fourth victim position. For a while, thanks to her contacts from the past, she lives as a part of the underground and manages to survive.

However, her attempt to escape across borders from Gilead was not successful. Moira is not sure herself what went wrong, maybe somebody from those who were helping her "got cold feet about it"⁷⁵ – and their fear was bigger than the desire to help her. After her escape, she ends up working in Jezebel's – the brothel, where now the Commanders come to have sex with women who manage to escape their assignment role in the system and they chose to work here, since the other option was death in the Colonies. Those who captured Moira, most probably tortured her to such an extent that even talking about it is hard for her and all she mentions is that "they didn't leave any marks."⁷⁶ She describes being shown a movie about the horrors of a life in the Colonies, so Moira understandably opted for the job in Jezebel's. Here, Moira is reunited with Offred for a moment that night Offred's Commander takes Offred there. In this moment, Offred is rather disappointed, she sees Moira as she is "dressed absurdly"⁷⁷ in a rabbit costume, humiliating herself to be a voluntary object for men's sexual fantasies. She sees the transformation of Moira's attitude and character; she seems less invincible. This certainly makes Offred feel disappointed as Moira always represented someone who does not give in, it even scares her, that Moira would succumb, which Offred admittedly reminds her of her own cowardness, when she says: "I don't want her to

⁷² See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 355.

⁷³ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 207.

⁷⁴ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 207.

⁷⁵ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 384.

⁷⁶ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 385.

⁷⁷ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 370.

be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin.”⁷⁸ Offred is frightened by the indifference she hears in Moira’s voice. She lacks her usual heroism and ability to combat single-handed.⁷⁹ Offred wishes a different destiny for Moira, she imagines her “blowing up the Jezebel’s with fifty commanders inside it.”⁸⁰ But the truth is, Moira was not able to win her fight and therefore free herself from her victimization. Although she is not faced with immediate death in the story, she herself is aware that she has “three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard.”⁸¹ Therefore Moira is aware that her death is only a matter of time and instead of fighting against it, she accepts the fact that all she has left is the access to ‘not so bad’ food, drinks and drugs.

In the end, Moira, the initially revolting and strong character, is defeated, since she failed to remain elusive and is robbed of her own dignity. She repeatedly undergoes physical bullying in the form of sexual victimization, and her final victim position fits the description of the second one. The oppression of her basic human rights is clear to her, but her desire to take responsibility and act against it is gone. This demonstrates that life in a strict totalitarian regime, governed by patriarchal society, can eventually defeat even those who seem they have the potential to survive and retain dignity at first.

2.3 Other categories of women in Gilead

As I mentioned earlier, victimization in Gilead’s patriarchal society undoubtedly does not relate only to Handmaids, but to all women in Gilead. Since the novel does not cover stories on all the social categories in much detail, I will analyse bullying and the victim positions only regarding to the category of Aunts, Wives and Unwomen – women who were sent to the Colonies. These groups offer representatives whose character development is interesting in the context of bullying and victimization.

2.3.1 The Aunts: Aunt Lydia

The mission of the social group of Aunts is to train and guide the Handmaids. However, unlike the Handmaids, they face a more insidious form of victimization, they are not the target of physical bullying, nor sexual abuse. Therefore, they may not realize how victimized

⁷⁸ The Handmaid’s Tale, 387.

⁷⁹ See ,The Handmaid’s Tale, 387.

⁸⁰ The Handmaid’s Tale, 388.

⁸¹ The Handmaid’s Tale, 387.

they truly are by the patriarchal society. That may be the reason there is no character among the Aunts who would express dissatisfaction with the conditions in Gilead and a desire to fight against the regime. The most frequently mentioned representative of this group in Offred's narrative is Aunt Lydia, "a privileged collaborator with the Regime"⁸² who trains Offred, Janine and Moira in the Red Centre.

Aunt Lydia perfectly fits Atwood's description of the first victim position, she is not aware she is victimized by the patriarchal society at all. As discussed in the chapter on Handmaids, Aunt Lydia represents a believer blindly following the rules and orders. She claims that Handmaids are in a privileged position, not a prison⁸³. Despite the fact that Aunt Lydia was a bully to the Handmaids she trained, she also feels compassion with them. When she tells the Handmaids about the Ceremony, she mentions that it may not seem ordinary, which is what the women are used to. However eventually even the absurd process of the Ceremony will seem ordinary, she claims.⁸⁴ She often sounded like someone who must tell the Handmaids the unpleasant things for their own good.⁸⁵ As Aunt Lydia claimed herself, she wants the girls to be valued.⁸⁶ Thus Aunt Lydia is the bully who chose to harm and sacrifice others for her own interests, but her actions do not come from hatred towards her victims.

It is rather the opposite, as Offred once says Aunt Lydia reminds her of a ballet teacher⁸⁷, that wants to teach her pupils a dance. That signifies, all Aunt Lydia's actions were done because she believed she had a purpose she needs to fulfil in order to achieve better life for all women in Gilead. Moreover, Aunt Lydia expressed compassion with the Wives too. She said "...it isn't easy for them,"⁸⁸ by which she encouraged the Handmaids to bear their own victimization and bullying from the Wives. At one point, there is a sign of certain regret, a moment in which Aunt Lydia expresses emotions which may be interpreted as regret or sadness. While telling the 'girls' that "love is not the point,"⁸⁹ she breaks into tears immediately and adding that it is not easy for her either. That may signify a moment in which Aunt Lydia also feels she is robbed of the right to have a relationship with a man

⁸² Foley, 51.

⁸³ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 11.

⁸⁴ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 55.

⁸⁵ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 175.

⁸⁶ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 175.

⁸⁷ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 29.

⁸⁸ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 21.

⁸⁹ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 339.

based on real emotions. However other than that, she remains in the first victim position throughout the whole story.

According to Foley, her suppressed rage is what makes her so cold and distant during physical torture towards others⁹⁰ – for example when Moira escapes or when she witnesses the Salvaging, during which criminals are beaten to death. Aunt Lydia justifies her mission to the Handmaids⁹¹ by saying she is trying to do the best for them and that: “I’m trying to give you the best chance you can have.”⁹² Therefore we may say that Aunt Lydia is aware the conditions which await the Handmaids are far from ideal, but she still continues performing her job because she believes that one day, women are going to live in a much happier and harmonic society. But again, as Atwood added in *Survival*, being in the first victim position and therefore always having to explain the obvious, suppressing all the anger and pretending that obvious facts do not exist, consumes a lot of one’s energy. Atwood also adds that this position is usually taken by those, who are “little better off” than others in the group, in the case of Aunt Lydia, the other women. The fear of losing the privileges is what keeps them in the first victim position.⁹³ Aunt Lydia is therefore a contrast to Janine, who is also in the first victim position, because she was the less fortunate and her position in the society is not privileged at all. Janine’s disability to free herself is caused by the extent of trauma she experienced, including the death of her child. Whereas Aunt Lydia is blinded by the idea that the regime represents “means of forming a meaningful, positive community of women.”⁹⁴ Unlike Janine, Aunt Lydia is not mentally destroyed by the regime to the point of insanity. For her beliefs she becomes ignorant to the suffering of others as well as her own.

Overall, the Aunts in general, are a group of women, who are manipulated by the patriarchal society to hurt and victimize other women. They publicly humiliate them (e. g. when Janine was blamed for being raped), they physically torture those who disobey them, as Moira did and they preach that women before Gilead, “foolishly flaunted their bodies, tempting men to sexual violence”⁹⁵, therefore now, in Gilead, they are safe and protected from men. In the context of bullying, the Aunts are a paradox, because they are major bullies

⁹⁰ See Foley, 52.

⁹¹ See Callaway, *Women disunited*, 51.

⁹² The Handmaid’s tale, 87.

⁹³ See Atwood, *Survival*, 36.

⁹⁴ Bloom, 22.

⁹⁵ Callaway, 53.

to other women, in a patriarchal society in which, men are the expected danger. Their own victimization is based on the fact that they are women, who live in a society in which women have no real value. In the novel's epilogue, which is a fictitious examination of Gilead's society by a university professor is stated: "... the most cost-effective way to control women...was through women themselves."⁹⁶ Therefore the Aunts are given a false sense of power, which is also a typical phenomenon for the first victim position in Atwood's theory, and they are manipulated to bully and control other women in exchange for benefits that may be acquired from their position. This may demonstrate the power of fear – middle-aged, unmarried women, who would be otherwise send to the Colonies rather agree to become the evil themselves.

2.3.2 The Wives: Serena Joy

In contrast to the Aunts, the women who seem to be the most privileged – the Wives, seem to feel the consequences of the society's victimization far more than the Aunts. The representative of this group is Serena Joy, in whose household the narrator Offred resides. Also Serena, as all women in Gilead, is victimized by the regime, and even though she is a wife to a powerful man, as a woman she has no political power whatsoever and no possibility of maintaining a purposeful work – she spends her time with gardening or needlework. She too is filled with anger, which she uses against Offred and thus she becomes Offred's bully. The reason for Serena's hatred is the necessity of having another woman in her home to have sexual intercourse with her husband, which understandably makes her angry and jealous. All women in Gilead demonstrates that living in a strict patriarchal society, causes disunity and jealousy among them and they envy each other, even within the households.⁹⁷

Initially, Offred hopes that Serena becomes an ally, a "motherly figure"⁹⁸ or an older sister to her, but Serena is not interested in befriending Offred. In fact, Serena's attitude is rather bitter and resigned. Serena endures her victimization, and her hostility is directed towards Offred instead of those truly responsible for it. Moreover, in the past, Serena was a public figure, who made speeches about how "women should stay at home"⁹⁹ and acted as a

⁹⁶ The Handmaid's Tale, 473.

⁹⁷ See The Handmaid's Tale, 75.

⁹⁸ The Handmaid's Tale, 24.

⁹⁹ The Handmaid's Tale, 71.

‘agent of Gilead’, but as Offred comments, in Gilead she became “speechless”¹⁰⁰ and “staying at home does not agree with her.”¹⁰¹ Serena did not realize what consequences her actions and her openly supporting patriarchal values will cause. By encouraging women to ‘stay home’ she metaphorically agreed to her position in Gilead, where her opinions do not have any value anymore. Furthermore, in the past, before Gilead, someone tried to assassinate her by placing a bomb in her car, but it exploded too early. The fact that Serena did not realize what consequences will the regime she openly supports have, signifies her blindness towards her own victimization. Serena also feels a false sense of power, while she encourages other women to become obedient housewives. These two attributes are what signifies Serena is in the first victim position.

However, her victim position changed only when she experienced the suppression of the totalitarian regime herself. When her ‘word was taken away’ and Serena suppressed all her anger, she found herself in the second victim position – she was aware she is a victim, for example she cried during the Ceremony, during which Offred felt her hatred the most,¹⁰² because Serena yet was not able to direct her anger to those responsible. Eventually, with the increasing pressure of living in Gilead, Serena attempts to change her situation, although it is Offred whose life and safety are at risk. By encouraging Offred to get pregnant illegally with Nick, Serena expresses a willingness to act and therefore, her victim position changes to the third one. In this position, she remains until she finds out about Offred’s and Commander’s secret ‘relationship’ by which she is clearly upset and betrayed. She promises revenge to Offred and if she would even act in revenge against her husband – the Commander, she may come closer to terminate her victimization and to free herself by entering the fourth victim position.

Overall, Serena is an interesting character who shows signs of evolving just like Offred, since she does not occupy only one victim position, but her position and attitude changes. She is an example of a “bully-victim”¹⁰³ – someone who deals with their own victimization by bullying others. This is similar to the character Aunt Lydia, but unlike her, Serena becomes aware of the oppression she undergoes. Although, she does not experience any physical violence, at least from what we know from Offred’s narrative, Serena too is

¹⁰⁰ The Handmaid’s Tale, 72.

¹⁰¹ The Handmaid’s Tale, 72.

¹⁰² See The Handmaid’s Tale, 141.

¹⁰³ See Yang and Salmivalli.

traumatized by the obligation of Ceremonies and frustrated with the fact, that her own opinion has no value in Gilead's patriarchal society.

2.3.3 Unwomen: Offred's mother

Those women who refuse to serve as Handmaids and those, who are old and infertile are labelled as Unwomen and sent to Colonies. There they are obligated to maintain the worst jobs, from cleaning and burning dead bodies to cleaning up the toxic waste exposed to radiation spills. In these conditions none of these women survives for long.¹⁰⁴ The Handmaids who fail to get pregnant and deliver a child in three households are sent to the Colonies as well.

The representative of this group is the narrator's mother, "a dedicated Second-Wave Feminist"¹⁰⁵. In times before Gilead and in her youth, she participated in protests, marches and pornography burnings. She tried to transfer her radical opinions about the importance of women empowerment such as "a man is just a woman's strategy for making other women,"¹⁰⁶ to Offred. However, most of the experience Offred's mother tried to explain to Offred seemed like a story to her, she was only a child and she "thought someone had made it up"¹⁰⁷. Offred's belief that her mother's experience is only a fictional story made it seem less frightening.¹⁰⁸ A certain misunderstanding defined Offred's relationship with her mother even when she was an adult. Her narration shows there was always a tension between her and her mother, because they were very dissimilar. Offred lacked the ability to understand her mother's actions and her rebellious personality. According to Offred, her mother expected too much from her.¹⁰⁹ She even felt like her mother expected her approval of the life choices she made, such as raising Offred on her own.

Offred's mother represents a tireless fighter against women's victimization, which is similar with the character of Moira – the narrator's best friend. Since Offred's mother was an active representative of the feminist group, we are able to say she was in the fourth victim position, according to Atwood's theory. In the times before Gilead, she was able to free herself from the victimization. Offred realized this only after she is forced to live in the totalitarian regime of Gilead. Under the oppression of the fundamentalist theocracy she was

¹⁰⁴ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 385.

¹⁰⁵ Callaway, 18.

¹⁰⁶ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 186.

¹⁰⁷ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 189.

¹⁰⁸ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 189.

¹⁰⁹ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 189.

finally able to understand the urgency of her mother's message – how easy women may lose their rights due to patriarchal society.

Due to her age and the fact she was an anti-patriarchal activist, Offred's mother ends up in the Colonies. Offred and her mother never reunite in the Gilead era, it was Moira who saw Offred's mother in a movie about the Colonies. The whole time, Offred thought her mother was dead and according to Moira, death was better than cleaning toxic waste in the Colonies.¹¹⁰ Offred's mother had the potential to fight against the regime, she was not prone to being brainwashed like Janine and she undoubtedly did not lack courage like her daughter Offred. In the same way as Moira, her brave personality was not enough to defeat the oppression and fight against the totalitarian regime, but unlike Moira, due to her age and infertility, she was sent directly to the Colonies.

¹¹⁰ See *The Handmaid's Tale*, 390.

CONCLUSION

This thesis analysed the forms of bullying against women in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and describe the victim positions in which the characters are. The theoretical base for this analysis besides works and studies regarding bullying and victimization as general phenomena, was primarily Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she introduced her theory of victimization, characterized by four victim positions. These positions are defined by the victim's attitude towards their own victimization. The first position is occupied by those who are not aware of their victimization and are, therefore, oblivious to the fact that they are victims. Those who reach the second victim position do realize they are victims, however, they are not able to determine the source of their victimization. Therefore, they cannot take responsibility and act against their bullies and victimizers. That changes in the third basic victim position, in which the victims reject their victim role. Finally, the true source of oppression is identified, and the victims may successfully move to the fourth position. The fourth basic victim position represents the main goal of all victims, which is the ability to successfully end their victimization and to become a non-victim.

One of the possible examples of victimization is bullying. Given the findings of the works regarding bullying and victimization, the theoretical part demonstrates that bullying is understood as a form of aggression, including physical, verbal, psychological and relational acts, that are intentional, and their consequences may be psychological, physical and social. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the most significant bully and victimizer is the political regime itself, in which all women are oppressed by the patriarchal society. They are grouped into several categories, each of them based on their ability to reproduce. Consequently, they are disunited and eventually come to the point when they bully each other. The main goal of the thesis was to investigate whether any of the representative female characters was able to free themselves of their victimization and therefore reach the fourth victim position.

The narrator, Offred, is a representative of the social group of Handmaids and her narrative gives the insight into this particular group. The women among Handmaids represent a wide spectrum of character development in regard to Atwood's theory. In comparison to other social groups, they experience the most severe victimization. They are separated from their families, deprived of their identities, repeatedly sexually abused, robbed of the right to have a job, to read, to write or to handle money. They are trained by Aunts, who

agreed to harm and bully other women in exchange for the privileges that come with their role of Aunts. Unlike Handmaids, they are not physically or sexually tortured.

Due to all the sexual abuse and victimization in the form of removing basic human rights, Offred's character and her victim positions develop the most. She manages to change her victim position multiple times. discussed Offred even manages to enter the fourth position. The pursuit of her relationship with Nick without the Commander and Serena Joy knowing and the fact she illegally recorded her story, suggests she discovered the creative ways to free herself. However, her cowardly personality and the fact that she becomes gradually blind to her own victimization results in her inability to fight against her bullies. The relationship becomes Offred's main concern and she resigns over any desire to fight. Therefore, she is never able to reach the fourth victim position permanently and free herself completely.

Nonetheless even those, who do not lack the courage – Moira and Offred's mother, are not able to fight against their victimization successfully. Their destinies prove that life in a strict totalitarian regime, governed by a patriarchal society, can eventually defeat even those who seem to have the potential to free themselves and fight against their bully. The bullying portrayed in the novel shows many typical behavioural patterns of the victims. Aunt Lydia is not aware of her victimization and therefore she relies on 'higher power', God, and her belief she is helping to re-establish the 'traditional values.' While analysing the character of Handmaid Janine, we may see major signs of self-blame, because she is persuaded her victimization was her fault and eventually, she starts to blame herself even for her daughter's death. That amount of self-blame and her past trauma results in her incapacity to ever free herself and she remains in the first victim position. Even those who seem privileged and less victimized than the Handmaids never openly perform any acts against the regime. An example of that is Serena Joy, who herself initially supported the idea traditional gender roles and women staying at home. It is in Gilead where she understands the discomfort of not being allowed to maintain a purposeful job and gets a taste of her own medicine.

Generally, the women living under the regime of Gilead represent a wide spectrum of victims and their reactions and attitudes towards their victimization vary. However, none of them manages to successfully find a way to end her victimization. With the Offred's unknown destiny, Moira's undignified job, Offred's mother in the Colonies and Janine with

her lost sanity, it is safe to claim that, despite all their effort, the extensive oppression eventually defeats them all. Not even those in privileged positions are able to enter the fourth position.

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