

Título: Gender Hierarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Jerarquía de género en El Cuento de la Criada

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Abstract

“Women are interesting and important in real life”, claims Margaret Atwood in the 2017 Introduction to her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. But if this is true, why have they been victims of violence and domination for centuries? Still, nowadays, in the twenty-first century, we may hear how thousands of women are raped, beaten and even murdered just because of their gender. For example, according to *Forbes* only in Argentina, a woman is killed every 18 hours on account of her gender. Therefore, the question is not only how the configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, but also why women end up clinging to the phallogocentric prescribed identity as a means to keep safe from exclusion, rejection or marginalization. Moreover, how is the masculinist domain legitimated and expanded while the Other is suppressed? In consequence, the aim of the paper is to discuss these questions through the analysis of three of the female characters (June, Moira and Serena) in the dystopic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in the light of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

Key words: gender(s), power, subversion, identity.

Resumen

“Las mujeres son interesantes e importantes en la vida real,” dice Margaret Atwood en la introducción del año 2017 de su novela *El Cuento de la Criada*. Sin embargo, si esto es así, ¿por qué han sido tantas de ellas víctimas de violencia y dominación por siglos? Aun hoy en día, en el siglo veintiuno, escuchamos que miles de mujeres son violadas, golpeadas o hasta asesinadas sólo por su género. Por ejemplo, de acuerdo con la revista *Forbes* tan sólo en Argentina una mujer es asesinada cada 18 horas. Por ende, la pregunta es no simplemente cómo la configuración del poder construye al sujeto y al Otro, sino también por qué las mujeres terminan aferrándose a la identidad fallogocéntrica prescrita para salvarse de la exclusión, el rechazo o la marginalización. Más aun, ¿cómo es que se legitima y expande el dominio masculino mientras que se suprime al Otro? En consecuencia, el objetivo de este ensayo es discutir estos interrogantes a través del análisis de tres personajes femeninos de la novela *El Cuento de la Criada*, a la luz del libro *El Género en Disputa* de Judith Butler.

Palabras clave: género(s), poder, subversión, identidad.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood said in the introduction to her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* that women are interesting and important in real life. Both women and men play roles of utmost importance: it is the male sperm cell that together with a female ovum that make procreation possible. Therefore, the point is not to discuss who is more important or whose part is more relevant because both men and women play distinctive but equally significant roles. Yet, for centuries, women have not been treated as equals, but just as vessels to bear children, or worse, as objects to be discarded. An evidence of this is the alarming report from *Forbes* that only in Argentina, a woman is killed every 26 hours on account of her gender and, in consequence, 3500 children have become motherless in the last 10 years. Moreover, 3000 teenagers under the age of 15 become mothers, in most cases, after being victims of intra-family rape.

In her book *Elemental Structures of Violence*, the Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato claims "violence is a message of power and appropriation pronounced in society. Rape, and other types of violence, aim at the annihilation of the will of the victim, whose reduction is signified by the loss of control over their body. The victim, therefore, is expropriated the control over their space-body [my translation] (Segato, 2003).

As part of this process of 'expropriation', for centuries, women have been the subject to not only physical violence, but also moral violence. According to Segato (2003) the most common manifestations of the latter are "economic dependence, restriction on social bonds, curtailment of their freedom to leave the home, moral disparagement (by, for instance, choosing what the woman should wear), sexual disparagement (by attributing lack of sexual desire to women) and intellectual disparagement (by deprecating their intellectual capacities) [My translation]".

Thus, this domination creates an illusion of disparity, and, consequently, hierarchy that becomes social reality (Butler, 1999). Therefore, the question is not only how the configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, but also why women end up clinging to the phallogocentric prescribed identity as a means to keep safe from exclusion, rejection or marginalization. Moreover, how is the masculinist domain legitimated and expanded while

the Other is suppressed?

In consequence, the aim of the paper is to discuss these questions through the analysis of three female characters (June, Moira and Serena) in the dystopic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in the light of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

June

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, June becomes a witness (and a victim) of how a society that used to be egalitarian and regard gender equality by allowing equal ease of access to resources and opportunities, surrenders to old the models of phallogocentric heterosexual domination. In the name of the preservation of the species (because only few women are still fertile) a group of men, and women too, little by little, without even being noticed, become the absolute rulers who expand their power at the expense of appropriating the 'space-bodies' of fertile women. Thus, in order to guarantee new births, these women are deprived of their own children and families, and assigned to the homes of prominent men to serve as 'worthy vessels'. It is interesting that these women are kept inside these houses not as sexual slaves but, as June describes, "for breeding purposes." She goes on saying: "We aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary [...] we are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices." In other words, these women are objectified and reduced to their sex. They are treated as mere sexed bodies with no feelings, desires or will.

So clear is the objectification of these women that 'the ceremony' (the sexual act through which the maids are supposed to get pregnant) is seen from June's eyes as just 'fucking the lower parts' of her body. She retells these ceremonies have "nothing to do with passion, or love or romance. [...] Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely" Although she does not consider these acts as rape, the violence is inherent. Thus, she needs to 'detach' herself and go through the 'ceremony' as if she was a mere eyewitness of what her body is exposed to.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* explains that sexual crimes against these bodies effectively reduce them to their sex, thereby reaffirming and enforcing the reduction of the

category itself. (Butler, 1999) By reducing the subject to 'sex', the strategy of exclusion and hierarchy is put into action; hence, the 'other' is born. The maids perform their biological role of giving birth under a regime of control and suppression. Even though they are the ones who can make the continuation of life possible, they become abject subjects in a barren society. As Butler claims they are "discharged as excrement, literally rendered 'Other'" (1999) when they have no choice but to conform to the status of a reproductive machine.

Consequently, the maids become a kind of conquered land of the men in power, to such an extent that they do not even retain their own names. Once the maids are assigned to one house they immediately receive the patronymic, 'composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question.' For instance, June is called 'Offred', and other characters in the novel are 'Ofwarren' or 'Ofglen'. This is not an innocent act but another way of imposing gender hierarchy by eliminating all traces of self-identity. Butler describes that it is through a regulated process of repetition that the rigid codes of hierarchical binarism are reified. Likewise, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the repeated acts of moral and physical violence against these women is what sustains patriarchal supremacy.

These women have no freedom to go wherever they please because there are places 'where women do not go'. Instead, they are constantly reminded of their duty: 'to stay at home' and 'remain invisible'. Together with this, another example of the rigid codes that reinforce hierarchy is female costumes. They are also beyond women's choice as the handmaids are given a red costume and 'prescribed white wings' to be worn around the face 'to keep [them] from seeing and being seen.' In other words, not only is the imposed costume a means of control, but it is also a means of invisibilization as they actually disappear under the white wings. Once again, all these facts illustrate how moral violence annihilates the will of these women by legitimating the masculine domain.

However, June can challenge the norm and record a chronicle of the events 'trusting it may be discovered later, by someone who is free to understand it and share it.' It is true she cannot subvert hierarchies but while she acknowledges she 'has been emptied' but she repeats to herself, '*I am. I am. I am. I am, still.*' According to Butler this 'I' challenges the

cultural inscribed gender role by becoming a critical witness of these cultural practices. For example, June's flashbacks throughout the novel towards the time when 'thousands of women, millions had jobs. It was the normal thing,' help her resist, at least from the inside, the imposed loss of equality. She even remembers the freedom and the sense of belonging she used to have when she put into the laundromat 'my own clothes, my own soap, my own money; money I had earned myself. I think about having such control.' The sole memory of the simplest things she owned, is powerful enough to reassert her own gender identity.

Moira

Another character that subverts the established gender hierarchies is Moira, June's best friend from the past. June describes in one of her flashbacks as having 'decided to prefer women', which assigns her the power of choice and control over her 'space-body'. She is the one that breaks all rules by, for instance, mocking the rituals imposed by the system when she renames hymns such as 'There is a Balm in Gilead' into 'There is a Bomb in Gilead' Due to her resistance to remain within the 'obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality' (Butler, 1999), she contests the assigned gender roles and runs away from the Red Centre (the re-education facility where the future handmaids learn 'to renounce their previous identities, to know their place and their duty, to understand they have no real rights')

However, when she is caught, she is assigned to the Jezebel's, the secret brothel in Gilead. To begin with, the choice of name of the club is not innocent. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes this biblical figure as the archetype of the wicked woman because she incited her husband to abandon the worship of Yahweh. The Bible describes her extravagant clothes and the use of make-up, which from the 20th century has been used as a symbol of prostitution. Therefore, this secret sex club is the place where the important men in Gilead have a 'collection' of women to satisfy their sexual appetites. The commander explains:

Nature demands variety, for men. [...] It's Nature's plan. [...] Women know that indistinctively. Why did the buy so many different clothes in the old days? To trick them into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day. (p. 237)

His words reveal how he avows that it is a natural thing for men to have different sexual partners and women have always been there to please them. The commander seems to be 'compelled to correspond with the idea of nature that has been established for us' (Butler, 1999) he is a man, he has the power and women are there to accept their role, as something dictated by nature. However, Butler explains that the idea of 'man' and 'woman' are just 'political categories and not natural facts'. This division responds to the interests of power within Gilead, as the Jezebels are women that before the regime were professionals: a sociologist, an executive, a lawyer. They used to play leading roles in a more egalitarian system and by dehumanizing them and reducing them to sex toys it would be easier to create the illusion of disparity. Moira, who has been turned into one of the Jezebels, cunningly remarks: "They like to see you all painted up. Just another crummy power trip." Moira's words clearly summarize how in order to boost their stature or feelings of self-worth these men create this oppressive system.

This brings us to the question why these self-sufficient women have ended up at this brothel. The commander explains they prefer it 'to the alternatives': becoming either handmaids or unwomen (a group of women considered useless for the regime and sentenced to death by cleaning up toxic waste). Such is their dehumanization that they are considered as 'evening rentals.' What is more, Moira herself has gone through a process of transformation when, at least for some time, she conforms to the 'heterosexual matrix' of the Republic of Gilead by renouncing to her choice of being a lesbian. Why would lesbians be a problem in this system? Butler elucidates that a lesbian 'is beyond the categories of sex' and, thus, exposes the instability of the binary relation between men and women.' (Butler, 2009) Considering these ideas, one may understand how convenient it would be for the hierarchical order to get rid of this 'problem'.

To do so, the system compels these women in their bodies and mind to correspond to what is the natural order imposed by men. For instance, Moira is made to wear 'high heels' though, she always hated them and a ridiculous bunny tail. So much has the repetition of these oppressive acts bored into her body that to be allowed in the brothel she had get ovaries removed. She says nonchalantly "Nobody in here

with viable ovaries, you can see what kind of problems it would cause." Her alienation causes June to say:

She is frightening me now, because what I hear I her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something-what? - that used to be so central to her? But how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?

June realises the courage that Moira used to have, what identified her, the power to contest the system has now been overthrown in order to impose the strategy of sexual domination. What is more, June acknowledges she has gone under the same process of abjection.

Serena

A third example of assimilation of gender asymmetry is Serena, the commander's wife. She used to be 'Serena Joy, the lead soprano in a choir' and later on 'made speeches about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay at home.' Before the Republic of Gilead was established, she, together with her husband, was in charge of designing the rules for Gilead. Despite her activism in favour of the regime, June observes:

She doesn't make speeches any more. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word. (p. 46)

According to this, staying at home and renouncing to be the 'authoritative speaking subject' (Butler, 1999) was part of Serena's plan. She seems to have miscalculated the implications of what it meant to reaffirm and enforce the phallogocentric male hierarchy when she was an active part of the propaganda. Her speeches played a central role in the cultural configuration of gender. She is the one that triggers the 'best and cost-effective way to control women' women themselves.

Serena, therefore, takes the lead in the 'formulation of sex/gender distinction' (Butler, 1999) although this turns into a trap for herself. Her will to become a mother, as a means to fit into the system, is so strong that it creates 'the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.'

(Butler, 1999) Consequently, even though she seems to be 'furious' at the submissive role she has to play, she cannot challenge the hierarchies, she helped to enforce.

Conclusion

After analysing the characters of June, Moira and Serena, let us discuss why these women end up clinging to the phallogocentric prescribed identity. Even though they were free women in control of their own lives and bodies, how did they end up in this 'state of absence, existing apart from [their] bodies'? In the case of June and Moira, they were unaware victims of a slow silent process of dehumanization. First, newspapers were censored and some closed down, then they lost their jobs and cancelled their bank accounts and declared 'women cannot hold property anymore.' They could feel the tension, 'like a subterranean hum', 'there was more music on the radio, and fewer words.' However, it is only in retrospect June realises how different her life would be now, had they reacted in time.

In conclusion, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a good testimony of how physical and moral violence becomes a message of power. Besides, it shows the process of annihilation of the will of women by losing control of their own bodies and minds, as a means to legitimate and expand the masculinist domain. June's own transformation from being a woman in control into a 'vessel' explains how repeated acts of violence expropriate victims of their gender identity. Therefore, the illusion of gender hierarchy is created as part of a political apparatus of domination and control.

On the one hand, the stories of June and Moira, embody the sexual, moral and intellectual disparagement many women are subjected to, as they are dehumanized and deprived of all control over their space-bodies. Serena, on the other hand, although she is functional to the regime, is also an example of how the 'illusion of disparity is created' to suppress the Other.

However, June's voice disrupts the foundations of the established gender hierarchy when she becomes a courageous witness of the whole process and records the events for posterity. Although, she lacks the power to change the regime and, probably, her own destiny, her recorded message becomes the key to destabilize and disrupt the foundations of gender hierarchy. Her flashbacks over the

events before the regime should warn women about how even small acts of violence might lead to a major outrage against them. Consequently, June's story becomes a cautionary tale about how the rights women have won over the time can be endangered and suppressed if we do not remain alert and constantly challenge the norm. Let us all keep the voice of women alive, let us all keep writing for liberty.

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