

Female Empowerment in Dystopia, through an Analysis of Feminist Theories of Power.

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Female empowerment in dystopia, through an analysis of feminist theories of power

“Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for” (Jo March, Little Women 2019).

Abstract

La tesi discute l'empowerment femminile all'interno del genere letterario e cinematografico distopico, attraverso un'analisi approfondita delle più rilevanti teorie femministe di potere.

Il primo capitolo, diviso in quattro paragrafi, è incentrato su un macro-argomento specifico ai fini dell'analisi eseguita. Partendo dalle numerose definizioni di potere elaborate nel tempo, che derivano da quattro correnti principali elitista, marxista, weberiana e pluralista; collegate a ulteriori teorie di celebri sociologi, tra cui Michel Foucault e Robert Dahl. Il secondo paragrafo, incentrato sulle teorie di potere femministe, approfondisce tutte le principali scuole di pensiero sviluppatosi negli anni. Cominciando dal femminismo liberale, basato su una più equa redistribuzione di potere tra sessi. Segue il Femminismo Fenomenologico, la cui principale esponente Simone De Beauvoir nella celebre opera *Il Secondo Sesso* rivendica l'esclusione delle donne dalla sfera pubblica. Femminismo radicale basato su una struttura diadica di dominio/subordinazione tra sessi. Procedendo con Femminismo socialista, derivante dalla tradizione marxista. Kimberle Crenshaw e il Femminismo intersezionale, fondato sull'idea che la discriminazione può essere esercitata su più livelli al di là del sesso. Chiudendo la discussione con Femminismo post strutturalista, derivante dalla tradizione filosofica di Foucault. Le teorie vengono affrontate per esaltare l'importanza dell'empowerment femminile all'interno di una società capace di garantire alle donne libertà di scelta. Spostando poi la discussione sul significato di distopia, unita ad una contestualizzazione storica del termine. Citando le prime opere letterarie associate al genere e raccontando il suo processo di estensione all'ambito cinematografico. Il capitolo si conclude con l'esplorazione del concetto di distopia femminista, sottogenere della distopia e su come il cambiamento del ruolo femminile all'interno della società abbia influenzato la sua rappresentazione nella suddetta categoria letteraria e cinematografica.

I capitoli successivi sono incentrati su un'opera letteraria o cinematografica ciascuno. Ognuno diviso in due macroaree, la prima volta ad analizzare gli elementi distopici all'interno dell'opera e la seconda i temi femministi presenti, tramite un *focus* sulla figura della protagonista.

Il secondo capitolo tratta il fenomeno cinematografico Alien attraverso il personaggio Ellen Ripley. Questa ha inaugurato la figura dell'eroina nella distopia fantascientifica. Dopo il riassunto della trama e

revisione storica del lungometraggio diretto da Ridley Scott, vengono esposti gli elementi distopici in *Alien*, classificato come “Corporate Dystopia”. Un’organizzazione che controlla la vita dei propri dipendenti, limitandone il libero arbitrio. La descrizione è basata sui primi tre film della saga, facendo particolare attenzione a secondo e terzo, diretti rispettivamente da James Cameron e David Fincher. Nella seconda parte sono discusse le principali teorie femministe che emergono dai tre film. Tramite una parentesi storica sul femminismo degli anni 70, periodo in cui è uscito il primo film, segnato dalla Seconda Ondata Femminista. Procedendo con un’indagine accurata della protagonista Ellen Ripley, oggetto di svariate polemiche e interpretazioni. La figura dell’*Alien* trova inoltre spazio per essere approfondita nel tentativo di comprenderne genere di appartenenza, se maschile, femminile o neutro. Per concludere Ellen Ripley viene descritta nel corso dei tre film, mostrandone i cambiamenti, attraverso studiosi quali Simone de Beauvoir e Judith Butler.

Terzo capitolo tratta l’opera letteraria di Margaret Atwood *Il Racconto dell’Ancella*. La discussione propone l’uso della distopia come strumento per trattare l’oppressione femminile nelle società patriarcali. Questo è possibile grazie ad un adeguato approfondimento di *Offred*, protagonista del romanzo. La dissertazione comincia con un’accurata descrizione dell’opera e contestualizzazione storica delle principali lotte femministe in corso durante la stesura. Procedendo alla descrizione della società distopica di Gilead in cui il potere appartiene agli uomini. L’oggettificazione della donna pronta a soddisfare ogni necessità del compagno. Seguono le principali tematiche distopiche presenti all’interno del romanzo quali manipolazione dell’informazione, pubbliche esecuzioni e sfruttamento del corpo femminile. Dopo aver evidenziato i temi distopici, passiamo a quelli femministi. Affrontando la critica di Atwood alla Seconda ondata Femminista, riportata in forma dettagliata. Analizzando poi l’oppressione esercitata contro ogni donna nella Repubblica di Gilead. Uno stato che scoraggia qualunque conquista per quanto concerne la parità di genere. Ciò è ulteriormente approfondito tramite i diversi personaggi femminili, con particolare attenzione rivolta a *Offred*. Il discorso si conclude con l’analisi della scrittura, impiegata dalla protagonista in una contro narrazione per resistere al sistema dominante.

Quarto e conclusivo capitolo tratta la trilogia letteraria di Suzanne Collins, *Hunger Games*, adattata poi a quadrilogia di film. L’analisi è incentrata sull’applicazione della teoria di Judith Butler riguardante la performatività di genere ai comportamenti della protagonista Katniss Everdeen. Inizialmente vengono discussi nel dettaglio gli elementi distopici dello stato totalitario Panem in cui è ambientata la vicenda. Sottolineandone la brutalità esercitata dallo stato nei confronti della popolazione e descrivendo la sua transizione da totalitario a democratico. In seguito, è proposta un’indagine, tramite la teoria sulla performatività di genere introdotta da Butler del personaggio di Katniss Everdeen, capace di proporre una nuova idea di eroina distopica. Questo punto ulteriormente rafforzato da un confronto tra la

protagonista e l'interesse amoroso Peeta Mellark. Dimostrando come entrambi abbattano stereotipi di genere e promuovano nuove concezioni di femminilità e mascolinità. La dissertazione si conclude con un'ulteriore analisi di altri personaggi femminili fondamentali all'interno della trilogia.

La conclusione, oltre a riassumere brevemente i contenuti, si propone di spaziare su nuovi argomenti di discussione. Focalizzandosi sull'impatto che la rappresentazione femminile attraverso i media ha sul grande pubblico. Spiegando poi perché la distopia è stata scelta per discutere l'empowerment femminile e come questa sua raffigurazione rifletta cambiamenti sociali. Proponendo sul finale possibili categorie alle quali la rappresentazione letteraria e cinematografica potrebbe estendersi.

Introduction

Female Empowerment is a vital issue within the dystopian genre. Over the years, female heroines portrayed in literature and cinema have evolved, becoming role models for contemporary viewers and generations to come. To better understand the link between female empowerment and dystopia, it is crucial to analyze the historical context and social changes taking place within the society at the time. The dystopian genre is indeed employed to portray contradictions in our everyday life which are easily overlooked. When dealing with feminism, its relevance stands in showing that equality among sexes is not guaranteed, raising awareness on major issues which are not often explored in detail.

This thesis begins by providing various definitions of power in modern history by multiple sociologists. Four main categories will be analyzed, Elitist, Weberian, Marxist, and Pluralist, together with other important contributions. The discussion will then move toward feminist theories of power. Starting from Marxist Feminism, supporting an equal redistribution of power between the sexes. Subsequently, I look at Phenomenological Feminism which is based on Simone de Beauvoir's writings. It supports the dominant role of men in society and women's relegation to being merely "other". Radical feminists follow and this is based on a dominance/subordination relation among sexes. Then, the Socialist Feminist approach whose roots are out of the Marxist tradition, where domination is a result of class exploitation. The intersectional approach, introduced by scholar Kimberlee Crenshaw, argues that discrimination can be exercised on multiple levels. Finally, the Poststructuralist Feminist approach analyzes how structures of power have generated women's subjugation, drawing their basic principles from Foucault's theory of power.

A brief definition of dystopia is provided, by mentioning the most important contributions to the genre. A primary aim here is proving how dystopian landscapes enabled women's empowerment, offering an

unreal platform which allows them to challenge typical roles in societies. To highlight this point, I am focusing on three main literary and cinematographic works that have influenced female empowerment within the dystopian genre on a large scale, featuring key problems in women's representation.

The Alien saga is the first of three examples reviewed. The dystopian world was created by a large, profit-driven, universal corporation. Ellen Ripley, the protagonist and an employee, became a generational icon for female empowerment. Her character is evaluated, demonstrating how her persona evolved throughout the first three movies and how it affected gendered perspective over all. References to the main theories of Simone de Beauvoir, on the perception of "otherness" and Judith Butler's gender performativity will be made.

The Handmaid's Tale follows. Written by Margaret Atwood, it centered on women's oppression in a patriarchal society. Underlining all dystopia elements in the novel together with a description of Gilead's Republic governmental structure. Atwood, through her best-selling novel, presents a criticism of Second Wave Feminism, which will be discussed. Offred, the central character, is followed, as her life unfolds under the cruel and despotic leadership of Gileads. The definition of a hero under such conditions is also considered. Depicting finally how the female protagonist attains control over and achieves agency over her life, through an analysis of writing.

Finally, the Hunger Games saga is exclaimed through the lens of female empowerment vis-a-vis the role of gender representation and introducing all dystopian elements in the series, describing the prevalent totalitarian features existing in the dystopian state of Panem. By applying Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity through a review of the main character, Katniss Everdeen, masculine traits, I offer a better understanding of the stereotypes the modern female heroine had to transcend to attain equality in society, this is especially clear when her behavior is contrasted to her male counterpart, Peeta Mellark, who ultimately reveals typical feminine traits.

The last point will deal with other female protagonists within The Hunger Games saga and their characteristics as compared to past traditional heroines.

The main objective of such work is to prove the social significance of female empowerment within dystopian products and how the evolution of female representation has impacted society's view of what being female is for now and for future generations. Displaying strong female characters presenting different characteristics and behavior while trying also to understand how this trend can have future developments.

Chapter 1: a general introduction to Power and Dystopia, through a feminist perspective

1.1 Theories of power

The concept of power is often contested due to the widespread level of disagreement concerning its different interpretations. All the different definitions of power have been regrouped by sociologists into four main categories: Elitist, Weberian, Marxist, and Pluralist. In the elitist approach, power is seen as a possession belonging to a small minority consisting of the members of the economic elite and policy planning networks. Max Weber defined power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be able to carry out his own will despite resistance...” (Weber M.). He talked about the concept of legitimacy, which is the willingness to comply with a system of rules regardless of how it is achieved. The legitimation of power is based on three ideal types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. The Marxist approach focused on the relations between power and class domination within capitalist societies. The state secures the conditions for economic class domination. Robert Dahl offered an “intuitive idea of power,” stating that “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl R., 1957). From his perspective, power was used to influence the actions of others. Another relevant explanation was provided by Foucault “If we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain person exercise power over others” (Foucault M., 1982). He believes that power is not held but wielded and knowledge becomes a medium for its exercise. Hanna Arendt linked power to terror. From Wright Mills’ point of view, power is “whatever decisions men make about the arrangements under which they live and about events which make up the history of the time”, in fact, “men are free to make history, but some are much freer than others” (Mills W., 1958). Gramsci’s power theory is based on the concept of hegemony, which derives from civil society. Hegemony is a set of dominant ideas that permeate society to make the existent power structures appear sensible, peaceful, and natural, it is a process granting the ruling class the power to enforce dominant ideas on the proletariat. Stuart Hall’s theory on cultural studies referred to identity and representation, focusing on the concept of “preferred reading”, power derives from culture and the interpretation of the media. In the institutionalist approach, power exists in the state, economy, and polity, which intertwine with the structure of society.

1.2 Feminist theories of power

Another relevant theory on power understands it as a positive social good unequally distributed. This is also shared by Liberal Feminists. The main idea is the redistribution of power between men and women. Iris Young, focusing on Marxist culture, assumed that power is “a kind of stuff that can be possessed by individuals in greater or lesser amounts” (Young I., 1990). She believed, following Foucault’s perspective, that power only exists when exercised, so it must be understood dynamically as the result of social interactions. The outcome of this unequal distribution is domination through a power-over relation.

For what concerns Phenomenological Feminist, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* is one of the primary pieces of literature on this. In her masterpiece, Beauvoir describes the situation of women within the social, cultural, historical, and economic context they live perfectly. Since they can’t fulfill the same roles as men, women have been relegated to the status of immanent “Other” without the advantage of having any other opportunities. “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (De Beauvoir S., 1949). Although Beauvoir believes that women are partially responsible for their situation, she also agrees that the status of “Other” was imposed upon them and how trapped they are. They are doomed to immanence without having any possibility of transcendence. This work was criticized because it promoted the idea that in order for women to achieve equal rights, the only possible choice was adapting to Western male standards. Beauvoir wrongly recognized the validity of the patriarchal model, pictured as desirable. Young argued that Beauvoir paid little attention to the role female embodiment played in women’s oppression by focusing only on women’s physiology. From Young’s point of view, their bodies fail to occupy the space they deserve. Women’s engagement in physical activities is limited and uncertain, while men’s commitment is generally more confident. This is because women don’t have a culture of performing physical activities, and so lack self-confidence. Without role models or mates or teams cheering them on, it’s easy for them to think “they don’t have what it takes.” As a result, women commonly give up before even trying. Another issue is represented by the perception of being physically weak and fragile. A women’s body is more likely to be damaged from becoming too strong. All these factors often produce in females a feeling of incapacity. Their own bodies become a burden and not a powerful expedient to attain their aims. Physical delicacy, however, is a device used by patriarchal societies to relegate women to the margins. Unlike men, they are not expected to show their physical strength but rather to exhibit a more delicate, gentle demeanor. The best solution, perhaps, is for women to move away from the idea that their bodies

are objects in the hands of patriarchal societies and to use their bodies according to their own will and desires.

In the Radical Feminist approach, the main idea is a dyadic relation of dominance/subordination. One of the main exponents of this movement Catharine MacKinnon argued that relations of domination derive from gender, implying that the distinction women/men could be translated into powerlessness/power. However, from Mackinnon's perspective, women had no other options than submitting to patriarchal power relations and wrongfully being perceived as helpless victims. Marilyn Frye suggested that domination and oppression are only present when one group imposes its authority over another. She understands that there is a strong separatism among genders, translated in "a system of interrelated barriers and forces which reduce, immobilize, and mold people who belong to a certain group, and affect their subordination to another group" (Frye M., 1983). Carole Pateman contributed to the debate by assessing that "the patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection" (Pateman C., 1988).

Socialist Feminist approach derives from the Marxist tradition, where "domination is understood in terms of class exploitation" (Marx K., 1867). Marx, in his theories, nevertheless overlooks women's activities in the household and exploitation within capitalistic societies. Thus, Young's proposal refers to a feminist theory of historical materialism. According to Young, there are five main faces of oppression (economic exploitation, socio-economic marginalization, lack of power or autonomy over one's work, cultural imperialism, and systematic violence). Nancy Hartsock supported the idea that reconceptualizing the notion of power from a feminist standpoint could be helpful in understanding how power is exercised over women. Nowadays, the Marxist approach is no longer relevant, except for what concerns the concept of reproduction of power. Patriarchal domination results from unchanged social structures, placing women outside of the public sphere.

"We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts" (Crenshaw K., 1993). This is the main issue on which Intersectional Feminism is based. The theory of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw and can be defined as "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Naomi Zack argued that intersectionality, however, doesn't allow feminism to be more inclusive since women are divided into small groups depending on specific intersections. One possible solution could be the extension of the intersectional framework to create a greater level of cohesion.

Most of the Poststructuralist feminists were inspired by Foucault's theory of power. In *Discipline and Punish*, the philosopher analyzed the role of disciplinary practices developed in schools, prisons, and factories during the 18th century in shaping bodies. Anyways, according to Sandra Bartky, Foucault didn't take into consideration the way in which these same procedures influence women's physiques, in fact some common gendered disciplinary practices such as dieting, being hairless and wearing makeup constitute a form of self-surveillance which translates into obedience to the patriarchy. Judith Butler believed that sex differences were socially constructed and shifted the focus from Foucault's disciplinary power to his debate on subjection. Butler wanted to understand how "feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (Butler J., 1988).

All the theories mentioned above provided a definition of power based on the idea of power-over, this has changed throughout the years, and a new conception of power-to has been recently introduced by Feminist theorists. The idea of female empowerment is considered as an alternative to male domination. Jean Baker Miller, for example, believes that power has the capacity to produce a change. Therefore, women should use it to improve their condition. Virginia Held also stated that women can find empowerment through their own experience of mothers by offering a different point of view to the public debate. According to Irigaray, another possible solution could be rejecting a definition of power belonging to the masculine type. An alternative thoughtful insight offered by Nancy Hartsock is power should be intended as "energy and competence, rather than dominance" (Hartsock N., 1943-2015); this point was first unconsciously introduced by Hannah Arendt, whose concept of rejection of the oppression model significantly overlapped with the idea of feminist empowerment. Serene Khader thought women's empowerment was hindered by adaptive preferences imposed on women by the established social conditions, so being able to make independent choices was considered the best option to escape this form of domination (Allen A., 2005).

1.3 Dystopia

Dystopia is generally defined as an anti-utopia. It depicts a future society where everything has gone wrong, people live under a totalitarian regime possessing a high level of control over their lives (Gerhard J., 2012). The term dystopia was first introduced by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill. This genre started developing between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century due to the crisis of utopia and idealism. During the Second World War, in fact, many totalitarian regimes emerged from all over the world, and indescribable crimes were committed, the dystopian novel was introduced as a form to express people's fears. The first dystopian novel, *We*, was published in 1924 by the Russian

writer Evgenij Ivanovič Zamjatin, the main characteristics of the totalitarian system he described were inspired by the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and Taylorism. Not many years later, in 1932, Aldous Huxley, in his masterpiece *Brave New World*, depicted a society based on mass production of human reproduction. However, the most relevant contribution was *1984* by George Orwell (1949). The novel outlines a totalitarian society granting no freedom to its own citizens by controlling every aspect of their lives: “Big Brother is watching you” (Orwell G., 1949). Later, in 1956, a movie adaptation of the book was advanced but had modest success. Dystopian cinematography became indeed more relevant during the 60s and 70s due to the rise of a new generation able to see in those films a reflection of the system they fought against. The main goal fostered by dystopian movies was underlining the flaws of contemporary society by exhibiting possible unpredictable and undesirable consequences. After the second half of the years 2000, the dystopian genre became increasingly popular and was recognized as an actual independent category of films. Among the most famous ones, “V for Vendetta” and “The Hunger Games” deserve a mention, together with popular tv shows such as “Snowpiercer” and “The Handmaiden’s Tale.” These productions are set in the near future, where no technological innovation is mentioned to separate dystopia from science fiction, in fact, the focus is on an oppressive system limiting individual freedoms and rights. Dystopia has been marginalized for many years due to its connection with reactionary politics, and even though there have been many attempts to write and produce pieces concerned with feminist dystopia, this current was never the object of study (Cinescuola).

1.4 Feminist Dystopia

Feminist dystopia is a significant contribution to this genre. For many years the role of women within the dystopian novels was mainly marginal, they played satellite characters having no significant relevance within the narrative arc. Examples of this can be found in both *Brave New World* and *1984*. Julia, the female protagonist of *1984*, is described as a “rebel from the waist down,” so her only contribution to society is sex. Orwell, moreover, partially blames women for the dictatorship of Big Brother. The same happens in *Brave New World*, where the only ones able to rebel against the oppressive order are men. Women in this novel are often pictured as “full of air,” and the term mother is considered vulgar, different from father, and more acceptable. Besides that, women are also stereotyped for their appearance, femininity and youth are crucial characteristics they must possess to satisfy men’s needs and desires. The negative societies described both within novels and movies are often close to reality. They perfectly describe situations where women are psychophysically violated, isolated, and commodified by men, so there is a connection between themes of gender, power, and sex (Daniels M. and Bowen H.,

2003). Jenny Wolmark's study underlined how this category has recreated the social order by transforming conventions and power relations. If the situation of women is observed from a different perspective through a dystopian narrative, then many existing contradictions present in their everyday life can be revealed and reported as negative. Consequently, feminist dystopia becomes "a place where theories of power can be addressed through the construction of narratives that test and stretch the boundaries of power in its operational details" (Foucault M., 1982). Feminist dystopian texts can call for a socio-political change rather than resistance to the dominant system. Some common features of these novels include a limited role of women in the public sphere, confined in the private one through the fulfillment of reproductive roles and management of the household. The protagonist generally represents a universal woman, defending her own rights and subjectivity from the oppression of the patriarchy. Male and female principles are separated, and their interactions are built upon feelings of inferiority and fear. Oppression is mainly dictated by the interiorization of submission and biological control with the aim of supporting male superiority, driven by "fear and desire of destruction because destruction is the most reassuring form of oppression." The main devices used to express thoughts and opinions are writing and narration, which entitles the main character to build her own identity. Horrific scenes are also relevant because they can unveil hidden truths about a current real situation and, in the meantime, provoke a reaction on behalf of the reader, translated in either empathy or anger. Such devices are useful in expanding female empowerment potential. The female lead starts as a victim at the beginning of the narration and ends up as the hero, by displaying a process of power construction. The "bad place," for this reason, through horrific images and repulsive actions, allows spectators to reflect upon their subjectivity and rethink their own situations. Fighting against the "symbolic constructs" of dystopia becomes an opportunity to identify the contradictions of reality (Di Minico E., 2019). In most feminist dystopian novels, women are generally treated as sexual objects, having no possibility of building a healthy sexual relationship. The female population is there to please the male gaze, so they are undermined and subjected to men's authority, with no possibility of emancipation. Patriarchal societies are obsessed with sexuality and purity, in fact, being a virgin is usually seen as a positive asset, while sexually independent women are regarded as dirty. This opposition between body and mind results in devaluing women's cognitive capabilities, who are denied access to culture. A further issue concerns the restrictions inflicted upon women inside the process of socialization, often superficial. The regime wants to promote disunity, to prevent any form of reaction. The lack of a female community was often regarded as a fundamental issue within contemporary societies; however, the situation has improved in recent years. Greater unity and sisterhood have matured, promoting the introduction of common grounds of debate built on reciprocal understanding. The feminine body has been a topic largely discussed by the

second wave of feminism. There is a strong connection existing between power and space since this last mentioned is determined by social constructs shaped through social relations and politics relying on dominance. Some examples of this are the limitation of movement, the establishment of ghettos, and all actions aimed at excluding a certain social group from public functions. In the Nazi world, this was reflected in the majestic arenas and spaces of popular intercourse, while in the feminist world corresponds to the separation between public spaces, only accessible to men, and private ones, reserved for women. In dystopian fiction, this division has been emphasized by exhibiting cities specifically designed around men, where women's bodies are completely shoved aside. A woman's physical body is needed for procreation, so it must be preserved. Yet, despite their importance, they are completely impotent, and their narrative near non-existent. This results in complete annihilation since they are ignorant of their potential and, consequently, cannot defend themselves. The marginalization of spaces women could occupy transformed them into objects, which helps identified them as "other", outside the general population. Women have been assigned limited roles and two discursive spaces: the space in the margins (associated with exclusionary zones) and the space of the body (which refers to the various modalities through which women's bodies have been depicted). However, these two spaces can be extended because of "liquid spaces", which guide women to regain their place in the public arena. Feminist dystopian stories have, therefore, the fundamental role of channeling frustration and anger that weigh women down and help guide them towards actively making a change. Not for nothing, their situation in these last years has bent significantly towards justice. The existence of such empowering movements like MeToo, and the Time's Up movement is proof that the empowerment of women gets results (Daniels M. and Bowen H., 2003).

Alien and female empowerment

2.1 Alien and Dystopia

2.1.1 Alien plot

The *Alien* film series was a commercial success and has had a substantial impact on multiple generations of filmgoers. The first movie in the franchise, directed by the notable Ridley Scott, was released in 1979. Prior to *Alien* this genre of science fiction with shock horror had a limited fan base. The plot of the first movie takes place in the not-so-distant future where humans travel to outer space for resources. The seven-person crew on the space-tug *Nostromo* working for Weyland-Yutani, is hauling a payload back to earth. The return trip is interrupted, and the crew is released from their cryosleep capsules to respond

to a distress call from an alien vessel. Ground control tells them of a systematized transmission indicating a possible intelligent origin on board. The distress call represents is a “bonus situation,” an opportunity for the crew to earn a promotion with higher pay. Not surprisingly, the two engineers on board, the lowest level in the ship’s hierarchy, are eager to go and finding out what is happening. The crew has no other choice but to board the alien ship, if it wants to be paid. The terror begins when the crew encounters a nest of extraterrestrial eggs on board the alien ship and a grotesque, frighteningly ugly organism leaps out and attaches itself to one of the crew members, causing him to collapse into a “coma”.

2.1.2 Corporate Dystopia

The elements characterizing corporate dystopia are evident in this first film. Weyland-Yutani’s, a colossal multinational company only objective is to make as much money as possible. Ripley and the rest of the crew must fulfill their duties by transporting oil refineries from earth to outer colonies. The struggle for equal pay unravels the true intentions of Weyland-Yutani, employees are expendable in order to gain as much economic advantage as possible (Dillon B., 2020).

In the sequel which came out in 1986, directed by James Cameron, the Nostromo crew has allegedly disappeared. Nevertheless, when Ripley shows up, she is blamed for the wreck of an expensive spacecraft. Her version of what happened on the ship is met with skepticism and so she loses position and flight status. She is all but accused of killing her fellow crew members. Ripley, out of desperation accepts the offer to return to the planet where the Nostromo’s crew was massacred. The protagonist has to take the offer, in order to both restore her position within the company and protect personal financial interests. Another relevant character is Burke, who represents the company. He comes off sympathy with Ripley, as a matter of fact, he is the only one who believes her. As a special project’s director, he has access to Ripley’s monthly psychological evaluations and using her trauma to pressure her in returning to the new Nostromo’s mission. In reality Burke is more interested in supporting the company’s objectives, and not helping a colleague improve her precarious situation. His actions suggest however that the corporation is not a monolithic entity where everyone is following a familiar path, it rather shows various individuals pursuing their agenda, driven by greed and money. Burke offers up co-workers for personal gain. However, what he doesn’t understand is the only interests he is attaining is that of Weyland-Yutani, which has complete authority of his life (Dillon B., 2020).

"When they first heard about this thing, it was crew expendable. The next time they sent in marines; they were expendable, too. What makes you think they're gonna care about a bunch of lifers who found God at the ass-end of space? You really think they're going to let you interfere with their plans for this thing? They think we're crud, and they don't give a fuck about one friend of yours that's died. Not one." – (Ellen

Ripley, 1979). Dystopian themes emerge more aggressively in the third movie of the series. Weyland-Yutani is the true is revealed as the actual enemy. In fact, at By the the end of the film, Ripley, carrying an Alien Queen inside her body, decides to sacrifice in the flames. By doing this she will prevent millions of deaths caused by the spread of the alien species . She actively agrees decides to challenge the authority of the corporation destroying their plans. The major theme of Alien 3 is the struggle for power in a totalitarian society. The Alien series plays a key role in criticizing the direction societies are heading, Giving unlimited rights and jurisdiction to outrageously powerful corporations. The strive to Increasing profits the point where fear of loss is stronger than saving human lives. To conclude this point, the film Alien teaches two meaningful lessons, first human life should always prevail over financial gain; and that different from what appears obvious evil comes from men and their willingness to gain power and wealth. Corporate dystopia is widespread throughout the entire Alien series. Ripley is a hero, fighting against the injustices of the greedy corporate class to her social class. She, as all workers, are continuously exploited by a corporation lacking any humanity. The Alien franchise may be seen as a cautionary tale a metaphor of unbridled capitalism and the unexpected consequences of unregulated expansion within present realities. Dystopia is in fact, a vital tool, capable of setting an alarm to a clear and present danger (Dillon B., 2020).

2.2 Alien and Feminist theories of power

2.2.1 Ellen Ripley's historical significance

Gender roles have been a topic of debate long before 20th Century Studios' Alien film franchise. There were numerous scientific discussions regarding the link between biology and the sexes gender. At the beginning of the last century. Such perspective lost supporters in late 1930s yet, became popular again leading up to 1979. There was widespread belief supporting men's genes superiority among undeveloped and developed societies. New ideas within the sociological field, opposing these beliefs began to emerge. Simone de Beauvoir was indeed a great representative of sexual science. Working together with Mary Daly and Adrinne Rich, Beauvoir tried to dismantle a patriarchal social framework, through separatism. New requests were advanced, specifically with birth control and sexual assault. Groundwork for social change was being laid: "What could be more unexpected than making the sole protagonist and survivor a woman?..women as heroic survivors was a concept alien enough to constitute a surprise for the audience, while at the same time not so foreign that it would put mainstream audiences off" (Gallardo and Smith, 2014). The main character in Alien, Ellen Ripley, was a symbol personifying a number of achievements obtained by Second Wave Feminism. Part of the Nostromo's crew, Warrant Officer Ripley,

a role normally played by men. The choice to cast Sigourney Weaver to play Ripley was the result of a rising feminist awareness in the 70s and how audiences were willing to pay to see a woman in this role. She portrayed an officer, who refused to comply with patriarchal conventions, rebelling against an oppressive authority. She had the strength both mentally and physically to defeat an Alien. Ripley's characterization derives from Radical Feminist movements, asserting her character as a middle ground between feminism and reaction against it. Radical Feminism was all about the fulfillment of women's needs. Even if inspired by such ideologies, Ripley is not an extremist character, rather, her personality was built around the awareness of the changes introduced in the late 70s. Nevertheless, she is full of contradictions and object of multiple interpretations, changing accordingly to meanings created by critics. Ripley is either perceived as a product of male discourse or the image of a liberated woman. There was controversy around this female protagonist and how she regarded by different generations. First, choosing a woman as the main character, was a novelty indeed. Before 1979, the male dominates science fiction genre had almost no female protagonists. The imaginary of the first film was far had none of the typical Hollywood female stereotypes. Officer Ripley, like the other crew members, she wore the same uniform, had short hair and wore no makeup. Ripley intentionally androgynous looking. Notably, Ridley Scott insisted on the same uniforms for men and women to promote a greater level of equality, just as in the actual armed forces. Therefore, she simply was a strong, competent woman who earned her position outperforming men (Graham E., 2010). Because of this, Sherrie Inness stated that Ripley, through her innovative skills "led the way for the large number of tough female characters who appeared in subsequent years" (Innes S., 1998). Gary Arnold praised her as "the most courageous and resourceful heroine seen on screen in years [...] Ripley's beautiful valor in the face of danger makes a mockery of the dippy blonde angels and ponderous super girls of television" (Arnold G., 1979). A significant contribution to Ripley's analysis was Clover's study of the "Final girl phenomena". Sociologist tried understanding the motives behind casting women as heroes/survivors, breaking the traditional gender expectations: "the functions of monsters and hero are far more frequently represented by males and the function of victim far more garishly by females. The fact that the female monsters and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behavior, and the male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself [...] A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers. And a figure is not a psycho-killer because he is a man; he is a man because he is a psycho-killer" (Clover C., 1992). In other words the figure of the hero is naturally conceived as male, implying that even if portrayed by a woman, will maintain men's attributes. Despite this Innes believed in the great potential of science fiction movies, capable "not only to reflect on women's role but to re-envision and

alter them” (Inness S., 1998). Two dominant ideas emerge out of science fiction. The first focuses on rules of costuming, dialogue, and character behavior based on sex. The second explores the level of technological advancement and modes of aliens’ reproduction. For instance, Doane commented: “technology makes possible the destabilization of sexual identity as a category” (Doane M., 1999), implying science fiction’s ability of reshape commonly accepted gender norms. Ripley explores central issues of Feminist theory, changing both the role of women within society and their representation.

2.2.2 The ambiguous Alien figure

Another character deserving a mention when talking about this franchise, is the Alien species itself. Having different incarnations throughout the movies, there are leading to discrepancies regarding the interpretation of its true nature. Aliens are sexless, being having a “fusion of male and female organs”. In spite of such unclear sexual identification, it they have has always been identified one or the other. Amy Taubin in 1992 described it as “toothy, dripping mouth was hermaphroditic: while the double jaws represented the inner and outer labia of the vagina dentate the projectile movement of the inner jaw was a phallic threat” (Taubin A., 1992). The horrific creature using human body as a home for its own development, mocks the idea behind gender differentiation. Men and women’s physiques turn into sites the monster can dispose of without any sexual distinction. The investigation on Alien’s body made by Feminist theory has failed, as revealed by the denial of its recognition as an independent entity. Demonstrated by the employment of the human physique framework for the analysis of a genderless creature (Green C., 2010).

2.2.3 Ellen Ripley dystopian heroine

Alien 3, marks a turning point with Ripley carrying the monster inside her body, turning it into a useful weapon. Ripley’s evolution, in the franchise highlights difficulties in identifying her character regarding sex. Hills argued that Ripley “illustrates the importance of creative thinking in response to the new signs which occur in her environment, a willingness to experiment with new modes of being and the ability to transform herself in the process” (Hills, 1979). When it was released, just before the 80s, it introduced a novel perspective on femininity and womanhood. Rebecca Bell-Metereau regarded Alien as “one of the first science fiction films to offer woman as a true heroine and survivor rather than helpmate to men” (Bell-Metereau R., 2012). Up until this point in the movies the widespread portrayal of women was, for the most part, ladies in distress, needing of a strong or any man, to come to their rescue. Ripley breaks this tradition and emerges as a female capable of defending herself; she is “tough-minded and sensible”. Second wave feminism secured the rise of new female icons. Such changes were determined by the

evolution of Western societies, supporting a new image of women within popular culture. Inness, subsequently, asserted that “the rise of the action heroine was a sign of different roles available to women in real life”. Significantly, Ripley perfectly adapted to changes, improving both women’s political and social mobility. She is a hard worker and the only female Officer on the Nostromo mission. Her position within the company reflects the improvements made by women in society. Sexism however is something she’s aware of and remains eradicated within her fellow male crew members’ minds. The opinions provided by Ripley are rarely considered (Green C., 2010). Around the 70s women had the opportunity or were economically forced to abandon the role of the traditional housewife. They were joining the work force in numbers not seen since WWII. These changes, even if significantly important compared to the past, were extremely slow, provoking the spread of radical Feminism. Soon enough women realized that all attempts aimed at changing the system form were useless to achieve any significant improvement. The only option left was promoting socially unacceptable ideas, to remain true to their final goal. Ripley’s radical evolution is depicted from the first to the fourth film in the series, Initially, she is a company employee devoted to equal rights, becoming a heroine able to challenge Weyland-Yutani’s authority. The corporation embodies, in fact, gender disparity and patriarchal oppression.

2.2.4 Motherhood and controversial femininity in Alien (1979)

One of the most influential criticisms, provided by Barbara Creed, presents Alien as “a complex representation of the monstrous-feminine in terms of maternal figure as perceived within a patriarchal ideology” (Creed, B., 2015). The mother as “origin of all life” is presented from the very beginning. The dormant spaceship is examined by a video camera and the awakening of crew members looks like “the first birth scene”. Maternal power is also depicted through the sequence delineating the entrance into a wrecked ship, resembling a vaginal opening. The penetration within its depths assumes the forms of violation, unleashing a reaction. The male body adopts a feminine perspective, by turning into a mother whose responsibility is carrying and giving birth to the terrible Alien. This feminist interpretation of the film was accepted for a long time. Later however, arguments have been made to suggest otherwise. The feminist psychoanalytic approach was very popular during the 70s and the collective imaginary was more prone to give this kind of reading into the main female character. Ripley, being the only survivor, has no possibility of rescue. Her only option is fighting to survive, displaying a strong perseverance. On the other hand, the male body is the prime victim of violence, in fact Kane is the first character violently attacked by the Alien. Many assume that his horrific death was perceived as too fantastical because of the number of severe abuses inflicted upon the male body (Anspach W., 2001). Furthermore, not everyone considered Alien as a revolutionary movie, capable of shattering Hollywood’s sexist

conventions. This opinion is based on the final scene. When Ripley is undressing her feminine body is borne to the audience. That scene generated a debate about concerned Ripley was sexualized or not. Some critics believe this scene, represents a victory for of the main character underlining her “empowerment as an eroticized presence”. Deleuze offers an interesting insight providing an ulterior interpretation: “Stripped down to her underwear, she presents audiences with an image of a female character who is both victim and her own rescuer: a character which breaks down the hierarchical division of active- male/passive-female. Whilst shots of Ripley in her bikini briefs certainly eroticize her image, her actions supply a strong counter- narrative” (Deleuze, G., 2005). Clover argues, instead, that the last scene really meets the requirements of Final girl’s characterization, since it reminds the spectators that even though she wears a unisex uniform, underneath, she’s still a woman: The film doesn’t seem comfortable in turning gender norms completely upside down which is why that scene is the final shot. The moment Parker tries killing Officer Ripley enforces, however, the idea of female objectification. The cat scene is particularly datable too, in fact her kind gesture of attempting to save the cat is regarded as a display of pure feminine traits in conflict with the genderless representation she offered throughout the movie. He moves the female protagonist to a bench and tries to take advantage of her, this circumstance is worsened by the presence of porn magazines undermining women representation. Here, for the first time Ripley is vulnerable and incapable of reacting, reduced to a victim (Green C., 2010). Another issue deals with the trouble Ripley faces throughout the film when exercising her authority. The problem in making Ripley an independent individual lies with the rigidity of gender roles. Because independence is attributed to masculinity whereas femininity is the opposite, dependent. Since Ripley is a woman, the audience struggles to see her she as autonomous. Burrow argued “social norms and ideals of femininity can restrict autonomy through the body” (Burrow S., 2008). The only means through which the protagonist is capable of overcoming obstacle is by acting like a man, since there is no equality among sexes (Graham E., 2010). This is a good argument that if we want to obtain equality, social construction must, change. A positive evolution would lead to a new association between femininity and autonomy, providing a true recognition of the Ripley character. She is seen in a particular because of social expectations eradicated within the minds of viewers unused to seeing a powerful and effective heroine. If this mindset goes unchanged, then women will never be recognized as independent. Although times are changing and society is improving, this narrow perspective is still deeply rooted. Even if regarded as a feminist icon, this character remains full of contradictions, because of her gender and the social expectations connected to it. Some may observe that Ripley’s ability is male based, since she is capable of critical thinking, controlling her emotions in situations of danger and showing off her strength when physically fighting against the menacing Alien. Meanwhile, she possesses multiple traits generally

identified as female she's unable to control her crew and is sexually objectified under certain circumstances. Yet, her femininity doesn't respond to most common interpretations, rather to a monstrous one, challenging authority. According to Creed, the monstrous femininity "brings about an encounter between the symbolic order and what threatens its stability" (Creed B., 1993). In *Alien* this is displayed when Ripley violated Weyland-Yutani rules first by destroying the cargo and later challenging male authority. Ridley Scott and his producers tried to introduce a male perspective on feminism. This point is probably one of the most problematic, because by trying to give their personal take on this they end up promoting stereotypes. The choice of Ripley being the last survivor was a late decision made when filming. The director wanted to show the victory of a minority, so the decision was to be between Ripley and Kane (racial minority). The writing of her character contributed to nothing innovation as it was based on a standard sci-fi protagonist: a rebel plotting against conventions, only to be proven right towards the end. When asked about his feminist take on the movie, Scott replied "My film has strong women, simply because I like strong women" (Scott R., 1979). This short extremely simplistic and somewhat hypocritical answer suggests that choosing a woman as the final survivor might have been a marketing move made to please the requests of Second wave feminism.

2.2.5 Aliens (1986)

Judith Butler's perspective on gender provides a useful insight following relations between subject's body and dominant social order. She sustains that gender is both performed by and upon subjects. Gender becomes the result of a bargain process not enacted by equals. The "ideology is an organic part of every social totality. It is as if human societies could not survive without these specific formations, these systems of representations (at various levels), their ideologies. Human societies secrete ideology at the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical representation of life" (Butler, 2004). Ideology shapes the social structure and establishes roles; this means that there is almost no possibility to challenge it. *Aliens* contains this kind of dominant ideology. As such Jean Narboni commented "those films which are imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form and give no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact" (Narboni, J. 1979). This implies that public social discourse decides what is "natural". According to this premise conception, women's position in the social order is inside the caring for the family. Such a female standardized role, surprisingly, is given to Ripley. She is often portrayed as a maternal figure in James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986). *Aliens* contains multiple stereotypes and Ripley depicts every natural conception about gender, underlining her lower social status compared to men. The film has a structural composition responding to male. This is why Ripley turns into a tough character framed within a dominant model, entirely

established by men, and fulfilling their own needs. Her greatness rests on the idea that a female heroine is out of the ordinary. Cameron was able to construct a world, responding to gender-based norms characterized by discrepancies between female and male world. Contrary from Ridley Scott, capable of removing differentiation based on sex, Cameron emphasized this fracture. *Aliens* is imbued with a dominant ideology, as opposed to its predecessor which was defined as “stunningly egalitarian”. In *Aliens* there simply is no space for powerful women, this is exemplified by to the casting of a female nurse and male doctor for the medics curing Ripely (Brown J., 1996). The heroic side of Ripley is prevalently shown when performing her standardized role, for instance when struggling to save a little girl. Another problem concerns the gender-based interpretation of the Alien. The fact that the Alien in some defined scenes gives the image of Alien-as-vagina, underlines a world where biology determines gender, and this establishes social status. Furthermore, this interpretation of the extraterritorial creature hints that female body is the other, a threat that must be destroyed. Women can only be two things in *Aliens*: either part of the lower or the alien monster.

2.2.6 Alien 3 (1992)

Another departure from the original *Aliens*, challenges traditional ideas when dealing with masculine and feminine power. *Alien 3* embodies many of the insights in De Beauvoir’s “Myth of Feminine” and her masterpiece “The Second Sex”. Ripley has an interdependent representation, being dangerous and nurturing at the same time. The movie is an illustration of femininity as “legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth” (De Beauvoir S., 1949), as affirmed by De Beauvoir. Women are oftentimes identified as Other in films. The otherness of Ripley is darker, and this is further reinforced by patriarchy and religiosity permeating through *Alien 3*, 1993, directed by David Fincher. Ripley’s presence is barely tolerated due to her sex, illustrated in a scene with superintendent “I don’t want to disturb the order...I don’t want a woman walking around and giving...ideas” (*Alien 3*, 1992). She clearly is regarded as a threat to spiritual unity. A woman owning freedoms, conforming to de Beauvoir’s thought, is indeed a menace to any system. Ripley will also turn into a resource for the corporation’s evil goal, using her as a bioweapon. Ripley’s body is an incubator of the Alien Queen ergo the mother of apocalypse. The Church is deeply rooted in this *Alien* movie, De Beauvoir saw the Church as an institution that “expresses and serves patriarchal civilization in which it is proper for woman to remain appended to man. It is through being his docile servant that she will also be blessed as saint. And thus, from the heart of the Middle Ages arises the most highly prized, perfect image of woman propitious to man...She is the complete opposite of Eve the original sinner; woman according to Catholic faith crushes the serpent underfoot; she is the

mediatrix [mediator] of salvation” (De Beauvoir S., 1949). When Ripley understands that her destiny is to save mankind, she is no longer the Other. Now a savior by refusing to comply with the corporate giant, Weyland-Yutani, rules she realizes her true mission. Ripley finding herself in a situation she didn't choose is trapped and when she it's clear she is alone, she takes a crucial decision. This choice is completely Ripley's own. Making this choice frees her and she bears on her shoulders the responsibility of nothing less than save humanity. Such gesture can establish equality between Ripley and men, transforming her into a simple human. No external influence guides her choice and for the first in the Alien franchise she is completely free. Ripley in the end obtains all requirements necessary to gain “full membership in the human race” (De Beauvoir S., 1949), resisting annihilation.

Chapter 3: The Handmaid's Tale and the Oppression of Women

3.1 The Handmaid's Tale and Dystopia

3.1.1 The Handmaid's Tale inspiration

The *Handmaid's Tale* is considered one of the most significant contributions to dystopian literature. The writer, Margaret Atwood, a Canadian, was inspired by historical events. She used the well-documented case of Margret Webster, a woman accused and brought to court for witchcraft in 17th-century colonial New England. The accusers, all prominent men of a small Puritan town, eventually had Mrs. Webster hung in the public square. More recent Historical events also influenced Ms. Atwood's book. Public executions in 20th-century England and America, and forced adoption in Canada, where children were removed from their single mothers and given to affluent families, also from the 20th -century. The oppressive regimes during WW2 had much to offer regarding the brutality of this terrifying work of fiction. The Handmaid's Tale was published in 1985. Atwood used recent American political history to set the book's theme. Starting with Richard Nixon's run for office in 1968, his party, the Republicans, devised a strategy to secure votes. They would tap into the angry white men of Evangelical Christians, mainly in the southern states. They created a voting block called The Silent Majority. Nixon won the presidency as a result. Throughout the 70s, the Religious Right became louder and more powerful. Thanks to this Moral Majority, as they were now called, Ronald Reagan was elected to the presidency in 1981. He remained prescient until 1989. Under his leadership, the country took a hard turn to the right. America saw a resurrection of conservative Christian ideals. Evangelicals take the Bible literally and given a chance, would see America ruled as a theocracy. This would institute an oppressive patriarchal

government. As they see it, women have no place in public and are restricted to running the home, as in biblical times. Men and only men hold power and make all decisions regarding women. Physical violence serves as a means to guarantee compliance and discipline. Not long after Republican Donald Trump shocked the world by winning the 2016 election, Margaret Atwood's book from 30 years earlier became a series for television. Despite the passing of decades and the process women have made since the book was published, Atwood's masterpiece is as relevant today as when it was written. Some could argue even more so (Atwood M., 2018).

3.1.2 The Handmaid's Tale's plot

The Handmaid's Tale depicts a dystopian future where atomic radiation has damaged fertility rates worldwide. The extreme right faction of the government took over, and the United States became a patriarchal, totalitarian, theocratic regime. Fertile women are sequestered by the state and are assigned to men in power to bear their children. Freedom to is the name of the protagonist, who is also the narrator. Five years before the takeover of Gilead, she was in a relationship, worked, and had a daughter. Now under Gilead, she is a Handmaid assigned to Commander Fred and his woebegone and barren wife. Marriage is fundamental in Gilead the way it is in the Bible. Handmaids, being fertile, are invaluable "because they are scarce...essential to the life of the group" the country cannot repopulate without them. Nonetheless, they are treated as subhuman and, as sex slaves. Regardless of how abusive and repressive Gilead is, the repressed citizens cherish the memories of the former times and find ways to communicate, opening pathways for future rebellions.

3.1.3 Gilead Republic's social structure

Atwood's main dystopian features are how the country has been divided into sharp social classes, creating a hierarchical system, limited freedoms, and using fear and violence to maintain control (Zivić J., 2014). That the handmaids are merely vessels for powerful men's prodigy is linked to Marx's statement, "Labor power, therefore, is a commodity, neither more nor less than sugar" (Marx K., 1867). Everyone in the Republic has a specific function. The hierarchy is a top-down structure. Commanders of the Faithful are at the apex of the social pyramid. There are, however, some categories outside the social network, such as the *Unwomen* transported to the Colonies and *Econowives* who are married to indigent men. As social outcasts, they are irrelevant to society. Handmaids who are disobedient and rebellious are punished by being placed in the Colonies. The colonies are an area that has been heavily contaminated by nuclear waste. The social outcasts are forced to "clean up radioactive waste as slave laborers" (Atwood M., 1984). The idea reminds readers of the labor camps in Eastern Europe during World War II. At the base of the pyramid are a group of women called Marthas, a reference to a woman from the Second

Testament in the Bible. They are too old or can't bear children and are not noteworthy enough to be a wife. These women are assigned to households to do stereotypical female tasks such as meal preparation and cleaning. Marthas haven't committed crimes, nor do they resist their positions, and thus are easily controlled by their superiors. Then there are the Guardians, whose primary responsibility is guaranteeing the safety of wives and children of Commanders. This class also is towards the bottom of the pyramid. They aren't intelligent enough to be in the army. Their lack of brain power keeps them from questioning their status.

Only in the role of Aunts do women have any agency. These women are responsible for preparing the Handmaids for their life's functions. This includes the freakish procreation ceremony. It is the Aunt's role to brainwash the handmaids into total acceptance. These Aunts, all true believers in the Gilead values, come off as misogynistic and sadistic because of the methods of physical and psychological abuse on maids.

The Commanders' wives have the highest status of women, but, in reality, they have less authority than the Aunts. According to Gilead rules, they must witness their *better half* during the conception ceremonies, pray that conception occurs, and help bond with the infant if and when one is born. Like in the Bible, wives must be obedient and attractive to satisfy their men, which helps them look good to their superiors. Leading an insignificant life that is psychologically draining. Nearly all private and civic power is in the hands of the Commanders of the Faithful. Their purpose mainly consists in reading the Bible and ensuring the principles of Gilead are shared by everyone; however, even if couples believe that sex should only be performed for procreation, men are allowed to frequent prostitutes (Zivić J., 2014).

The Second dystopian pillar of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the loss of freedom. Citizens living in oppressive societies often live under the misconception they are free. Yet, in reality, they have no liberties whatsoever. Such a statement is proven by Handmaids, enslaved people deprived of all possible rights and no free will. They are commanded to serve the privileged class. Reading and writing are verboten, except for Commanders. There are next to no activities the Handmaids are permitted. They have been reduced to walking fetus pods. Aunt Lydia informs them that the idea of freedom no longer exists. She explains, "There is more than one kind of Freedom: Freedom *to* and freedom *from*. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom *to*. Now you are being given freedom *from*. Don't underrate it" (Atwood M., 1984). Firstly, this means freedom from the basic human rights guaranteed in a democracy, which are limited. Secondly, "women have few freedoms, but their fertility is respected, and they are free from the threat of sexual violence on the streets" (Atwood M., 1984). Offred knows her life has dramatically changed, and her freedom to do as she chooses is a thing of the past. Gilead is frequently compared to a

prison, where no one can make decisions. Even Commanders have limited freedoms when exercising their will because of the demands of reproductive duties. Giving up someone's own liberties in the name of a greater good is one of the traditional traits in dystopian fantasies. Gilead's citizens renounce their rights and, in return, get government protection, bringing to mind Hobbes' Leviathan. Security granted from higher up is nevertheless false. People are blind to what opportunities exist because of all limitations placed on them.

The third feature of dystopian worlds is how the powerful employ fear to control the masses. In this regard, Gottlieb said, "In dystopian societies [...] they confine their activities to evoking fear in the population that anyone could be pushed into the circle of outsiders" (Gottlieb E., 2001). The circle of outsiders in Atwood's novel means the category of Unwomen. The key conflict in dystopian novels is between one's will and social rules. In Gilead's Republic, control is secured through the threat of war (Gerhard J., 2012). Offred wrote down in her journal, "This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are, we aren't sure they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the center, where nothing moves" (Atwood M., 1984).

3.1.4 Dystopian elements in Gilead Republic

The government lacks technological innovations, depicting a stagnant world with no improvements, rigid and closed to change. Citizens abandoned their freedoms and abdicated authority to a right-wing religious extremist movement because of a terrorist attack on the United States. Fear of instability provoked this situation. Information is controlled by the Commanders and their wives using state-controlled information broadcast on television. Before the advent of the internet, television was proven to be the most powerful propaganda tool available to manipulate citizens' emotions and keep them in constant fear. One of the only pastimes Gilead grants its citizens is watching the news. Gotsch supported "Power and conflict are central to the society of Gilead, its political and economic structure" (Gotsch-Thomson S., 1990). Offred is conscious of the fakeness of the news she watches, yet since she is forbidden to read or watch anything else, she passively accepts it, "any news now is better than none" (Atwood M., 1984). Everything missing in their lives, including necessities, is blamed on war. expedient used to make news spread through television more credible. Even the Bible can be manipulated in Gilead. Modifying the content to reflect the leaders' values is acceptable. This is born out in a scene where Offred listens to a tape, noticing that some words are missing from the holy text she knows from her past life. She is aware she has no chance to inform any one of these scams, and she lets it go. Another powerful way fear is implemented in the community is through public executions of enemies of the state. Doctors who performed abortions in their past life, for example, are executed for all to witness. Dead bodies are hung

on the “Wall”, reminding all citizens that crimes against the government are not tolerated. Another particularly gruesome strategy to spread terror is making the Handmaids kill criminals with bare hands. Gottlieb argues that “allowing the victims to act as executioners of other victims is probably the single most important ritual expressing the essential mechanisms of dictatorship” (Gottlieb E., 2001). This is a practice used by both Hitler and Stalin during WWII. The novel tone’s not solemn but surprisingly somewhat ironic. Horrific scenes are scarce compared to previous products of the dystopian genre. For this reason, tragic situations are described by the author sympathetically, capturing the public’s attention. The Handmaid’s Tale undoubtedly faces a problematic theme: feminism and all the issues concerning males’ acceptance of sexual equality. Extremization of events is used to depict a possible result of present-day actions. Despite all achievements obtained through the years, unconditional equality is not within reach (Gerhard J., 2012). Patriarchy is deeply eradicated in the minds of many. The significance of Atwood’s masterpiece stands in its ability to be contemporary, even if written more than two generations ago. Unraveling present contradictions helps illuminate the flaws of reality. The novel has a dualistic perspective on the world: everything is regarded as black or white, with no gray areas. Behavior is either right or wrong. Actions are good or evil. The result being citizens are deprived of their individuality. This leads to the population developing into a clan, which is easier for the authorities to control. Something totalitarian regimes have practiced all through history. Lives no longer belong to themselves. Instead, they have been turned into products owned by a higher authority. Rules must be obeyed. Challenging control is unacceptable since they must trust that authority. The best weapon against an oppressive regime is words. Dystopian plots typically abolish the right to free speech. Without freedom of expression, citizens are helpless to defend themselves from false narratives and fake news. Words are readjusted to allow only the ideologies of the oppressors to be expressed. Unique discourses favor unity. Given the opportunity to question there is no way of a counter-discourse, denies individuals the possibility of identifying incongruence in the Gilead Republic.

3.2 The Handmaid’s Tale and feminist theories of power

3.2.1 The Handmaid’s Tale: a criticism to Second Wave Feminism

The Handmaid’s Tale is mainly concerned with the social status of women and the politics of control. Atwood depicts a forbidding society where women have been reduced to men's possessions, fragmenting any relationships among their own sex. They are forced to dress in a specific color depending on their role and have no liberties. Gilead’s Republic perfectly fits the previous description of dystopia. The author was inspired by real past and current events with realistic fears for a hypothetical future (Lacroix JM., Leclaire J. and Warwick J., 1985). As commented by Dodson in “The Handmaid’s Tale lies the

powerful suggestion that progress toward global human rights will never be possible until nations of 'freedom' face their own incorporated dystopian realities" (Dodson D., 1997).

Sexual equality emerged as a significant concern in the 70s due to the rise of Second Wave Feminism. For instance, the movement's history was relatively short, only lasting 20 years, but major changes for women were introduced and often implemented. To this, Gordon commented, "radically transformed medical research and services, sports, education, family life, the professions, law, popular culture, literature and the performing arts, social work, international development thinking, and even religion. Furthermore, it helped the same-sex liberation movement possible" (Gordon L., 2005). Feminist theories support equal distribution of power among sexes, contrary to the man-dominated world Atwood describes in her novel. In that world, the patriarchy makes a comeback and is stronger than ever. The primary source for this story was Liberal feminism, strongly linked to the First Wave. The main points promoted were equality between men and women, universal suffrage, and decreasing the level of domestic violence. Consequently, women started gaining independence and thus were less dependent on their husbands. They were able to move beyond the confines of the home as a variety of new job opportunities opened to them. Gilead, knowing the threat women posed because only they could repopulate the country, abolished all the advances made by First-Wave Feminism. Social positions were lowered to an extent where such a Republic resembled 1600s political realities. Surprisingly, Atwood didn't share many of the ideas of the Second Wave Feminists. Her novel, actually, can be taken as a harsh critique of that movement. The role of the Aunts and their ideology displays the damages of extremist Feminist theories. The same is true for Offred's mother, who was a proponent of total separatism of the sexes. She and her ilk would constantly criticize men whom they perceived as inferior. Second Wave feminists opposed female solidarity and supported an "antagonistic view towards men".

The author's critique in *The Handmaid's Tale* is bidirectional, she challenges both radical feminism and right-wing Christianity, which, if extremized, leads to unwanted outcomes. Accordingly, Gerhard affirmed how Atwood's masterpiece "satirizes the contemporary feminist movements as well as misogynistic inclinations" (Gerhard U., 2001).

3.2.2 The control over the body

Women in Gilead are denied all freedoms by being turned into sexual slaves and losing any autonomy. In the meantime, they are deprived of femininity by the compulsory and impersonal dress code. Sex acquires a vital purpose in dystopian literature, it can either be employed to impose dominance or to challenge the oppression of regimes. In *Handmaid's Tale*, the sex act is adopted to emphasize submission. Fertile women have no control over their destinies despite the importance of their unique biological

function. Accepting this statement automatically places the novel within the dystopian genre. Nevertheless, oddly, the author does not identify as a feminist dystopia. Her goal was to distinguish herself from authors in the past by providing a female perspective under a totalitarian regime. Margaret Atwood doesn't classify her work as a feminist dystopia, "except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered 'feminism' by those who think women ought not to have these things." Independently from her intentions, the book is undoubtedly filled with feminist queries and food for thought. The so-called Ceremony, the ritual where Handmaids and Commanders have sexual intercourse in order to impregnate the maid, is emotionless, ritualistic, and inhuman. A description given by Offred sums it up:

"My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below is the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love because this is not what he's doing. Copulating, too, would be inaccurate because it would imply two people and one involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for" (Atwood M., 1984)

Detachment from her body enables Offred to cope with her situation. Her physical presence doesn't belong to the Commander but rather to a system. The only option left for her is to stay alive and produce offspring for the system. This perspective of sex radically transforms after she meets Nick. Yet, even their secret relationship is an act of compliance for the protagonist since she is once again surrendering to a man and accepting his protection, complying with what is expected from her by society. Exclusion from the public sphere is a common feature for women in Gilead; denied any form of reaction. Such a circumstance is justified given the country's crisis to produce a future generation. Handmaids are key to the survival of the new ruling class, and in maintaining power, the rulers must keep their control over them. To that end, they have stripped women of their rights, including freedom of speech. Using the Bible as an excuse, the handmaids must dress like religiously oppressed women everywhere, heads covered, bodies draped in long identifiable cloth, like nuns. Men, however, can treat them like their sexual possessions. If they do become pregnant, they have no choice but to come to carry the fetus to term and give birth. Men can improve the social hierarchy of the maids. Women who behave in a typically masculine manner are rewarded in Gilead (Callaway A., 2008).

3.2.3 Women in The Handmaid's Tale

On the other hand, women who, before the disaster, were known activists have been punished and removed totally from the community. Offred shares a memory of her mother returning from a riot "They'd been in March that day; it was during the time of the porn riots, or the abortion riots, the [riots] were close together" (Atwood M., 1984). Offred's mother as a consequence of her actions, received the

biggest punishment reserved to a woman, being exiled to Colonies. Feminism is reflected in Ofglen as well, a Handmaid and part of the resistance. She and Offred form a special bond. Offred's Commander has information important to the resistance and asks for Offred's help, but she is too afraid of the consequences and refuses to give a hand. This proves too much for Ofglen, and out of despair, she decides to hang herself. Choosing to sacrifice her life in order to avoid revealing information to Gilead's Secret Police. In another example of how bleak life is under the theocratic patriarchy, Offred's best friend, Moira, against conventions, is very open about her sexuality and desires. After several failed attempts to escape, the authorities force her into prostitution. This role is actually a positive for the woman who is finally free to manifest her sexual orientation. Despite strong feminine role models, Offred is unduly passive (Zivić J., 2014). No doubt because she has witnessed so many women rebelling and failing. As Stephanie Barbé Hammer underlines: "Significantly the rebellious females of Offred's world are all defeated: Ofglen commits suicide in order to protect the May Day under-42 ground; Moira's escape attempts are thwarted, and she's imprisoned in the city's brothel; Offred's own mother is glimpsed in a film-documentary about the dreaded toxic-waste colonies. To survive, Offred seems to suggest one must surrender" (Barbé Hammer S., 1990). Never having to complain in her former life, Offred was dependent on her husband Luke. She was aware, nevertheless, of gender's unequal treatment and consideration, especially when talking to friends about Luke "We are not each other's anymore. Instead, *I am his*" (Atwood M., 1984). She's not politically active in Gilead and simply waits for Luke to rescue her. Eventually, she finds comfort in another man's arms by choice, not because she is forced. Incapable of saving herself on her own or making an independent decision, Offred seems delusional about female empowerment. The novel shows the different ways women can subjugate other women. The wife of Offred's Commander, Serena Joy, used to make public speeches defending the subjugation of women. Explaining they were only fit for household chores and how men are biologically superior. However, after listening to Offred complimenting her and telling her she had an enviable situation, Serena becomes profoundly frustrated and unhappy. The protagonist, nevertheless, feels no pity for Serena. From a passage in Offred's diary, "[Serena] doesn't make speeches anymore. 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" (Atwood M., 1984).

3.2.4 Patriarchal Oppression

All maids are denied previous identities. With their new identity comes a new name. This is what happens to women who choose to join a convent; they surrender their birth names. Offred used to go by a different name, but it has been changed to exercise dominance upon her persona and render her past no longer relevant. Her re-identification pacifies her. The name Offred is linked to her new master, the Commander

is a relevant issue in Gilead, which also played a part during Second Wave feminism. Losing one's name creates disunity among women lacking any type of significant relationship with one another. It automatically puts them in the private sphere, a form of isolation. Unaware of the importance of their own narrative, they seem incapable of understanding the bigger role they might play in the process of liberation. The system keeps them fearful of rebellion. They are blamed for the severity of Gilead's cruel oppression. As a result, they accept their lot in life and do nothing to improve their future. The system remains afloat despite their complacency. Matriarchy is, we read at the end of the book, "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes, and it was through women themselves" (Atwood M., 1984). Promoting conflict enabled Gilead to destroy female solidarity. Two dysfunctional methods in the Republic are how handmaids are trained and the structure of the household, which increases isolation, denying access to both public and private spheres. First, the training only deals with the biological function of reproduction, the only activity recognized by the Republic for maids. By reducing them to a vessel for developing fetuses, they become mere machines and non-humans. Human beings are as many social creatures as possible (Atwood M., 1998). We are programmed to share. "Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task" (Atwood M., 1984). A further atrocity Maids are exposed to are porn videos, used to better fulfill their tasks which are to satisfy the man. Being forced to watch scenes where women are, objectified and violently treated by men, for their pleasure. Inexplicably these repulsive shows never had a role in the Bible, yet in Gilead, they are held in high regard in this otherwise religious society; perceived as nearly sacred. With no friends, and no trust, Offred establishes relations with other Maids just for her potential as an informer for the resistance. Atwood displays a possible future scenario, depicting the probable fates of many women. Extremization of Second Wave Feminism could lead to a society like Gilead. Without sisterhood means no social improvement for women ripe for division and concur by the patriarchy. Gilead relies on Sacred Scriptures based on a different set of values from a composite of different religions. Organized religions reinforce gender roles and grant "male hegemony state control over women's bodies, biological reductionism, strict [hetero] sexual mores and the equation of natural and normal" (Miceli B., 2017). Anxiety is a common condition for Gilead's inhabitants, Offred lives in constant fear of not getting pregnant, developing an obsession with her health, especially her menstrual cycle. Consequently, she meets regularly with a doctor, who controls her diet. Obviously the arrival of her menstruation represents a failure, she is not pregnant. Hypocrisy fills each chapter of this novel, the ritual between Handmaids and Commanders displays some unacceptable behaviors according to the Bible, such as fornication and adultery, challenging the "natural" conception of family. Another important point is women's perception

of their own bodies, as Offred interprets it (Hsieh J.). The protagonist's perception of her body is unusual: "My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits on the beach? I did without thought among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, and could be seen. Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (Atwood M., 1984).

3.2.5 Religious themes

Surrogate motherhood, reflected in the figure of the Handmaids is another key issue. Such practice has biblical origins, together with the institute of marriage, based on procreation. Infertility can undermine the concept and bonds of family, and historically religions have blamed women for any failures. As stated by the Bible "without procreation and the creation of new families, there can be no history" (Bible, 15th century). The same is true for Gilead's Republic, where fertility is the only quality of value a woman holds. Without it, she risks being sent to the Colonies, the forced labor camps. Offred, as mentioned previously, is the patronymic of the Commander she serves, Fred. Such reference corresponds to the name Adam gives Eve, "wo-man" (of man) "denoting men as origin and woman as different from yet belonging to man." During the heinous ritual Ceremony, Commanders symbolize God the omnipotent father, portraying patriarchy at the zenith of affirmation (Pettersen F., 2010). For this particular purpose, Religion assumes an instrumental goal by using biblical references to amplify sexual differentiation. Sex assumes a religious scope, it is not driven by love or used to receive pleasure and turns into a simple device guaranteeing the continuity of the human species. Offred's former life was living the perfect stereotypical nuclear family. Except for the fact of being Luke's mistress before getting together and having a child. The man had, in fact, been previously married to another woman. Such a situation would make the protagonist unfit for the society she lives in when narrating her story. Cheating on another woman was frowned upon in the post-feminist world. The idea of Gilead was inspired by claims of the New Right in the 1980s, whose objective was to restore *traditional* family values according to anachronistic literature; make families great again. This might be explained by the fear installed in men by all the legal and economic advances made by women in the previous decades.

3.2.6 Writing as a counternarrative against oppression

Losing control over her body is one of the main consequences of the oppressive regime undermining her. Her physique no longer belongs to her. It is separate from her, she has no control over it, as if it is an external entity living a different life. Just before the Ceremony Offred says, "I used to think of my body

as an instrument...for the accomplishment of my will...Now the flesh arranges itself differently” (Atwood M., 1984). Body and self are two separate things on two separate levels. Alienation is a typical element of Offred’s life, performing in her everyday routine and limiting actions not driven by her choosing. The space her objectified body can occupy is exceedingly narrow. Offred’s body has shrunk to the point she ceases to be human “We were the people we were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of the print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories” (Atwood M., 1984). If space responds to power, she has none. Her freedom to move about is nearly nonexistent and marked by constant waiting. Her body is possessed by the Commander, a reward for his service to the Republic of Gilead, and envied by others, like a trophy. Food and body are deeply connected in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Food is often employed metaphorically referring to the body. Such comparison furtherly reinforces women’s reification. Food odors, like for Proust, can trigger powerful memories from Offred’s past. Marthas’ meals are frequently compared to the scents of the main character’s childhood. The reappropriation of herself, as previously stated, is possible through writing, also allowing her to regain her own body (Hsieh J.) When speaking, Handmaids are forced to use specific forms, reminiscent of the bible, when speaking with one another, as Offred demonstrates when describing the permitted greetings among the handmaids “‘Blessed be the fruit,' she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. 'May the Lord open, 'I answer the accepted response” (Atwood M., 1984). A language unique from the vernacular becomes a means for Offred’s liberation and resistance to the regime’s oppressive rules. New narratives turn into tools of freedom, raising awareness of her condition. By narrating one’s own version of the story. Offred understands her emotions, coming to terms with who she once was. The protagonist, through her writing, challenges an oppressive regime realizing that, despite numerous attempts, her voice has not been silenced. Conscious of the present situation, the main character regains control and confidence over her existence, developing an independent perspective on reality. Additionally, Scheherazade stressed the idea that “Feminists are particularly interested in stories because as a marginal group of society, women have often been the objects rather than the creators of narrative: their stories have often been untold”. People on the margins of societies often find they are denied access to the discourses that confer power and status” (Stein K., 1992). Offred’s self-expression is nevertheless limited by Gilead’s male-based language. Truth for women, following Foucault’s theories, is socially constructed by men and consequently trapped within the regime’s rigid borders. Offred’s character is full of contradictions, and readers can’t tell if she despises Gilead or has given up on liberty. The main issue concerns Gilead’s communication strength, which is too powerful to be challenged. Offred’s opinions are the result of dominant ideologies, her vision of reality reflects the regime. Wearing makeup is, for example, considered unacceptable, and Offred’s immediate reaction is to agree with this view. Who

controls knowledge controls power, as supported by Foucault. Offred can't gain knowledge if the only information she's exposed to is controlled by the oppressive government. Her opinion will never be entirely independent if she is denied access to read or write. Her truth is limited to what Gilead decides it is. For example, if a handmaid can't get pregnant, the fault is not Commander's, even though he is just as likely to be sterile. But it serves the leaders to blame the women, as they must be seen as responsible for failures. Law is only enforceable upon the weakest protecting the strongest (Pettersen F., 2010).

The women in this novel are portrayed as the antithesis of feminists. Gilead's public discourse remains unvaried and so easy to control. Through her altering language and recalling the one from her past, the contradictions begin to dawn on Offred. She reconnects with the people around her and offers a powerful contradictory narrative. Sensitivity and imagination become weapons, defeating oppression and reconciling body with mind. Taking care of her physical self also augments her will to find her true self, regaining humanness. By developing a personality, understanding her own desires, and discovering pleasure, Offred forms her own opinion about circumstances and becomes autonomous once and for all. "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name; remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (Atwood M., 1984), she declares. Women are not as unnecessary as the system depicts. The Commander genuinely needs Offred to display to the community, his wife, and himself his power. Yet, without a legitimate heir, he is valueless. Offred also understands she has authority over his wife "I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot" (Atwood M., 1984). Handmaid's Tale concluding chapter is oddly ambiguous, Offred's destiny is unknown. The reader is left wondering whether she escaped or joined the resistance. Somewhat disappointing about the triumph of Offred's writing is its only purpose is to bring about the protagonist's self-awareness and maturation. She fails to transmit the necessary information to the resistance. However, readers should not judge her. She, as Dr. Pieixoto points out "must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she is part" (Atwood M., 1984). The novel should be seen as a cautionary tale. To prevent such a regime as Gilead from ever coming to fruition. novel in describing the lack of Gilead's advances, invites the reader not to repeat the same mistakes and if trapped in such a situation to react.

Although the narration abruptly ends and Offred's future is intentionally undecided, importantly, the reader knows she has gained a sense of subjectivity, making her a hero by literary definition. Ultimately, even while struggling to maintain her newly acquired consciousness, she clearly understands that her body is the temple to her mind and it is vital and is empowered rather than broken, as everyone around her tried to make her believe. "Whether this is my end or a new beginning, I have no way of knowing

[...] And so I step up, into the darkness within, or else the light” (Atwood M., 1984). Offred is no longer afraid of the possible consequences of her actions because, for the first time, they are *her* actions.

Chapter 4: The Hunger Games and female representation

4.1 Hunger Games and Dystopia

4.1.1 The Hunger Games inspiration

Suzanne Collins published *The Hunger Games* in 2008. It became a huge success among young readers around the world. It was translated into 26 languages. As the title indicates, the book is centered on games. The Ancient world was an important influence for the author. Once during an interview, she admitted she was “I was a huge Greek geek as a kid, and it’s impossible for it not to come to play in my storytelling.” (Collins S., 2008) The connection to the myth of Theseus is obvious from the start. As a young prince of Athens, he partook in a lottery that placed seven girls and seven boys in the labyrinth in Crete and thrown to fight the fearsome Minotaur In some versions of the myth it is an arena and not a labyrinth’s a maze.” (Collins S., 2018)). The influence of Gladiators during the Roman empire, also from the ancient world, battling in arenas like Rome's famous Coliseum, were a very popular form of entertainment enjoyed by everyone from all classes during the Roman era is also evident (New York Times, 2018). Actual wars were also inspiring for the book. Collins’ father was an officer in the US Air Force and fought in the problematic Vietnam War (1955-1975). Her father would tell her about his experiences when she was growing up. The Vietnam War created a lot of division and strife among Americans at that time the late 1960s, especially between the generations. The popularity of television brought the war into the living rooms across the nation. The horrors of war, like biological weapons and resulting in genocide, were witnessed by the population at large. But it was as an adult that the story came to her. She channeled surfing and landed on a reality show where a gang of young people were isolated and had to survive to win, then she switched channels and subsequently was watching the news about the war in Iraq War. She came up with the idea to combine the elements of both shows and turn them into a dystopian masterpiece. “I was very tired...and I was flipping through images on reality television where these young people were competing for a million dollars or whatever, then I was seeing footage from the Iraq war, and these two things began to fuse in a very unsettling way, and that is the moment I got the idea for Katniss’s story” (Collins S., 2012).

4.1.2 The Hunger Games’ plot

The events of the books (there are three altogether.) take place, like Margret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, in a futuristic North America called Panem. The states are now divided into 12 districts ruled by Capitol

City, the power base of Panem. Every year districts choose by lots two teens, a male, and a female, as tributes to the leaders of Panem. These twenty-four young kids will then compete in a game of survival. The Hunger Games is the name of this sport-like competition which is broadcast to all districts for the nation to watch. Participants must fight each other until only one of them is left alive. The winner will become a celebrity and be forgiven by the Capital for that district's past participation in the rebellion. The games were introduced as a consequence of a popular bloody uprising in the districts against the tyrannical government.

4.2.3 Dystopian elements

The Hunger Games is a dystopian novel even if it has few of the necessary post-apocalyptic requirements or science fiction elements. The main dystopian features in a dystopian genre are oppression, bleak outlook, with vanguard technology. The most striking dystopian feature in Panem is class inequality. The Capitol is the wealthiest region by far. It is located in an area that was once California on the west coast. The districts nearby are also well-off. The districts further away from The Capital are much poorer. The games are a device the leaders use to create a rivalry between the districts, This is particularly clever on the part of the Capital to prevent the districts from joining forces to combat the Capital. The upper-class area is referred to as "career districts". Citizens living in this section see the Hunger Games as an opportunity for social advancement rather than a threat. Youngsters living here, referred to as districts 1 and 2, actually have special training centers to get an edge over the other districts and actually volunteer as tributes rather than wait for the lottery. Winning the Hunger Game means instant wealth and glory. However, all victors suffer severe consequences from the event. They have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD became a diagnosis after veterans from the Vietnam War) with night terrors, alcoholism, and suicidal tendencies (Lemgo, 2020-2021). "By allowing a sole winner the Games also breed deadly enmity between co-tributes from the same district. The reaping system itself was contrived as a way of sharpening social divisions. Those who are eligible for the draw can choose to add their names multiple times to the lottery in exchange for a food card which is the equivalent of a year's supply of grain and oil per person. Thus, the system penalizes the children of poorer families, who are driven by hunger to submit their names in order to get food cards several times during the year, which significantly increases their chances of being reaped" (Soncini S., 2015). By streaming actual Games throughout the country, the Capital unites the country the way a sports championship match does. While the annual game is entertaining with a festival-like atmosphere to the privileged inhabitants of Capitol City, in the outer districts it is terrifying. It is in the Capital's interest to keep that population terrified do the games are an essential tool for the government to maintain power. Cettl argued in this regard "the overall oppressive status quo, an order in which everyone is potential prey". This is exemplified when the President at the

end of the first book/film decides to kill the game producer who failed to control *Katniss*'s acts of defiance in the arena" (Cettl F., 2015). A further justification for the Games is they are the best way to prevent other wars and anarchical uprisings. The reality show serves as a reminder for districts that rebellions of the past have not been forgotten. Furthermore, with the all-powerful Capital, any attempt to counteract the government will be violently put down. No one is safe in Panem, strongly demonstrated by choosing adolescents to be the fighters. Transforming them into killers before they get too independent. This program is heavily influenced by financial interests inside the Capitol. The games are financed by sponsors; the more people watch, the higher the ratings, the higher the ratings, the more sponsors are willing to pay which in turn means more revenue for the government. Advanced technology is another key issue of the dystopian genre. Different advanced mechanisms serve multiple purposes. They are used as means to impose oppressive authority,, through surveillance. Technology goes into developing razzle-dazzle (the dress that lights on fire before the games) to shock and awe the audience in order to distract them from the evil doing of the government. And, of course, technology helps create new innovations used for the government's violent purposes (Lemgo, 2020-2021)

4.2.4 Katniss Everdeen in Panem

Katniss Everdeen, the novel's protagonist lives in District 12, on the opposite coast from the Capital. In current American geography, it's where West Virginia is located—an area known for its coal deposits. This district is one of the poorest in all of Panem. There is not enough to eat. To survive, one must be clever and develop skills. Katniss is a skilled hunter, which helps keep her mother and younger sister from starvation. There is no father as he died years before. The armed insurrection against the ruling class resulted in a government crackdown on the human rights of the citizens. Districts 'freedom is lost, and individuals have no identity. Thanks to advances in technology the government can watch over its citizens 24/7. The surveillance cameras trace their movements and their actions. Preventing any form of resistance or freedom to express themselves. Information is constantly controlled and collected by the state, waiting for the right moment to use it against its enemies. Lastly, Hunger Games are powerful since they are utilized as a distraction from more serious problems, like hunger and the trauma of poverty. However, no money or fame can cure traumas victors lived within the arena and happiness, even if imposed through threats, can't overcome such horrors. As in all dystopian novels/movies elements of reality are presented in the extreme. The violence perpetrated by the Capitol in the books reflects actual modern-day problems such as child sexual abuse and physical torture. The Hunger Games does not end happily. Haymitch, a pivotal character in the series, says "Nobody wins the Hunger Games, there are only survivors" (Collins S., 2008). War is over, and peace is finally obtained, but after many losses. Although Katniss is granted a life full of love with Peeta, her partner in the Games, the previous years of

her life cannot be erased. Those memories, full of horror and death will haunt her forever. Primrose motivated all of Katniss' actions. She felt obligated to protect her. Yet, she died despite all the effort and sacrifices Katniss made for her. Her little sister joined the rebel cause and was betrayed by them (Lemgo, 2020-2021). Hunger Games shows a society dominated by the worst of capitalism. Districts are expected to fulfill partial specific activities dictated by Capital. This plan ensures the districts never become autonomous and Capitol City can maintain its authority over everything. Poverty or wealth is a question of random luck, not unlike in the real world. "Remember who the real enemy is" (Hunger Games: Catching Fire, 2013), a recurrent quote as the rebellion takes hold. The series underlines that at the end of the day, evil resides in the state, Typically, the state diverts uprisings by blaming others keeping the populous divided, needy, and angry. Katniss comes to realize that her true enemies are not the other participants in the games. They are simply playing a role in the game the leaders, whose only concern is gaining economic advantages and benefitting from unfortunate circumstances. Katniss, at the end of the second book, understands the truth and instead of killing other tributes as expected of her, shoots an arrow in the middle of the arena. A bold and symbolic gesture exposing her intention of challenging Capitol City and attaining liberty. However, the rebellion doesn't make much of a difference for the inhabitants in the outer districts. As it turns out President Coin, leader of the rebels, was only interested in defeating Capitol City for revenge against the privileged classes. Years ago her husband was killed because of them. The enemies are those incapable of exercising authority correctly. Related to this last statement Plutarch's letter is extremely significant in underlining that societies can evolve into new political systems, but peace is never granted. "[...] The war's over. We'll enter that sweet period when everyone agrees not to repeat the recent horrors. Of course, collective thinking is usually short-lived. We're fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction. Although who knows? Maybe this time we'll learn" (The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2, 2015).

4.2 The Hunger Games and Feminist theories of power

4.2.1 Katniss Everdeen: a new dystopian heroine

Katniss Everdeen redefined the conventional conception of what a heroine is. In her book Collins takes traditional gender roles and promotes unconventional non-stereo type behavior. After Primrose was chosen to go to the Game Katniss felt obliged to take her place. During the Games, thanks to her remarkable hunting skills, survival instinct, and marketing ability to win sponsors, she was victorious. However, she soon becomes a threat to Capitol City because of her charisma and talents. She is an inspiration for the victims of the oppressive regime. Her role as a feminist in the series is very relevant, basically because her way of challenging well-established social norms (Agrawal N., 2020). She is an

independent thinker, acting in unpredictable ways, constantly, bypassing commonly accepted behavior. The female protagonist is strong, bold, and independent. She can take care of herself without any help from any man. Her resentment with the patriarchal oppression is enough for her to take it on and she has the self-confidence to defeat the system. She's a true feminist, not because she can "wielding a bow and beat boys up" (Stark R., 2012). Katniss finds strength in other women. In the first book when teaming up with Rue during the games, Collins offers the powerful image of two capable women fighting against a more powerful foe. The main character is both aggressive when required and compassionate when needed.

4.2.2 Gender performativity within the Hunger Games saga

Judith Butler's thesis posits that gender performativity is influenced by social expectations. Depending on the situation, individuals may choose their own gender. Katniss' gender performance changes according to circumstances. Her personality constantly mutates depending on how others see her (Butler J., 1988). Panem, differs from what is normal. Even though people must adhere to their biological sex, there is no job discrimination, no gender division of labor. Mine workers, in District 12, are made up of both sexes. Such requirements are not present in Capitol City, where citizens are allowed to do whatever they wish as long as they don't challenge the government. Traditional gender roles don't exist, and the majority of inhabitants might be seen as strange, exotic, or extravagant, living life large. Collins promotes a gender-neutral environment, where all kinds of roles are assigned to individuals of different genders and ages. Katniss has been shaped by childhood events, such as her father's death, requiring the protagonist to take care of her family at a very young age, performing a role typically attributed to males. She has to defend her relatives from famine "It was slow-going at first, but I was determined to feed us. I stole eggs from nests, caught fish in nets, sometimes managed to shoot a squirrel or rabbit for stew, and gathered the various plants that sprung up beneath my feet [...] I kept us alive" (Collins S., 2008). Nevertheless, when volunteering for the Games, in order for her to receive help from sponsors she has to pretend to be in love with Peeta, acting according to gender stereotypes. She does what is needed to survive and protect loved ones. Culture is the main influence in determining both gender and how this last is seen by society (Němečková V., 2021). According to Judith Butler "We struggle with the idea that the division of humans into two and only two categories, 'male' and 'female' is not universal that 'male' and 'female' are cultural concepts that take different forms and have different meanings cross-culturally" (Butler J., 1988). Male-female differentiation is biologically established while gender is socially determined. Divisions existing within society are determined through interactions, and this also involves roles. Men's and women's positions are different, the former is expected to carry important functions, while the latter is considered better off by working in the household. Lois Tyson supported the

idea that “traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; and women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson L., 1985). This definition, however, does not apply to Katniss Everdeen. In order to provide for her family's, survival, Katniss appropriates the masculine definition. Yet, as exemplified by her compassion, s for her younger sister, Primrose, the feminine definition is very much present.

4.2.3 Katniss Everdeen and gender performativity

Ms. Collins gives Katniss the role of narrator in the trilogy, emphasizing her leadership role. The Hunger Games' main theme is not gender inequality, as it was in *Handmaid's Tale*. Here the roles are demonstrably balanced. Courage and strength are qualities in both men and women. One of the biggest differences between Peeta and Katniss is their completely different attitudes toward what is commonly accepted gender social expectations. Peeta has typical feminine traits. He is kind and empathetic, likes to be surrounded by other people, and is sensitive. Katniss shows no emotions and comes off as being very focused on the task at hand, emotionally cold and distant. Additionally, she comes off as man-like in her appearance and movement early on in the book, in her role as a hunter to feed the family (Němečková V., 2021). “I swing my legs off the bed and slide into my hunting boots. Supple leather that has modeled to my feet. I put on trousers, a shirt, tuck my long dark braid up into a cap, and grab my forage bag” (Suzanne Collins, 2018). Her role as the provider doesn't allow her the luxury of taking care of her looks. Hunting is dirty business. But she handles her bow and arrow with skill and precision, and that is what she is focused on. Displaying her feminine beauty is rare and is done only when fulfilling social duties related to her role as victor. For example, Katniss is forced to wear a dress during the reaping, for special events and interviews after her big win. Looking beautiful is very important in developing her fan base. The public finds her more appealing when she is 'dolled-up'. Cinna, Katniss' stylist says in one relevant scene “You're not going to like what they do to you. But no matter what it is, don't resist” (Collins S., 2008), when talking about her makeover. The makeover transforms Katniss. She is physically attractive, something she has never realized before the Games. She is clever enough to understand how to use this to her advantage. Her gender identity is particularly strong under such circumstances since she truly despises catering to the crowds by investing time in her looks and acting graceful and gentle. Yet, it is a sacrifice she is willing to do for the sake of her family (Extremo A., 2014/2015). Katniss rarely shows her sensitive and empathetic side, even though it is a major motivator for her. It was on display when caring for her mother and sister. During the games, it is also apparent when she chose to help Rue, a younger female competitor who later died. Then again, this side of her shows up while faking her relationship with Peeta to help save him. That this side of her comes out when helping others depicts maternal instincts (Extremo A., 2014/2015). In another display of empathy, she

agrees with Haymitch's plan to gain more sponsors, once again complying with gendered expectations. After Peeta is wounded, Katniss cures him, switching roles, by going to the Cornucopia to get some medicine. Procuring this special medicine entails her risking her life. Peeta, whose masculine pride prevents him from intervening, begs her not to go "If you, go and I'm going too" (Collins S., 2008). In spite of her heroic gesture, Katniss doesn't want to take on the burden of becoming a couple. Rather she simply desires equality.

4.2.4 Male counterparts and gender performativity

As mentioned above Peeta has some feminine traits. He is deeply empathetic as in this early passage "The boy took one look back at the bakery as if checking that the coast was clear, then, his attention back on the pig, he threw a loaf of bread in my direction" (Collins S., 2008). He helped Katniss when in need of food. Peeta exhibits in the meantime some masculine traits his pride stated above, and his willingness to sacrifice his life to save Katniss. Ever since they were small, he has been in love with her. His powerful love for her is one of the main storylines in the books. Gale, on the other hand, Katniss's other love interest, unlike Peeta, is more like herself. They both share a strong need to protect, and when the protagonist is with him, she feels relaxed and doesn't have to worry. Shown through a comment made by Katniss in the novel "Gale gave me a sense of security I'd lacked since my father's death. His companionship replaced the long solitary hours in the woods. I became a much better hunter when I didn't have to look over my shoulder constantly when someone was watching my back...being out in the woods with Gale...sometimes I was actually happy" (Collins S., 2008). That observation displays Katniss' oscillating emotions. She goes between feeling the stress of being in charge and a sense of calm by letting deal with it.

4.2.5 Katniss Everdeen and her rebellion against Panem

The finale of book one changes everything for the couple and the regime. Katniss, even if unsure about her feelings towards Peeta, understands that she can't kill or lose him and directly challenges Capitol City, by attempting a double suicide when trying to eat poisoned berries. Having two winners for the Hunger Games is unacceptable, and the sense of order in the state is perturbed. President Snow blackmails Katniss to do her part in convincing the love story is genuine, otherwise, the consequences against her loved ones and country will be catastrophic. "I have a problem Miss Everdeen [...] A problem that began the moment you pulled out those poisonous berries in the arena [...] People viewed your little trick with the berries as an act of defiance, not as an act of love. And if a girl from District 12, of all places, can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what is to prevent them from doing the same? What is to prevent, say, an uprising? That can lead to a revolution. And then in a fraction of time, the

whole system collapses”. And Katniss ’response “It must be a fragile system if it can be brought down by just a few berries” (The Hunger Games: Catching Fire, 2013), showing her analytic and political skills when confronting power. Once again Katniss must comply with what is imposed on her. She is at once a symbol of a threat to the power structure and a heroine, despite her gender. Performing as “the Mockingjay” requires the adoption of both feminine and masculine attributes. Gender, following Judith Butler’s definition, can be “produced and reproduced all the time” (Butler J., 1988). Katniss states, “Cinna has turned me into the Mockingjay... There is no place for a girl on fire” (Collins S., 2010), which switches her social identity. Adopting typical masculine attributes under such circumstances is vital for negotiating with Capitol City. “While you are alive, the revolution lives” (Collins S., 2010). The protagonist starts attaining power, something she never imagined; *“Now I must become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution. The person who the districts- most of which are now openly at war with the Capitol- can count on to blaze the path to victory”* (Collins S., 2010). Appearance is fundamental too. What she wears will reflect her strength and bravery. This gives her an opportunity to reach gender equality while being gender-fluid. Katniss has been defined as an anti-hero, which according to an American dictionary is: “a protagonist who lacks conventional heroic qualities. These individuals often possess dark personality traits such as disagreeableness, dishonesty, and aggressiveness” (Webster M., 1964). Regardless, it is these very characteristics that define Katniss as a true hero. Perfection is an overrated quality and just unrealistic. Claire Symons in her analysis of Katniss writes *“She ’s rough around the edges, she ’s a little bit damaged, she isn ’t for the fame. Sometimes she ’s not even very likable. She doesn ’t go into the fight for anyone but her sister and comes out having inspired a whole country of people. I think that ’s pretty cool”* (Symons C., 2016). In one of Katniss’ sharper declarations, she says “If we burn, you burn with us”, how much confidence she has gained in leading the uprising of the masses. After Capitol bombs a hospital in District 8, she responds *“I want to tell people that if you think for one second the Capitol will treat us fairly if there ’s a cease-fire, you ’re deluding yourself. Because you know who they are and what they do... This is what they do! And we must fight back!”* (The Hunger Games Mockingjay: Part 2, 2015). When President Snow decides to reap tributes from previous winners for a new edition of the Games, it is clear that the state is truly afraid of uncontrollable consequences and needs to eliminate the dangerously popular Katniss. Transforming from a popular money-maker across Panem into a serious threat to the powers of Panem amplifies her empowerment. The young female protagonist is often regarded as a bloodthirsty agitator, but that is not the case. She only kills when out of necessity, animals for survival, and humans, for self-defense. An exception to this is when, near the very end, she goes after Snow for revenge. However, once she realizes there is another cruel dictator ready to take Snow's place, she takes him out, as well. Shooting an arrow

into his heart gives Katniss the appearance of an alpha male (Grandinetti J., 2015). Interestingly, had Katniss been a boy she would have been killed long before she became a threat. But being a girl implies, she would never have become popular, as she eventually did. In this sense, her sex saved her and granted her the independence to become powerful. Her power resides in her independence and therefore losing her freedom means losing her power. Katniss is not determined by her sex but by her ability to think and act on her ideas. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* claimed that “A human being is not anything. He [she] is to be measured by his acts” (De Beauvoir S., 1946). It has been argued, however, that all the improvements made by Katniss as a woman, when approaching the end of the third book are lost. Collins's trilogy provides a somewhat discouraging ending. Notwithstanding all her achievements as a leader and efforts in destroying the tyrannical government, Katniss opts to become a wife and a mother when all is said and done. Such a statement was made in a famous article “Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in the Hunger Games”: “*The Hunger Games* trilogy, despite ostensibly representing Katniss as strong, independent and, in need of no man, returns to mirror ‘the traditional tales [that] do equate feminine power with being unwomanly if not inhuman. They tell us that it is unnatural for a woman to be active or powerful. What is demonstrated as ‘natural’ .. is Katniss’ eventual submission to a heteronormative order that positions women as belonging to the home” (Woloshyn V., Taber N., and Lane L., 2013). Katniss becomes what she wanted to avoid from the first novel, subjugating to patriarchy. This perspective, even if justified, is not completely true. The protagonist, after all, proves to be perfectly capable of handling difficulties on her own and chooses a path, she was initially reluctant to follow, given the circumstances of life at that time. But by altering those circumstances, other choices became available. Katniss’ decision is not dictated by subjugation to male power. It is entirely the other way around. Motherhood, after all, is not subjugating to patriarchy. Hers is a conscious choice borne from her own will. It was clear from the start that her ambition was never to be a political leader, but rather to care for and offer protection for those she loves. Having a political career in the Capitol a choice based on something imposed on her and not her true self. Underlining that someone can only be identified by their actions, offers no objective explanation to individuals.

4.2.6 Women in The Hunger Games saga

Collins does not give her characters strong gender identities. Instead, she portrays them with gender-neutral characteristics and essential human qualities. Apart from Katniss, there are other significant examples of gender neutrality.

Johanna Mason, winner of the 71st Hunger Games, and President Alma Coin, both of whom are strong and independent individuals. Neither fit a stereotypical description or category. The leader of District 13,

Alma Coin, lacks personal growth throughout the saga. She has multiple masculine features in her exercise of power, furthermore, her physical appearance is bland and impersonal, perhaps even androgynous. She leads the rebels in their fight against Capitol City. Ironically, not unlike the tyrannical rulers of Panem, Alma is cruel. She is not motivated by improving the lives of the oppressed in her district but rather by revenge and anger.

Due to Katniss's colossal success, Alma considers Katniss a threat. Her popularity diminishes Alma's power and influence among the rebels. Alba verbally attacks and criticizes Katniss to demonstrate she is no different from President Snow. At the end of the coup d'état in Capitol, Alma suggests, "In place of eliminating the entire Capitol population, we will have a final, symbolic Hunger Games. We will put the children of those who held the most power in the arena" (The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2, 2015). Alma can't be defined as genderless but as a woman possessing masculine traits.

Johanna Mason, showing up in the second book, is a young woman from District 7. In the arena, she wields an axe, a very bloody and macho weapon. She endured a tormented childhood, rendering her callus and cold-blooded. Regarding personal growth, she starts as brutal and aggressive, but following untold tortures at the hands of Capital authorities, she is reduced to a guileless little girl. Because she has had all empathy beaten out of her and no longer cares, she is relentless, which is a significant advantage for a rebel soldier. Being more confident and assertive than Katniss, she might have been the face of the rebellion. However, lacking empathy does not make one very popular. Initially, she gives off major masculine vibes. Still, as victory is near and she no longer needs to fight as aggressively, she reverts to her fragile self, constantly needing reassurance and protection.

Effie Trinket is an ulterior relevant female character responsible for the tribute selections in District 12. Raised in Capitol, she is snobbish and superficial. She struggles to understand the feelings of others. Viewing the Games as the best period of the year, she is clueless about the tributes' anxieties and the deplorable circumstances under which they grew up. Effie behaves according to state rules, as Butler observes, "*insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' is constructed*" (Butler J., 1988). Adopting a different attitude would make her appear as Other and be excluded from social activities. Luckily her character develops in the second and third books of the saga into a more empathic and caring persona, to the point where living under District 13, she gives up part of her feminine ideals. She is obligated to dress differently and accepts the new way, modifying her behavior.

Finally, there is Cressida, who comes directly from Capitol. She is a film director documenting the rebellion. She is the female character with the most masculine traits. She's invulnerable and courageous and utterly devoted to Katniss and her mission. Beauty is one of the critical elements within the entire Hunger Games series. Collins completely overturns traditional gender roles and expectations by providing male characters with feminine traits and vice versa. Butler observes that gender is socially constructed, but Collins does something unique. The author challenges traditional Western canons and describes a distinctive gender interpretation; empowered, strong, decisive women. Such performances in a new social order with feminist icons evolved and ameliorated, ready to inspire future generations, making the Hunger Games relevant to the feminist narrative (Kalkenberg GL., 2019).

Conclusions

The portrayal of women in the media has always had a great impact on cultural norms. According to this, Woods believed that "Cultural views of gender are depictions of women as sex objects who are usually young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent, and often incompetent and dumb. Female characters devote their primary energies to improving their appearances and taking care of homes and people. Because the media pervade our lives, the ways they misrepresent genders may distort how we see ourselves and what we perceive as normal and desirable for men and women." (Woods J., 1994). Media is responsible for the perpetuation of social stereotypes and gendered inequalities. Such practices are subordinate to "ascribing an individual woman or man specific attributes, characteristics or roles on the sole basis of her or his membership to the social group of women or men" (Cusack S., 2013) Consequently, movies and novels must have a production team that focuses on diversity. White males can no longer be the sole representatives of their market, as they constitute a limited part of the population. By offering broader representation in their productions the audience will be able to identify with who they see on-screen. A large fanbase means higher profitability and a broader market for products like action figure dolls leads. Heroines were first introduced to novels back in the 1800s, By the 20th century, the characters acquired more prominent and complicated roles. Women in films only started to see a significant shift to starring roles in recent decades, however. Historical changes in culture and the law that women were finally experiencing in their lives also took place on the screen. Fictional female characters were transforming away from helpless victims needing rescue into brave heroines interested in fulfilling their ambitions. Even the notorious Femme fatale characters, so popular in the 1940s film noir, have about disappeared from major Hollywood movies. Women aren't being used to seek vengeance from men

anymore, rather they wish to promote fair and just values. Ameliorating gender representation is the outcome of social changes. In the past, women's only role seemed to be playing the love interest of the leading man. The genre of dystopian movies modified this outdated perspective proving that love isn't the only emotion women could deal with. This proved to be a profitable change. Love is seen as a weakness; women can and do take on traditional roles without excluding either toughness or bravery. Emotional vulnerability is not a flaw. Actually, if written well, it often enhances the heroine. They display their vulnerability and courage, thus making them stronger. Feminist movements have led to women participating in new activities, those previously assigned to the opposite sex. Having achieved greater recognition and representation, women found new opportunities and influence in their lives. Nowadays, both movies and novels often include a feminist twist, improving stories where once there were only men in starring roles. An obvious example is the blockbuster Star Wars saga. Princess Leia, from the 1977 original, was an equal among the rebel fighters against the evil empire. By the end of the series, we have Rey as the female lead; tough and much more independent than the princess. The narrative arc of female heroines have become more focused on personal achievements and growth. Significant changes have been introduced by Second Wave Feminism, allowing for women's empowerment not only in everyday life but also in the world of fiction (Pillet A., 2014).

Trites points out the significance of children's literature "a novel in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender. A keyword being 'regardless': in a feminist children's novel, the child's sex does not provide a permanent obstacle to her development" (Trites R., 2018). Female heroines don't follow established gender norms; instead, they promote an innovative viewpoint challenging authority. therefore, female leads reach their objectives through feminine traits that are usually overlooked by social systems. Women, living in a world designed by men, are incapable of finding where they belong so they end up creating their own dimension by finding and developing various forms of empowerment. Subverting already existing gender norms is a useful tool when broadening the definition of a hero (Hall M., 2012)

The aim is to instill value in what is typically understood to be unheroic traits, proving that power can be attained by anyone who knows her worth and as long as capable of discovering one's own value and is willing to raise her voice. Regarding science fiction novels, females have mainly been portrayed as subservient to men. Within this genre "the 'grisliness' that is being promoted is often so super-feminine as to render the content mere window dressing" (Savran D., 1998). What they feel carries more weight than whatever intellectual capabilities they might have. That narrative device was obsolete through the

rise of female awareness-raising. Their main goal was to suppress all stereotypes by promoting new and more realistic images of heroines. Social changes were also embedded in literary and cinematic material (Hall M., 2012). As a result, writers and filmmakers have modified their works to gain a broader audience made up of women and men alike. In 1985 a quick test called the Bechdel was devised. It was able to determine the degree of female interactions in a particular movie. It consists of three simple conditions a movie must include not to be sexist:

- 1) Are there at least two named women in the movie?
- 2) Do these women talk to each other?
- 3) Do these women talk to each other about something other than a man?

If the answers to all three questions are affirmative, then the movie passes the test. As basic as the test is, it is surprising how many movies don't satisfy all three. *The Hunger Games*, *Alien*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* all pass the Bechdel Test (Wikipedia).

Understanding their own value is vital for female protagonists because makes them aware of their potential to confront patriarchy. Two sociologists, Joann Brown, and Nancy St. Clair, believe “all main characters in dystopia are empowered in some ways through maturation; therefore female empowerment needs to help girls find strength by valuing positive feminine characters instead of striving to be as competitive, assertive and powerful as boys, even though societal norms tend to endorse those latter qualities.” They support the idea that women must find their own strength beyond traditional values “Empowerment is not synonymous with entitlement, so meaningful empowerment should result from purposeful action rather than innate talent or coincidental circumstances” (Brown J. and St. Clair N., 1990-2001) Power should be regarded in the same way, independently from sex, because it is always linked to elevated status. Post-Wave Feminism began looking at these social changes in female characters. Science fiction heroines don't follow traditional values, they simply take on roles generally assigned to men and use their femininity as a means of empowerment. Before science fiction and dystopia, women's main objective was finding true love, their storylines were based on romance. Traditional divisions, based on social constructions placing men in the public sphere and women in the private one, could be used as a valid explanation for the assignment of specific literary and cinematic genres to one or the other gender. Action, science fiction, and Western genres were strictly assigned to men and society's traditional values. This statement explains why nearly all main characters in the above-mentioned genres men were. Stories, whether in the form of novels or movies in these categories, reinforced patriarchy, and many were sold precisely for that purpose, maintaining the divided roles for

the sexes. Typically, the commonly accepted themes for women were love, marriage, and motherhood or, occasionally, fallen women. The narratives in such films and books endured for so long because they proved appealing and profitable. Love is presented as more important for women than personal growth and career prospects. The story goes that life for women was fulfilled when a relationship with a man was attained. When dystopia was first introduced, it became clear that romance did not jive within this genre. There is little space for romantic feelings and sentiments in a dystopian world. The absence of these defines dystopia. Dystopian heroes generally don't have an easy time of it. Overcoming difficulties is necessary for the character's development. Losing loved ones allows the female lead to gain strength in facing her enemies and fighting oppressive systems. However, such genre has evolved throughout the years leading to a reconciliation between action and love, making dystopia extremely appealing to readers and spectators. This last point shows how female heroines can play complex roles and forms of gender manifestations. They alternate feminine and masculine behavior, eliminating the attribution to a specific category. The first film in the Hunger Games series, released in 2012, started this trend. Rather than being regarded as a weakness, love turns the heroine into a better giving her strength when defending her values. Characters with personalities rich and rounded-out personalities are more relatable to the audience. If a lead were just romantic or brutal, in other words, one-dimensional, the viewers would not be able to identify or sympathize with her (Hall M., 2012).

“In the seventies, women entered...genres that until then had been thought of as ‘male’...The world of action and violence was no longer a man’s world” (Schubart R. , 2014). Apart from narrating stories of brave female heroines, Dystopian novels and movies with dysfunctional unsettling realities are part of a genre trendy among young consumers. These settings are dark and chaotic. The social and gender norms are unrecognizable and ordinary citizens are threatened. The possibility for new leaders, including women, to come forth and save the family, the world, or the universe is ripe. There is a revolutionary aspect to this world, but sadly women were excluded from participating for a long time. As Basigner suggests, when women are “grafted, or fused onto a genre that would be called ‘masculine’...there is a clear and brutal demonstration of how society and nature restrict women” (Schubart R., 2014).. Dystopia, through its depiction of future societies is the best genre for elevating solid female heroes. Because the stories occur outside reality, male audiences see the female leads as less threatening. Fantasy and Dystopia, throughout multiple transitional phases, are the best scenarios for; exploring female roles, keeping male audiences, and maintaining traditional values. Characters with rich and rounded personalities are more relatable to the audience. If a lead were just romantic or brutal, in other words, one-dimensional, the viewers would not be able to identify or sympathize with her (Alter A., 2018).

In the films analyzed in this thesis, dystopia is described from a feminist point of view. Ripley fights against the oppression of Weyland-Yutani and defeats the Alien. Offred resists patriarchal domination in Gilead, and Katniss becomes the symbol of the rebellion under the authoritative regime of Panem. Female protagonists have unique ways of questioning significant issues of feminism and coming up with their original solutions. Dystopia and feminism are more connected than what might have been expected. As previously stated, dystopia's main aim is to underline existing contradictions in contemporary societies, which generally go undetected.

The advances mentioned above, initiated by the Women's Movement, have undoubtedly made progress, but they still need to be improved. Portraying major issues using a chaotic future scenario helps promote knowledge and display how present actions lead to uncontrollable consequences. Each chapter of the thesis discusses different aspects of feminist oppression and empowerment. Feminist dystopian storylines are vital in modern societies to heighten awareness regarding women's rights and how their circumstances have evolved. Narratives of this nature are for men and women alike. They are compelling stories with a clear and subtle message to bring about social. Feminist dystopia becomes, for this reason, an enjoyable genre, accessible to a large audience and a tool for development and improvement, fighting against social injustices. *Alien* is a movie that affected more than one generation of moviegoers. The protagonist was the first independent, strong female character to be portrayed in a dystopian science fiction setting. *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a critique against extremist ideals promoted by Second Wave Feminism. Atwood wanted to demonstrate that disunity and hostile approaches towards men could never bring greater equality between the sexes. Finally, we have Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*. Her character belongs to post-feminism and exhibits a new approach to being a hero. Distinct from Ripley and Offred, her character here is not defined by her gender but by her deeds. She is, despite her imperfections, a role model for millions of young girls worldwide, myself included, proving that heroism and power exist in anyone regardless of gender and without renouncing their emotional being.

Ellen Ripley, Offred, and Katniss Everdeen have forever changed the perception of women through the media, opening a new era for gender equality. Each movie or novel is a product of its historical background, portraying what is acceptable for society. Improvements have been observed, but there is still a long way to go before attaining equality. While female characterization has improved, the same cannot be said for representation in general. This has been explored through intersectionality, defined as discrimination perpetrated on multiple levels. This problem is not limited to gender but includes race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. From this standpoint, equal representation has a long road

ahead. Intersectionality became increasingly relevant during Third Wave Feminism, and fundamental changes began in 2018. Minorities were severely underrepresented in both movies and the publishing world.

Kerry Washington, the star of the hit television show, *Scandal*, delivered a riveting speech “Having your story told as a woman, as a person of color, as a lesbian, or as a trans person or as any member of any disenfranchised community is sadly often still a radical idea. There is so much power in storytelling, and there is enormous power in inclusive storytelling, in inclusive representations” (Washington K., 2015). Having adequate female representation isn't enough. The world comprises many more groups beyond white men and women. So many other groups continue to be under-represented, supposing they have been represented on screen at all. The goal now, should be to expand the portrayal of excluded minorities so the stories we see or read about represent the work in all its diversified beauty with their strength and values.

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Acknowledgments

All the merit of this work goes to Elise, who stayed by my side since I was three years old and taught me the English language. Unfortunately, she is not going to witness such a significant achievement. She has taught me to be a strong and independent woman fighting for her dreams and I will never be able to express my gratitude. Her memory, always engraved in my heart, will shape my future experiences. Writing this was one of the most challenging experiences of my life, because of the awareness she was not going to read the final draft. She has always cheered me on and I know she would be proud of this. But most of all, she would be glad I'm happy, even though I chose a different path. I will never forget all afternoons spent laughing in her kitchen, drinking tea and enjoying life. She always appreciated the smaller things and lived the life she deserved, deeply loved, and cherished by her loved ones. Elise wherever you are I hope you are okay and that one day I will get to see you again.