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Offred's Thymotic Resistance in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Haleh Zargarzadeh and Samrand Avestan
Urmia University and University of North Texas
h.zargarzadeh@urmia.ac.ir, samrand.avestan@unt.edu

Drawing on Francis Fukuyama's notion of *thymos* or the "desire for recognition," this article aims to examine Offred's resistance in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Women categorised as the Handmaids live under the strict surveillance of the state of Gilead; deprived of their human rights, the state only values their body's fertile organs. The Handmaids' resistance to this demeaning reduction, particularly Offred's, has been mainly examined from feminist, dystopian or Foucauldian perspectives but not from Fukuyama's critical perspective. By examining Offred's perceptive insight and courage, this article argues that her strong thymotic urge is the primary impetus behind her defiance of Gilead. The findings suggest that by dismantling the Gileadean disciplinary codes sexually, emotionally, intellectually and above all aesthetically, Offred qualifies to become recognised as a full human being with diverse capacities. Her *thymos* gains her due recognition as an author and a historian and due respect for her fellow Handmaids who, despite the panoptic gaze they are subject to, share with each other a legacy of resistance. By deploying Fukuyama's concept of *thymos* in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is hoped that this article will contribute to novel conceptions of the power-resistance dyad in Atwood's *oeuvre* and in resistance literature more broadly.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *The Handmaid's Tale*; Offred; discipline; Francis Fukuyama; *thymos*

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La resistencia tímica de Offred en *The Handsmaid's Tale* de Margaret Atwood

Este artículo se propone analizar la resistencia ofrecida por Offred en *The Handmaid's Tale* de Margaret Atwood (1985) a partir de la noción *thymos* o "deseo de reconocimiento", según la desarrolla Francis Fukuyama. Las mujeres que ocupan la función de Criadas viven sometidas al escrutinio estricto del estado de Gilead; privadas de derechos humanos, el estado solo pone

en valor sus órganos fértiles. La resistencia que ofrecen las Criadas—en particular Offred—ante esta humillante interpretación reduccionista de su ser ha recibido atención académica desde los campos del feminismo y los estudios distópicos, así como desde una perspectiva foucaultiana, pero nunca se ha utilizado la perspectiva crítica ofrecida por Fukuyama. Este artículo analiza el valor y la perspicacia de Offred y propone que su fuerte instinto tímico es el impulso principal que la conduce a su desafío de Gilead. Los resultados sugieren que el hecho de que Offred cuestione los códigos disciplinares sexuales, emocionales, intelectuales y, por encima de todo, estéticos, permite que se la perciba como un ser humano completo, poseedor de capacidades variadas. Su *thymos* le procura a ella reconocimiento como autora e historiadora y a sus compañeras Criadas el merecido respeto. Estas, a pesar de estar sometidas a un escrutinio panóptico, consiguen construir un legado de resistencia. Al aplicar el concepto de *thymos*, según entendido por Fukuyama, a *The Handmaid's Tale*, se espera que este artículo contribuya a la emergencia de perspectivas noveles en torno al binomio resistencia-poder tanto en la obra de Atwood como en la literatura de resistencia en general.

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood; *The Handmaid's Tale*; Offred; disciplina; Francis Fukuyama; *thymos*

1. Introduction

"I shall speak about women's writing:—about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 1976, 875; emphasis in the original). Hélène Cixous begins thus her feminist essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," and it resonates with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The character of Offred's transcribed narrative voice becomes an authentic source for the dark epoch of Gilead. The novel presents a dystopian world wherein a highly misogynistic and theocratic society overthrows the government of the United States and subsequently establishes the state of Gilead. Among the hierarchically classified women in the regime, namely, the Wives, the Marthas, the Unwomen, the Econowives and the Handmaids, the Handmaids are subject to harsh disciplinary ideologies.

Much critical attention has been paid to the notion of resistance and agency in *The Handmaid's Tale*, particularly concerning Offred's behaviour. While Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Kirsten Braun, Stephanie Barbé Hammer, Jenny Wolmark, Sandra Tomc and Jamie Dopp have examined Offred as a passive character, others have analysed her resistant attitude.[1] Marta Caminero-Santangelo contends that *The Handmaid's*

[1] Apart from the two main lines of inquiry in this novel, namely Offred's passive submission to the regime and her active opposition to it, some critics have taken Offred as an accomplice to the system. On complicity, see Allan Weiss, p. 122.

Tale conceptualises resistance and its restraints in a "particularly *postmodern* feminist sensibility" (1994, 20; emphasis in the original). Julia Kuznetski argues that Atwood represents the female body in *The Handmaid's Tale, The Testaments* and the cinematic version of *The Handmaid's Tale* for Hulu as a site of domination as well as one of "agency and resistance" (2021, 3). In "'From a Distance it Looks Like Peace': Reading beneath the Fascist Style of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," Angela Laflen envisions *The Handmaid's Tale* as a novel that substantiates "context-specific resistance" (2007, 94).[2] Elsewhere, Laflen posits that Offred defies the system by relating her life story to her supposed listeners (2009, 109). Amanda Howell takes Offred's storytelling as her strategic resistance against Gilead (2019, 3) and Hilda Staels similarly emphasises this aspect, stating that "[t]he narrator's poetic discourse resists the reduction of reality to coded concepts and of individuals to reified objects" (1995, 461). Meanwhile, David S. Hogsette argues that Offred defies the absolutist ideology of Gilead by constructing an alternative vision of reality with her language (1997, 265) and Debrah Raschke correspondingly takes Offred's language use as the most effective tool for defying Gilead (1995, 262-63). In like manner, Linda S. Kauffman understands Offred's tape recordings as a modern epistolary mode of narration for countering the Gileadean ideology (1992, 222). As reviewed, Offred's defiance of Gilead has been examined by many scholars; however, no-one has related it to her spiritedness. Hence, this article aims to analyse her resistance in terms of Francis Fukuyama's concept of *thymos*[3] as a form of "spiritedness" that can be expressed as a "desire for recognition" as well.

As Fukuyama explains, "desire for recognition" was initially proposed by Plato in the *Republic* when he assigned three parts to the human soul, "a desiring part, a reasoning part and a part that he called *thymos* or 'spiritedness'" (1992, xvi). According to Fukuyama, human behaviour consists mainly of "desire and reason: desire induces men to seek things outside themselves, while reason or calculation shows them the best way to get them" (1992, xvii). But he then emphasises that, "human beings seek recognition of their own worth, or of the people, things, or principles that they invest with worth" (1992, xvii). Hence, *thymos* has a particular position in the human psyche and is irreducible to reason or emotion (1992, 163). Fukuyama associates it with "noble" qualities such as "courage, generosity, and public-spiritedness" as well as "the seat of resistance to tyranny" (1992, 181). Distinguishing *thymos* from the "desire for recognition," Fukuyama argues that *thymos* "refers to a part of the soul that invests objects with value, whereas the latter is an activity of *thymos* that demands that another consciousness share the same valuation" (1992, 165). One can also have thymotic belief in oneself without demanding the recognition of others (1992, 165).

Evidently*, thymos,* as part of Plato's tripartite structure of the human soul, courageously assigning value to the soul and demanding its rightful recognition, resonates strongly

[2] As Laflen understands it, "context-specific resistance" is a practical kind of resistance that negates the straightforward and ineffectual resistance of Ofglen, Moira, and Offred's mother (2007, 94).

[3] Some scholars spell this word as *thumos*. We follow Fukuyama, who uses *thymos*.

with Offred's role as a product of the abuses inflicted by a sexist regime that maintains its authoritative supremacy through violence and intimidation. Gilead envisions women as "nonpersons— individuals who lack the rights and opportunities that might enable them to counter openly society's construction of them as [...] Handmaids " (Hogsette 1997, 263). The Handmaids are women who are cruelly deprived of basic human rights and are solely valued, as Hogsette puts it, "in terms of the condition of their ovaries," despite having diverse human capabilities (1997, 264). This dehumanising degradation of human dignity strongly stimulates Offred's thymotic sense and prompts her to strive for her due recognition as a full human being with all her potentialities. Demanding due recognition in the hierarchical context of Gilead requires courage. Under such circumstances, *thymos* may incite the individual to "risk" her/his life for the attainment of self-worth (Fukuyama, 1992, 163). Offred bravely risks her life in order to gain recognition. In doing so, she perceptively integrates her *thymos* with the desiring and reasoning parts of her soul. As the novel attests, the tripartite structure of her Platonic soul is well-balanced. Therefore, Fukuyama's concept of *thymos* is significant for examining Offred's resistance in this novel. We will argue how through her relationship with Nick, Commander Fred's chauffeur, Offred actively and courageously fulfils her emotional, sexual and social desires; how through her interaction with the Commander, she thoughtfully revitalises her intellect; and how, above all, by narrating a story with her bruised body and soul, she brings visibility and recognition to the community of the gagged Handmaids. By deploying Fukuyama's concept of *thymos* in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is hoped that this article will contribute to novel conceptions of the power-resistance dyad in Atwood's *oeuvre* and in resistance literature more broadly.

In what follows, we will first discuss the intimidating atmosphere of Gilead, how the Handmaids are subjugated and the extent to which their most basic human rights, including the need for a secure home, filial integration, social affiliation and political agency, together with their sense of corporeality, sexuality and intellectuality, are violated. After outlining the Gileadean disciplines below, which are explicated more than adequately by other critics, the discussion will proceed to the role of *thymos* in Atwood's novel.

2. The Gileadean Discipline

The ambiance of Atwood's Gileadean tale is comparable to the late seventeenth-century plague-stricken town Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* With the appearance of the plague, certain strict measures were put in place.

> Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere: 'A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance', guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter to ensure the prompt obedience of the people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates 'as also to observe all disorder, theft and extortion'. At each of the town gates there will be an observation post; at the end of each street sentinels. (Foucault 1977, 195-96)

The similar exacting control, surveillance and gaze prevail in Atwood's imaginary Gilead on a daily basis, where the coercive measures are to guarantee the autocracy of the regime and to maintain order. Even though these disciplinary rules affect all members of the republic in one way or the other, the Handmaids are among those most affected.[4]

As a Handmaid, Offred's social position obliges her to live in "reduced circumstances" (Atwood 2006, 14), a reduction that bans her from any social interaction. This calculated deprivation of interpersonal relationships brutalises the Handmaids' sense of humanity as social beings. This social estrangement is intensified as Gilead has also prescribed controlling rules for the function of their body parts to the extent that their senses are likewise savagely affected. Their officially prescribed red Handmaid attire makes their visibility easy, while their vision is circumscribed by their winged bonnets which keep them "from seeing, but also from being seen" (2006, 14). This is utter alienation. Their speech is likewise controlled even while walking with their Handmaid shopping partners as they could be spies. "Blessed be the fruit," "May the Lord open," "Praise be," and "Under His Eye" are their formulaic speech patterns upon seeing each other (2006, 27-28, 55). Offred thus describes how she and her shopping partner, Ofglen, go to "some open space" to talk, "[i]f you can call it talking, these clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It's more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech" (2006, 229). Even though they are inaudible to others, they fear punishment. Horror hovers everywhere; situated opposite the church, the Wall is, to use Foucault's words, the theatrical spectacle of "public torture and execution" (1977, 44). It displays the hanged bodies of men and women for days to inculcate dread in spectators (Atwood 2006, 191). As Offred describes it: "We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them" (2006, 42).

The Handmaids' sense of touch is similarly stultified: "I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch," Offred yearns (2006, 18). While waiting for Commander Fred for their first monthly ceremony—the ritual copulation of the Handmaids and the Commanders for procreation—the tip of Nick's boot touches Offred's shoe. Offred feels a softening sense in her shoe: "blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin" (2006, 95). Even though no-one can see this Gileadean crime as it happens "beneath the folds" of her Gileadean shroud (2006, 95-96), she moves her foot away. She fears the consequences of this forbidden touch of leather-on-leather since she has internalised the dictates of Gilead taught to her and her fellow Handmaids-to-be at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center. In such a daunting atmosphere, the victims comply with the crushing domination of the system.

[4] In "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and The Dystopian Tradition," Amin Malak contends that all those who live under the autocracy of Gilead are to obey "the church-state decrees" (1987, 13). Even the Commander's monthly sexual relationship with Offred is performed as obligatory (1987, 13).

In the course of the story, Offred recalls Aunt Lydia's warnings when she proclaims that Gilead "knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (2006, 32). They have no privacy. Apart from this, akin to African slaves, reading and writing are forbidden for them.[5] They do not have any sense of choice, autonomy, creativity or individuality. They long for coffee, liquor and art galleries. Their names change according to the name of the Commander they are serving at the time; any of them might become Of Fred or Of Glen. What the system highly values and recognises in them is their wombs. The Handmaids are solely "for breeding purposes" (2006, 156), although after giving birth, they can neither claim the baby nor take care of it. They are, however, allowed to stay in that posting for a few months to breastfeed the baby as the Gileadean authorities "believe in mother's milk" (2006, 145). Afterwards, they must leave for a new procreative mission. In this way, their human sense, dignity and autonomy are brutally disrupted. Despite this total and intimidating control, the dehumanization and deprivation, not all subjected individuals succumb to these pressures. Offred feels that Handmaids must, at least, have basic human rights, and she does not intend to stand for this "disciplinary mechanism" (Foucault 1977, 222). She is determined to prove that the Handmaids are something more than Ellisonian "invisible" women in the context of Gilead with its discriminatory hierarchy and injustice. As "moral" agents, the Handmaids must be "capable of free choice" (Fukuyama, 1992, 181). Like Serena Joy, Commander Fred's wife, Offred wants to enjoy "small goals that can be easily attained" (Atwood 2006, 20): "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," she reflects (2006, 114). There needs to be a change. This is how Fukuyama's concept of *thymos* appropriately accommodates Offred's predicament, as *thymos* refers to "the part of the soul that demands recognition" (1992, xviii). Indeed, not just Offred but other Handmaids also desire to be "evaluated correctly in proportion to their worth" (1992, xvii). Hence, in what follows, we will examine how the thymotic passion of the Handmaids, particularly Offred's, challenges the various constraining disciplines of Gilead.

[5] The racial implication of *The Handmaid's Tale* has aroused controversy among Atwood's critics. To some scholars, the Handmaids' plight is analogous to the predicament of African-American slaves (Sethna 2020, 3) or "transatlantic slaves" (Phoenix 2018, 206). Others highlight the affinity of this tale to slave narratives (Kauffman 1992, 221; Dodson 1997, 73; McElroy 2002, 338; Feuer 1997, 91). Elisabetta Di Minico and Aisha Matthews identify the Handmaids as procreative slaves (2019, 3; 2018, 15). Karen Crawley reads this novel as "almost a re-enactment of Harriet Jacobs' 1861 *Incidents in the Life of the Slave Girl*" (2018, 343). However, some commentators claim that Atwood excludes race in her "all-white" novel (Moffett 2019, 158). Danita J. Dodson posits that Offred does not have "an equivalent or identical subject position to the black slave woman" (1997, 75). Maria Lauret similarly claims that in this novel Atwood is mainly concerned with gender issues rather than race problems (1994, 182). Aisha Phoenix contends that "The suffering of the black people in her [Atwood's] world is [...] rendered invisible" (2018, 206). Paul Moffett examines the treatment of race in the novel as well as the Hulu series adapted by Bruce Miller. He claims that Atwood depicts race "as almost entirely irrelevant" (2019, 159). Even though, as Phoenix contends, Miller includes "mixed" and "black" characters in his cast, these coloured people are not subjected to colour discrimination in the series (2018, 206-207). Phoenix asserts that, for both Atwood and Miller, fertility is the determining criterion for social stratification of people, not race (2018, 207).

3. Offred's Thymotic Passion

Thymos, according to Fukuyama, "initially came into being for us as an evaluation of one's own worth" (1992, 181). Human beings, he says, grant themselves a certain degree of value, a feature shared by almost all people regardless of their social standing (1992, 165, 168). The demand for proper evaluation applies not only to one's moral values, self-sufficiency or self-worth; it also calls for a due recognition of a person's "wealth, or power, or physical beauty" (1992, 182). The thymotic urge takes a wider dimension as well when it craves recognition of the values of other people who are not evaluated properly (1992, 172). Hence, this sense of evaluation operates at both the personal and the collective level.

In Fukuyama's conception, *thymos* or the "desire for recognition" is manifested in two forms; one is the humble form, or *isothymia*, and the other is its "dark side" *megalothymia* (1992, 182). A term coined by Fukuyama but with a Greek origin, *megalothymia* is manifest "both in the tyrant who invades and enslaves a neighboring people so that they will recognise his authority, as well as in the concert pianist who wants to be recognised as the foremost interpreter of Beethoven" (1992, 182). As such, then, one who exhibits *megalothymia* develops the intention of domination and superiority, while with *isothymia,* the individual simply desires the same sense of recognition as others have (1992, 182).[6] Fukuyama considers a megalothymic sense of recognition as a chief political concern since it is the source of imperialistic, tyrannical and domineering impulses (1992, xxi). Fukuyama's conception of *thymos,* both as *megalothymia* and *isothymia,* reverberates strongly in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

To speak in Fukuyama's terms, Gilead appears megalothymic as it demonstrates the repressive desire of "a Caesar or a Stalin" (Fukuyama 1992, 182). Instead of recognising the Handmaids' self-sufficiency as independent individuals (1992, xix), this panoptic regime turns them into red string puppets to be manipulated. They are treated as an invisible layer in the Gileadean social strata, disciplined to only produce babies, and reside "in the blank white spaces at the edges of print [...] in the gaps between the stories" (Atwood 2006, 68). But, as Fukuyama argues, a humble sense of self-worth is universal; it enables one to operate in the world and to enjoy a sense of contentment (1992, 181). The Handmaids are no exception. They strongly believe that they are something more than a womb. Under these demanding circumstances, however, they can only dare to strive for *isothymia*, that is, they want to be treated like other human beings, to have basic human rights and to enjoy goals, no matter how small they may be. But instead, they experience disgrace, humiliation and degradation. When they are not valued to the degree they anticipate, anger flares up. As Fukuyama contends, anger is a synonym of the "indignation" that "arises when something happens to

[6] In his celebrated essay, "The Politics of Recognition," Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that an equal sense of recognition is "not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society" (2005, 470). Its denial, as current feminist, racial and multicultural debates accentuate, can be harmful and oppressive for those who are deprived of it (2005, 470).

offend [a person's] sense of worth" (1992, 165). A sense of offense and the absence of recognition propel the Handmaids "to desire change" (1992, 194) and to have their "pure prestige" recognized (1992, xvi).

Ofglen, Offred's shopping partner, has a spirited personality. While the Handmaids do not confide in one another, Ofglen jeopardises her life by informing Offred about the existence of Mayday, an underground resistance network. She even invites Offred to join them:

> "You can join us," she says.
> "Us?" I say. There is an *us* then, there's a *we*. I knew it.
> "You didn't think I was the only one," she says.
> I didn't think that. It occurs to me that she may be a spy,
> a plant, set to trap me; such is the soil in which we grow.
> But I can't believe it; hope is rising in me, like sap in a tree.
> Blood in a wound. We have made an opening. (Atwood 2006,194; emphasis in the original)

This is an encouraging revelation; Offred had no idea about the activities of such resistance movements. Finding the words "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*"[7] carved on the floor of the cupboard in her room kindles in Offred the flames of determination to resist the dehumanising Gilead, and instead to pursue *thymos* (2006, 63). Offred reflects on this sentence silently since it gives her "a small joy" (2006, 64), she also feels it is "less like a prayer, more like a command; but to do what?" (2006, 169). According to Fukuyama, a person should seek "higher, abstract principles and goals" (1992, xvi). Offred contemplates the "opening" created by Mayday agents (Atwood 2006, 194). While she hopes that these openings may ultimately crack the autocracy of the disciplinary Gilead, she also recognises that a level of competency is required in order to succeed in the challenge. Unwise defiance would be pointless, as is the case of Ofglen, who hangs herself upon hearing the siren of the black van approaching to arrest her. Her involvement with Mayday was likely reported to Gilead. Harvey C. Mansfield claims that *thymos* "makes the soul insist on itself and, precisely when insisting on itself, offer to sacrifice itself so as to be unbeatable. The ultimate sacrifice is the ultimate defense" (2006, 207). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ofglen sacrifices herself for her conviction. Like Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* who kills her daughter to save her from slavery, Ofglen bravely hangs herself to demonstrate her resistant spirit and free will. Her honourable death, as a defence mechanism, foregrounds her autonomy in the panoptic context of Gilead, and her audacity emboldens Offred as a disenfranchised subject in this punitive regime.

As discussed above, establishing social interaction is forbidden for the Handmaids in Gilead. However, the Commander, as a Gileadean authority, conveys his messages

[7] "Don't let the bastards grind you down" is how the Commander translates these words (2006, 214).

to Offred through Nick.[8] Offred's and Nick's non-verbal communication becomes sexual as Serena Joy, suspecting the Commander's fertility problems, wants "*the fruit of the womb*" (2006, 105; emphasis in original), no matter who fathers it (2006, 234). Nevertheless, Offred gradually turns this procreative mission into a desirous affair even if she is not sure whether Nick is affiliated with the Eye or Mayday. Establishing such a sexual relationship with Nick attends to Fukuyama's conception of *thymos* when he argues in his book that *thymos* does not merely refer to one's moral senses; it can refer to "natural" desires as well (1992, 176). In this sense, Offred secretly visits Nick without Serena Joy's authorization in order to gratify her natural desires. Her thymotic passion propels her to see Nick "entirely" for her own sake and not for the sake of the Commander or Serena Joy (Atwood 2006, 302). While Fukuyama observes that "sexual conquest is usually not just a matter of physical gratification" (1992, 176), Offred's sexual affair with Nick challenges this notion in that it is the fulfillment of her bodily desires that is of paramount significance for her. Their sexual relationship can be examined from two standpoints; firstly, she is trying to prove that her *body* matters to her; that her natural needs are important.[9] Their frequent sexual encounters gratify her sexual needs and, more importantly, violate the Gileadean rules. Nick's room, Offred acknowledges, "is one of the most dangerous places I could be. If I were caught there would be no quarter, but I'm beyond caring" (2006, 304). As Susan M. Purviance emphasises, *thymos* is "the path to decisive action under threat of harm or death" (2008, 5). Offred daringly jeopardises her life for her *thymos.* By seeing Nick, she "gives voice to a want, to a personal desire for touch and for being touched" (Staels 1995, 460) and in this way, subverts Gilead.[10] In a similar vein, Ferns relates this subversive act to the secret and private nature of their "illicit encounter" (1989, 381), an observation which attests to Offred's autonomy in creating a life of her own in Gilead.

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[8] For a comprehensive comparison of the role of the Commander, Nick and Offred's husband, Luke, in this novel see Madonne Miner.

[9] Cixous interprets female writing in terms of the female sense of sexuality and contends that: "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (1976, 880).

[10] While critics like Barbara Ehrenreich, Amin Malak, Chris Ferns, Victoria Glendinning and Coral Ann Howells take love as subversive, others think otherwise. Allan Weiss understands Offred and Nick's relationship as subversive but not effectively challenging (2009, 135), while in terms of this sexual affair, Madonne Miner argues that "the novel subverts the subversive force of love, and […] raises serious questions about a man-woman axis, when this axis models itself upon patterns that restrict rather than liberate" (1991, 165). Miner believes that Offred's love relationship with Luke, Nick and the Commander emphasise the limitations of love rather than its possibilities (1991, 165). Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson contend that although Offred subverts the Gileadean alienating disciplines through her sexual affair with Nick, this transgression does not signify defiance (1994, 76), their reasoning being that "for Nick, Offred reduces herself to body" (1994, 76). We disagree with this notion as the body is of paramount significance for Gilead. It is disciplined and is the site of power, control and punishment. Through her sexual relationship with Nick, Offred claims her body and revives her crushed bodily desires and by so doing regains and revitalises her rights as a human being.

Secondly, Offred, in Fukuyama's words, needs someone to recognise *her* "desirability," (1992, 176), that is, the desirability of a Handmaid. Fukuyama adds that "the deepest forms of erotic love involve a longing for the lover's recognition of something more than one's physical characteristics, a longing for what amounts to a recognition of one's worth" (1992, 176). As such, Offred makes Nick respond to her bodily desires: "There is not much talking between us anymore, not at this stage. Already I am half out of my clothes. We save the talking for later" (Atwood 2006, 303) and satisfies hers (2006, 295). Elsewhere Offred excitedly relates how Nick welcomes her: "He's undoing my dress, a man made of darkness, I can't see his face, and I can hardly breathe, hardly stand, and I'm not standing. His mouth is on me, his hands, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him" (2006, 295). By having a sexual relationship with Offred, Nick gives life and vitality to her bruised body and soul, recognising her as a human being with natural desires. In this way this "forbidden lovemaking" fortifies Offred's thymotic passion (Howells 2006, 168) and disrupts the Gileadean rules which savagely reduce the corporality of the Handmaids to simply their body's "reproductive function" (Garrard 2010, 229).

Apart from gratifying her sexual desires, Offred develops an emotional intimacy with Nick too. Her *thymos* encourages her to risk her life in trusting Nick, in the same way Ofglen does when she confides in her. She even reveals her real name to him. Kauffman argues that when Offred tells Nick her name and life story, "she unburies the body, the voice, the intelligence that the regime sought to annihilate" (1992, 249). Thus, through the figure of Nick, she invigorates her crushed sexual desires and releases her repressed agonies. In so doing, Nick also helps her actualise her sense of self-recognition, and protects her from emotional, sexual and social erasure. This is how someone from the category of Handmaid bravely transgresses the panoptic gaze of Gilead. This is how a victim turns out to be a vanquisher.

Moira, Offred's rebellious lesbian friend, embodies a different form of resistance; she resists disciplinary Gilead directly. Offred and other women admire her: "Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked" (Atwood 2006, 153). No-one can deny Moira's courage and determination in disrupting the Gileadean consistency but, as Atwood represents it, mere courage does not suffice. Moira escapes from the Red Center, a place where the Aunts train women to be the Handmaids. But she is captured, beaten to the point "[h]er feet did not look like feet at all" (2006, 108) and brought back to the Red Center. This severe punishment is to make her more compliant, although her thymotic pride overpowers her fear of punishment and motivates a second escape. Once again, they capture her but refuse to send her to the Red Center, labeling her a "corrupting influence" (2006, 284). She faces two choices, and ultimately, she chooses working

at Jezebel's[11] over being sent to the Colonies. Offred sees her in the club and "the lack of volition of the new Moira" frightens her (Hansot 1994, 64). Moira has become indifferent. She has lost her defying urge (Atwood 2006, 284) to the extent that she asks Offred to join Jezebel's: "Anyway, look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (2006, 285). This invitation to Offred to join her signifies Moira's acceptance of being at Jezebel's, though she is so desolate that even a cosmetic cream makes her content (2006, 284). Moira seriously worries Offred, who wonders where that exemplary boldness has finally led Moira. Even though the Handmaid's used to admire Moira's bravery, it seems that mere boldness does not lead to effective resistance. Analysing the futility of Moira's reckless rebellion, Caminero-Santangelo suggests that "[r]esistance by the sword is not condemned by the text — it is merely seen as useless" (1994, 24). Wisdom is required for effective resistance, while Moira's courage, as a reverberation of her *thymos*, overwhelms her sense of rationality. She is unable to harmonise the tripartite structure of her soul according to the Platonic paradigm. Her *thymos* is stronger than her sense of reasoning. Hence, mere heroism leads to her social enslavement and imprisonment.[12]

Unlike Moira, Offred plans to act more competently and prudently. Once, Ofglen asks her to search the Commander's office for some documents, but she declines, noting that: "I scarcely take the trouble to sound regretful" (Atwood 2006, 305). She intends to defy Gilead successfully not remorsefully. She does not want to die or end up at Jezebel's. Hence, she opts for a wiser plan:

> What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bedsheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere. Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be. (2006, 165)

Defiance requires a well-thought scheme and careful contemplation. As Fukuyama postulates, reason must accompany the desiring sense (1992, xvii). This is how the reasoning part of Offred's Platonic soul guides her, resisting her desire for the

[11] Jezebel's is an illegal club where Moira and other prostitutes work for the Gileadean officials as well as Arab and Japanese businessmen.

[12] Contrary to our observation, Barbara Hill Rigney believes that Moira is the only heroine of this novel who rebels against Gilead (1987, 115). "Moira protests repeatedly, escapes periodically, is tortured, but presumably survives" (1987, 115). However, a heroine is someone who accomplishes great deeds, while Moira is doomed to live as a prostitute in Gilead. Stillman and Johnson rightly observe that "[t]he whorehouse offers limited freedom: except for work, the women are left to themselves, to drink, to do drugs, to have sex with each other. But they are also completely isolated, marginalized from the rest of society, in a dead-end, a prison. There is no possibility of escape or active resistance" (1994, 80). We would argue, then, that Moira is not a heroine, but falls into a complete state of victimhood.

actualization of her *thymos*. Offred is determined to alter her current victim status: "I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever" (Atwood 2006, 154). Nonetheless, she is well aware of the consequences of a poorly considered venture.

The Commander, one of the authoritative architects of Gilead, can facilitate her defiance. She only needs to wisely "manipulate" him (2006, 165). She meets him secretly in his office which, along with Nick's room, is a space where Gileadean rules, such as the one that makes reading illegal for Handmaids, are broken: "Behind this particular door, taboo dissolved" (2006, 180). For Offred, a former college student, the only reading material in Gilead is the word "FAITH" on the cover of a cushion in her room: "I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH" (2006, 68). Even reading this single word worries her: "If I were caught doing it, would it count?" (2006, 68). This unfair deprivation violates the Handmaids' sense of intellectuality, their right to cultivate their minds as human beings. In other words, it affects their *thymos*. However, the Commander allows Offred to read and write as he is impressed by her intelligence and self-sufficiency (2006, 240). He does not see her as a "usable body" anymore, or "a boat with no cargo" (2006, 188). Valuing her aptitude, he encourages her to "distinguish" herself and "show precocity" (2006, 210).[13] Offred dearly values this opportunity and reads his books (2006, 211). As Jonathan Shay understands it, *thymos* propels the individual to have "an active commitment to right and wrong" (2002, 158).[14] Offred's thymotic self propels her to initiate political debates with the Commander and even to query his position in the regime. Steadily, she also develops a different feeling toward him: "[H]e's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow" (Atwood 2006, 188). She is cognisant that the Commander can act as an agent to facilitate her survival in Gilead as she desires a change in her status from a "nondescript woman in red" (2006, 27) to a recognised one. Her "misrecognition," in Taylor's words (2005, 465), makes her more conscious and contemplative of her predicament than the masters, whereas the Commander, akin to a Fukuyamaian master, spends his time casually and in an unconcerned manner (Fukuyama 1992, 194). Offred has a distinctive consciousness that pushes her to achieve a reasonable insight into the status quo. She knows that a "violent struggle" for the recognition of a Handmaid in Gilead may lead to her downfall (1992, 147), so her opposition is less direct.

Offred envies the Commander's pen: "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains" (Atwood 2006, 213).

[13] Lucy M. Freibert thus interprets Offred's relationship with the Commander and Nick: "Offred gets the chance to develop both aspects of her being through her association with the Commander—the head—and Nick—the heart. From the outset, being with the Commander is a kind of intellectual game that activates Offred's imagination. It holds just enough risk and fear to keep her adrenalin flowing. When she begins her visits to his study, where he wants her to play Scrabble with him, allows her to read books and magazines and shares with her the schoolboy's joke '*Nolite te bastardes corborundortum*,' she begins to see the value of her own way with words." (1988, 287)

[14] Shay associates *thymos* with the notion of "character" and argues that sociability, passion and spirit are also related to this concept (2002, 158).

In order to survive the Gileadean annihilation and erasure, she uses the power of words. She thinks of writing something that petitions for the recognition of the Handmaids, to celebrate their worth, but realises that her resources for doing so are restricted, coming to the conclusion that her only option is to "[t]ell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in my case forbidden" (2006, 50). Oral narration is, thus, an action that is prompted by her *thymos*,[15] and she decides to record herself relating the Gileadean phase of her life on cassette tapes after escaping from Gilead.[16] Karen F. Stein interprets Offred's storytelling as "a gesture of hope, of love, of reaching for connection with other readers and hearers" (1992, 278). In this way, the Gileadean rule of social alienation is disrupted as her story will be transcribed and read in the future as a warning to generations to come (1992, 278).[17] Through her recordings, Offred both immortalises and transhistorises her voice. Two centuries later, researchers attend a symposium on Gileadean Studies to hear the keynote speech regarding the discovery of Offred's tapes. Calling her the "Goddess of History," Professor Peixoto commends Offred's effort in narrating her life story: "[W]e must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us" (Atwood 2006, 348).

As an abused subject in Gilead, Offred gains the reputation of being the "principal historian" of a dark epoch of history (Howells 2006, 165). The Historical Notes, that constitute the epilogue of the novel, rightfully substantiate the value of her contribution to the process of history and by so doing establish her remarkable prestige among the researchers. Offred's actions link to Fukuyama's assertion that "it was the slave's continuing desire for recognition that was the motor which propelled history forward, not the idle complacency and unchanging self-identity of the master" (1992, 198). Offred bravely ventures into hazardous but thoughtful courses of action, and she correspondingly changes her status from a victim position to a rebellious heroine (Malak 1987, 13).

In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian literature*, a ground-breaking monograph on Canadian literature, Atwood defines four positions of victimhood and suggests the possibility of resistance.[18] According to Malak, Offred's position resonates with the third, a position in which the victim acknowledges her/his victimhood but refuses "to accept" its inevitability (1987, 13). We agree with Malak as Offred is strongly determined to survive Gilead. In Atwood's classification, position Four is for "ex-

[15] Shirley D. Sullivan contends that in lyric poetry *thymos* leads to "song" while, in the Homeric tales, it is allied with "speech" (1993, 50).

[16] Kauffman interprets Offred's narrative as "a defiant testimony of her innocence and culpability, her defiance and desire, her submission and rebellion to the history being written before her eyes" (1992, 262).

[17] Even though Offred has been dubbed a storyteller and a historian, some critics understand her as a passive character. We disagree with Sandra Tomc when she contends that Offred is a "heroine whose sole resistance goes on inside her head, a resistance at once indistinguishable from passivity and masochism and uncomfortably synonymous with traditional stereotypes of feminine behaviour" (1993, 77).

[18] The positions are "denial, fatalistic acceptance, repudiation, and creative non- or ex-victim" (Wynne-Davies 2010, 11).

victims: those who have been able to move into it from Position Three because the external and/or the internal causes of victimization have been removed" (2004, 49). As such, then, a tyrannical society needs to change if a victim is to be identified as an "ex-victim." This part of the definition of Position Four does not accommodate Offred's situation, given that she is identified as a victim while living in Gilead. In this regard, Atwood assigns an additional attribute to Position Four, whereby the victim becomes involved with "creative activity" (2004, 49): "[A]n author is in Position Four at the moment of writing" (2004, 51). This applies to Offred when she narrates her life story: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (Atwood 2006, 301-302). Here Offred becomes both the author of her story and the creator of her audience. She imagines an environment where there is no external victimiser. Therefore, her willed audience can listen to her painful story without apprehension (2006, 301). Interestingly, she promises to listen to their story whenever or wherever possible. She does not wait for the change of regime or its overthrow; she assumes the position of an "ex-victim" during the narrating process.

4. Conclusion

Amid all the disciplinary prohibitions and controls, Offred triumphantly deconstructs the hegemony of the theocratic Gilead and challenges its "faceless gaze," to speak in Foucault's terms (1977, 214). Her thymotic urge spurs her to action, to prove her value as a social being with an active mind and passionate body. She gratifies her corporeal desires and intellectual worth through her forbidden interactions with Nick and the Commander. With these gestures, she proves that she is a human being with multiple needs and that she cannot simply be valued as a vehicle for procreation purposes. The satisfaction of her desires at the personal level qualifies her to experience the isothymic sense of *thymos* where the individual craves an equal sense of recognition with fellow human beings. Her recorded voice indicates that the removal of the repressive political system is not a requirement to achieve "ex-victim" status. One can defy the system as an "ex-victim" while the tyrannical regime is still in power. Offred's transition to Position Four challenges Atwood's own postulation of victimhood. Offred's successful defiance of Gilead gains benefits for other Handmaids as well. Even though they fail to resist Gilead constructively, they leave the legacy of resistance to Offred. Integrating her thymotic pride with wisdom and desire, she successfully makes the world hear "[w]hatever is silenced" widely and loudly (Atwood 2006, 175).

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Haleh Zargarzadeh is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Urmia University, Iran. She recently published a book review entitled "Derek Walcott and the creation of a classical Caribbean" in *Textual Practice* (2025).

Samrand Avestan is a Ph.D. candidate and a Teaching Fellow at the University of North Texas, USA. Samrand's academic pursuits center around colonial, postcolonial and speculative fiction. He has published an article entitled "The 'Roaring Flame': Pursuing *Thymos* in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" in *International Dialogue* (2022).