

***The Handmaid's Tale* as a representation of “pedagogies of cruelty”**

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As Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, explains in the class “Speculative Fiction Case Study *The Handmaid's Tale*”, “the rule that I made for the book was that nothing went into it that had not happened in real life, somewhere, at some time” (6:51). Thus, the descriptions of certain events in this novel are not coincidental at all, but they are closely related to many societies in real life worldwide: the rigid moral codes, the modest clothing, the banishment of dissenters during the period of the 17th century Puritans in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the system of “handmaidens” the Catholic sect “People of Hope” implemented; and the stealing of babies throughout the military coup that took place in Argentina in 1976, are just some of the several examples that inspired Atwood to write her dystopian novel. All the historical events that inspired her were characterized by violence, a core theme that underlies *The Handmaid's Tale* from beginning to end. In these cases, violence is inflicted by a patriarchal system. Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker refer to Kate Millett’s concept of patriarchy as a system that “subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male, and this power is exerted, directly or indirectly, in civil and domestic life to constrain women” (123). In other words, a patriarchal system is one in which males are superior figures that control and limit women.

In the book *Counter-pedagogies of Cruelty*, Rita Segato, an Argentinean writer, anthropologist, and feminist activist, exposes and describes different types of violent acts and behaviours that people “teach” in a patriarchal system which she terms “pedagogies of cruelty.” She affirms that “the repetition of violence produces an effect of normalization of a landscape of cruelty and, with this, promotes low thresholds of empathy that are essential

for the predatory business” (my trans.; 11). In this way, this lack of sensitivity towards others’ suffering keeps on enacting this process of teaching and naturalizing cruelty. With the assumption that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a representation of “pedagogies of cruelty,” this paper aims at analyzing how violence is portrayed in this dystopia through the conception of women as tutored bodies, the expropriation of identity, and the masculinity mandate.

One of the most common pedagogies of cruelty that Segato presents is that of “women as tutored bodies.” From this point of view, she explains that “...sexual assault is also an aggression towards her [the victim’s] tutor, the man that has the duty of guarding the moral and the honor, taking care and tutoring that body” (my trans.; 75). With this statement, Segato contends that apart from sexual assault being an aggression towards the victim, there is another victim, which is her “tutor”. This “tutor” is generally a man, such as a father, a husband, or a brother, and is in charge of taking care of all the aspects of a certain woman’s life. When a man sexually abuses a woman, he is disrespecting the tutor first, and then the woman.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one of the first measures that the Sons of Jacob introduce when they mount the coup is to deprive women of their finances. The handmaid is fired from her job and instantly, her finances belong to her husband Luke. In this case, the notion of “tutor” is reflected, as the handmaid feels that she resembles an object that belongs to her husband: “we still have... he said. But he didn’t go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn’t be saying *we*, since nothing I knew of had been taken away from him. (...) we are not each other’s anymore. Instead, I am his” (182). In Gilead, many women are separated from their family and are sent to the Red Centre, where they would be indoctrinated to become “handmaids.” This is the category given to fertile women who are assigned to couples to give birth to their babies. Once the Aunts, who are in control of the process of indoctrination, decide that the handmaid is ready to fulfil her role, she is sent to a family house where a couple lives. This couple is composed of a husband or Commander and his Wife. To get the protagonist pregnant, the Ceremony is carried out.

Throughout this, the Wife sits on the bed, and between her legs, the handmaid lays. The Wife holds her by her wrists and the Commander uses her for copulation. Thus, the Commander sexually assaults the handmaid and becomes the criminal that first disrespects Luke, her tutor, as he deprives him of tutoring the protagonist (See appendix 1).

According to Segato, in a patriarchal system like this, “women are not considered entirely persons” (my trans.; 74) but have two contradictory features that make them fit in society: while they represent the integrity of a particular community, they are also objects that undertake a primary function within it (74). Handmaids reflect these double-featured women in the sense that they are considered “vessels” whose aim is to provide Gileadean couples with babies. This role is reinforced constantly, for instance, when Aunts highlight the importance of eating healthy before and during pregnancy: “you have to get your vitamins and minerals, said Aunt Lydia coyly. You must be a worthy vessel” (65). Gileadeans see handmaids as vessels in the sense that they see them as the engine of society because it is through them that they would be able to increase the population in this post-apocalyptic society. In this way, handmaids are objectified and treated as vessels that are supposedly sent by God to fulfil their essential role in life and thus represent the integrity of Gilead.

In the case of Commanders, they are closely related to how Segato describes sexual aggressors and what is behind this crime. She reminds readers that “rape” and “rapine” have the same etymological root and that “rape, rapine, and consummation are part of the same universe of sense” (my trans.; 75) to which sexual aggressors belong: a “predatory business” (my trans.; 11). With this, she states that sexual aggressors act through rapine, they are predators that consume. Also, Segato adds that “the motivation is not sexual: it is political and it has to do with the necessity of demonstrating power through controlling a body” (my trans.; 75). Such is the case of the relationship Commander-handmaid, as it is through sexually assaulting the protagonist that the Commander reinforces his position of power and demonstrates how important he believes his role in society as a male figure is.

Additionally, Segato explains that women are also tutored bodies in the sense that the system decides which role is given to them and where. She affirms, “everything that cannot be processed, digested, and translated in some way by the universal [men] sieve will become the rest, the waste, the anomaly of the citizen mass (...) everything that cannot be approved by the Men filter, subject of politics, will be transformed into an anomaly, expelled as waste...” (my trans.; 97). This means that those who are not able to successfully adapt to the system, become useless, they become waste. This is exactly what happens in Gilead: those that cannot adapt to its laws and values become the waste of society. For example, Gileadeans believe that homosexuality is a sin and classify homosexual people as “gender traitors” (248), condemning them to be hanged on The Wall, a place where sinners are hanged and exposed to remind citizens that they should behave according to the norms. If the sin is less serious, the person is possibly sent to a place full of toxic waste called the “Colonies.” Regarding this place, Gileadeans affirm that “...the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you’ve got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves. They don’t bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything (...) Anyway they’re mostly people they want to get rid of” (248). In the Colonies, where women are a majority, they are barely fed or protected. They are dehumanized and classified as “unwomen,” that is, women who have lost the conditions that according to Gilead, make them such. In both cases, people become the “waste” that does not contribute to the system.

In *Counter-pedagogies of cruelty*, Segato also refers to the fact that in many societies, it is common that people teach and naturalize the expropriation of lives and identities. She asserts that several times a patriarchal system creates a vocabulary that puts women in a subordinate place in relation to men, that marks the difference between them, taking into account that gender is an important tool when it comes to dominating: “(...) creating a vocabulary that allows naming the differences with which the patriarchy acts. They are all crimes of patriarchy, but they are different crimes in the format, in the manner of their

production. They are all crimes that put us women in a subordinate place that threatens our lives without a doubt” (my trans.; 72). This is exactly what happens in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: the government of Gilead expropriates women’s lives and identities. They are deprived of reading, writing, having coffee, smoking, wearing their pre-Gilead clothes, having sexual intercourse with somebody that is not the assigned Commander, talking about their pre-Gilead lives or even using their real names in the case of handmaids and Marthas. At certain points of the novel, the protagonist feels oppressed, as she affirms “such songs are not sung any more in public, especially the ones that use words like *free*. They are considered too dangerous. They belong to outlawed sects” (54) and “I used to dress like that. That was freedom” (28). In both cases, the protagonist feels nostalgic when thinking about the past because of not being able neither to sing about past freedom nor wear the clothes she desires. Regarding the question of names, in the case of handmaids, they acquire a name relative to the Commander to whom they have been assigned. That name is created after the Commander’s name preceded by the preposition “of” that denotes belonging. For example, the protagonist is given “Offred” as her new name. Moreover, she must only use red clothes from the neck to the bottom: red gloves and a red ankle-length dress with long-length sleeves. Also, she must use white wings on her head to cover her face and prevent her from seeing and being seen. Last, she must use flat shoes to prevent her from falling in case she gets pregnant. These clothes match the handmaid’s role in this society: red represents the colour of blood, which is related to conceiving children. Offred’s face and body are almost all covered, as she should not be seen as an object of lust but as a vessel, her assigned identity. In fact, Aunt Lydia usually manipulates handmaids to embrace their identities and to “think of it as being in the army” (7). Not only are handmaids deprived of their identities, but also maids, who are in charge of cleaning the house and cooking. They cannot use their real names either: all maids are named “Martha” and are referred to as “my Martha” as if they belonged to the Commander. Given that he is the master of all the women in the house, they belong to him and act according to his desire. Indeed, it is even part

of his name: a Commander commands and is characterized by leadership and ownership. In this way, Gilead is organized by classifying people according to their assigned new roles. This is closely related to what Segato explains in one of her classes: “symbolic violence is a way of classifying value; it is a way of attributing differential value to people according to their gender” (my trans.; 13:36). According to her, assigning certain features to people only because of their gender is a type of violence. Gilead exercises this by attributing citizens new identities and new names according to what the leaders in this system believe is more appropriate to each gender.

Additionally, what Segato describes as “the masculinity mandate” (my trans.; 40) is another pedagogy of cruelty that has been naturalized in society. According to her, in a patriarchal system, there is a male mandate that constantly tests men based on showing their manliness in front of others which needs to be accomplished in order to belong to the man status: “the masculinity mandate demands men to prove they are men all the time; because masculinity, different from femininity, is a status, a hierarchy of prestige, it is acquired as a degree and its validity must be renewed and verified currently” (my trans.; 40). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, those who run the republic of Gilead are Commanders. They control politics, war, and the economy, and make decisions together. One of these decisions, as previously mentioned, is to use handmaids for copulation to repopulate the area. As part of their masculinity mandate, all Commanders should consider this as their role without exception. This is perceived by the protagonist at the moment of the Ceremony, as she thinks to herself: “this is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty” (95). Doing this “business” would honor him and keep his status. The figure of the Commander is directly related to Segato’s definition of a sexual aggressor, who “is not an anomalous subject, as the media and the common sense or the collective imaginary portray: strange, lonely, isolated, deviant and with a singular vocation as a criminal (...) but a subject that executes his action in company” (my trans.; 40), since Commanders agree on using handmaids for copulation. However, Commanders are not the

only participants that are present in the Ceremony, but also there are other “interlocutors in the shadows” (my trans.; 41) as Segato calls them. This means that there are other agents that agree with the sexual assaulter or are even present at the moment of the crime. Such is usually the case of Aunts, Eyes, and Wives. While Aunts are in charge of indoctrinating handmaids and making them believe that their natural role sent by God is that of delivering their bodies to Commanders and bearing life, Eyes are in charge of monitoring, spying, interrogating, and even arresting handmaids (or other citizens, less probable) if necessary. In the case of Wives, who serve the Commanders inside houses, they are present at the moment of non-consensual intercourse. Throughout the Ceremony, Wives sit on the bed and take handmaids by their wrists while they lie between the Wives’ legs so that they stay quiet. Also, handmaids are probably positioned like this to symbolize that the Commanders access Wives through handmaids. Also, Aunts, Eyes, and Wives are the Commanders’ “communicating veins” (my trans.; 50) in Segato’s words, as they are agents that administrate life and act in a parallel way with the government, conformed of Commanders in the novel. In this way, patriarchy functions everywhere. Additionally, Segato considers another crucial aspect included in the masculinity mandate: “...the patriarchy (...) is historical because it needs the mythical narrative to justify and legitimize itself. If the patriarchy were of natural order, it would not need to narrate its foundations” (my trans.; 45). With this, Segato acknowledges that it is through a mythical narrative, generally the Bible, with which a patriarchal system justifies its functioning. This is also part of the masculinity mandate among Commanders in Gilead. Gileadeans use the Bible repeatedly to justify their actions, as this was used as the foundation of the republic. They adapt the content of the Bible and make it convenient to their beliefs to justify every cruel act they perform. For instance, Commanders cite from the Bible before the Ceremony takes place: “and Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband” (90). This passage refers to the story of Leah, a woman who was infertile and decides to bear children through her maid, which resembles the relationship between Commanders and handmaids. One of

the reasons why Commanders decide to found Gilead is their lack of emotions. Segato points out that in a patriarchal system, men silence their emotionality and are unconscious of what they lack:

men suffer and cannot perceive their own suffering, so they cannot treat it. As they cannot express it, they cancel the perception of their physical and psychological pain. Due to masculine narcissism (...) men cannot be aware of what they lack, as they mask and silence their lack. (...) Women have forms of friendship, bonds, that allow them to find their support, and, most of all, they do not have any honour problems as men (my trans.; 65).

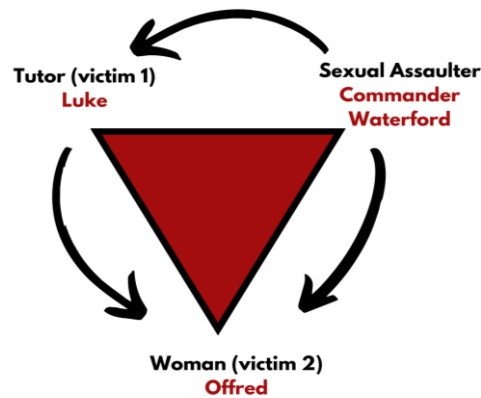
According to her studies, Segato expresses that it is easier for women to analyze how they feel, externalize those feelings, and form bonds with others to share them. This is how they can feel emotionally supported. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is seen recurrently in handmaids, Marthas, and Commanders. In the case of handmaids and Marthas, they find ways to talk about their feelings, send messages to each other, and even form alliances to try to escape Gilead. Nonetheless, this is not the case for Commanders. In one of his talks with the protagonist, her Commander confesses: “the problem wasn’t only with the women, he says. The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore (...) you know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel” (210). He explains to her that the reason for creating Gilead was because of Commanders’ demotivation and emptiness which needed to be filled. In Segato’s words, men are trained to “...show and demonstrate that they have a thick, hardened, desensitized skin (...), that they can abolish inside them the vulnerability that we call ‘compassion’ and, furthermore, that they can commit cruel acts with a very low sensitivity as a consequence” (my trans.; 45) and Gileadean Commanders are not an exception but a reflection of this. They have built a republic in which they fulfil their roles of violence without any remorse, but with a lack of

compassion that allows them to remain in their manly status and accomplish the masculinity mandate in Gilead.

Clearly, *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects Segato's pedagogies of cruelty. The objectification and dehumanization of women who are considered tutored bodies, the expropriation of identity, and the masculinity mandate are taught and naturalized by most Gileadeans. At the same time, as previously mentioned, this dystopia reflects real life as it is a recollection of true events that inspired Atwood to create her work of fiction and give it the name *The Handmaid's Tale*. In order to try to make a change in society and prevent these events from happening again, it is important to consider the protagonist's role in the novel in relation to the pedagogies of cruelty seen throughout it, because, in Segato's words: "...we are in front of a warlike scene, a type of war that lacks a name, but expands as a scourge capturing the most vulnerable lives, the lives of unprotected people due to inhabiting social and geographic spaces where the state's light does not light up" (my trans.; 51). Then, how can people counteract pedagogies of cruelty? By, as Segato tries to answer, conceiving "a counter-pedagogy of cruelty [that] works on the consciousness [and] that only a linked and communal world determines the limits on the objectification of life" (my trans.; 16). A counter-pedagogy of cruelty would only be achieved if people question and analyze the mechanism of the patriarchy, become aware of what they are, where they come from, what they were taught and what they teach now, leave aside individualism in order to embrace society considering it functions as a unit, and identify the suffering and talk about it, as the other's suffering is everybody's. By working on this gradually, people would be able to heal, rescue the sensitivity which was mostly lost, and build on new values that would certainly provide people with welfare worldwide.

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Appendix 1



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