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GENDER ISSUES IN U.S. LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND *VOX*

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of history, the representation of female characters in literature has been influenced by the historical and social context of the author's time of production. Feminist leading figures in real life, apart from attempting to achieve equal access to opportunities for women, have influenced the development in the characterisation of female roles. The progression that could be perceived in society was transferred into literature. From passive objects, women developed into active subjects within the literary world.

This BA thesis presents a comparative study of the female characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018). The aim is to discuss the evolution in the representation of female protagonists from a feminist position, specifically from the 1980s until the 2010s. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* will represent the position of an author dissenting from Ronald Reagan's radically conservative politics. On the other hand, Christina Dalcher's *Vox* has been selected to illustrate a more contemporary perspective, since the novel was composed in the context of Donald Trump's sexist, racist and exclusionary political programme.

The analysis of the corpus has been done following Algirdas Julien Greimas' actantial model. The emphasis has been placed on the characterisation of the female roles that are involved in the action of those dystopian novels. To begin with, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* offers the present and past perceptions of Offred, a handmaid that lives in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, a state that has substituted the United States of America. While serving the Commander and his wife (Serena Joy), she describes the limited freedom allowed to women, with reference to the fact that handmaids are designated to bear children for the elite couples that have difficulties in being impregnated. By establishing a close connection with Gilead's secret police force, Offred accomplishes an active and predominant role in the novel. Similarly, in Christina Dalcher's *Vox* Jean McClellan performs the central role. She is a mother and neurolinguist who is embedded in an American minister's plan to cure the country of evil by restoring the Victorian model for women. In this case, female liberty is also restricted: women return to the domestic sphere, where their speech is restrained by counters to one hundred words per day. Comparable with Offred, Jean McClellan's

function becomes essential: considering her excellent reputation for her research, she is the elected person to contribute to the government's plan to damage the language areas of the brain by being assigned to create a serum to cure fluent aphasia. By refusing to participate in the minister's strategy, she aims to ensure the population's freedom from the government's control.

The study is organised as follows: Chapter 1 contains a conceptual report. Section 1.1. provides the historical framework of reference for a better comprehension of the third and fourth waves of feminism, which delimit the time of production of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox*. Section 1.2. offers an explanation of the Algirdas Julien Greimas' actantial model. It will be used for a deep analysis of the female characters that constitute the corpus of the dissertation. Finally, Chapter 2 is devoted to the examination of the evolution of the female characters in the aforementioned dystopian novels. Another chapter for the main conclusions reached is provided to close this dissertation.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The term *feminism* refers to the belief in social, economic, and political equality between the sexes, and the social movement that fights to achieve it. This concept has experienced an evolution throughout the course of history, regarding the substantial impact and emergence of different ideological perspectives about gender. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has depicted in *We Should all Be Feminists*, everybody has their own conception of the term and, therefore, "some people will say a woman is subordinate to men because it's our culture. But culture is constantly changing" (2014, 24). Adichie insists on the fact that, despite the noticeable biological differences among sexes, people make culture, and it is socialisation that "exaggerate[s] the differences" (2014, 19). Regarding gender, she incorporates the notion of women's oppression into her perspective, asserting that

> [f]eminism is, of course, part of human rights in general—but to choose to use the vague expression human rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women. That the problem was not being human, but specifically about being a female human. (2014, 23)

Considering modern feminism, normally a three-phase distinction is established, regarding the three different feminist waves that have emerged at different points of history. Arguably, a fourth stage can be added, with reference to the fact that it is contemporarily emerging and taking advantage of social networking to make the still-present different gender issues visible. What they all have in common is their aim to protect women's rights and interests in order to achieve their independence, together with their self-determination in public life. Nonetheless, feminism has acquired different interpretations concerning these waves' more precise interests. A revision of these four stages will be provided in order to clarify the examination of the different perception of the term within Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Christina Dalcher's *Vox*.

1.1. Historical framework: An introduction to feminism

In the Anglophone context, the first wave of feminism refers to the movement that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Valery Sanders asserts in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*,

> [n]ineteenth-century feminism emerged as a response to the specific difficulties individual women encountered in their lives: hence the emergence of 'key personalities', and a series of campaigns to achieve clearly defined ends. By the end of the century, major reforms had been accomplished, but the terms 'feminist' and 'feminism' had only just begun to be used. (2006, 15)

The primary purpose then was to promote and provide equal access to opportunities for women, and it was inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). This book was perceived as the commencement of modern feminism, regarding her innovative conception about an indispensable middle-class women's revolution in manners. At this stage, women were for the first time conducting a mission that differed from the Victorian model of preservation of peace and purity of their family.

As one of the most defining factors of the first wave, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 made American feminist activism visible. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1840) drafted the *Declaration of Sentiments*, and conjointly with Lucretia Mott, directed the convention. They used "the 1776 Declaration of Independence as a model for the Declaration of Sentiments issued by the Convention" (Sanders, 2006, 21). Approximately three hundred men and women attended the meeting in order to claim for the end of discrimination based on sex and to campaign for the effective "modification of the divorce laws, married women's property rights, and the vote" (Sanders, 2006, 21).

The 1850s was defined as the most significant decade of the nineteenth century for Victorian women. Considerable legislative and social reforms were introduced in agreement with women's individual crises and personal needs. After the suffragettes' fight to incorporate married and single women in the country's political process, the vote exposed some limitations. It was not until 1928 that American women were perceived as the same as men in legislative terms, since the remains of the separation into two different spheres were still illustrated.

Once America entered World War II (1939-1945), women acquired a more independent status that shifted the previous homemaker designated role. They received special attention in relation to "women's employment, familial roles and personal freedom" (Macintyre, 2013, 65). Some of them were offered a paid job related to the war industry, so they could even serve the country. This was the first step by which the barriers against married women accessing jobs were reduced, being symbolised by

Rosie the Riveter. In addition, approximately 300,000 women served in U.S. military uniform with organizations, including Women's Army Corps and Waves.

Simultaneous to the Vietnam War, the existing racial tensions and, after women won suffrage, "beginning in the 1960s—with the approval of the birth control pill by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration—the second wave of the feminist movement began" (Bronski, 2011, 267). It is important to remark that "for nearly half a century, feminists had identified lack of reproductive control as a central impediment to women's personal, sexual, and economic independence and freedom" (Bronski, 2011, 267). The first major contribution to the second wave was the National Organization for Women (NOW). It was founded in 1966 by Betty Friedan's liberal feminist tradition. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) proposed a change within the existent social structures aiming to achieve equality of opportunity for women within the public sphere. Regarding the failure of America's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), NOW aimed to discuss sex discrimination and attempted to "bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, assuming all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men" (Thornham, 2006, 25). Its first conference was held on 1967.

The feminist writer Kate Millett is also considered to be a pioneer of the second wave. In 1969, her *Sexual Politics* described the eminence of patriarchy in sexual discourse, perceived to lead to gender oppression. She inaugurated a mode of feminist analysis which emphasised that culture and ideology were the main supporters of the patriarchal primacy, leading to the assimilation of women to a dependent, and subordinated class. In this line of thought, the origin of the Women's Liberation Movement lies in the "civil rights, anti-Vietnam War and student movements of the 1960s" (Thornham, 2006, 26). A sense of consciousness-raising defined women's liberation groups, defined as "the move to transform what is experienced as personal into analysis in political terms, with the accompanying recognition that 'the personal *is* political', that male power is exercised and reinforced through 'personal' institutions such as marriage, child-rearing and sexual practices" (Thornham, 2006, 26). With reference to this slogan, Carol Hanisch wrote the *The Personal is Political* (1969), an essay that proclaimed the relevance of making available to the society even the most private aspects of women's lives. The term *identity politics* was also coined in order to

relieve society of sexism, by demonstrating that race, class and gender oppression types were related.

Public action emerged at this point. Protests against the Miss America beauty contest took place in Atlantic City in 1968. Feminists satirised what they regarded as a humiliating "cattle parade" in which women were diminished to mere objects dominated by patriarchy. Significantly, "among the demonstrators' actions was the creation of a 'Freedom Trash Can' into which were thrown 'objects of female torture' such as dishcloths, high heels, bras and girdles" (Thornham, 2006, 26). This event has been regarded as a metaphor of women's repression by their husbands, which forced them to stay at home or to have low-paying jobs. Conclusively, the purpose of this wave was to strive for equality, together with the promotion of solidarity and sisterhood.

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After having provided some introductory information, the stages that pertain to the time of production of the dystopian novels that conform the corpus of the dissertation are going to be discussed. Firstly, being influenced by postcolonial and postmodern ideologies, the third wave of feminism started in the mid 1990s. Third wavers belonged to a new generation, and they strived to create their own particular conception of feminism by incorporating the particular set of challenges they faced, together with the inclusion of different social contexts.

Claire Snyder conceives feminism at this stage as a full-scale rebellion against the second wave's perception of feminism, and more precisely, as "a tactical response to the conditions of postmodernity rather than to portray it as a new postmodernist stage of feminist theory" (2008, 187). In her essay *What Is Third-wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay*, Snyder asserts that, contrasting with their predecessors, "third-wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it (heterosexual or otherwise), and actively play with femininity" (2008, 179). Besides, third-wave feminists criticised the second-wave assertion that women "share something in common as women: a common gender identity and set of experiences" (Snyder, 2008, 183). In this case, sharing their experiences within consciousness-raising (CR) groups was not the unique means to raise awareness to their oppression. Nevertheless,

"the phrase 'the personal is political' still forms the core of feminism and sharing personal experiences functions as a form of CR within the third wave" (Snyder, 2008, 184). In this sense, third-wave stories aimed to demonstrate the disparity between dominant discourses and the reality of women's lives, who occupied minority subject positions.

The third wave has been described as intersectional. Women who had been reared in interracial or multicultural contexts shared their experiences as a means of illustrating the considerable impact of race, class, and gender into modern life. Snyder observes that "[i]n its response to postmodernity, third-wave feminism strives to accommodate a wider array of identity positions than did the second wave—at least theoretically" (2008, 187). Therefore, at this stage, women of colour or belonging to other marginalised groups were given voice and visibility for the first time. Their personal experiences emphasised that, for the third wave, there was not a unified category or version of women which every woman had to accept. Third-wave feminism involved the individuals' control over their agency and liberty to self-expression, enthusiastically welcoming inclusion, ambiguity and exploration. As the National Organization for Women asserts, "gender binary and heteronormativity should not exist" (NOW, 2016).

Definitely, this wave was made possible by an increased professional power, and therefore, economic status that was achieved by women belonging to the second wave. Precisely, third-wave feminists are founded on second wave, taking into consideration the substantial differences that have been described. As Lise Shapiro Sanders concisely expresses: "The third wave is not only concerned with cultural and sexual politics, but also with political and social issues, ranging from ongoing wage discrimination, access to education and domestic violence, to eating disorders, globalisation and the effects of racism and classism on the movement—all historically feminist concerns" (2007, 40-41).

Noticeably, the underground feminist punk "grrls" gained importance and visibility by their construction of rhetoric of mimicry which subverted the sexist culture by appropriating derogatory terms, including *slut* or *bitch*, as represented in Elizabeth Wurtzel's *In Praise of Difficult Women* (1999). They also advocated for the creation of women-only cyberspaces, promoting the total rupture with gender boundaries by experimenting creative thought and multiculturalism. Still, third-wave feminism is

considered to have influenced the present society, in view of the contribution of the late 20th-century information revolution to the massive expansion of innovative ideas, encouraging change and indicating the entailment of all parties' participation.

Susan's Faludi's concept of *backlash* may be one of the most distinctive aspects of this stage of feminism. It is connected to the term *postfeminism*, conceived as a reaction and critique on the feminist movement. In this sense, Sarah Gamble asserts that Susan Faludi "in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991), portrays postfeminism as a devastating reaction against the ground gained by the second wave feminism" (2006, 37). What Faludi identifies as *backlash* against women's rights is "nothing new in American history. Indeed, it's a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway toward equality, a seemingly inevitable early frost to the culture's brief flowerings of feminism" (Faludi, 1991, 61). She describes the impossibility for women to progress in their constant fight against gender discrimination:

> [T]he history of women's rights is more commonly charted as a flat deadline that, only twenty years ago, began a sharp and unprecedented incline. Ignoring the many peaks and valleys traversed in the endless march toward liberty, this mental map of American women's progress presents instead a great plain of "traditional" womanhood, upon which women have roamed helplessly and "naturally," the eternally passive subjects until the 1970s women's movement came along. This map is in itself harmful to women's rights; it presents women's struggle for liberty as if it were a one-time event, a curious and even noxious by-product of a postmodern age. (Faludi 1991, 61)

She also claims that the contemporary backlash started within the New Right:

> The New Right leaders were among the first to articulate the central argument of the backlash—that women's equality is responsible for women's unhappiness. They were also the first to lambaste the women's movement for what would become its two most popularly cited, and contradictory, sins: promoting materialism over moral values (i.e., turning women into greedy yuppies) and dismantling the traditional familial support system (i.e., turning women into welfare mothers). (1991, 242)

The New Right program was introduced to Congress in 1981 through the Family Protection Act. Contrasting with its label, its objective consisted in disassembling almost all legal achievement of the women's movement. At this point of American history, feminism encountered Ronald Reagan's victory in the first election to the White House, in 1980. As a reaction to Reagan's social change agenda, "[a] more ideologically profound tension existed in the field of civil rights where Reagan's early commitment a president to 'guaranteeing equality of treatment [as] the government's proper function'

was trumped by his more deep-seated opposition to social welfare spending, federal regulation and especially employment quotas for blacks and women" (Bashevkin, 1994, 675). Along these lines, the bases for feminist policy isolation were perceptible: "Republican transformation in 1980 was an official party platform that, first, rejected the Equal Rights Amendment, second, endorsed a constitutional amendment banning abortion and, third, believed positions on the federal judiciary should be awarded only to anti-abortion nominees" (Bashevkin, 1994, 679). Faludi's conception of *backlash* had been illustrated once again, as we will see depicted in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this sense, Atwood's novel is a "product of the 1980s, focusing on the possible consequences of neo-conservative religious and political trends in the United States" (Howells, 2006, 161).

With a view to reflect the conception of feminism that is developed in Christina Dalcher's *Vox*, the last stage of feminism must be analysed. The fourth wave of feminism is currently emerging. It is generally considered to have started in December 2012, the moment when a young woman died in India after she was brutally gang raped. As Nicola Rivers asserts, "the fourth wave has risen from the ashes of postfeminism and assessing where fourth-wave feminism overlaps and intersects with notions of postfeminism(s) and previously established 'waves'" (2017, 1). Its main focus includes the previous waves' main issues in relation to identity, gender and sexuality, including sexual harassments, rapes and body shaming. Additionally, "much like the third wave before it, fourth-wave feminism is fractured and complex, frequently reinforcing the advancement of the individual and centring the seductive notions of 'choice,' 'empowerment,' and 'agency'" (Rivers, 2017, 24). In this respect, the fourth, prospective wave will give rise to transnational feminist actions.

In order to invoke social change, a number of social movements, including the Women's March on Washington, #MeToo, and the Time's Up campaign have been established. Subsequent to the 2016 Presidential Election, and concerning Donald Trump's sexist, racist and exclusionary political programme, these campaigns remained of potential relevance. In this context, Asad Haider has directed attention to the struggle of shaping an identity within a transforming society, particularly when encountering oppressive institutionalized and publicly accepted behaviours. Particularly, in *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (2018), Haider asserts the following:

> [I]t is devastating to live with questions about who you are; it is also devastating to confront a world in which so much is wrong and unjust. To oppose this injustice, the project of universal emancipation, of a global, revolutionary solidarity, can only be realized through organization and action. I believe it is possible to achieve this, to carry forward the struggle of those who came before. But the dominant ideology is hard at work convincing us that there is no alternative. In this flat, hopeless reality, some choose the consolations of fundamentalism. But others choose the consolations of identity. (as cited in Robertson, 2019, 8)

The day after the 45th president's inauguration (January 21, 2017), Women's March demonstrations took place. The aim of this movement was to face Republican Donald Trump's dominant ideology and to reinforce gender equality and civil rights. Those protests were held in Washington D.C., but they rapidly spread, leading to actions across the United States and beyond. With more approximately, 4.6 million people attending the different rallies in the United States, the Women's March can be regarded as the largest single-day demonstration in the country's history.

Another campaign to promote the decisive accomplishment of social change was the Me Too Movement, fundamentally organised by means of social media. It gave visibility to shared experiences of sexual violence. Although it was originally founded in 2006 by the sexual harassment survivor and activist Tarana Burke, its great prominence came in 2017. At this point, several actresses revealed their sexual harassment episodes, alluding to the film industry impunity. Since that moment, the movement has yielded a source of solidarity for women victims of sexual assault from all over the world, who began to use the hashtag #MeToo when sharing their experiences on social media. Furthermore, the campaign continued expanding through public denunciation of influential male figures in the public sphere.

Revisiting the evolution of feminism throughout American history is relevant to delimit the time of production of the novels that are at the centre of this analysis. In this sense, identifying the perceptible contrast concerning the historical context of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Vox* (2018) enables the construction of a more accurate perspective of the female characters that have the leading role in their respective publications.

1.2. Narrative framework: Algirdas Julien Greimas

The analysis of the evolution of the female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox* will be done through the application of an actantial model. In theory, "any real or thematized action may be described by at least one actantial model. Strictly speaking, the actantial model for a text does not exist. For one thing, there are as many models as there are actions; for another, the same action can often be seen from several different perspectives" (Hébert, 2011, 72). Besides, a text could be analysed by applying a set or group actantial models in which there is a relationship between them. As Louis Hébert explained, those relationships could be temporal, and/or logical.

Algirdas Julien Greimas' Actantial Model will be used here. This theoretical framework, embedded in the field of narrative semiotics, can be defined as "a tool that can theoretically be used to analyse any real or thematized action, but particularly those depicted in literary texts or images" (Hébert, 2011, 71). Greimas' narrative semiotics has emerged from the synthesis of narratology and semiotics. With regard to semiotics, it "analyses social and cultural phenomena by isolating units of signification and examining their structural interrelationship" (Duvall,1982, 192). Narrative semiotics precisely "manifests a desire to make literary studies systematic and scientific" (Duvall, 1982, 192).

Greimas' theory reflected on the concept of meaning as a structure. His proposals have been influenced by the structural analysis of the folktale by Vladimir Propp. In *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), the function of the characters in the story is discussed as actions distributed in the narrative. Greimas himself asserts that Propp provided him with the syntagmatic or syntactic component for his work at the first stage of his examination of semiotics: "When I examined Propp's work on folktale and analysed it, I noticed that four principal segments could be identified, that these segments could be paired, and that two of these pairs made up a Lévi-Straussian schema" (Greimas, Perron & Collins, 1989, 541). Around 1970, Greimas made an attempt to reformulate the elements of narrativity to attain a global comprehension of narrative, leading to the definition of the *act*:

> An act consists in causing things to happen or to be. But in order for things to be they have to be realized. In order for them to be realized the conditions for realization must be met, that is to say, one has to be able to do, or know how to do, and so on. (Greimas, Perron & Collins, 1989, 542)

Greimas considered the Proppian tale as an ideological narrative schema, and he realized the following:

> Propp's model was intuitive and that it could be broken down into parts, […]. In other words, we discovered a semiotics of manipulation—how the sender manipulates the subject; then a semiotics of action—how competence is acquired to carry out performance; and finally a semiotics of sanction—that is to say, passing judgments on self, on others, and on things. (Greimas, Perron & Collins, 1989, 543)

Also, Greimas was inspired by structural linguistics (Saussure) and the structural analysis of the myth (Lévi-Strauss). He adopted from Saussure a significant and crucial linguistic metaphor for his theory, consisting of the perception that "literature is a language, and the individual narrative is a sentence" (Duvall, 1982, 192). He aimed to comprehend the grammar of the narrative sentence. From Lévi-Strauss' notion of *mythemes*, Greimas developed the concept of *sememes*, "the smallest unit of semantic signification, which he finds in the *actant*" (Duvall, 1982, 192). It should be stressed that, despite narratology providing Greimas with various relevant concepts,

> [t]hese concepts were not simply borrowed but were modified, transformed, problematized, and redefined before being integrated into the global theory. A case in point is Propp's thirty-one functions, which were initially defined to account for the morphology of the folktale. But what initially described the morphology of the folktale at the level of events was transformed over the years by Greimas into a model of syntactic structures governed by intersubjective relations […] he opened the way to a semiotic of passions that studied both how passions modified a subject's cognitive and pragmatic performances, and how epistemic categories, such as knowing and believing, modified the subject's competencies and performance. (Perron, 1989, 527)

In the actantial model, "an action may be broken down into six components" (Hébert, 2011, 71). Those components are called *actants*, which are assigned one of the actantial classes. Hence, the actantial analysis illustrates that every narrative possesses six actants, which function on three axes. These are called *categories* by Greimas, as defined by their relationship to the central category—the subject-object relationship:

> 1) the axis of desire on which the subject (S) carries out the major action to obtain the object (O); 2) the axis of communication on which the destinateur (Dl) or sender gives the object to the destinataire (D2) or receiver, which is also the subject; and 3) the axis of conflict on which the subject confronts both adjuvants (A) or helpers and opposants or traitors (T) to avoid confusion with the object). (Duvall, 1982, 192)[1]

[1] Duvall's' *Communication* and *Conflict* correspond to Greimas' *Knowledge* (sender/receiver) and *Power* (adjuvant/opponent), respectively. Greimas' terminology is preferred for this dissertation.

Besides, it could be relevant to note that what differs from the traditional study of characters is that in the actantial analysis "actants do not represent human agents and they need not even be characters" (Duvall, 1982, 192). As Louis Hébert depicts, an actant may correspond to three different categories: an anthropomorphic being, a concrete, inanimate element, including things; or a concept. He added than an actant could be individual or collective. Besides "in theory, the six actants may belong to any of the three ontological categories listed above. In actual application, there are some common exclusions: subjects, senders and receivers tend to belong to the category of anthropomorphic beings" (Hébert, 2011,73).

An illustrative schema of Greimas' actants is provided below:

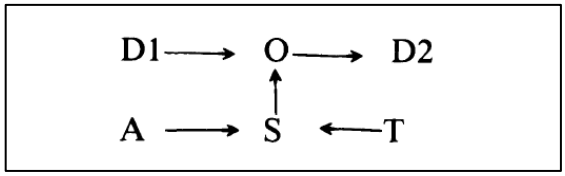

Figure 1. Source: John N. Duvall (1982)

Considering the possible relationships between the actants, another approach could be presented. Greimas delineates the general structure of the actantial model grounded in the object of the subject's desire and located (functioning the object of communication), between the sender and the recipient. The subject's desire is modified into projections of the adjuvant and of the opponent. In this model, the *thematic investiture* is possible. Rafael Venancio defines it as "a thematic force in the subject-object relationship (graphically represented by the arrow)" (2019, 14), in which the notion of *desire* remodels itself into different functions, as it will be later explained. Conclusively, Greimas provided the following graphical representation of the actantial model:

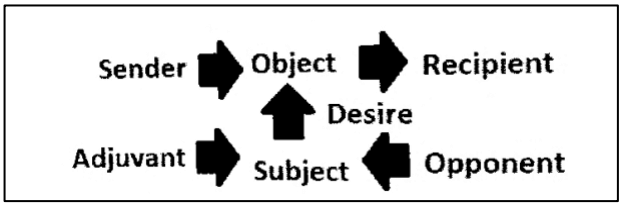

Figure 2. Source: Rafael Venancio (2019)

As previously stated and illustrated, those actants are located in three different axes: the axis of desire (subject/object), the axis of power (adjuvant/opponent), and the axis of knowledge (sender/receiver). As Louis Hébert depicts in *Tools for Text and Image Analysis* (2011), in the axis of desire "depending on whether the object is conjoined with the subject […] or disjoined example it [s relationship] is called a conjunction or a disjunction" (71). Regarding the axis of power, a different relationship can be established between adjuvant and opponent: "The [adjuvant] assists in achieving the desired junction between the subject and object; the opponent hinders the same" (Hébert, 2011, 71). Finally, within the axis of knowledge, it could be asserted that a mutual-interest relationship is established: "the receiver (or beneficiary-receiver) as that which benefits from achieving the junction between subject and object" (Hébert, 2011, 71).

After having attempted to briefly discuss the origins and the structure of the actantial model, a more exhaustive analysis of each of the actants will be provided. The first of them is the *Subject*: it is considered to be central for a narrative production, "what is directed toward an object" (Hébert, 2011, 71). As Venancio affirms, the place of action of the subject in Greimas' model is interrelated with an experience of loss. In this sense, he observes that "the notion of loss […] is inherited, in fact, from the very philosophical process that places us as humans. Since Plato, human life is considered a process of loss of full life" (2019, 21). Besides, he remarks that every narrative has "[a] searching experience that only the first loss of break with normality produces" (Venancio, 2019, 22). As my analysis will prove, episodes of loss clearly define the existence and actions of the female characters that have the leading role in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Dalcher's *Vox.* Their freedom, agency, economic independence, families, aspirations and, therefore, identities have been suddenly eradicated.

From Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, Greimas has inherited the notions of *collective* and *group*, distinctive of the Marxist perspective perceptible in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). From Sartre's perspective, both terms are considerably opposed: "Collective is the sign of passivity, of the 'classical mass'. […] Group is the mass with class "consciousness", revolutionary and active. However, there is always the risk of one becoming the other" (Venancio, 2019, 28). Relocating this

position to Greimas' actantial model, an interexistent condition of the subjects can be illustrated. For him, the collective acting as a narrative subject "dissolves their individualities into a single entity, causing little disturbance in the narrative" (Venancio, 2019, 30). From this standpoint, double protagonists or extremely cohesive characters could be conceived as subjects. By contrast, in those cases in which the narrative subject is presented as a group, "the protagonists cause small multiplicities in the actantial model, facilitating the interaction with the audience as well as its expansion" (Venancio, 2019, 30). As a result, it could be asserted that presenting the actantial model with a subject as a group prompts multidimensionality. As viewed, the subject has always been seen to be a crucial actant, and it could be important to note that the general actantial model has to be adapted to each particular narrative. In this dissertation, two individual subjects as protagonists will be examined: Offred (*The Handmaid's Tale*) and Jean McClellan (*Vox*). Additionally, some collective and group characters will be briefly discussed, in order to exemplify the passive or active roles of female characters in dystopian narrative, including the Wives, Aunts, Marthas, Econowives, and the Unwomen (*The Handmaid's Tale*), and the Pure Women (*Vox*).

Another essential element for the analysis is *desire*: "the only one [which] is not an actant per se, but the vector that unites subject to object, the vector of the so-called Thematic Investiture" (Venancio, 2019, 35). In this case, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis has evidently influenced Greimas' theory. The Lacanian notion of desire consists in the representation of the human identity through the *mirror stage*. In that respect, the human being was thought to feel a sense of completeness: "the human being, when generated, is nothing more than a part of another human being. And even when it is born, it takes a while to realize that it not part of this other human being, but just like him, outside" (Venancio, 2019, 36). Nonetheless, following Lacan's psychoanalytic perspective, this first complicity evolved into a lack, a failure. The subject could not be represented in its entirety, but it was perceived in its openness. Under these circumstances, the thematic investiture of desire is conceived as an imaginary form of completeness, pursued by the object through the object. As Venancio summarizes, "[t]he resolution of loss in reparation is made by the object and the search for it is desire" (2019, 42). Therefore, the notion of desire in the narrative is central, regarding that it is the driving force of the action: "It is the desire that unites Subject to

Object, which connects the transport of Object from Destinator to Recipient, as well as the aid condition of the Adjuvant with that of antagonism to the Opponent" (Venancio, 2019, 42).

In order to conclude with the examination of the axis of desire, the *Object* narrative actant is going to be analysed. As mentioned above, desire is transported through the object as a means of repairing the sense of loss that the subject experiments. Besides, Rafael Venancio adds that "the status of truth […] lies in the Object of the narrative. If the Subject permits ordering positioning, the Object indicates the narrative anchoring situation" (2019, 54). Greimas insists on the fact that the "examination of the object actant allowed […] to identify two kinds of objects: those that are invested with "objective values" and those that possess "subjective values" (Greimas, Perron & Collins, 1987, 112).

From the mid-20th century, the search for greater attention to the narrative object was emphasized by two French streams: the Nouveau Roman and the Rive Gauche Cinema. Both of them indicated that "it [was] possible for the Object to be one similar to the Subject that has been reified by Desire" (Venancio, 2019, 59). This notion could be relevant for the analysis of the female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Vox*. In this respect, the female figure could be objectified by the male subject or the male opponent, presenting the Object's weakness in contrast with the Subject. Besides, the Object could also be reified by a situation which determines its abrupt departure from the narrative plot. In this case, the Subject would react with complete indifference. As a consequence, by making the Object problematic, the narrative defines two more narrative actants: the Sender and the Recipient.

For a narrative story to evolve, atemporal and spatial context is needed to locate the Subject-desire-Object axis. At this stage, two main issues may rise: on the one hand, the Sender could be confused with the beginning of the narrative. On the other hand, the Recipient could be confused with the assembly of the narrative world, the diegesis. In other words, "the possibility of having other worlds constructed from the referential world that exists outside the narrative and is where we live" (Venancio, 2019, 59). From this perspective, with a view to construct a given world through a text, a reference to what is thought to be the reader, and more specifically, the model reader, is needed. Hence, narrative authors attempt to build their model reader as accurately as possible,

for instance, by adapting the degree of linguistic difficulty, the abundance of references, or the introduction of allusions. All in all, the Sender symbolises the most distinctive part of the diegesis and the principal source of the narrative. As Greimas conceives it, "the Sender is the one who provides the laws for the functioning of the narrative and its action. That is why they are linked to objectivity—the Object" (Venancio, 2019, 71).

With reference to Greimas' model, the recipient could be confounded with the narrative ending. In this sense, "[n]ot [with] the end of the story itself, but the embodiment of the ultimate goal. After all, if the Subject takes the Object to the Recipient, we have the end of our story" (Venancio, 2019, 73). It could be added that even though narrative productions can end without any imposed conditions, the narrative end will be invariably imaginary. Greimas asserted that "the recipient [could] be its own sender" (Greimas, Perron & Collins, 1987, 112). The Sender's world does not offer the possibility of renewal. It could be asserted that the relationship between the Sender and the Recipient is based on a specular limitation, examined by the trajectory of the Object. Therefore, an influence of the Subject-desire-Object tripod is noticeable.

To conclude, an examination of the axis of power will be provided. To begin with, in order to define the term *Adjuvant*, it could be relevant to remark that there are two types of actants in the search for the subject by the object: "One, which is intended to aid the Subject, is called by Greimas as an adjuvant" (Venancio, 2019, 81), and it can be regarded as a mentor or as a sidekick. This notion represents the case for spinoffs, and it could be relevant for briefly analysing the relationship between Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel: *The Testament*s (2019). In relation to this, Greimas exposed that each narrative had a separate and independent existence. As previously mentioned, all novels are separately analysed with an individualised model.

The Opponent could be regarded as the negative Subject: "Negative in the sense that, ideologically, it is set in opposition to the Subject and the path of the other actants, relegating its place, whether of villainy or counterpoint" (Venancio, 2019, 95). Russian formalism, especially Propp's, assigns the Opponent two different categories: the villain and the false hero. Both of them have interfered with the hero's path "either in linking with the Object through Desire or in directing the story towards the Recipient" (Venancio, 2019, 96). Greimas has been inspired by this conception in order to place the Opponent in a contrary vector to the others, but near the Recipient. In this sense, the

Opponent "is both the first and barrier to this fact. Usually, the first barrier is the villain and the last is the fake hero" (Venancio, 2019, 96).

As a conclusion, the thematic investiture that is present in every narrative connects the subject and the object through the notion of desire. Greimas' ideas and legacy have definitely contributed to the foundation and analysis of various types of narratives. His theory will be used as a means to exemplify the evolution of the female characters within Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Christina Dalcher's *Vox*.

2. FEMALE ROLES IN DYSTOPIAN FICTION: TWO CASE STUDIES

Before analysing the evolution of their female characters, it is relevant to clarify that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Christina Dalcher's *Vox* belong to the genre of dystopian fiction. As the most essential component of this type of narrative, both show perceptible shifts between the past, present and future, predictably with a self-consciously warning determination. On the one hand, *The Handmaid's Tale* "is a product of the 1980s, focusing on the possible consequences of neo-conservative religious and political trends in the United States" (Howells, 2006, 161). On the other hand, *Vox* is set in a near-future government-dominated United States, where the female population is oppressed and only allowed to speak one hundred words a day if they want to avoid a thousand volts of electricity coursing through their veins.

Together with the existence of time shifts (through which the protagonists recall their prior lives), both novels are embedded in the dystopian genre. They are founded on the generic features of this kind of narrative, including "failed utopian visions, counter-narratives of resistance to a new prevailing order, survivors' stories and open endings" (Howells, 2006, 162). In this sense, "[t]o think about utopia, […] one must think about the ideal or perfect. Dystopia involves utopia's opposite: a nightmare, the ultimate flawed world, or *a society worse than the existing one*" (Wilson, 2013, 1). It could be asserted that both novels discussed here conform the "writer's response to contemporary situations of cultural crisis" (Howells, 2006, 161).

Margaret Atwood and Christina Dalcher could be framed by Sharon R. Wilson's approach, expressed in her book *Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, which considers "how utopia and dystopia create new worlds, establish genre and critique gender roles, traditions and values" (Wilson, 2013, 2). In addition, their novels depict a futuristic scenario. Both books exhibit their authors' environmental concerns and construct a hypothetical future situation, based on contemporary evidence. Atwood has constructed the plot by portraying "the late twentieth-century Western trend towards mass consumerism which Gilead tried to reverse by its fundamentalist doctrines and its liturgy of 'moral values'[resulting] in an American lifestyle of consumerist decadence in a high-tech world which is ultimately death doomed by one man's megalomaniac project of bioterrorism" (Howells, 2006, 161). In a 2005 United States, Atwood creates a hypothetical situation by the incorporation of "environmental catastrophe, high

incidences of infertility, the rise of right-wing Christian fundamentalism as a political force, and deep hostility to thepost-1960s feminist movement" (Howells, 2006, 162). Similarly, Dalcher tries to show in *Vox* the devastating effect of the full control of a sexist government, closely related to the women's subjugation under the male figure. Definitely, women's liberty and agency are restrained by their limited speech and forced silence. In this sense, some parallelisms can be established between *Vox*'s storyline and Donald Trump's authoritarian and racist project, coinciding with the fourth wave of feminism.

Finally, as it will be explained in the next two sections, these two novels disassemble the canon for dystopias: "the majority of dystopias […] have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime. They've acted as the temptresses of the male protagonists" (Atwood, 2004, 516). In my case studies, the female protagonists struggle against the historical conflict of women's silencing, by which they are deprived of their identities. Atwood and Dalcher reverse the patriarchal model of society by incorporating the experiences of a female first-person narrator as a means to defy silence.

2.1. Female characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

As previously mentioned, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a dystopian novel. For its production, "Atwood has resisted the ghetto of science fiction, insisting that she writes 'speculative fiction' which rehearses possible futures on the basis of historical and contemporary evidence" (Howells, 2006, 162). The book particularly emphasises human rights abuses, centring on "the oppression of women under a fundamentalist regime, [and it is] entirely social and political in its agenda" (Howells, 2006, 163).

Regarding its setting, in consequence of a military coup, the Republic of Gilead comprises a "patriarchal theocracy with a strict hierarchical order" (Kuznetski, 2021, 3). This particular regime has been established for the purpose of resolving the alarming infertility and infant mortality rates produced by nuclear waste and toxic pollution. Contrastingly, the leaders of the revolution claimed that the catastrophic demographic situation "resulted from too much individual freedom, free love, homosexual relationships, birth control and women having careers" (Kuznetski, 2021, 3). Gilead

integrates many of the features that "are familiar to the reader of dystopian fiction: the lack of freedom, the constant surveillance, the routine, the failed escape attempt (in this case by Offred's friend, identified by her real name, Moira), and an underground movement (in this case called Mayday)" (Ketterer, 1989, 211). Certainly, Atwood has demonstrated by the level of surveillance "the extent to which the female subject and her body are contained and closely watched within a patriarchy that considers their very existence an attack or departure waiting to happen" (Davies, 2006, 62). Additionally, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a change of setting in the last section of the novel ("Historical Notes"): from the Republic of Gilead to the historical conference in Nunavit two hundred years later, contributing to its characterisation as a dystopian novel.

Within this framework, Margaret Atwood incorporates three different categories of female characters: individual characters and, using Jean-Paul Sartre's terminology, group, and collective characters. It is relevant to allude to this subdivision in order to better understand the distinctive characteristics of Offred, the protagonist in the novel that is going to define this part of the corpus. As it is going to be explained, in the novel "women are further divided into classes according to how useful their bodies are to the regime, and are thus turned into socially" (Kuznetski, 2021, 4). *The Handmaid's Tale* consists of six different collective characters, as they have a passive role in the action of the novel, with reference to their subjugation to the male authority and dominance. They are going to be briefly discussed, listed in order of their freedom within the female scope under this male authoritarian regime.

First, the *Wives* comprise the elite, as they are married to Gilead's military Commanders. They have a considerable influence in Gilead. On the one hand, many of them had a fundamental role in the creation and implementation of Gilead's drastic religious laws, as well as in the drafting of the basis of the constitution. For instance, Serena Joy was one of the founder minds of Gilead. On the other hand, the Wives' most important role in the household is visible during Ceremonies, in which they hold the arms of their Handmaids and witness the ritualised rape. They wear blue as a symbol of "both purity and, paradoxically, royalty and subservience" (Kuznetski, 2021, 4). In turn, the *Aunts*, who are post-menopausal and unmarried, are loyal allies to the new fundamentalist regime, wearing brown in resemblance to the soldiers' uniforms in the

two World Wars. They conform the only class of women who are allowed to read, "in exchange for their cruelty in maintaining order within the female sphere" (Kuznetski, 2021, 4). The next category is the *Marthas*: unmarried or beyond their fertile age, they labour for the Wives as domestic servants. Marthas also perform in the novel as a symbol of social status for the Commanders. Another collective is constituted by *Econowives*, who are only defined by their lower status, despite being fertile and married. Yet another rank is constituted by the *Unwomen*, who are "the lesbians, feminists, political dissidents, or rebels, who are sterile, or past childbearing age" (Kuznetski, 2021, 4). They have no reproductive role in Gilead. In consequence, they are sent to the colonies, where they are death-sentenced due to their excessive exposure to chemical and radioactive waste.

As the most relevant class for this BA thesis, the *Handmaids* are going to be discussed in more detail, and within it, Offred will be singled out as an individual. The women who are elected and forced to belong to the collective of Handmaids are classified by their low morality (in Gilead's terms), as they are "divorced, single mothers, cohabiting, remarried, with relationships outside marriage, lesbians who have had IVF, prostitutes, rape victims ... anyone who is regarded 'sinful' in Gilead, fertile but not 'deserving' of raising their biological children" (Kuznetski, 2021, 5). Their role is to procreate for the unfertile elite couples. In fact, every stage of their reproductive cycle is completely controlled. They are impregnated by a Commander in rape rituals labelled *Ceremonies*. In the novel, Margaret Atwood has conferred Offred the following perception of her own situation as a Handmaid: "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (1985, 103). Once the Handmaid has given birth, the baby is raised by the elite couple, and the Handmaid is delivered to other family with a view to perform the same essential function for the regime. In this respect, the female body is inevitably limited to public use. This class of women is typified by their red clothes, implying two different possible connotations: on the one hand, red could resemble the colour of blood: "they are the life-blood of a state whose demographics is catastrophic" (Kuznetski, 2021, 4). On the other hand, regarding their absence of chastity for the system, red could be perceived as the symbol of "a 'scarlet woman,' making Handmaids highly visible" (Kuznetski, 2021, 5). In other words, red would be

designated for the Handmaids as a means of highlighting their impurity relying on the fact that they had had numerous sexual encounters with different men.

In this context of oppression for the different classes of women, Margaret Atwood creates a feminist dystopia in which she provides a female character with an inner life and a voice. Protagonist and first-person narrator Offred is a 33-year-old woman that must have been born in the 1970s.[2] She "is imprisoned in a domestic disaster situation where she is always aware of a world beyond Gilead and hopes for a different future as she addresses her putative audience" (Howells, 2006, 162). Throughout her life, Offred faces the typical dystopian scenario of being confined in a space and a narrative where she is deprived of any sense of agency. With the absence of a real name, "as a Handmaid […] she has no rights as an individual but instead has been conscripted into sexual service to the state, reduced by its doctrine of biological essentialism to her female role as a child breeder" (Howells, 2006, 195).

In order to analyse Offred as an individual character, Greimas' actantial model will be used. As the protagonist, narrator and central actant who desires an object, Offred is the Subject. She experiences episodes of loss as her identity has been erased and she has been deprived of her agency and individuality by the patriarchal Republic of Gilead. Her characterisation is marked by this traumatic event synchronically with the sudden loss of her husband (Luke) and their daughter (Hannah). As explained above, in Greimas' axis of desire, the Object is also included. In this case, Offred's desire (the driving force of the action) is to recover her identity and agency. Her real hope is to regain control over her own body, "whose femaleness has been reinscribed by Gilead's biological discourse and its oppressively Old Testament sexual practices" (Howells, 2006, 167). By achieving her Object through desire, she would be able to eradicate her experience of loss and arrive at a state of completeness, in Lacan's terms.

The axis of knowledge comprises the Sender and the Recipient. Both actants embody an interaction so that the optimal conditions are generated to achieve what the Subject desires. Offred's Sender could be the sense of freedom and independence that characterises her former life before the creation of the Gilead authoritarian regime. Her

[2] Offred is the patronymic name of the protagonist and narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The name could be understood as a derivation of "Fred's" to denote that she is "in the service of Commander Fred". It symbolises that she has been stripped of her own name and identity. It is suggested that Offred's real name is June, although it is not verified by Margaret Atwood. The first mention to Offred's name is given in the first chapter of the novel "Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (Atwood, 1985, 10).

Recipient, conceived as the realisation of her primary purpose, could be the whole female community. Offred would typify the situation of an individual who is fighting with an active role for the passive collective. She aims to guarantee the restoration of female autonomy for everyone.

In order to fulfil her ultimate goal, the axis of power has to be described. Offred has different Adjuvants, who are intended to aid her to satisfy her personal, social and political aspirations. Three different aspects have to be considered: first, the fact that she is moved by her cleverness. Within the course of the narrative, "the Commander requires a relationship with Offred outside of the Ceremony. Most of the time they play Scrabble (an illegal game since it promotes literacy); but on one occasion the Commander takes her to Jezebel's, a brothel for officers" (Ketterer, 1989, 211). She develops a strategy to continue meeting with the Commander and being close to Mayday in order to satisfy her interests in Jezebel, where Moira is secluded as prostitute. To this extent, Moira is one of the female characters that act as Offred's Adjuvants. A separatist feminist, she is Offred's best friend since their adolescence, and their close friendship is still visible when they are recruited in the Red Centre, the place where Handmaids are hosted and trained. Her role becomes more active in the novel when she successfully escapes. From that moment, Offred does not see her again until she finds her at Jezebel. Offred trusts Moira's assistance to attain her goal: the restoration of female's freedom. Moira does not seem to be cooperating in this case, since in Jezebel she has discovered more about the cruelty of the regime. Finally, it is important to consider the collaboration of Nick Blain as the only representative of the male characters performing as Adjuvants. Nick is a driver for the Waterford home in Gilead. Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, organised a sexual intercourse between him and Offred in order to bring a child to the family, since Mr. Waterford's sperm was not viable. Nick and Offred eventually made a connection and started to sneak around to see each other romantically in Gilead.

The other component of the axis of power is the Opponent: the oppressive force limiting the action of the Subject. This actant could be also analysed by establishing a division between female and male characters. In this sense, Offred finds opposition within the female scope in individual and collective characters. On the one hand, Serena Joy's behaviour denotes jealousy towards the sexual practices that occur in the

Ceremonies. She is frustrated by her inability fulfil the role that the regime has imposed on all women: to procreate. For this reason, she treats Offred violently and contemptuously. After discovering that Offred and Commander Waterford were secretly having a romantic attachment, she sends a van to arrest Offred. Serena Joy is therefore the character who determines the uncertain ending for both Offred and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Conjointly with Serena, the Aunts also obstruct Offred's mission. Aunts are considered to be the most elevated social standing for a working woman in Gilead. Their duties include instructing, supervising and preserving the health of the Handmaids, incorporating violence and brutality into their practices. The Handmaids are limited in their possibilities of escape by their constant surveillance by the Aunts, along with the harsh punishments and shock doctrine that the Aunts have embraced in order to adhere to the Gilead's administration. Surprisingly, a shift is found in the character of the most representative Aunt: Lydia. Despite her barbaric approach, adopted to dutifully serve the nation, she seems to have a real concern for the Handmaids and for what she regards as their wellbeing. Even though she believes sincerely in the ethos of Gilead, this adjustment in her behaviour could be analysed as her conversion from Opponent to Adjuvant, not only of Offred, but of all the Handmaids' collective.

With a view to close the description of Greimas' actantial model for *The Handmaid's Tale*, the set of male characters who operate as Opponents must be addressed. In this case, the entire class, except for Nick after becoming her ally, would function as Offred's Opponents. All men are supposed to both complicit and cooperate with the repressive patriarchal regime on which the Republic of Gilead is founded. Offred, as the protagonist and communicator of the Handmaids' situation and emotions, conceives this system as the fundamental cause for women's subjugation to male power, and most importantly, for the female loss of agency, identity, and their inferior, insignificant social and political role.

Offred's figure certainly tries to defy patriarchy and to reverse Gilead's authority. Margaret Atwood creates a novel that is based on the dissident account by Offred, incorporating the transcription of her recorded tapes. In this sense, the plot becomes a narrative account with a double consciousness strategy for Offred's survival, inducing to a sense of dislocation. On the one hand, "Offred survives in the present by continually slipping back into the past" (Howells, 2006, 166). In this regard, it is

Offred's determination to remember who she was and expects to return to that provides her with a stronger sense of her own identity. Atwood conjoins the past presented by the narrator's voice with the present, leading to the opposition of Offred's memories with "the official version of late twentieth-century America and herstory exposes the lies of official history, just as on her illicit visit to Jezebel's club with the Commander she registers the hypocrisy and inauthenticity of the regime" (Howells, 2006, 166). On the other hand, Offred employs memory narrative as a conscious escape mechanism: "she escapes out of time back into memories of student days with her friend Moira, the separatist feminist, or further back to childhood memories of her mother, the old-fashioned Women's Libber, both of them condemned as dissidents by the new regime" (Howells, 2006, 167). In this sense, Offred revives these fading women's heroism, creating her own irreverent idioms in celebration and mourning for them. Through this process, she strives for her psychological and emotional survival as she recounts her story, with the aim of securing her future life after Gilead.

To conclude the analysis of the female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is relevant to mention that Offred's personal narration could be understood as the incorporation of Margaret Atwood's

> own ironic view of the new neo-conservative women's culture [and] also presents a critical analysis of North American feminism since the 1960s, from the Women's Liberation Movement of her mother's generation to the rise of the New Right and Christian fundamentalism of the late 1970s and 1980s, represented here by the Commanders' Wives and the terrible Aunts. Her account dispels any singular definition of "Woman" as it emphasizes Atwood's resistance to reifying slogans, whether patriarchal or feminist. (Howells, 2006, 169)

In this sense, it could be argued that Atwood would be implying the possibility of women's rights being subjected to considerable restraints at some point in future history. Originally published in 1985, during Ronald Reagan's administration, and concurring with the restoration of women's agency over their bodies and the emergence of minority groups, *The Handmaid's Tale* could also be perceived as Margaret Atwood's direct response to his authoritarian and misogynist measures. Indeed, considerable similarities are present between the novel and the American situation in the 1980s. Reagan's presidential campaign, for example, leaned on the Christian Right as a means of imposing traditional Christian values on the citizenry. In addition, he enacted a ban on abortion in all states and was opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

He also disapproved homosexuality. Definitely, women's activism was severely restricted by law during Reagan's era. Similarly, the Handmaids' liberty was inexistent in the book, due to their enforced subordination to the male authorities. As seen through the examination of the novel, all women were disempowered under the authoritarian, sexist and misogynist fundamentalist regime that characterised the Republic of Gilead.

2.2. Female characters in Christina Dalcher's *Vox*

After having presented an analysis of a 1985 feminist dystopian novel, another perspective in a similar vein will be provided with *Vox*, a 2018 production by Christina Dalcher. This author depicts a society which is marked by a government that (within an atmosphere of alarming pollution, traffic, and obesity levels), endorses male supremacy. This system has led to the transition from the highest standard of visibility of the female power in the United Sates to women's conversion into slaves. The authoritarian established regime is based on a radical ideology and religion which instructs men to impose a correct profile for women by depriving them from their right of opinion. In this regard, the sexist government has instigated the definitive loss of women's independence by limiting their speech to a hundred words a day, leading to the constraint of the female role to household chores and the rearing of children. Along these lines, it could be argued that Christina Dalcher would be inciting her expected audience, mostly female 21st-century readers, to continue fighting for their rights.

Regarding the protagonist, Jean McLellan, it is important to allude to her role as an individual character within the female sphere. Before proceeding to describe her substantial contribution to the evolution of the plot, a general schema of the female characters within *Vox* will be provided. Similarly to Margaret Atwood, Christina Dalcher integrates individual and collective female characters that are subdued to the group of men that exercise control over this given context. In this case, the female collective characters belong to the Pure Movement. These women are depicted as modest and submissive. Their behaviour is constructed with the purpose of glorifying men, and therefore, praising God. They believe in the imposed and hierarchical American family ideal in which the restoration of the Victorian moral and values is apparent.

Jean shares certain similarities with Offred. Both characters are first-person narrators who present to the reader their voice and experiences of oppression and marginalisation within a patriarchal system. A second time, Greimas' actantial model will be applied in order to analyse Jean McLellan as the most representative individual character of a dystopian novel. Conjointly with Jean, other individual female characters are relevant within the course of the narrative, including Sonia (Jean's daughter), Jackie (Jean's friend from college), Lin (Jean's co-worker), and Olivia King (Jean's neighbour and Pure woman), as we will see.

Starting with the axis of desire, as a Subject Jean is a leading neuroscientist and linguistics expert. Her prestigious recognition as a doctor is not sufficient for the authoritarian regime, which forces her to abandon her laboratory to become a submissive housewife and to devote herself entirely to the raising of her four children. This new status of inferiority could be understood as a central, traumatic event for Jean, together with the limited speech that forces her (and all women) to speak maximum of one hundred words a day. As previously mentioned, Christina Dalcher confers on Jean the narrative voice by which the anxiety and repudiation that the female sphere feels as part of a misogynist society is expressed. As all women, she is being deprived of her identity, and it can be seen that Jean considerably diverges from the collective of Pure Women. She does not seem to relish baking and gardening, and she opposes the removal of females from the workforce. As a resolution of her loss of identity, Jean's desire is presented through her Object: she aims to reclaim voice for herself and, especially, for her daughter, Sonia. In this respect, and despite the threat of unbearable pain, she refuses to keep silent several times within the course of the narrative.

Advancing with the analysis of Dalcher's *Vox,* in the axis of knowledge, the Sender actant is considered to be the principal source of the narrative. According to this statement, Jean's Sender could be her previous freedom and agency, and the sense of equality that she could experience before she was dispossessed from her previous life, career, and individuality. This can be exemplified throughout the novel, where Christina Dalcher supplies Jean (as narrator) with flashbacks, as a means to recall the past. Therefore, Dalcher constructs some instances of memory-narrative, with a view to make Jane remember what her former life was like and to instigate her to protest against the exclusionary and patriarchal regime.

Sonia's innocence and autonomy could also be perceived as another Sender for Jean. Those are the values on which Jean is inspired to confront the authoritarian system which threatens to prevail over the future life of Sonia and the subsequent generations. By achieving the Object (bringing voice back to all women), it could be asserted that Jane's Recipient would be Sonia first and, by extension, the female society. Comparable to Offred, Jean would be fighting as an individual for the benefit of the whole, symbolised by her particular interest in protecting her daughter's rights. In this sense, she opposes a regime that promotes a society marked by the male power, and which instructs women from an early age to submit to the will of men, with no possibility of voicing their opinion. Furthermore, Jean's desire to fight for the recovery of women's equal rights becomes more urgent when she perceives Sonia as a constant illustration of the outcomes of Pure Movement. As the most representative instance, Sonia regards as an achievement having the lowest word-rate in the class, for which she has been awarded: "*Won prize!* she said. *Lowest!* I know what her school is up to. I know, because the counter on her thin wrist says the number 3. My daughter has been silent all day" (Dalcher, 2018, 87). Along these lines, a contest is created for the purpose of enrolling in the Pure Girls School (PGS). Comparable to Atwood's Aunts, in the PGS, "older women provide teaching and training to younger women" (Dalcher, 2018, 89). As a result, Jean comprehends that Sonia is an innocent victim of the system and could be regarded as the embodiment of the ease with which a society acquires its beliefs. A significant step for Jean's recognition of the acceptance and assimilation to the imposed and misogynist system could be the moment when Sonia makes a drawing of their family: "Instead of standing next to Patrick, or even at the far end of the family line, book ending our kids, I'm fifth. After my husband, after Steven, after the eleven-year-old twins. And Sonia has made me smaller than everyone except for her" (Dalcher, 2018, 92).

Finally, for the purpose of completing the actantial model of *Vox*, a description of the axis of power will be provided. This axis establishes the circumstances that will favour or disfavour the events that will take place in the action of the novel. On the one hand, Adjuvants (who help to ensure the desired connection between the Subject and the Object), could be divided into three different categories: non-material, female, and male characters. Firstly, Jean's neurolinguistic expertise, especially her research on

Wernicke's aphasia, will transform Jean from a housewife into the elected person to cure the president's brother's speech disorder after having suffered a skiing accident. After being assigned to create an anti-aphasia serum, Jean accepts the proposal on her own terms, for which she visibly attains certain empowerment: "I want three things, Mr. President. I want my daughter's counter removed. I want her excused from school; I'll tech her at home Friday through Monday. I want Lin on the project full-time, not just backup" (Dalcher, 2018, 94). In exchange for her research, she manages to dispose of the word counter and to provide her daughter with a higher daily word quota, as well as to restore her co-worker Lin to their laboratory.

At this point, it is significant to discuss the role of Jackie Juarez as another Adjuvant. As Jean does not have a counter tallying each word uttered, she does anything to be heard. She finds inspiration in the figure of her friend Jackie, a radical women's rights activist that has always insisted on the duty of women to be involved in politics. Jean constantly recalls Jackie's words in this respect: "You can start small, Jeanie," she said. "Attend some rallies, hand out flyers, talk to a few people about issues. You don't have to change the world all by yourself, you know" (Dalcher, 2018, 152). As a result of her previous interactions with Jackie, who becomes a role model for her, Jean performs minor rebellious acts, reacts to the system, and demonstrates her optimism for the near-future restoration of equality. She refuses to remain silent and to accept the one-way imposed system, in which the male supremacy is established. For instance, as it will be later on explained, she reacts against her son Steven, who also tries to impose on her the traditional values of the Pure Movement:

> "'Save some for cereal tomorrow,' I say. 'You're not the only human in this house.' 'Maybe you should go out and get another carton, then. It's your job, right?' My hand flies with a will of its own, makes contact; and a bright palm print blooms on the right side of Steven's face. He doesn't flinch, doesn't raise his own hand, doesn't react at all, except to say, 'Nice, Mom. Real nice. One day, that's gonna be a crime.' 'You little shit'". (Dalcher, 2018, 66-67)

Another remarkable instance could be the moment when she accepts to take part in the project, she declares her intentions, and demonstrates her opposition to the regime, even aggressively: "My price is to eradicate the Pure Movement from the ground up, like pulling weeds from what was once a lively garden. My price is to see

Reverend Carl Corbin and his flock hanged or torn to shreds by wild torn to shreds by wild dogs or burnt to cinders in hell" (Dalcher, 2018, 91-92).

Finally, regarding the male sphere, Lorenzo would be the last of Jean's most significant Adjuvants. He is Jean's Italian lover and collaborator in developing the serum. As a means to establish a comparison between her husband and her lover, Jean considers Lorenzo to be the only person without any attributable fault, contrasting with the figure of Patrick. Although Jean classifies men in the established totalitarian regime into two different categories, she excludes Lorenzo from this categorisation. She asserts that, within the system, most men are conservative, white and heterosexual, divided into believers and misogynists. In this sense, she asserts that "Patrick is the third type of man. He's not a believer and he's not a woman-hating asshole; he's just weak. And I'd rather think of men who aren't" (Dalcher, 2018, 70). By contrast, for characterising Lorenzo, Jean insists on his uniqueness, stating that "Lorenzo isn't a believer or a hater or a coward. He's in his own category, tucked inside a dark and pleasant corner of my mind" (Dalcher, 2018, 73). Definitely, Lorenzo's active and protective attitude, together with their mutual passion, will be of major significance in shaping the ending of the narrative. After she becomes pregnant by him, Lorenzo tries to pursue an alternative for Jean, contemplating the possibility that their baby could be a girl. By means of different contacts, he manages to get Jean to regain the possibility of travelling and provides her with a passport in his former wife's name. Despite her initial doubts, Jean finally decides to move to Canada, where she begins a new life with Lorenzo and her children. It is in this new narrative space where she can conclude her long-awaited struggle for freedom.

On the other hand, the axis of power is also constituted by the Opponent actant. In this case, two different oppressive forces hinder the course of the action of the narrative. The most evident Opponent for Jean is the extremism and political radicalism that characterise the new regime, conjointly with the creation and implementation of sexist laws that assign women a secondary and almost non-existent social role. Within this patriarchal regime, founded on the Pure Movement, two male characters should be emphasised: the new Purist President Sam Myers, whose victory in the election would imply the definite loss of women's rights; and Reverend Carl Corbin, as the most representative and influential figure of the system. Under a disordered and chaotic

American political climate, Jean struggles with not hating the men in her life. Firstly, Jean perceives her husband Patrick as a bystander of injustice and bigotry. Despite an evolution in the construction of the character, who acquires a more active role, he is perceived as characterless by Jean as she considers that Patrick accepts the regime precisely because, as a man, he has been able to preserve his autonomy. Additionally, Jean witnesses in her oldest son, Steven, the process of indoctrination through education. Both male members of her family become Jean's Opponents, and she admits hating them on several occasions:

> I don't hate them. I tell myself I don't hate them. But sometimes I do. I hate that the males in my family tell Sonia how pretty she is. I hate that they're the ones who soothe her when she falls off her push-bike, that they make up stories to tell her about princesses and mermaids. I hate having to way and listen. (Dalcher, 2018, 26)

In this sense, it can be seen how Jean does not accept her silenced and passive position. She tends to accuse the entire male group for this imposed social position on women, and she constantly strives to believe that Patrick and Steven had no role in the elaboration of the regime's programme. Nonetheless, she cannot stand the idea that they could be accomplices in the brutality of the situation, instead of using their liberty to express a strong sense of opposition.

As a conclusion, it could be relevant to reflect on the fact that, as a 2018 narrative product, *Vox* incorporates various similarities with Donald Trump's sexist and exclusionary political agenda. Simultaneous to the fourth wave of feminism, this novel approaches the topics of inequality and lack of agency as means of providing visibility to the issues that still women of the 21st century are fighting against. In this sense, the silencing of voices could be perceived as allusion to the #MeToo movement and understood as an urgent plea for social change. Christina Dalcher uses literature to address real social problems. Within the course of the narrative, she is presenting a story of social inequality with the aim of promoting women's solidarity against injustice. Ultimately, the novel plays a significant role in understanding the extent of the social and political problems impacting women in the United States and, therefore, that affect the welfare of the society. Even Dalcher has attributed the novel's success to the time of production, stating the following: "I think if your agent pitches a book about limiting women's speech at the same moment #MeToo is happening, publishers are going to pay attention. So some of *VOX*'s success was a happy result of timing!" (Dalcher, 2019).

Within this framework, the authoritarian regime instigated by the Pure Movement that Christina Dalcher has included in *Vox* corresponds with the numerous references to Christianity and God that characterised the blatant sexist and racist statements that Donald Trump offered during his political campaign in 2016. It could be argued that President Sam Myers' principles resemble Donald Trump's ideology. Both dominant leaders conceive the repression of the human rights as a symbol of strength for a powerful government. Similarly, Donald Trump exhibited his devotion to religion and traditionalism.

From this perspective, Trump's belief system is characterised by his misogynist perception of the society. For him and for the Pure Movement, the popular Victorian image of the *Angel in the House* would define the women's submissive role in society. Along these lines, Dalcher echoes Trump's retrograde perspective, based on the belief that "a woman's place is in the home, and her role is to support her husband without complaint" (Wilson, 2017, 212). All things considered, Trump ideal standards for women correspond to the depiction of women by Christina Dalcher: women bereft of their agency and with no power over their bodies, sexual orientation, or choices.

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation has presented a study of the female characters of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018). The analysis has incorporated the introductory research, which centred on the description of the evolution of female characters regarding the historical framework, together with the application of Julien Algirdas Greimas' Actantial Model. Both dystopian novels have presented various similarities, which are going to be summarised within this section.

In the first place, both authors have incorporated a first-person female narrator and protagonist as a means of reversing, firstly, the patriarchal model society and, secondly, the canonical dystopian structure. Despite the fact in the novels that the female characters are divided hierarchically, conforming a caste system, the situations that are presented within the course of the narratives affect all the female characters and their freedom equally. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, each collective of women has a pre-established social role, which they cannot evade. They have no freedom, not even if they belong to the elite class. As previously mentioned, all women are characterised by the colour of their clothes, as a symbol of repression. Correspondingly, the female characters in *Vox*, are united by their powerlessness, even though some of them belong to the Pure Movement established as preferential by the authoritarian and patriarchal regime. All of them are deprived of their voices and identities, and they are enforced to meet the Victorian standard: merely to become submissive housewives.

Another important aspect that both stories share is that, in spite of the control and manipulation of women's bodies that has resulted in the loss of individual freedom, women play an essential role in both societies, and the protagonists embody this fact. On the one hand, Offred, as a representative of the Handmaids, has an essential role in ensuring procreation in Gilead. On the other hand, Jean is the only person who is considered valid to save the president's brother, due to her neurolinguistic studies and research.

As described in the core of this thesis, in both novels religion performs a very important function in the indoctrinating of the characters. The regimes that are established are based on traditional religious ideals based on heterosexuality and a three-faced hierarchy: God > man > woman. In order to guarantee traditional family values, strict methods of surveillance, violence and cruelty are installed. In Margaret

Atwood's work, women are controlled by the Angels, the Guardians, and the Eyes, along with characters belonging to the female collective such as the Aunts. Similarly, Christina Dalcher has incorporated cameras into her dystopian setting, and forces each of her female characters to wear word counters that will deliver electric shocks when users deviate from what the regime has established as correct.

Regarding the political context of the authors, it could be asserted that Margaret Atwood and Christina Dalcher are defying the inferior imposed social status and silence on women in the moment when they created their characters. They write in order to exhibit their dissatisfaction with the regimes of Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump, respectively, through the vindictiveness of their protagonists. In this sense, *Vox* could be understood as a contemporary re-imagining of *The Handmaid's* Tale and as a disturbing reminder of the power and importance of language. Despite their different times of production, the major resemblance that could be appreciated in the novels could be the authors' deliberate intention of encouraging their expected female readers to continue the struggle for women's rights.

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