

# “TWO LEGGED WOMBS”: SURROGACY AND MARGARET ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Published in 1985, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is Margaret Atwood’s most famous work and her first dystopian novel, since all her previous fiction had adjusted to the conventions of realism. In general the plot of any dystopia should be based on factuality, or in other words, it has to be a plausible representation of the future of a concrete society. However, either when the novel was published or now that more than thirty years have passed, there is no such thing as “handmaids.” Nothing of the sort exist in any democratic country (Kay n.p.). However, as Chaterjee points out, there are many “disturbing” overlaps between Atwood’s handmaids’ struggle and the real experience and events that take place in contemporary surrogacy agreements. (n.p.). This paper examines Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century posthumanist perspective, which discusses the economic and ethical implications and no insignificant shocking similarities between the handmaids in the novel and our present-day surrogate mothers.

## RESUMEN

Publicada en 1985, *The Handmaid’s Tale* es la obra más famosa de Margaret Atwood y su primera novela distópica, ya que toda su obra de ficción anterior partía de las convenciones del realismo. Generalmente el argumento de una distopía tiene que

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estar basado en la facticidad o, en otras palabras, tiene que ser una representación creíble del futuro de una sociedad concreta. Sin embargo, ni cuando la novela fue publicada, ni ahora que han pasado más de treinta años existe algo como las criadas. No hay rastro de nada parecido en ningún país democrático (Kay n.p.). No obstante, como Chaterjee señala hay muchas coincidencias “inquietantes” entre la lucha de las criadas de Atwood y la experiencia real vivida en los acuerdos contemporáneos de subrogación (n.p.). En este artículo se analiza *The Handmaid’s Tale* desde una perspectiva posthumanista del siglo XXI, que debate las implicaciones económicas y éticas y las no insignificantes y llamativas similitudes entre las criadas de la novela y las madres subrogadas de hoy en día.

## INTRODUCTION

Published in 1985, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is Atwood’s most famous work and her first dystopian novel, since all her previous fiction had adjusted to the conventions of realism. The novel is Offred’s first person account of her own story. She is a “handmaid” in the Republic of Gilead,<sup>2</sup> a totalitarian and theocratic regime that has replaced U.S. democracy. Gilead has a very low birth rate and many children are born with severe deformities and defects due to chemical experimentation and environmental changes. In this state of affairs, the few women who are still fertile and not married under the regime’s rules are forced to serve as “handmaids.” Robbed of their own small children, they have to bear Gilead commanders’ babies and give them up immediately after giving birth to them, only to be relocated in another commander’s house and start the process all over again. But before being called Offred –the name consists of the possessive “of” followed by the name of the handmaid’s commander, indicating the handmaid’s commodification and transformation into her commander’s mere possession– the unnamed protagonist was an American citizen with a very different life that is recollected and narrated in a discontinuous way through autodiegetic, fragmented,

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<sup>2</sup> The name ‘Gilead’, which refers to a town in a hill or a hill of testimony, has a biblical origin (Gen. 31:21). It points to the religious character of the regime, which aspires to be a “model of perfection.” This concept of the perfect and model society is also related to John Winthrop’s sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” and his “city upon a hill,” which also strives to be a model of moral standards (Winthrop n.p.)

and apparently simultaneous narration,<sup>3</sup> digressions, and analepses (in Genette's terminology 244–45).

Barbara Kay strongly claims that the plot of any dystopia “should be grounded in some kind of reality, whether of historical fact or of human psychology” (n.p.) She argues that “neither genders' relationship in the 1980s, nor the influence of evangelical Christians were controversial enough to justify, even hypothetically, the creation of such a regime as Gilead” (n.p.). Kay reduces the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* to a mere example of the binary thinking of the war of the sexes and affirms that the novel has “zero degree of probability” (n.p.). She contends that “in an era of falling fertility rates [...] the spectre of mass eugenics is a compelling topic for a futurist. Yet 32 years on, there are no signs of a handmaids' program in democratic countries” (n.p.).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, she concludes that “the plots of dystopic novels based in ideology rather than observed reality can be just plain silly, with *The Handmaid's Tale* [as] a perfect case in point” (n.p.). In contrast, other critics such as Moss and Howells label *The Handmaid's Tale* as a “political fable for our time, as if the present is rushing in to confirm Atwood's dire warnings about birth technologies, environmental pollution, human rights abuses, religious fanaticism, and extreme right-wing political movements” (in Bouson 3–4). Timely, as Atwood herself defends after Trump's election (in J. Kay n.p.), or timeless because the novel tackles many issues that are still unsolved problems in Western societies, it seems undeniable that the novel still keeps its controversial character. The following pages reexamine *The Handmaid's Tale* from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective, since we have presumably reached the historical time in which Atwood placed her dystopian novel.

As Robert Pepperell explains, the “posthuman condition” and “the end of humanism,” among other things, deal with “how we live, how we conduct our exploitation of the environment, animals and

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<sup>3</sup> When readers reach the final chapter of *The Handmaid's Tale*, “Historical Notes,” they learn that Offred's story is the result of the transcription of thirty cassette tapes found in the future. Since Offred does not have any possibility of recording a cassette during her life as a handmaid, the simultaneity of her narration is obviously questioned and with it Offred's reliability both as narrator and as focalizer.

<sup>4</sup> Eugenics, as defined by its founder Sir Francis Galton, is “the science which deals with all influences which improve the inborn qualities of race; also with those which develop them to the utmost advantage” (Squier 57).

each other. It is about what things we investigate, what questions we ask and what assumptions underlie them” (171). If Gilead is a society in which extended infertility is the consequence of the environmental mistreatment and degradation that has also caused the extinction of many animal species, where the handmaids’ slavery is a perfect demonstration of exploitation of the –gendered– other, the assumption seems to be that Gilead reached the terrain and condition of the posthuman long before the term was widely known. The next pages will also assess the thin line that divides what is ethically justified and accepted by a given society –Gilead vs 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western society– and what is not.

### **SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD AND HANDMAIDS**

The role played by creative writers is, according to Squier, crucial in the understanding and treatment of artificial reproduction issues and their gender and social implications. Squier acknowledges the diverse representations and approaches of this field in the works of Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler and Angela Carter, among others. There is a certain “disjunction” in the feminist responses to reproductive technologies (RT). Some of them give “emancipatory interpretations of reproductive technologies” (19), whereas other feminist theorists classify these technologies as “unsuccessful, unsafe, unkind, unnecessary, unwanted, unsisterly, and unwise” (19). Kim Toffoletti explains that some feminist critics such as Wajcman see technology associated to maleness and as a means of perpetuating power inequalities between genders. Moreover, as Cockburn affirms, “technological tools are used by men to maintain power over women” (in Toffoletti 22). The handmaids’ role is accepted in the novel’s universe, as happens in some countries of our present-day Western society with surrogate motherhood/substitute wombs. Atwood herself acknowledges in the novel the intended relationship between surrogate mothers and handmaids. In the ‘Historical Notes’ section of the book, Pieixoto explains that already in the pre-Gilead period –the 1980s U.S.– “the need for birth services was already recognized [...] inadequately met by ‘artificial insemination,’ ‘fertility clinics,’ and the use of ‘surrogate mothers,’ who were hired for the purpose” (317). However, many people who are shocked by “the ceremony” and Offred’s duty to conceive a child for her commander and his wife, deny any parallel between her and a contemporary

surrogate mother. However, as Aunt Lydia says in the novel, “ordinary [...] is what you are used to [...] [what] may not seem ordinary to you now [...] after a time it will. It will become ordinary” (*Handmaid* 43). In other words, as Fukuyama asserts, “there are no transcendent standards for determining right and wrong beyond whatever a culture declares to be a right” (113), and in a significant number of countries our contemporary Western society approves of any biotechnological development that allows people to have gene-related offspring.

When *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, Louise Joy Brown –the first baby born as a result of an in vitro fertilization (IVF)– was seven years old. The enormous possibilities that her birth brought about for infertile people raised almost immediately the first ethical objections and the problematization of possible future developments in the field of human reproduction. At that time, Gena Corea published her book *The Mother Machine* (1985), in which she entered the ethical debate surrounding scientifically mediated motherhood and the probable implications for women in general. The issue, she argued, “is not fertility. The issue is exploitation of women” (7). In other words, what for feminists opposing RT poses a problem is the “exploitative and unequal” relationship between women and technological advances that situate women’s bodies and nature in a position increasingly dominated by technology (Toffoletti 23). Chaterjee points out that “While Atwood’s handmaids are not called surrogates, some disturbing parallels exist between their experiences and the realities of modern-day surrogacy” (n.p.). At the time of *The Handmaid's Tale's* publication, gestational surrogacy without embryo transference was a fact.<sup>5</sup> In 1983 a figure of about one hundred children had been born through this method in the United States of America (Corea 214). In her book, Corea reflects on the ethical, social, legal and economic consequences of the new possibilities opened up by the biomedical advances in RT. She enumerates the main arguments put forward in the defense of surrogate motherhood: it was an attainable resource for all these women who suffered “the empty arms” syndrome, a cure for the infertility “disease” which was a “free” decision for all the parts involved. What is more, the surrogate mother who rents her womb has certain psychological

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<sup>5</sup> In surrogacy without embryo transference the surrogate mother is inseminated with the sperm given by the prospective father, thus she is the baby’s biological mother.

“rewards”: she helps other human beings to have their own children and obtains financial gain, that is, everybody gains something. In this allegedly beneficial exchange, on the one side there is a woman’s body, on the other technology and money, as Offred thinks: “There’s always something that can be exchanged” (*Handmaid* 24). The objections Corea raises are related to probable racism, the medicalization or treatment of infertility as a disease, the lack of a real possibility of choosing on the part of the women renting their wombs, the economic factor that would transform mothers and babies into commodities, and the search for the reduction of production costs in the process that would be the trigger of another kind of colonialism.<sup>6</sup>

Sterility is the main problem regarding Gilead’s society, although it is something that officially affects only women, since any problem related to procreation by law is a woman’s fault, never a man’s (*Handmaid* 72). It is the most genuine patriarchal thought that leads Gilead’s commanders to desire the preservation of their own genes, whereas the wives, who know that none of their own genetic information is going to be preserved, only want to be mothers. They have “empty arms,” they consent to their husbands’ having sex with other women in the hope of obtaining a baby in exchange. Why does a woman accept her husband to have sex –even if as allegedly “impersonal” as the one in the ceremony– with another woman? Extrapolating this to real life, Corea explains that the reasons behind women’s acceptance of first surrogacy experiences –without embryo transference– include, among others, trying to get attention and love from the future child, fear of being exchanged for another fertile woman and a certain fear of “social ostracism and economic abandonment” (220). Corea goes on to say that in surrogate motherhood “the woman is again seen as the vessel for a man’s seed, just as she was under Aristotelian/Thomistic biology” (221). Moreover, she also affirms that it is the Judeo-Christian tradition

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<sup>6</sup> Corea remarks how, with the advent of reproduction techniques, the relationship between prospective parents and surrogate mother emanates from a situation of economic and social inequality in which the latter is the powerless. Even worse RT could imply actual racism in their practices: there is little demand for third world/other-than-white women’s eggs whereas, in contrast, there is high demand for their wombs, capable to grow up the—mostly white—babies of the powerful. In this view, infertility starts to be considered as something to heal and genetically related parenthood as a right for the economically and socially more powerful prospective parents.

which gives a woman value in relation with her fertility, as illustrated in the story of Abraham's wife, Sarai, and her "handmaid" Hagar; and now biomedicine and technology make possible the renewal of the "same old story" (223-224). This is the same narrative that Gilead's regime uses to justify the "rightfulness" of the handmaids' status. Offred is looked after for the sake of her commander and his wife, the prospective parents: "washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig" (Atwood *Handmaid* 79) and taken to the doctor "once a month, for tests" (69). Ayesha Chaterjee contends that present-day gestational mothers "are akin to Atwood's handmaids –outsourced, outside, and out of sight [...] separated from their own families, including their children, during the pregnancy and required to stay in dormitories, constantly monitored and unable to leave at will" (n.p). But the bad living conditions suffered by these modern surrogate mothers are often, whether voluntarily or not, ignored, as happens with Offred's commander in the novel, who several times "gave evidence of being truly ignorant of the real conditions under which [she] lived" (*Handmaid* 167).

Serena Joy –Offred's commander's wife– has an overwhelming desire for a baby who would raise her social value. Even if socially powerful, the wives are "defeated women" (*Handmaid* 56), since they have been unable to have their own babies. In the birthday ceremonies, Gilead's wives whose handmaids are having a baby perform childbirth as if they were themselves really in labor. They appropriate the laboring woman's role in the childbirth and get the other wives' attention. It is another kind of "ceremony" that belongs only to women and in which they achieve the highest level in social ranking among their peers. The "successful" handmaid who gives birth to a commander's healthy baby only gains her immunity, her right to continue living, whereas the wife gains both the status of mother and a baby that she will not have to share with a handmaid. It will be only "hers." Aunt Lydia declares that "a thing is valued [...] only if it is rare and hard to get" (124). In the novel's universe, the wives want to "fill their empty arms" with the most valuable possession in Gilead: a baby. As Davidson observes, it is remarkable that "there is no necessary relationship between one's importance to the perpetuation of society and one's privilege within that society" (120). The handmaids are the only fertile women in Gilead, but they live subjugated to the powerful wives as their slaves. In terms of biology, commanders and wives have surpassed the age signaled by nature to be fertile, as happens with some contemporary parents

through surrogacy,<sup>7</sup> but both the wives in the novel and the parents in 21<sup>st</sup>-century reality have the power, the means and the money to obtain their reward, the most valued commodity, a perfect baby – because both in the novel and in real life ‘defective products’ are rejected or “put somewhere, quickly, away” (*Handmaid* 123).<sup>8</sup>

### **SURROGACY: AN ELITIST “CURE” OR BUSINESS**

Corea explains that before the irruption of biotechnological advances in reproduction “a woman could at some point, however painfully, come to terms with her infertility, go on with her life” (6). Moreover, according to the World Health Organization, infertility –a “state” which all women and men reach at some point in their lives– is defined as a “disease of the reproduction system characterized by the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse” (n.p.). It is in this context of infertility/disease that RT entered as something therapeutic, something designed to “heal” someone who is “ill,” and formerly exclusively intended for heterosexual couples. Viewed in these terms, infertility would be a sickness needing a cure: genetically-related parenthood.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as has been alleged recently, genetic parenthood is the prospective parents’ right.<sup>10</sup> The desire for gene-related offspring also implies as a consequence the elimination of multiracial families. At the beginning, mostly Western white heterosexual couples resorted to surrogacy, an image that Gilead faithfully represents. Gilead is a racist white society,<sup>11</sup> and so seems

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<sup>7</sup> Only as an example, in the U.S. District of Columbia, the April 2017 new surrogacy law, sets among other things the verification of “medical and mental health evaluations and approvals of the surrogate (but not the intended parents)” (Crockin, n.p.).

<sup>8</sup> In 2016, surrogacy was on the front page of newspapers when “baby Gammy,” a Down Syndrome child “was rejected by an Australian couple who kept Gammy’s twin Pipah. The case was further complicated by the fact that the father paying for the children was discovered by the birth mom to be a sex offender” (Lahl n.p.).

<sup>9</sup> One or both parents are biologically related with the child and their genes are therefore transmitted to the child.

<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of 2017, Ciudadanos—at the time the fourth political force in Spain, where surrogacy is illegal—drafted a proposal for a surrogacy law. This generated a national debate about whether surrogacy is an exploitative practice or an “undeniable” right for those who want to be parents (Blanco n.p.).

<sup>11</sup> The TV series based on *The Handmaid’s Tale* has incorporated the figure of non-white handmaids, thus attempting to lower the clear racist component present in the original work.

to be the process of surrogacy, which was suspected from the beginning of undeniable racist nuances. As Corea argues,

Since we live in a society where white people are valued more highly than those of color, these technologies will not affect all women equally. There will be no great demand for the eggs of a black woman. But there may well be a demand for her womb –a womb which could gestate the embryo of a white woman and man. (2)

One of the main arguments against surrogacy agreements is not only the commodification of the woman's body, very often equated to prostitution, but also the issue of the baby turned into a trendy and luxury product. Nowadays surrogacy is regulated by contract, a business concerning millions of dollars in the states of the U.S., where commercial surrogacy is legal and that has turned India and other third world countries into "womb providers" (see Pardies 2016). This view of surrogacy as mere business is, according to Offred, also shared by the commander and his wife in the novel. For him, even "The Ceremony" in which he has to inseminate his handmaid "has nothing to do with sexual desire [...] is not recreation [...] is serious business" (*Handmaid* 105), whereas Serena Joy affirms that "as far as [she is] concerned, this is like a business transaction" (25). It seems that it is not a democratic way to reach motherhood/parenthood, either in the novel, or in present-day society, because not all infertile people can afford to pay for the process. It is frequently argued that it is precisely its character of profitable business that makes the agreement beneficial for all the parties involved: surrogate mother, intended parents and intermediaries. Surrogacy involves a significant economic investment on the part of the prospective parents who want to "choose" the child they want, above all a baby with their own genetic information. This is why surrogacy has been suspected of having in its roots not only the shadow of racism but also of eugenics.

In the novel there are only white handmaids, since Gilead is a racist white theocracy. In our society, when the egg comes from donors, the intended parents want to have the "best" possible baby, and those donors "who are graduates and those with high IQs are in particular demand" (Iona Institute 6), although most of the couples prefer, when possible, to be genetically related to the baby. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, a handmaid pregnant by a man other than her commander, if discovered, is sentenced to death (71). In that sense,

the survival of Gilead's society as a whole becomes only an excuse: it is the rulers' offspring that is at stake. The commanders only want their babies, not "any" Gileadean baby. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this desire for the "genetically right" baby leads some surrogate parents –suspecting that their child does not have the desired genetic code– to feel outraged. There are some cases in which, after raising a healthy baby, they sue the surrogate mother and the agency involved in the contract, thereby gaining a large economic compensation. They win lawsuits for damages because of "loss of genetic affinity" (Crockin n.p.).<sup>12</sup> As Archana Saxena *et al* wrote in 2012, "It seems ironic that people are engaging in the practice of surrogacy when nearly 12 million Indian children are orphans," and claimed for "the need to modify and make the adoption procedure simple for all" (6). But it seems at least dubious that intended parents –having the economic means to obtain a genetically related baby through surrogacy– would prefer an already born, probably from another race, and non-genetically related baby.

### **SEPARATING GENETIC INFORMATION FROM THE BODY/FLESH IN MOTHERHOOD**

In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine N. Hayles is critical of the identification of human identity with informational patterns that would be transferable from one container –the body– to another. In this conception of the posthuman subject, the body would be deprived of any substantial weight in the construction of human identity. This idea of being only a dehumanized container for a baby –genetic information– is perfectly expressed by Offred when she says: "We are containers, it's only the inside of our bodies that are important" (*Handmaid* 107). In 1990, Hayles had already argued that biogenetics and reproduction techniques stand as a good example of the denaturalization of the human body:

When the genetic text of the unborn child can be embedded in a biological site far removed from its origin, the intimate connection

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<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, recently a woman who accepted a commercial surrogacy in California delivered two children she supposed were twins, but because of a medical incident called superfetation, one of the babies was her biological son. She has been asked for compensation by the intended parents, who did not want to keep the 'unrelated' baby (Farand n.p.).

between child and womb which once provided a natural context for gestation has been denatured. ("Chaos" 27)

Both Gileadeans and contemporary want-to-be parents foster genetic information as the imperative condition to define the baby belonging to its family, its identity and, in consequence, familiar relationships. The surrogate mother, the "two-legged-womb" is, like the handmaids, ejected from a process of motherhood in which the body has lost any right and is not considered an intrinsic part of a woman's identity. After years of women's struggle affirming the ownership of their bodies, the surrogate mother's dispossession goes as far as losing any legal power of decision over her own body. A triplet's pregnant surrogate under a signed contract cannot even refuse to have a selective abortion when the intended father does not want to keep all three babies: a "75-pages agreement [...] includes a provision agreeing to selective reduction" (Crokin n.p.). As Block wonders, "if gestational surrogacy eliminates maternity rights [...] If the thinking is, 'This is not my baby; this is not my seed; I am not the mother,' can the thinking slip into 'This is not my body?'" (n.p.).

This rejection and woman's detachment from her own body is also a defense mechanism used by Offred in the novel: "one detaches oneself" (*Handmaid* 106). During the "Ceremony," she says that the commander is "fucking [...] the lower part of [her] body" (104), as if her body –split in two halves– and her bodily sensations could be separated from her mind. Moreover, Offred avoids "looking down at [her] body" because she does not want "to look at something that determines [her] so completely" (72-73). Block explains that some surrogate mothers "linguistically" dissociate from their pregnancies by means of using the language of "babysitting, foster parenting or nannyng" (n.p.). Moreover, Nadya, a Russian several-times surrogate, considers herself a worker rather than a mother, and denies any importance to the fact that the baby is fed inside her body and with her blood: "The only thing I did was giving the babies blood. The foetuses were attached to my placenta. That was the only link to my organism, the only thing that was mine!" (Weis n.p.). They try to avoid creating emotional bonds with the fetus, but as medical sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman argues, "If you are pregnant with a baby, you are the mother of the baby [...] the nutrients, the blood supply, the sounds, the sweep of the body [...] That's the only mother that baby has" (in Block n.p.). But this is not the case either in the novel or in present-day society. In both sites "there will be family

albums, too, with all the children in them; no Handmaids [no surrogate mothers] though. From the point of view of future history, this kind, we'll be invisible" (*Handmaid* 240).

Some popular posthuman theories see the body as something disposable. They defend the idea that what makes us humans is the information stored in our mind, which can be transported from one container to another. This controversy could be extrapolated to the issue of what makes us parents, the genetic information of an embryo –which cannot survive by itself–, or the body that grows this embryo into a human being? Or both? And, what about nurturing the child in the case of foster parents? It seems that those who are parents through rented wombs make it clear that genetic codes/information is the most important issue here, what gives them the right to use a woman's body to satisfy their desire. They are prospective parents that see the woman's body only as a container. If genetic information is what makes someone a baby's mother or father and the womb is considered only as a "hatchery," the baby's identity and belonging would also be associated to the 'right' genetic information. This notion becomes questioned when one learns about the ROPA –Reception of Oocytes from Partner– technique as the best way for lesbian couples to really *share* their motherhood. The technique explains that both are "biological mothers" since one is the person "who provides the eggs and the other who carries the embryo in her womb" (Marina *et al* 939). This technique implicitly recognizes the importance of the "egg mommy" and the "womb mommy" in order to "actually" share motherhood between two women; it also implicitly invalidates the argument of "disembodied" motherhood detached from the womb.

Francis Fukuyama, one of the pioneers of the Posthuman theoretical debate, is particularly worried about the implications for human identity of technological enhancements and modifications. He claims that human nature is a meaningful concept that defines our ethical dimension or "basic values" (7), and remarks that once our nature is modified by technology, our values and acceptance of political regimes will be modified as well and "will have possibly malign consequences for liberal democracy and the nature of politics itself" (7). In Gilead, most of the population is infertile, its nature has been transformed as a secondary effect of the abuse of technologies and biological experimentations that have altered both human bodies and their environment. This change in Gileadeans' bodies is the trigger of a radical shift in the social thread. Furthermore, what lies

behind creating the figure of the handmaid is not the need of the Gileadean society, as a whole, to avoid the danger of extinction, but the need of the dominant men to have their own biological descendants. It is the powerful commanders' genetic material that they want to preserve, and this is why the young guardians dream of gaining "enough power and live to be old enough, of being allotted a Handmaid of their own" (*Handmaid* 32). Genetic inheritance is as important for the commanders as for people signing a surrogacy contract.

In spite of Kay's strong defense of *The Handmaid's Tale's* fantastic and non-factual character and even though it is true that there is no sign of "pure" handmaids in democratic countries, at the time of writing this paper there seems to be a growing number of women in underdeveloped countries who have become "two legged wombs" (*Handmaid* 146) or surrogate mothers—as Offred was "forced" to be in the novel because finally "the expectations of others [...] have become [her] own" (83). As Glosswitch affirms, "*The Handmaid's Tale* has already come true just not for white Western women" (n.p.). The modern "handmaids" in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world are economically weak women, particularly third-world women, whereas "the commanders" and "wives"<sup>13</sup>—financially powerful enough to pay for renting a womb—mainly belong and remain in the first world. Twenty-first century society shows generalized tolerance and a certain lack of debate on the ethics of a woman risking her body's integrity when serving another man/woman to be a parent.<sup>14</sup> But perhaps in a not too distant future, the economically disadvantaged women's wombs will become outdated commodities and be replaced by artificial wombs.

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<sup>13</sup> I use the names "commanders and wives" indistinctly for men and women since nowadays some of the want-to-be parents that resort to a surrogate womb are also homosexual couples.

<sup>14</sup> In surrogacy with embryo transference—the preferred, in which the embryo carries at least half of its intended parents' genetic information—the surrogate mother has a hormone treatment to suppress her own ovulation, takes estrogen and progesterone for weeks. Moreover, she endures sexual abstinence with her partner, in sum, "her uterus resumes an amplified, robotic version of its normal cycle" (Block n.p.). To maximize the probabilities, the woman is implanted with more than one embryo, so the result is frequently a multiple gestation which "increases maternal morbidity and both fetal and neonatal morbidity and mortality" (*Practice Committee American Society for Reproductive Medicine*, n.p.).

Human gestation outside the womb has been the unsuccessful goal of several researchers during at least the past thirty years, but it seems that 2017 was the highlight that marked a new path. In 2017, researchers succeeded in keeping alive a lamb fetus in an artificial womb for the second time (Zoellner n.p.). In addition to this, researchers at Cambridge University kept alive a human embryo in artificial conditions imitating the womb, this time for 13 days, because there is a 14-day legal limit for keeping an embryo alive in a laboratory (Sedwick n.p.). The possibility of a human being grown outside of a woman's body seems a probable next step in the future. While the debate of whether rented wombs should be universally accepted and legalized is still unresolved, scientific developments will confront us with a new ethical dilemma, "ectogenesis," which Helen Sedwick links to the total deprivation of women's power over pregnancy. The future of human reproduction could be totally governed and controlled by technology. An option that looked like science fiction some years ago, is now a real possibility. As happened to the introduction of RT, there is not a unanimous response to ectogenesis. Some optimistically see it as the breaking up of the most important barrier separating gender roles, that is, the actual women's liberation (Prasad n.p.). In contrast, others problematize the negative possibilities: the phantom of eugenics, who controls and decides when and how to use ectogenesis, the widening of the gulf between rich and poor in reproduction, as well as the ultimate deprivation of women's right to choose (Sedwick n.p.). Others question whether an infant "nurtured in an artificial womb would not be comparable to the 'healthy, happy fetus in the womb'" (Yuko n.p.). When the controversy of women's bodies modified and controlled by technology in favor of other more powerful men and women is still unresolved, scientific research, faster in its development than society's response, goes one step further and seeks for the disposability of women's bodies in reproduction issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

The handmaids in Margaret Atwood's novel play a key role in a society that needs them to survive. But egotistically, particular interests and desires are imposed on these women, forcing them to be mere receptacles for the seed of the powerful. The handmaids' commodification and subjugation are without any doubt issues of

gender politics in a patriarchal society, but in my reading, the prioritization of the commanders and wives' reproductive needs corresponds to the imposition of the powerful individual's will over the powerless'. As Offred remarks, "maybe none of this is about control [...] Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it" (*Handmaid* 144-45). Once women's bonding is broken, "wives," "marthas" and "econowives" support, accept and collaborate with the dispossession of women. As a result, a great part of Gileadean women also cooperates with the regime and justify the handmaids' role because "they have the choice" (20). Offred herself affirms that she is not forced to be a handmaid: "this was what I chose" (*Handmaid* 105). Gilead society could have survived with the handmaids having their own babies with their own partners, but the resulting babies would not have been the "right" ones. Moreover, these babies' genetic codes would have been "wrong" and they would shift from valuable "objects" of desire to disposable things. If genetically related babies in *The Handmaid's Tale* are the powerful commanders' privilege, a parallel could be established with the situation of contemporary babies bred through artificial insemination and grown in a rented womb to satisfy the wish of financially powerful contemporary surrogate parents. In a 21<sup>st</sup>-century society in which human fertility does not involve any primary risk of extinction, contemporary surrogate mothers "voluntarily" take health risks, being as dispossessed of their bodies as the handmaids, and detached from their feelings to give another man/woman the ultimate possession they can pay for: their own genetically related baby. Both handmaids and surrogate mothers "voluntarily" do it. Both "are very happy [...] what else can [they] say?" (*Handmaid* 39). If present-day society is extremely shocked because of the handmaids' destiny, it should also be shocked because of its contemporary surrogate mothers, mostly economically powerless women, equated to the handmaids under the mission of giving the more powerful what they desire.

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