

## 79. Toxic silence of women in pre-Gilead and pre-pandemic times

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### Abstract

For a long time, the whole world has been going through difficult times and lurching from one crisis to another including natural disasters, climatic changes, economic uncertainty and political/social turmoil. However, among them, COVID-19 is the one that has put people all around the world in a situation beyond their control with its devastating and lifelong consequences. Since December 2019, it feels each day like people are living out some dystopian novel's future anew. Like the citizens portrayed in those dystopian works, the citizens of a global pandemic have lost the mastery over their own bodies and minds, and they are imprisoned in a disciplinary system of COVID-19. In that disciplinary system, the coronavirus seems not to discriminate between people; however, its long-lasting impacts do not fall equally. In fact, in a chaotic atmosphere of the pandemic, the patriarchal system makes use of the pre-existing inequalities through which women, once again, are confined into a life of passivity and submissiveness. Due to the toxic masculinity that spreads as fast as coronavirus, they are either forced to accept those truth(s) constructed in semi-silence or internalize them by ignoring. Considering those issues and analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), one of the most challenging and repulsive works of Margaret Atwood, this study aims to justify the fact that nothing depicted in this novel is too distant future for today's women, especially after COVID-19. Therefore, basing its argument on Foucauldian discourse analysis and French post-structuralism, it focuses on clarifying how women of the post-pandemic world may also fall victim to violence, exploitation and abuse emanated from toxic masculinity if they remain silent and ignorant against insidious and penetrating phallogocentric discourses prevalent in their current societies.

**Keywords:** *The Handmaid's Tale*, toxic masculinity, pre/post-pandemic world, semi-silence, discourse analysis

## Gilead ve pandemi öncesi dönemi kadınlarının toksik sessizliđi

### Öz

Uzun süredir tüm dünya doğal afetler, iklim deđişiklikleri, ekonomik belirsizlikler ve sonu gelmeyen siyasi/sosyal kargaşalar nedeniyle zor günler geçirmekte ve adeta bir krizden diđerine sürüklenmektedir. Ancak tüm bu felaketlerin arasında COVID-19, yıkıcı ve yaşam boyu sürebilecek sonuçlarıyla tüm insanlıđı kontrollerinin ötesinde bir durum içerisine hapsetmiştir. Aralık 2019'dan beri, insanlar sanki her gün distopik bir romana ait uzak geleceđi yine ve yeniden yaşıyormuş gibi hissetmekte ve tıpkı bu eserlerde tasvir edilen kişiler gibi kendi bedenleri ve zihinleri üzerindeki hakimiyetlerini kaybetmektedirler. Diđer bir deyişle, küresel bir pandeminin hayatta kalanları olarak COVID-19'un disiplin sistemi içerisinde sıkışıp kalmışlardır. Bu yeni disiplinin kural koyucusu koronavirüs, ayırım yapmaksızın tüm insanlar için aynı sonuçlara neden oluyor görünse de, bazı

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grupların pandemi döneminde de dezavantajlı duruma düştükleri açıkça görülmektedir. Ataerkil sistem, pandeminin bu kaotik ortamını ve var olan eşitsizlikleri kullanarak kadınları bir kez daha edilgen, itaatkâr ve teslimiyetçi bir yaşam içerisine hapsedmektedir. Kadınlar ise, virüs gibi hızlı bir şekilde yayılımını artıran toksik erkeklik nedeniyle, gizil söylemler bağlamında oluşturulan bu yeni gerçeklikleri ya sessizce kabul etmek ya da göz ardı ederek içselleştirmek zorunda kalmaktadır. Bu bilgiler ışığında Margaret Atwood'un en çarpıcı eserlerinden biri olan *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü*'nü (1985) inceleyen bu çalışma, romanda tasvir edilen hiçbir olayın günümüz kadınları için çok uzak bir gelecek olmadığını ve aslında öncesinde de var olan eşitsizliklerin Covid-19 ile tekrar gün yüzüne çıktığını kanıtlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla, argümanlarını Foucault'nun söylem analizi ve Fransız post-yapısalcı kuramlarına dayandırarak, kadınların yaşadıkları toplumlarca oluşturulan fallosentrik söylemlere sessiz kalmaya ve/ya karşı çıkmayarak göz ardı etmeye devam etmeleri halinde toksik erkeklik kaynaklı şiddet, istismar ve sömürüye maruz kalmaya devam edeceklerini göstermektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü*, toksik erkeklik, pandemi öncesi/sonrası dünya, gizil söylem, söylem analizi

## Introduction

With the large outbreak of a novel coronavirus emerged in China, the whole world has been experiencing a disaster. In fact, since December 2019, “we are living in a science-fiction movie, and none of us know the ending”, as Jerry Davich stated in *Chicago Tribune* ([chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com)). This virus has devastating impacts on all fields and sectors of society around the world; however, those impacts do not fall equally. As the previous epidemics have proved, such as HIV-AIDS, SARS, H1N1 and Ebola, COVID-19 is also a blow to women and their social, cultural and economic progress having been gained through a lot of suffering. It has increased the pre-existing gender gaps and widened the inequalities, since women are forced to leave the labor market permanently. They are imprisoned into a life of passivity and submissiveness due to the patriarchal norms and gender roles that stigmatize women as family-caregivers.

In fact, nothing in this androcentric world is gender-sensitive, neither is COVID-19. Even though this virus cannot be considered the root cause of the discriminatory and oppressive attitude towards women, it is certain that it has reinforced and aggravated the victimization process of them in many areas of daily life. Most importantly, it has led to the resurgence of misogyny by exploiting existing gender stereotypes and magnified the performance of toxic masculinities fed by its toxic silence. Besieged by toxic pandemic and toxic masculinity, women are once again imprisoned into ‘no-choice’ situations. What’s worse, they face losing “everything [they] worked for, that has taken 25 years”, as Anita Bhatia, UN Women Deputy Executive Director, has stated ([news.ctgn.com](http://news.ctgn.com)). Actually, two years before the COVID-19 pandemic, in an interview with Reuters in 2017, Margaret Atwood, a Canadian writer and literary critic, warned future generations about potential dangers and contingencies. By underlining the fact that what was “once preposterous”, is “now immediate”, Atwood continues as in the following:

People have forgotten that civil rights themselves had to be hard fought for and have to be fought to maintain because someone is going to take them away from you if they get the chance... I think whole generations came along who didn't have to fight for those things and weren't too worried. ([reuters.com](http://reuters.com))

Actually, the cautious readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* (hereafter *HT*, 1985) have long realized that Margaret Atwood has had sneaking suspicion about what might happen. With that in her mind, therefore, she has struggled hard to demonstrate how the ignorance about women's rights and gender

equality will result in the destruction of the society and lead to chaos. For instance, the central character of the novel, Offred, formerly an educated working wife and a mother named June Osborne, does not show any interest in the feminist movement in the society. Upon that, her mother, who is an active participant of the women's movement, gets frustrated and blames her daughter for taking her rights granted as in the following:

You young people don't appreciate things. ... You don't know what we had to go through, just to get where you are. Look at [your husband], slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far? (*HT*, p. 91)

Actually, Offred's mother foresees and thus, fears the consequences of this ignorance. Knowing very well that everything in this phallogocentric world is gendered, she reminds her daughter that the world they have now is changing. After so much effort and hard work to eliminate the subordination of women in all ethnic, class and cultural forms, because of some ignorant women who bury their heads in sand, Offred's mother thinks that they are about to lose the 'female space' offering great opportunities for the construction of genuine female voice and consciousness. For her, 'her-stories' written in "white ink", what Cixous has first uttered in her famous essay, 'The Laugh of Medusa' (1976, p. 881), are fading away and gradually being replaced by 'hi(s)stories' written in the man-made language to penetrate phallogocentric norms and ideologies. Those androcentric stories inscribed by 'pen(is)', a provocative concept put forward by Gilman and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984), confine women, once again, into a patriarchal space where they have been captivated and silenced for ages.

Thus, Offred's mother's fear has been justified and things have begun to go disastrously wrong for women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The President has been shot and the Constitution has been suspended and then violently replaced by a totalitarian and theocratic regime asserting that they would put an end to falling birthrates and terrorist attacks causing mass panic in the society. However, this new regime, the Republic of Gilead<sup>2</sup>, shows its true colors very soon and starts to implement a system of enforced sexual servitude based on oppression. Claiming that the human race is at risk, all remained fertile women (all men are fertile by phallogocentric definition) are enslaved and forced to serve as full-time breeders, or 'handmaids' to the Commanders of Gilead and their barren wives in a ménage à trois. In this dehumanized sexual 'Ceremony', including the Commander, the wife and the Handmaid, the ritual copulation, justified by the story of Rachel<sup>3</sup>, is held every month. It starts with the following lines: "And she said, behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And she gave him Bilhah, her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her" (*Genesis* 30: 3-6).

In fact, it is a ritualized holy rape, but there is no choice for those handmaids, who are trained in obedience and self-denial. They have to sacrifice their bodies to the goals of the new regime, which is breeding without questioning and rioting. From now on, they have no names, no identities and no bodies. They are just the possession 'Of their commanders, who merely regard them as "two-legged wombs" (*HT*, 103). In other words, their existence is restrained with their reproductive organs. That cruelty and physical/psychological violence exerted on the handmaids is described by Offred as below:

The Ceremony goes as usual. I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers. ... Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. ... The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge.

<sup>2</sup> 'Gilead' has a Biblical origin, which means 'a hill of testimony' (*Genesis* 31:21). The name also echoes with the religious character of the regime, aspiring to be a perfect model.

<sup>3</sup> The original handmaid's tale in *Genesis*, which is about Rachel and her husband Jacob. Rachel, unable to have a baby, lets her husband impregnate Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, so that they can keep the family lineage.

... My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. ... There wasn't a lot of choice. ... Therefore I lie still. (*HT*, p. 73)

After the Ceremony, the Commander leaves the room callously, and Serena Joy commands Offred to "get up and get out" (*HT*, p. 74), which signifies the humiliating treatment and objectification of women, not just by men but also by the passivized women of Gilead. This detached sexual copulation is, furthermore, the token of severe and long-established religious attitudes and dogmas imposed upon women and their sexualities by the patriarchal regimes. That is, the handmaids are restrained from having any control over their bodies and identities. They are "no-bod[ies] that [are] dressed up, wrapped in veils, carefully kept distant, ... nullified, kept out of the way, ... on the bedside?" as Cixous has exemplified in *The Newly Born Woman* (1986, p. 69). Thus, under the phallogocentric and theocratic gaze of the Gilead, women keep on experiencing the heart-breaking reality of being silenced and suppressed. However, one may wonder about the situation of women before the Gilead regime and ask whether that oppression and violence have started at once and unexpectedly. In fact, it is known that no discourse comes out of itself.

### The ignored semi-silence in pre-Gilead society and pre-pandemic world

Contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits ... nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: It is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true. (Foucault, 1980, p.131) (emphasis in original)

Most people accept 'truth' as universal, unchanging and ultimate since they believe that a set of truth has been established through time and knowledge. Nevertheless, for Michel Foucault, who is one of the most influential figures of French post-structuralist movement, truth is not enduring and absolute, but rather, it is reproduced and regulated constantly by the privileged groups and/or the social, political and religious institutions having the 'power'. Those powerful ones set boundaries on people's comprehension and interpretation of the world, thereby creating certain discourses and alternative truths that work to prioritize some interests over others. That is why, in accordance with the demands of those who are in positions of authority, various truths and various ways of articulating it have been produced. Foucault defines this construction as "the multiple games of truth" (1988, p. 17), and then, he continues to explain his assertion as in the following:

[S]ince the time of the Greeks, ... we do not have a complete and peremptory definition of the games of truth which would be allowed, to the exclusion of all others. There is always a possibility, in a given game of truth, to discover something else and to more or less change such and such a rule and sometimes even the totality of the game of truth. ... Who says the truth? Individuals who are free, who arrive at a certain agreement and who find themselves thrust into a certain network of practices of power and constraining institutions. (1988, p.17)

In this sense, according to Foucault, the truth is the result of the imperishable relation between 'power/knowledge regimes', and therefore, it is shaped by anybody having and/or trying to obtain power. It is a ceaseless struggle and Foucault likens it to a battle: "a battle for truth", for which people fight each other, because "there is always within each of us something that fights something else" (1980, p. 208). However, within this perpetual battle and under its disciplinary power, some groups are subjugated and forced to behave in certain ways. They are defined and reshaped by the practices of knowledge formation, or more precisely, by the 'discursive practice(s)' (Foucault, 1972). In those practices, the voices, experiences and discourses of oppressed and marginalized groups, among whom are the ones being labeled as deviant and/or pathological together with women and children, are thoroughly ignored and denied legitimate status.

Consequently, in this ‘battle of truth’, no matter what the real truth is. Once the powerful authorities or regimes define something as true within the framework of established discourses, it becomes true for everyone living in that society. This is one of the most common leitmotifs running through dystopian tradition. For instance, Lois Feuer, who analyzes the similarities between Orwell’s 1984 and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* in her article, illustrates how ‘truth’ can be reconstructed and taken to the level where it cannot be argued even if it is a validated mathematical truth: “O’Brien forces Winston to acknowledge that two plus two can equal five if the Party says so. [...] O’Brien’s point is that truth, even the *a priori* truth of mathematics, is relative and subject to the violence-enforced will of whoever is in power” (emphasis in original) (1997, pp. 87-88). In a similar way, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the totalitarian regime creates its own truth and forces all ‘Pre-Gilead’ women to accept this new code of ‘Gilead’. However, as Stuart Hall has explained basing on Foucault’s ideas, “nothing exists outside the discourse” (1997, p. 44). In other words, even for the powerful ones, the truth(s) must be reconstructed and legitimated in connection with the conditions of the ‘previous truth(s)’. According to Foucault, these previous truths have already been integrated within the discourse; nevertheless, they remain silent, hidden, denied or forbidden until they come to fruition, as he puts in *The Archeology of Knowledge*:

[A]ll manifest discourse is secretly based on an ‘already-said’; and that this ‘already-said’ is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a ‘never-said’, an incorporeal discourse, a voice as silent as a breath. ... It is supposed therefore that everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that precedes it, which continues to run obstinately beneath it, but which it covers and silences. The manifest discourse, therefore, is really *no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say*; and this ‘not-said’ is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said. (1972, p.25) (emphasis mine)

In accordance with what Foucault calls ‘semi-silence’, Atwood gives voice to Offred and through her narrative that portrays the ‘truths’ of ‘before and after’ societies, she wisely reveals how the ignored semi-silence(s) in Pre-Gilead eventually become/s the core truth(s) in Gilead. In other words, the reader of the novel discovers that the discourse and the values of Gilead have already been constructed in Pre-Gilead. In fact, these semi-silences within the society are more insidious and penetrating than the long-established norms as they are considered unriskey, thereby overlooked. However, Atwood aims to unmask the fact that if people do not defend their rights and eradicate the sexist and racist semi-silences prevalent in their societies, the things depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* may not stay as being potential political prophecies. Offred’s confession is the clear evidence of the devastating results of that ignorance:

We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, [...] but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. ... We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. (*HT*, pp.48-49)

The oppression and violence experienced by ‘others’ is considered far-fetched, thus ignored by the ones living in the comfort zone. They even sometimes blame the victims by claiming that ‘they have asked for it’. However, this insensitivity, ignorance and lack of action against all these suppression leads to more chaotic situations for people, especially for women. Under the new regime, governed by men who do not respect the sovereignty of women and their bodies, women have been disgraced and forced to be socially, physically, and economically dependent on men. As a result, they have lost their properties, jobs, families and even identities. Despite all these great losses and humiliation, most women neither ask for any clarification nor do they show any reaction, as the ones resisting to be captivated and sexually usurped are caught, tortured, and then sent to “butch paradise ... Jezebel’s” (*HT*, p. 182), where they are forced into prostitution. The others, who accept to be “offered” like Offred, (Bouson, 2001, p. 43)

internalize the new discourse, or as the Aunt Lydia has named, the new kind of ‘freedom’ provided by the Gilead regime:

There is more than one kind of freedom, [...] Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it. (*HT*, p. 27)

According to the claims of the Aunts and the Commanders of the new regime, Gilead women are given more than they have been taken away through this new kind of freedom, which is ‘freedom from being seen, gazed and penetrated’. Within this ‘limited freedom’ and the shaping practices, women now believe that they are protected from any trouble they have been previously exposed to in Pre-Gilead. The Commander Fred also, convinced of his own righteousness and the constructed truths of Gilead regime, asks Offred to remember the annoying situations of women in before society:

Don't you remember the singles bars, the indignity of high-school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. ... This way they all get a man, nobody's left out. And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, [...] or else he'd stay around and beat them up. Or if they had a job, the children in daycare or left with some brutal ignorant woman, ... Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. ... This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. (*HT*, pp. 160-61)

What is presented as freedom and happiness to women by the Gilead regime is actually life under surveillance, or as Foucault's well-known concept from *Discipline and Punish* (1977), under the ‘panoptic gaze’, which is an alert and all-seeing eye everywhere. Gilead women are now continuously monitored, watched and disempowered by this scrutinizing gaze consisting of the males in Gilead, who are “lower echelon guards called Angels and an elite corps called Guardians who frequently double as spies or Eyes” (Hansot, 1994, p.58). Debarred from the dynamic freedom, which is ‘freedom to actively do’ based on free will, and forced to live “under His Eye” (*HT*, p. 40), pre-Gilead women morph into captivated objects that “no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom” (*HT*, p. 195). Instead, they accept their ‘so-called biological destinies’ and internalize the newly constructed discourse of Gilead that gives nothing but stigmatization, imposed silence/invisibility and (sexual) violence for women.

The systematic tyranny imposed on the handmaids, or the women in Gilead is not something new or an exaggerated nightmare just depicted in a speculative fiction, but a long-lasting and habitual toxic masculinity happening everywhere. Women throughout the world, even in this day and age, have to fight against those phallogocentric discourses and struggle for their survival, dignity and freedom - ‘freedom to’ take active part in educational, financial, marriage and childbearing decisions that directly affect them. Nevertheless, in every positive step that women have taken against men's violence and brutality, they are threatened and obliged to conform more to the paradigm of hegemonic masculinity, because men acknowledge women as domestic nurturers and sexual beings for themselves. For Jocelynne A. Scutt, this is the main reason of men's violence against women, as she puts in the following:

*Violence by men against women is centered in the very fact that women are women: the violence is directed against our womanness, our sex and our sexuality. ... Yet because she is a woman, every woman knows that because she is a woman, she runs the risk of violence. The risk lies in being a woman.* (1994, p. 88) (emphasis in original)

That is why, when women have to choose between ‘freedom to’ and ‘freedom from’, they tend to move in the direction of the latter despite knowing the fact that they will be limited and imprisoned into silence. Therefore, they gradually begin to define ‘freedom to’ as something frightening and dangerous,

like the handmaids in Gilead: “[W]e found this frightening. ... Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure” (HT, p. 100), because the women in Gilead are indoctrinated that “it’s up to [them] to set the boundaries” (HT, p. 55) if they do not want to worry about being degraded, assaulted, raped and/or killed.

In fact, women of today’s world have faced the similar risks of freedom loss and increased violence during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. According to the statistics provided by the UN Women Organization, nearly 47 million women have faced the risk of extreme poverty during COVID-19 (unwomen.org), as they are the first ones to be sacrificed. On the surface, the reason for women’s exposure to layoffs and loss of livelihoods is because women typically earn less and have less secure jobs when compared to men. However, the underlying point is the patriarchal legacy that limits women to domestic duties by relying on the assertions of biological essentialism, which claims that “women’s biological properties cause and explain their subordinate social role and low status” (Stone, 2007, p.144). Within the chaotic situation of COVID-19, hegemonic masculinity and its oppressive ideology has increased its impact and started to dominate the society again. Basing its argument on the idea that women’s biology determines their destiny, that toxic masculinity poisons around and imprisons women into houses, in which men’s violence has increased because of the growing tensions in households, economic burden and women’s limited access to social and protective services available pre-lockdown. Actually, even before the COVID-19, the magnitude and scope of inequalities and violence experienced by many women in the world has been heinous. The field of education takes the lead among these inequalities. It is true that lockdowns and school closures during the pandemic have severely affected girls’ education and threaten to roll back years of progress. For instance, with the outbreak of COVID-19, nearly 129 million girls are out of school according to UNESCO (unesco.org), which ends in forced child labor or even worse, child marriage. However, this is not unusual for lots of today’s (young) women as it is the pre-existing problem for them. They consistently have to struggle hard to be able to go to school, where they get the opportunity to fulfill their potential and learn to build better futures for themselves. ‘Daddy, Send Me to School Campaign’, run by Aydın Doğan Foundation in Turkey since 2005, can be a good example for that never-ending struggle of women for their education rights. Even in the 21st century, women have to plead for their essential birthright and much worse, they have to convey these requests to their fathers in accordance with the phallogocentric culture and its constraints. That is, mothers are forced to be invisible and voiceless, like female ghosts. Hence, it would not be wrong to claim that nothing has changed for most women *‘before, during and/or after the COVID-19’* (emphasis mine) as silence and powerlessness have been their predetermined destiny by the ‘Father’s Law’, and that hegemonic masculinity knows the fact that education for girls/women is the first step for their future careers, which would provide them the ‘freedom to do’. That is why; that right must be restrained ever so as not to lose the patriarchal control on women.

COVID-19 has a snowball effect on women’s lives. Like robbing and/or interrupting the education opportunities of women all around the world, it has also deepened the pre-existing inequalities and insecurities in the field of economy. Economic insecurity has already been a problematic and unresolved issue for women even long before the pandemic. They have generally earned less, held less secure jobs and suffered disproportionate job/income losses compared to men. However, with COVID-19, this economic injustice has turned into ‘she-cession’<sup>4</sup> and the situation is getting worse for women according to the research results conducted by the European Parliament in May 2021:

[T]he lockdown and social distancing measures coupled with global travel bans have alternatively transformed the current global crisis into a ‘she-cession,’ as the *service sector* has been unduly vulnerable to the economic shock and women now increasingly face a higher likelihood of poverty, at least in the short-term. In fact, not only have women disproportionately lost their jobs at the onset of

<sup>4</sup> a term coined by C. Nicole Manson, President and Chief Executive of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research

the pandemic, but they have also encountered greater obstacles to re-enter the labor force in the period between the first two ‘waves’ of COVID-19 cases in the summer 2020. (p. 10) (emphasis mine)

That ‘she-cession’ has increased in the ‘service sector’ is not surprising indeed, as these sectors are generally regarded as ‘suitable jobs’ for women in accordance with their biology and gender roles. Occupational segregation based on sex has remained the most prevalent and challenging aspect of the labor market and women have to break through the glass-ceiling constructed by the male hegemony. When they attempt to cross over into male dominated sectors, they are hindered and sometimes blamed for being the main reason in the increase of unemployment rate, as Mehmet Şimşek, Minister of Finance of the ruling AK Party between 2009 and 2018, stated in a conference titled ‘Global Financial Crisis and Turkish Economy’:

Do you know why the unemployment rate is increasing? The answer is times of crisis. During times of a global crisis, the number of jobseekers is increasing. That is, the rate of labor force participation is higher, *particularly among women*, during times of crisis. (2009, hurriyet.com) (emphasis mine)

In other words, the phallogocentric discourse and its constructed truths for women are generally the same, which is being an obedient woman/wife for her man/husband and a self-sacrificing mother for her children. These demanding and long-established norms are hardly changing overtime, since the patriarchy does not want to be deprived of the power to control women’s lives. However, when faced with resistance, the patriarchal social structures *pretend* to be democratic and more tolerant. For instance, as soon as achieving economic independence has been the primary goal for all women across the globe, the falsifying patriarchy creates new discourses that seem promising for women through every possible tool, as in the case of Nil Karaibrahimgil’s commercial song for women’s sanitary pad. In the commercial, the main female character and her friends enjoy themselves in a funfair and sing the song: ‘As a woman, I both have a child and a career’. On the surface, the logic of the ad is to represent a strong and self-confident woman challenging traditional gender norms and roles. Nevertheless, the ad also has a sub-text having already been formed, but ‘not-said’ explicitly. It is a whisper established in the ‘semi-silence’ and subconsciously internalizes the traditional dictation that the essential role of a woman is to be a mother. Consequently, women are trapped in a dilemma between their roles as mother/wife and worker, and they “attempt to reconcile work commitment’s masculine definition of self-sufficiency and independence with family commitment’s call for mothers to devote themselves to children” (Hennessy, 2015, p.69). It is such a difficult situation that men hardly experience, because their parental involvement as fathers is not expected and forced.

Briefly, women are obliged to learn to be resilient and to accept the status quo of patriarchy, no matter whether they live in pre-Gilead/pre-pandemic or Gilead/post-pandemic. The discourse and truths of the present day have been already created and established in the semi-silence of before societies. That is why, women struggling hard all through their lives get gradually disappointed and exhausted due to physical, psychological and sexual intimidation under patriarchy. Then, among the limited choices left for them, women are generally obliged to choose to surrender and internalize the man-made truths in such a way that they do not even think about the existence of another world. When they remember how they used to live, they get surprised to see how easily everything has changed, like Offred, seeing Japanese tourists:

A group of people is coming towards us. They’re tourists, from Japan it looks like, a trade delegation perhaps, [...] I can’t help staring. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture. ... Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, [...] We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom. (*HT*, p. 29)



Actually, if Offred did not fail to realize the constraints imposed on her by pre-Gilead society and if she did not fail to resist the patriarchal status quo and its hegemonic ideologies constructed in the semi-silence, she would take control of her own destiny and she would not passively accept the conditions of Gilead. In the end, this ignorance “grind[s] [her] down” (*HT*, p. 210) and costs her the freedom that she is longing for now. In a similar way, the same kind of ignorance and lack of action having been adopted by most women in pre-pandemic times has resulted in increased violence, oppression and gender inequalities during and post-pandemic. Briefly, the incorporeal discourse of semi-silence becomes the new truths and/or new normal of today’s women and like the handmaids of Gilead, they have been ground down by the COVID-19.

## Conclusion

[I]n *The Handmaid’s Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or which it is not doing now, perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. We’ve done it, or we’re doing it. Or we could start doing it tomorrow. (Atwood, 2005, pp. 102–103)

It is what Margaret Atwood has aimed to depict to the whole world in her challenging work, *The Handmaid’s Tale*: ‘people’s ignorance, insensitivity and indifference to the perennial inhumanity’. She warns readers, especially female readers, about the devastating consequences of apathy and lack of action against toxic masculinity by insisting that such kind of project mentality and procrastination will result in deepened oppression, sexism and gender inequalities. For her, unless this tendency of denial is eradicated, achieving an all-encompassing universe free from violence and suppression will never be possible and the repressive order of pre-societies will constitute the Republic of Gilead for today’s women.

In fact, this is what has happened during/post-pandemic. Taking advantage of the fear and uncertainty created by the COVID-19, toxic masculinity has found its way once more and perpetuated the existing injustices and inequalities for most women. Reading between the lines, one can find many disturbing and horrific connections between Atwood’s “two-legged wombs” (*HT*, 103) exploited and silenced by the totalitarian Gilead society and the 21st century women disempowered by the Covid-19. In both cases, women have woken up into an amorphous and chaotic world, in which they are forced to sacrifice their self-determination and freedom. Consistently disrespected, silenced and humiliated by toxic masculinity, women have no choice but to accept and normalize to be imprisoned in phallogocentric ideologies. They are left voiceless and made invisible in decision-making systems ranging from economy, education to intellectual life. In other words, deprived of all the rights and freedoms, women of Gilead and post-pandemic are gradually morphed into disciplined bodies, hereby being forced to be docile and productive in culturally and historically specific ways for the servitude of males. Now, they are just ‘useful bodies’ for the hegemonic masculinity and its panoptic gaze that re/produce and steadily naturalize the male-designed/defined roles and identities. These patriarchal mechanisms, in the end, lead to women’s normalization of phallogocentric ideologies and self-disciplining themselves because of the high liability of men’s violence and punishment - not just physical but psychological and sexual as well. According to Atwood, however, women’s blindness, apathy and ignorance constitute and increase the number and forms of those oppression. That is why, she warns women about the possible evils and horrifying future veiled in today’s world and reminds the fact that “ignorance is no mere lack of knowledge but rather is actively produced and maintained” by the privileged masculinity (Gilson, 2011, p.309). If women do not resist but remain silent against phallogocentric discourses already articulated in the semi-silence, which continuously indoctrinate women to keep silent by accepting their socio-culturally and biologically determined roles, it will not be possible to attenuate oppression and gender-

based violence. Most importantly, the perilous effects of ignorance will continue for generations and the new ones “will accept their duties with willing hearts” (*HT*, p.89) as they do not know any other way. Thus, creating an awareness about the destructive results of that ignorance and lack of action is crucial to stop and eradicate violence and oppressive social relations in general. Otherwise, unspoken or even unofficial facts, values and ‘truths’ transcend and become the new realities of humanity, as portrayed in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In fact, the whole world has seen Atwood’s misogynistic fiction, highlighting “the extrapolated, exaggerated horrors of the near future” (Yamamoto, 2009, p. 197) is not so ‘exaggerated’ during the quarantine of COVID-19 pandemic. Most women have been trapped into a hegemonic vicious cycle once more, where they have to fight against oppression, humiliation and gender-based violence in all forms. Abusing the atmosphere of pandemic arousing chaos, fear and anxiety, hegemonic masculinity resurrects the existing inequalities and re-imposes the image of ‘real manhood’ by introducing phallogocentric politics and ethics. Women are, once more, at the forefront of the battle against the toxic masculinity that has magnified its violence in the toxic silence of toxic pandemic. It seems women can even yearn for returning to the pre-COVID normality as they have no heed to the potential perils of the semi-silence supporting men’s superiority and dominance. Therefore, it is high time for women to realize that the ghastly future is already cloaked in the current world, as Atwood has forewarned them in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. If women do not want to be trapped in the toxic masculinity/toxic pandemic, and if they want to be ‘survivors’ rather than being ‘victims’ of patriarchy, they have to liberate themselves from the veil of ignorance and silence.

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