

Killing Joy in Utopian Gilead: Girlhood and Subversion in *The Handmaid's Tale* "Media Franchise"

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Submitted: 29/04/2023

Accepted: 15/09/2023

ABSTRACT

This article explores the representations of girlhood introduced in the recent additions to *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise: Bruce Miller's 2017 Hulu series and Margaret Atwood's 2019 novel *The Testaments*. Drawing on affect theory and girlhood studies, I analyze how the girls do not conform to the cultural expectations of utopian Gilead but manage to challenge and contest them. Heterotopian spaces, where the girls are expected to undergo a process of self-transformation into stable identities, are employed by the nation to direct them towards their prescribed happiness markers. Sara Ahmed's notion of the feminist killjoy is used as key mode of dissent that arises when the girls encounter the dissonance produced between the objects that are collectively imagined to cause happiness and how they are affected by them. I argue that, through Kathleen Stewart's notion of ordinary affects and their liminal position as girls, they find radically joyful alternatives that clash with Gilead's fixed prescriptions. This article analyzes three depictions of girlhood across media in *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise, focusing on girlhood as a liminal category that empowers girls to become feminist killjoys to fulfill their own desires.

Keywords

Ordinary Affects; Feminist Killjoy; Girlhood; Margaret Atwood; *The Testaments*; *The Handmaid's Tale*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the fictional world of Margaret Atwood's classic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been expanded with the series adaptation by Hulu in 2017, as well as the publication of the literary sequel *The Testaments* in 2019. The conflation of the release of the series in 2017 with the convulsive sociopolitical context as Donald Trump took office were key factors favoring a renewed recognition of the franchise. In fact, Atwood herself has supported the idea of the relevance of *The Handmaid's Tale* in relation to Trump's America by taking part in promotional interviews and articles, thus capitalizing on the pro-Trump and anti-Trump movements (Somacarrera-Íñigo 88-89).

This newfound popularity allowed both author Margaret Atwood and showrunner Bruce Miller to expand the scope of readers' and audience's insights about Gilead, the theocratic patriarchal nation where the action is set. *The Handmaid's Tale* novel has worked as the "tentpole text" (van Dam and Polak 177) while the franchise has been expanded by introducing a variety of perspectives of different characters in both the 2017 series and *The Testaments*. This approach offers the chance of exploring a diversity of issues, going beyond the limited knowledge obtained through the first-person narration by the protagonist Offred in the 1985 tale.

Some of the new characters introduced are young girls, whose storylines deal with how they navigate the restrictive system that is put into place by the regime. Depictions of girlhood are initially introduced in season two of the series, with the character of Eden, and then expanded with other characters, such as Esther in seasons four and five. In addition, girlhood takes a prominent role in Atwood's 2019 novel *The Testaments*, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, especially through Agnes's narration which delves into the shaping of the girls' roles and their upbringing into proper womanhood.

Although Atwood firstly introduces girlhood in dystopian Gilead in *The Testaments*, it has been a prominent theme throughout her literary career. It is present in some of her most renowned works, such as *Alias Grace*, in which the youth and girlishness of protagonist Grace Marks features in her recollections from prison, and it is considered as a defining trait of her personhood (Ober Mannon 558). Again, girlhood features retrospectively in *Cat's Eye*, which "examines the ways young girls learn to despise their corporeal selves, becoming complicit in their own possible annihilation" (Appleton 70). The examination of the corporeal self and its constriction by the patriarchy takes prominence in *The Testaments*, as Agnes, reflects on her own girlhood in Gilead, surrounded by a harmful environment that is regulated by patriarchal norms. Other works by Atwood like *Moral Disorder & Other Stories* and *The Maddadam Trilogy* also include less prominent reflections on girlhood and the experiences of growing up female.

Girlhood studies, which emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, may be used as a methodological tool to analyze the representations of girlhood featured in Atwood's fiction. Girlhood studies aim to consider the girl at the centre of the research, focusing on the specifics that differentiate their experiences and depictions in diverse media from those of adult women. Moreover, several authors have pointed out the importance of focusing on the girl as a subject, as scholarship has previously dismissed adolescence as a transitory phase that ends when adulthood is reached and has not been considered worthy of academic study (Daley-Carey; Driscoll; Wills and Bright). Thus, the study of girlhood and its representations in literature and other media are key to understand the unique challenges young girls face that have been so far largely ignored by feminist scholarship.

Recent works in the field of girlhood studies pay attention to representations of girl adolescence as a liminal phase that may allow them to challenge the limits of conventional boundaries and hegemonic patriarchal prescriptions (Bellas; Harkin). Therefore, girlhood may be considered as a productive stage to question dominant codes and systems deemed as commonsense.¹

This article will explore depictions of girlhood in *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise by combining girlhood studies, paying special attention to the possibilities of subversion of the girl-subject, and affect theory, mainly using Ahmed's notion of the feminist killjoy. In addition, the ordinary as understood by Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart will also be studied as zones of convergence where the radical potential of becoming a killjoy may arise. In particular, I will be analyzing three recently added character storylines depicting young girls in *The Handmaid's Tale* series and *The Testaments*: Eden and Esther, who appear at different points in the series; and Agnes, who is one of the main narrators in the novel's sequel. The objective of this article is to explore how the girls navigate the promises of happiness constructed in the collective imaginary of the utopian nation of Gilead. I argue that from their position as girls they become disruptors, embodying the feminist killjoy, and challenge the good life that they are made to perform when they discover the cruelty that is embedded within it.

2. Promises of the Good Life in Utopian Gilead

Although generally considered dystopian fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* universe may be conceptualized more accurately as "utopia." This term, coined

1. Recent television adaptations such as Naomi Alderman's *The Power* have also engaged with the topic of girlhood and its potential as a subversive force.

by Margaret Atwood, refers to the coexistence of visions of utopia and dystopia within the same text: "Utopia is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 66). While the fictional world of Gilead has been described as dystopian by most, those in power are putting forward the necessary means to create their own utopian nation. The Sons of Jacob, the fundamentalist Christian group that takes over the United States, believe that happiness may be achieved by the setting of codes and rules that will be followed by the rest of society. This is illustrated by the words of Commander Judd as he explains to Aunt Lydia his plans to reshape the American social organization: "You do agree that human beings are at their most unhappy when in the midst of chaos? That rules and boundaries promote stability and thus happiness? You follow me so far?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 174). Therefore, the regime aims to regulate happiness by defining it as the fulfilling of each person's assigned role, leaving no room for pursuing any other lifestyle that does not align with the one they prescribe. Julia Kuznetski interprets this need for control of chaos in Gilead as an allusion to Foucault's panopticon, as the system of "Eyes" surveils every corner of the nation to maintain order through violence and "the radical elimination of individuality" (289).

This elimination of individuality is enforced through class roles defined by a performance of what Judith Butler has named the heterosexual matrix, that is, individuals must express a stable gender that aligns with their sex and practice compulsory heterosexuality (194). In the case of women, they are divided into categories that must assume different tasks and hold different amounts of power. Some of the categories are "handmaids," fertile women who are considered "sinners" and must sacrifice their bodies to the nation to bear children for elite families; "wives," who accompany their husbands, they are the second head of the house and retain some amount of power within the household; or "aunts," who function as the teachers of the regime, transmitting knowledge and making sure the restrictive codes are followed. While these roles are presented as rigid, they are purely performative and individuals may shift from one category to another, mostly as a form of punishment. Those who mis-perform the heterosexual matrix are either brutally punished or eliminated from society.

Gilead is produced as a project that seeks happiness by creating happy objects in the collective national imagination whose citizens must strive towards, that is, fulfilling their roles appropriately. As Ahmed theorizes, these happy objects "are attributed as the cause of happiness, which means they already circulate as social goods before we 'happen' upon them" (*The Promise* 28). These objects hold the promise of happiness, which lies ahead if we do the right thing (29). For handmaids, getting pregnant and providing upper-class families with children ensures happiness; for wives, receiving that child and

acting as their mother is a goal they must attain to be happy. The good life can only be achieved by living "in the right way, by doing the right things, over and over again" (36). By performing the restrictive roles and following their codes and duties, anyone in Gilead can achieve happiness. It is just a matter of reaching those objects that circulate as happiness promises. However, as Ahmed points out, these objects may be judged as happy before we even encounter them (28). Thus, entering in contact with them may result in a contradiction, a dissonance between the promises they hold and how you are affected by these objects (42). When these objects are encountered, they may cause different emotions other than the expected happiness that has been previously attached to them.

The disenchantment of not achieving happiness even though the instructions to do so have been followed is experienced by Eden, a character depicted in the second season of the series. She is a fifteen-year-old that is forcedly married to Nick, a collaborator of the regime with a prominent role in the series as he steadily climbs into power as the show evolves. Eden is willing to participate in Gilead's good life, as she tries to perform her role as a wife as she has been taught: she arranges the house, cooks for her husband and tries to have sex with him. Nonetheless, Nick does not want to have a romantic or sexual relationship with a young girl.² There is an inconsistency between the expectations of happiness Eden holds about marriage and how she is really affected by the role once she becomes a wife.

The contradictions between affects and objects that characters like Eden experience may be considered as part of what Berlant refers to as "cruel optimism." These optimistic expectations "become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1). Subjects cannot achieve happiness simply by entering in contact with those objects situated as happiness bearers. As shown in the case of Eden, she does not simply reach happiness with marriage or by performing her wifely duties. Thus, Eden is left disoriented and must seek happiness someplace else that is not within the bounds of Gilead's matrix.

To teach their version of the good life, the nation makes use of heterotopian spaces. Theorized by Michel Foucault, these function as "counter spaces" that seem suspended in time and are opposed to areas of passage (e.g. streets or trains), areas of transitory halt (e.g. cafés or cinemas) and closed areas to rest like home (Vidler, Foucault, and Johnston 20). Foucault distinguishes several characteristics regarding heterotopian spaces, but I will focus here on heterotopias of

2. Although Nick's exact age is not explicitly revealed, he is visibly older than Eden, it may be estimated to be around late 20s or early 30s.

crisis and heterotopias of deviation. Heterotopias of crisis “are generally reserved for individuals undergoing a ‘biological crisis’” (20), which usually refers to a shifting or fluctuation of the body such as puberty, menstruation or giving birth. Thus, these reserved spaces serve the function of allowing subjects to go through these changes in a designated space, elsewhere. Foucault manifests that heterotopias of crisis are disappearing and giving way to heterotopias of deviation, which host individuals whose behavior does not align with the norm (20).

There are three prominent heterotopias in Gilead, where a transformation of the self takes place: the Vidala School, a heterotopia of crisis; the Rachel and Leah Centre and Ardua Hall both featuring as heterotopias of deviation. In the Vidala School young girls belonging to elite families learn to become wives. They are undergoing puberty while they attend school until they are paired with a husband and thus leave girlhood behind and enter adulthood. The Rachel and Leah Centre, also known as the Red Centre, works as a re-education center where women considered sinners are taken to learn their new role as handmaids. Lastly, at Ardua Hall, devout women choose a nun-like path and avoid marriage to learn how to become aunts. In all these different centers, a transformation of the self takes place and individuals leave once they have become a different and stable subject: from girls into wives, from sinners into worthy handmaids and from unmarried women into aunts. In these heterotopian spaces, there is an imperative for transformation, so that women enter those spaces because they are seen as being in some form of crisis, either in the biological sense as the case for girls in the Vidala School, or in a crisis of deviation such as the soon-to-be handmaids and aunts.³ The ritual of purification (Vidler, Foucault, and Johnston 21) that occurs in these isolated counter-spaces is visually represented with a change of color in their garments, as clothing marks the roles they inhabit—from girls wearing pink and plum, turning into red when they become handmaids, blue for wives and brown for aunts.

The need for renewal Gilead instills through heterotopias may be linked with the need to create a stable subject that abandons the liminal phase that characterizes the coming-of age process. The seminal work of Arnold van Gennep regarding the rites of passage is essential to the process of becoming that occurs during girlhood and adolescence. Van Gennep identifies a three-phase pattern in indigenous ritual ceremonies: the preliminal rites (separation),

3. As I have stated, the handmaid category is reserved for women that the puritan regime considers as sinners (divorced women, single mothers, etc.) and they must go through a process of purification and penitence before they can re-enter society with their new identity. In the case of aunts, they must acquire the inside knowledge that is reserved for them as administrators and teachers of the “women’s sphere” within the regime.

the liminal rites (transition) and the postliminal rites (reincorporation). Building on this theory, Victor Turner has focused on the threshold that the liminal phase creates, drawing attention to the "invisibility" of the liminal subject, as their state is ambiguous: at once no longer classified and not yet classified (96). The liminal phase is held as an unclear stage that is defined in opposition to the stability of childhood and adulthood. Regarding adolescence, Catherine Driscoll points out that it is retrospectively defined as a prior phase to adulthood and a disruption of childhood, both considered relatively stable periods (6).⁴ Thus, Gilead aims to exploit the indeterminacy of identity during the liminal period to lead the girls into a stable category.

In *The Testaments*, Agnes provides insight into the workings of these heterotopian spaces as she firstly attends the Vidala school for young girls and later starts her preparation to become an aunt at Ardua Hall. In her testimony, she dives deep into the gendered categories Gilead creates and how they shape her understanding of the world. Moreover, she provides readers with information on how Gilead is presented to young girls and adolescents as an object of desire. Education is solely focused on transforming the girls into future happy wives by teaching them how to make flower arrangements, sewing petit-point and nurturing their future husbands and children. Nevertheless, their future as happy wives is also instilled with fear and self-blame as some of the aunts refer to the girls as "snares and enticements" who "could make men drunk with lust" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 10). The girls are made responsible for any harm the men may cause them, and they must protect themselves from "the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner" (10).

These contradictory images of men as both predators and potential husbands cause fear in Agnes, who refuses to become a wife.⁵ While preparing for her wedding, those around her encourage her to accept the man she will marry. Her stepmother tells her to think of the position she would acquire by marrying Commander Judd, who is powerful within Gilead (Atwood, *The Testaments* 225). Agnes is given the illusion of choice, as three candidates arise as

4. The period of girlhood is not clearly delimited and recent scholarship points towards the lengthening of the period between childhood and adulthood, particularly in the West. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett refers to this new phase as "emerging adulthood."

5. The ambivalence of male protagonists as both predators and lovers is reproduced in other works by Atwood. It is a main theme in *The Edible Woman* in which the engagement of protagonist Marian to Peter "signifies her submission to the traditional role of passive femininity" (Appleton 64). Sarah A. Appleton points out that while Atwood's women may be looked at as victims to male power and fantasies, they resist to various degrees and with different strategies (61). This is also a predominant theme in other works such as *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Heart Goes Last*.

possible husbands, but she is aware her preference does not matter: she will have to marry the man with the most power, Commander Judd. She becomes desperate as she can find nobody that listens to her desires, so she starts considering suicide as her only way out. Her escape comes with the visit of Aunt Lydia, who goes to Agnes to bring her news about her friend Becka, who had attempted to kill herself with secateurs: "'Becka has received a call to higher service. If you yourself have such a calling,' she said, 'you still have time to tell us'" (231). After the encounter, Agnes manages to communicate to one of the aunts that she has received a "higher calling" and expresses her desire to become an aunt to escape a dreadful marriage.

3. Cruel Attachments and Rape Culture

As the girls soon discover in their journey into womanhood, Gilead's promises of the good life are conditional and to achieve them they must sacrifice their own desires. Using Berlant's term, Gilead's advertising of marriage may be described as cruelly optimistic "insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a word finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (2). While the girls are behaving as it is expected of them in Gilead by becoming wives, they experience extreme disappointment and shock at the intrinsic violence that is bound to their marriages: Esther is constantly raped by several men so that her husband may obtain a child; Eden is ignored even though she tries to be a good wife; and Agnes is paralyzed by the idea of marrying an old man who has killed many of his child wives. Their marriages are cruelly optimistic since the harm they experience within them is a feature they must accept to be judged as happy. The attachment of happiness to marriage dissolves once they discover the abuse they will bear as they enter the new phase of their lives.

The feeling of detachment and distance between joyful expectations and violent affects is woven into the fabric of the ordinary. Kuznetski declares that "in Gilead violence and executions are the means of enforcing the values of the traditional family" (292). Aunt Lydia emphasizes how they will eventually normalize these circumstances: "This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 43). This quotation from *The Handmaid's Tale* novel is recalled by Offred as she stands with her shopping companion staring at the wall where corpses of sinners and dissidents hang for everyone to watch. Such an overt display of violence becomes ordinary, the shock value wears off as they pass through the wall every day to get their shopping done. Similarly, the girls must accept the

disappointment and damage that comes with their roles, which will soon become part of their ordinary lives.

One of the concessions girls must make as they navigate girlhood is the commitment to keep silent as they are raped and abused. Rape is institutionalized in Gilead due to declining birth rates through the "Ceremony," a ritual in which the handmaid of the house is raped by the commander, the head of the family, while his wife holds her down. However, rape and sexual abuse go beyond the limits of a ritualistic practice and are also executed in other situations, justified by the patriarchal culture that allows male abuse and demands silence from girls and women.

Agnes is sexually abused by her dentist, as she recounts in her personal testimony in *The Testaments*. In this traumatic event, the dentist touches her breasts while she is alone with him at his consultation and then proceeds to masturbate in front of her. He exploits her vulnerability at that moment, in which she cannot call for help and she simply freezes, in shock. After that, Agnes blames herself as she was taught by the aunts: "So it was true then, about men and their ram-paging, fiery urges, and merely by sitting in the dentist chair I was the cause" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 96). She believes she has enticed Dr. Grove to sexually abuse her and that only she is to take the blame, as Gilead has ingrained into her. When she is about to leave the dentist's office, the assistant tells her: "'You look pale. Some people have a fear of dentists.' Was that a smirk? Did he know what had just happened?" (97). This suggests that there is common knowledge about men in power being abusers, getting away with it and protecting each other from possible consequences.

The girls that dare to report abuses will be punished, as Agnes explains: "Some girls had reported such things. One had claimed their Guardian had run his hands over her legs. Another had said that an Econo trash collector had unzipped his trousers in front of her. The first girl had had the backs of her legs whipped for lying, the second had been told that nice girls did not notice the minor antics of men, they simply looked the other way" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 97). Kuznetski points out the precariousness endured by the girls in these vulnerable situations, which render them powerless: on the one hand, they are encouraged to report sexual harassment, but on the other they are punished and whipped for lying (294-295).

Esther is also a victim of the repeated abuse that men in Gilead are allowed to commit. She becomes a wife at fourteen to Commander Keyes, who is also significantly older than her. He rapes her repeatedly, but she does not get pregnant, so he invites other men to rape her to fulfill his wishes of eventually becoming a father. Through her harrowing experience, the audience understands how rape is a common occurrence that is covered up and even shared by groups of men and not an isolated incident. Rape is part of the collective

imagination of Gilead, which involves accepting it as something ordinary that is simply part of the good life, a sacrifice vulnerable women and girls must endure. Rape is ingrained into Gilead's social and political configurations; it is an essential part of the culture that relies on the ritualized exploitation of women's bodies to regenerate a nation whose power is declining.

The notion of rape culture emerged during the second wave of feminism and was firstly used in Noreen Connell's and Cassandra Wilson's *Rape: A First Sourcebook for Women* published by the New York Radical Feminists in 1974. These theorizations on the cultural prevalence of rape were shortly after expanded with Susan Brownmiller's seminal work *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* published in 1975. Brownmiller states that "women are trained to be rape victims" (309) and thus during their upbringing they are indoctrinated into becoming victims of power relations sustained by rape culture.

Moreover, Cameron Greensmith and Jocelyn Sakal Froese suggest that "under the auspices of rape culture, women's and girls' worth is predicated on enduring gendered and sexual violence, which is to be accepted in order for them to gain access to what they think of as the good life" (88). Rape culture legitimizes violence against women and girls, reinforcing male dominance as a normal part of the good life that is monopolized by men and boys (88). Girls are then taught to accept that in order to achieve the projected good life, they must endure rape culture, as they are made to believe that they are luring men in through a discourse of individual responsibility and self-victimization.

At this point, it is important to note that girlhood is a particularly vulnerable period in terms of gender based-violence. "For example, adolescent wives between the ages of 15 and 19 are three times more likely to be murdered than older wives... It has been found that girls are likely to be sexually abused in their teen years between the ages of 11 and 14 and boys between the ages of 4 and 6" (Jiwani 176). These statistics are especially worrying regarding the idea of immaturity linked to adolescence, so that adolescents are less likely to be believed by adults, as well as the knowledge among abusers that young women and girls are not likely to be believed which can coerce them to remain silent (176-177).

In Gilead, the ability to simply accept rape culture as part of the ordinary is praised. They are good girls if they keep silent but become problematic by pointing out what is wrong with their surroundings. Moreover, the girls are expected to be resilient, to experience the damage and bounce back to perform their roles. Robin James points out that resilience makes individuals legitimate members of society and its benefits, and this means to perform specific behaviors that maintain and reproduce the Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy (142). To maintain the patriarchal hegemony of Gilead, which uses rape culture as the base of its conception, girls are expected to bounce back every time

they are harmed, to perform as happy wives, handmaids or aunts and simply continue to reproduce the vicious cycle of performance and damage.

Still, the mandates of the regime and their visions of utopia do not constitute the totality of the everyday lives of Gilead's citizens. These are also composed of the ordinary, as Berlant understands it, which contains unexpected encounters, conversations or sights that may have the potential for setting in motion the subversion of those codes. Berlant suggests that the ordinary may be conceived "as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine" (10). Similarly, Stewart theorizes ordinary affects as a contact zone that may have the potential to affect the subject in particular ways (3). "Ordinary affects highlight the question of the intimate impacts of forces in circulation. They're not exactly 'personal' but they sure can pull the subject into places it didn't exactly 'intend' to go" (Stewart 40). Through the circulation of ordinary affects and their potential, the girls are redirected towards other forms of happiness outside of Gilead's envisioned utopia.

4. Killing Joy as a Mode of Survival

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed reflects on the conditionality of happiness. It may be conceived as an orientation towards certain choices and not others (54), but it is also conditioned by "being given as a shared orientation toward what is good" (56). However, it is not shared in a reciprocal way, but it favors the happiness of those that come first, while for those that come after "happiness means following somebody else's goods" (56). In the case of patriarchal Gilead, the righteous men in power come first. They are supported by other women in positions of relative influence, such as aunts or certain wives, who help sustain the notion of the good life attached to male happiness. Consequently, the girls' upbringing is conditioned to fold into their beliefs of what the good life is.

Ahmed refers to education as a way to direct and orient towards the "right" versions of happiness (*The Promise* 54). Gilead employs the heterotopian spaces described above to attempt to enmesh the girls in just the right course towards the good life. Nevertheless, the mandates and fantasies of cruelly optimistic happiness do not completely account for their experiences of girlhood. Despite the attempts to direct the girls towards the conditional happiness created by the regime, their liminal positions as girls together with the potential concealed in the unpredictability of their surroundings allow the girls to go beyond prescriptions and effectively disrupt Gilead's notions of the good life.

As stated above, the liminality and instability produced by the process of becoming are prominent characteristics of girlhood and make up a fertile ground

for the girls to challenge the conditional happiness of the regime. It is within the volatility that comes with their developing identity, which is undergoing transformation, that the girls manage to challenge the unquestioned utopianism of Gilead. The liminal, ambiguous stage of adolescence “is a site where conventional boundaries and hierarchies dissolve, giving way to an unsettling of the status quo” (Bellás 18) which makes female adolescence a generative site for resistance and opposition to patriarchal norms (1). While it is regulated by patriarchal culture, it is also subject to the girls’ disruptions and challenges (11). Stephanie Harkin points out that the liminal phase reflects uncertainty but also freedom and may be conceived as a particularly productive space for resistance against patriarchal paradigms in relation to adolescent girls (17). Gilead’s narrow categories cannot fully contain the extent to which the girls exist, and the representations of girlhood in both *The Handmaid’s Tale* series and *The Testaments* depict it as a fruitful period to contest and redraw the borders of what it means to be a girl and even a woman.

Even so, their liminal state as adolescents is not the only cause of their rebellion. It must be said that the girls’ actions against the gender politics of the regime do not simply arise from within themselves but through Kathleen Stewart’s ordinary affects. Through the potential of unexpected encounters with objects, conversations or even violent aggressions, Eden, Agnes and Esther are able to shift their paths towards other versions of the good life. While their liminal state allows the girls to be open to the possibility of change, the affects encoded in their ordinary encounters harbour the potentiality to redirect their desires towards other objects. Eden, Agnes and Esther are surrounded by a harmful environment where they are the targets of rape culture and they must break away from Gilead’s prescriptions in desperate attempts for survival. Their instances of disruption of the happiness sustained by violence turn the girls into dissonant voices that go against the regime’s requirements. They must embody the figure of the feminist killjoy as a way to redirect their own desires for a good life.

The notion of the feminist killjoy first appeared in 2010 in *The Promise of Happiness* but has been more thoroughly examined in Ahmed’s latest book *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. In her helpful guide to become a killjoy, Ahmed considers becoming a feminist killjoy as an assignment, that is being willing to cause unhappiness, not intending to cause it (*The Feminist Killjoy* 19). The aim is to kill the joy in situations where one becomes trapped, limited by a dominant discourse that forces the subject to experience uncomfortable and even violent situations that directly attack their personhood or that of others. But as Libe García Zarranz states, these moments of disorientation work “precisely as moments of joyful insurrection” (18). There is joy in resistance, disruption and leaving behind what caused one to suffer.

The three girls whose narratives I have selected to analyze take on the task of becoming feminist killjoys. In order to find joy, they must first become a problem for Gilead, since by speaking up against their abusers they will likely be punished so that no one else dares to speak up and break the preserved happiness. As feminist killjoys, they speak up when they consider something that has been said or done is problematic, but by making the problem visible they become a disturbance of the otherwise kept peace (Ahmed, *The Promise* 65). The good life of utopian Gilead is too tight for Eden, Agnes and Esther who find alternative ways of being by killing Gilead's promises of happiness. The three girls follow the same pattern: they become disappointed when they do not find happiness in their assigned roles; then they enter in contact with someone or something that affects them with the potential for change; and lastly they rebel, challenge and resist to be confined to what Gilead expects of them and thus embody the feminist killjoy.

In the case of Eden, after getting married, she becomes disappointed when her expectations do not meet the reality she experiences. She seeks reassurance in June, a handmaid and main character of the series, to whom she expresses her frustration about how even though she behaves as a good wife, her husband ignores her. In their encounter, June tells her that "in this place, you grab love wherever you can find it" ("Postpartum" 19:01). This conversation, encoded in the zone of convergence of ordinary affects, changes Eden's perception of how she may find love and happiness. So, when she encounters love she does not doubt and acts, contrary to Gilead's teachings. She runs away with another young boy but they are both caught and turned in by her father. She is given several chances to repent her sins, but Eden has found joy and love in her rebellious challenging of the rules. Her decision is firm and she will not go back to Gilead's version of happiness, which means becoming a killjoy and breaking apart with a system that has failed her. In her public execution, Eden reasserts her decision by quoting the Bible "love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking..." ("Postpartum" 43:55). It is ironic how she uses the Bible, which women are forbidden from reading and Gilead holds as the source of its creation, as a tool to resist by reappropriating its meaning. In addition, an annotated Bible is found among her possessions, in her hands it becomes an incendiary device, her search for love and god are the root cause of her resistance.

The Bible also plays a crucial role for the subversion of Agnes in *The Testaments*. As stated before, Agnes refuses to become a wife and is luckily saved from that destiny by Aunt Lydia and her friend Becka, so she goes on to prepare to become an aunt. In her new role, she is encouraged to read, which is forbidden for most women in Gilead. Through the ordinary act of reading the Bible, Agnes discovers the truth about Gilead: throughout her years in the

Vidala school, she was presented with interpretations of biblical texts that twisted the meanings of the passages, presenting information in a way that fitted Gilead's mandates.

Agnes recalls a particular episode in which they were taught the story of the concubine that was cut into twelve pieces (see *New International Bible*, Jud. 19-21). As the story is told, the girls are horrified about the murder of the concubine. However, they are consoled by Aunt Estée: "There's another way of looking at the story. The concubine... sacrificed herself to keep the kind traveler from being killed by those wicked men... That was brave and noble of the concubine, don't you think?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 79-80). Aunt Estée frames the concubine's actions as benevolent and gracious, an act of self-sacrifice that reflects the cultural implications of the patriarchal nation.

When Agnes gets access to reading the Bible, she goes back to this precise story and the potential of this ordinary re-encounter brings about her subversion against the utopian project. She finds out that the woman was given no choice, she was simply murdered. Agnes soon realizes how Gilead twisted the meaning of the story, changing it to fit their needs. This is a breaking point for Agnes's confidence in Gilead's teachings about god and faith. "This was what the Aunts meant, then, when they said women's minds were too weak for reading. We would crumble, we would fall apart under the contradictions, we would not be able to hold firm" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 303). In fact, here Atwood "plays with the Bible's ambiguity and openness to infinite interpretation... hence the constant need for more testaments" (Sabo and Graybill 132). The author addresses the need for change and constant revision of those in power. Agnes must then get involved with Aunt Lydia and her plan to bring the nation down and eliminate rape culture and its perpetrators.

The last of the representations of girlhood that I have selected to analyze is Esther, whose storyline has not concluded yet and will possibly play a major role in the upcoming sixth season of the series. Just like Eden, both became wives as teenagers but they approach their marriages in distinctive ways. Contrary to Eden's compliance with her role, Esther is hyper-aware of the cruelty that is embedded in Gilead's ideas of the good life. As mentioned above, her experience as a wife has been marked with constant instances of sexual abuse. As a result, Esther refuses to conform to Gilead's impositions and simply performs her role to be safe while actively working against the regime: she poisons her husband and collaborates with dissident groups. At the end of season four she is caught working with rebels and she is turned into a handmaid as a form of punishment. This means a considerable decrease in her power at home, and also the fact that she will continue to be regularly raped, which she had struggled to avoid. In season five, she's at the Red Centre, the heterotopian space Gilead uses to train girls and women to become handmaids but Esther refuses to cooperate.

There is one specific conversation that gets Esther to change her mind, and it is the potentiality encoded in this conversation that will affect her subsequent actions. Janine, another handmaid and Esther's closest friend at the center, tells her: "be good and you'll be safe" ("Ballet" 10:11). Janine encourages Esther to act according to Gilead's rules so that by performing these actions repeatedly, she is promised that she will be protected. Regardless of her behaviour, her safety and protection are not guaranteed, as Esther and Agnes have already learned. In this case, Esther has no choice but to try and be a good handmaid, but when she finds herself alone in a room with a commander, she is raped again. Once more, Esther is left feeling betrayed and abandoned as the safety she was promised crumbles. In a desperate attempt, she tries to kill herself and poison Janine, who had assured her that a good life was ahead. Both survive, but Esther is completely deranged and refuses to comply, as she has been violently harmed in the process every time.

Esther embodies the feminist killjoy as she confronts Aunt Lydia afterwards: she is tied up to a hospital bed, wearing a white hospital gown that symbolizes that she has now freed herself from the gendered categories. Aunt Lydia approaches Esther to ask her whether she did anything to entice the man that raped her, following the victim blaming logic of rape culture. When Esther says that she did not do anything, Aunt Lydia genuinely apologizes to her, but that is not enough. Esther clearly states that "they all do it, you know they do, you're not sorry" and screams at her to get out of the room ("Together" 12:41).

Esther has nothing left to lose, her own identity in Gilead is now a blank slate and this grants her the audacity to go beyond the constraints she has been previously imposed. She directly confronts Aunt Lydia and tells her that she is an accomplice, by allowing men to exercise their power facing no accountability. As Esther states, "they all do it," this is an endemic issue part of rape culture and not an isolated event. Approaching her mentor in this unrestricted way means killing the joy that Aunt Lydia may have found in Gilead, as her privileged position had allowed her to be relatively safe while actively collaborating in the shaping and preservation of the utopian fantasy. Even though up until this moment Aunt Lydia had collaborated with the regime without questioning their mandates, it seems that this encounter may contain the seeds for the possible rebellion that will transform her into the one who leads the plan to bring the nation down. Contrary to Eden's fate, who ends up dead before giving into the good life, Esther receives some kind of retribution, as the man that raped her this last instance is executed. By gathering the strength to speak up against the regime and killing the joy in Gilead, Esther creates the space to build an alternative future away from Gilead's happiness, but her destiny is left to see in the final season of the series.

5. Conclusion

The representations of girlhood included in both *The Testaments* and *The Handmaid's Tale* series revive the need for change and renewal of the restrictive politics of fictional Gilead, but also of Western patriarchal nations. Through points of contact with their own communities and their evolving identities, they manage to assert their refusal to become part of a system ruled by violence and abuse. Their subtle connections with ordinary but potentially radical moments in their coming-of-age process are the key elements that spark their transformation into feminist killjoys. Their dissonant voices, asking for joy and refusing to absorb the palpable abuse that is ever-present, will also impact others to act, resist and challenge the impositions. While the consequences of rebellion are not rewarding for all of those who decide to defy Gilead's codes, they will at least reach others who are impacted by the immanent force of their courage and act in their own ways to put an end to the genocidal nation.

This article has highlighted the need to study girlhood and its possibilities for resistance as a key mechanism for agency and proudly standing in the way of unethical and predatory practices. Girlhood and adolescence may be seen as a messy and transitory stage of life, which may underestimate its perception as a powerful force for change. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of possibilities within girlhood harbours an immense potential to generate alternative conceptions of the self that do not align with conventional notions of femininity, consistently striving forward with the radical desire of hanging on to joy.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article has been supported by the project "Grupo de Referencia Competitiva (GRC)- BiFeGa: Grupo de Investigación en Estudios Literarios e Culturais, Traducción e Interpretación" (Ref. ED431C-2020/04), funded by Xunta de Galicia, Convocatoria Consolidación y Estructuración 2020 as well as by the 2021 predoctoral grant program by the Xunta de Galicia: "Programa de axudas á etapa predoutoral da Consellería de Cultura, Educación e Universidades da Xunta de Galicia."

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