

Stony Brook University



OFFICIAL COPY

The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.

© All Rights Reserved by Author.

Traumatic Memory, Gender Melancholia, and Prospective Multiplicity:

Negotiating with the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

A Thesis Presented

by

Yun-Chu Tsai

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Stony Brook University

May 2009

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Yun-Chu Tsai

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this thesis.

Jeffrey Santa Ana – Thesis Advisor
Assistant Professor, English Department

Elizabeth Ann Kaplan - Second Reader
Distinguished Professor, English Department

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

Traumatic Memory, Gender Melancholia, and Prospective Multiplicity:

Negotiating with the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

by

Yun-Chu Tsai

Master of Arts

in

English

Stony Brook University

2009

Writing, for Margaret Atwood, is a way to bring back the dead from the past into the realm of the living. This thesis is going to discuss how a person is traumatized in patriarchal heterosexuality, becomes a melancholic subject, and creates productive power through traumatic experience.

In Chapter One, we are going to see how Offred the narrator in *The Handmaid's Tale* loses her family, friends, and freedom. The traumatic memory creates a melancholic subject who is not able to memorialize, to love, and to mourn.

Moreover, Chapter Two shows that male inability to love in the story comes from the double disavowal of never having loved and never having lost the homosexual object. The Commander in Gilead represents the melancholic masculine subject who does not recognize his homosexual attachment and does not know how to love and mourn properly.

Furthermore, melancholic femininity in Chapter Three demonstrates not only homosexual attachment in the form of female self-repudiation, but also resistance against patriarchal and heterosexual oppression through laughter and narration. The doubleness of the female characters as well as the ambiguity created by story-telling produces multiplicity of fates and the possibility of prospective future.

In conclusion, the process of remembering the traumatic memory makes the narrator less of a melancholic subject and endows her with the power to mourn and to love. It also enables the reader a creative power to imagine any possible future.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
I. Memory, Love and Melancholia: Negotiating with the Dead.....	4
II. Trauma, Patriarchy/Heterosexuality, and Gender Melancholia: Melancholic Masculinity.....	12
III. Trauma, Patriarchy/Heterosexuality, and Gender Melancholia: Melancholic Femininity.....	21
IV. Conclusion.....	38
Works Cited.....	40

Introduction

The female protagonist, Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a handmaid of the Commander. Her duty in the Commander's family is to give birth to a child whose parents will be the Commander, Mr. Fred, and the Wife, Serena Joy. Before she became a handmaid, Offred was a free, well-educated and economically independent woman named June. She lived in North America and had a husband named Luke and a little daughter. However, with the sudden rise of the regime of Gilead, she was captured and confined to the house of the Commander. She must follow every puritan routine and the hierarchical order of patriarchy, heterosexuality and monotheocracy in the nation. She is assigned to the duty of reproduction, or else she must be sent away to the Colony and die. She is separated from all her acquaintances, her family and friends. She cannot read, must be silent, loses her family and freedom. Most importantly, she is not allowed to mourn over her past. Offred gets stuck over the helpless present in which she cannot look back at the past or look forward to the future. According to the "Historical Notes" in the last chapter of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's story takes place in the late twentieth century. The pre-Gilead period is thus the modern world we are living in right now. The "Historical Notes" are presented as a record of a symposium on "Gileadean Studies" which is held in 2195. At the end of the novel, the destiny of the protagonist remains unclear. It shows that the previous part of the novel is the transcription of a handmaid's story-telling recorded in tapes. The collection of tapes is the narrator's memoir of her past in Gileadean and pre-Gileadean time. The story leaves the audience or the reader an unresolved ending.

In this thesis, E. Ann Kaplan's trauma studies will lead us to the influence of trauma, the melancholic subject trauma creates, the patriarchal and heterosexual ideology it implies, and the productive power of trauma. *The Handmaid's Tale* tells stories in the nation of Gilead as well as in the modern world. Patriarchy and

heterosexuality underlie Gilead and the pre-Gilead world. The patriarchal and heterosexual subjects are melancholic. According to Judith Butler, the more extreme patriarchal heterosexuality there is, the less tolerance of “otherness” like femininity and homosexuality there will be:

the more hyperbolic and defensive a masculine identification, the more fierce the ungrieved homosexual cathexis. In this sense, we might understand both ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ as formed and consolidated through identifications which are in part composed of disavowed grief. If we accept the notion that heterosexuality naturalizes itself by insisting on the radical otherness of homosexuality, then heterosexual identity is purchased through a melancholic incorporation of the love that it disavows: the man who insists upon the coherence of his heterosexuality will claim that he never loved another man, and hence never lost another man.... This ‘never-never’ thus founds the heterosexual subject, as it were; it is an identity based upon the refusal to avow an attachment and, hence, the refusal to grieve. (Butler 139-40)

Butler’s analysis of the heterosexual double disavowal of ungrieved love and ungrieved loss is a perceptive theoretical description of patriarchal heterosexuality. The love and loss that cannot be mourned traumatize the characters in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and make them melancholic subjects. Patriarchy and heterosexuality traumatize the characters in *The Handmaid’s Tale* by not allowing them to mourn the loss of homosexual desire and disabling their ability to love and to forgive. With the traumatic experience of extreme patriarchy and heterosexuality, Offred, the narrator, forgets her past. Offred and the other characters become melancholic subjects who are not able to mourn their loved and lost object. The melancholic subjects cannot recognize or avow the loss; instead, they internalize the loved object into their ego.

The process of recalling the past demonstrates the double disavowal of loss and love – the loss of the loved object and the internalization of love are denied by the subjects.

However, Margaret Atwood's notion of "negotiating with the dead" offers opportunities for melancholic subjects to become less melancholic. In the story, the narrator recalls her memory in order not to forget who she was and how others saw her in the past. The ability to remember her past and her loss enables the narrator to mourn properly. In this way, she is negotiating with the past and understands how she is traumatized. In remembering the feeling of love, the narrator is reopening the possibility to love. By negotiating with the dead of the past as well as loving Nick, she is regaining her memory and her ability to mourn and to love. This allows her to mourn properly for the love that has been lost, recover from the loss and become less of a melancholic subject.

Moreover, the story itself and the form of it open room for various possibilities and multiplicities. Julia Kristeva's view of doubleness and multiplicity through narrative has been proven in *The Handmaid's Tale*. She argues the double meaning of the narrative provides new interpretation of the world. The doubleness of female characters in the story shows ambiguity as well as variety. This indicates awareness of something other than the singular norm of patriarchal heterosexuality. The urge of laughing in the story, according to Helene Cixous, implies the recognition of patriarchal oppression and the will to struggle against it. Meanwhile, the tale is a transcription of a series of tapes recorded by a handmaid. The recording and transcription are successful remembrances of the handmaid's past. The obscure ending of the story also leaves readers room to imagine the prospective future.

I. Memory, Love, and Melancholia: Negotiating with the Dead

Patriarchal heterosexuality in Atwood's novel traumatizes subjects by disabling their ability to remember, to mourn, and to love. The subjects are melancholic and not able to recognize their love and loss. It is through remembering the past, the dead and the absent in time and space, that the narrator is able to regain her ability to remember, to mourn and to love. Love only exists within an equal relationship between one person and another. The more extreme heterosexual patriarchy is, the less love exists. The extreme patriarchal heterosexuality makes subjects lose their ability to love and to mourn, and therefore, they become melancholic subjects. After staying alone with the Commander many times, for instance, Offred finds out she is unable to love him as long as she "belongs" to him. When Offred is a subject of the Commander, it is impossible for her to fall in love with him. She describes when they are alone in the hotel room that

his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership. I remind myself that he is not an unkind man; that, under other circumstances, I even like him....He sits up, begins to unbutton. Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power? Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried. The trouble is that I can't be, with him, any different from the ways I usually am with him. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 254)

In this passage, the Commander's hand rests on the tattoo. This reminds Offred of her loss of power, freedom and subjectivity. It also reminds her he has control over her body now. Meanwhile, his action of unbuttoning manifests his conspiracy to strengthen patriarchal order. The clothing embodies the hierarchal power of men over women. In the nation of Gilead, the blackness of the Commanders' clothes symbolizes

“prestige” and power (17). The redness of the Handmaids’ clothes represents blood and reproduction (8). Without the clothes, the Commander loses his emblems of power as well as his defensive cover. The Commander’s denudation exposes his weakness as well as his inability to make the narrator love him. This might only cause her to pity him. Moreover, the narrator’s name in Gilead even suggests her being in subjection to Fred the Commander: Offred is named after Fred; the preposition “of” indicates subjugation. Being in the unequal relationship with the Commander, Offred finds no way to love him.

On the contrary, her relation with Nick the Guardian is based on equality. The equal relationship makes both love and subjectivity possible. Offred and Nick have a lot in common. For example, they share a similar hierarchical status in Gileadean society. Unlike the Commander who possesses the ownership of everyone else in the family, Nick is subordinate to the Commander, as Offred is. Even though they are subordinate to the Commander, both of them still have their bodies. They can decide to accept the suggestion or not when Serena Joy, the Wife, asks Nick and Offred to have intercourse in order to reproduce. They seize the chance of a possible future by using of their own bodies instead of turning down the offer. This is what Offred has been expecting since the very beginning of the novel: “[s]omething could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy” (4). If Offred can be pregnant with Nick’s child, she will be exempted from exile and death. Here, a securer life and a promising future can be exchanged by the use of her body. It is the possibility of change that might be a tradeoff. If she can give birth to a child, she no longer needs to worry about being sent away to the Colony.

Moreover, when Offred goes back to Nick time after time without notifying Serena, they are in an equal and mutual relationship. She goes on telling her story

about her relationship with Nick, “I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely. I didn’t even think of it as giving myself to him, because what did I have to give? I did not feel munificent, but thankful, each time he would let me in. He didn’t have to” (268). When she enters his room, she always asks if it is too late for him although she understands that “[i]t is understood between us by now that it is never too late, but I go through the ritual politeness of asking. It makes me feel more in control, as if there is a choice, a decision that could be made one way or the other” (268-9). Nick and Offred lose their initiative under extreme patriarchal hierarchy in Gilead. However, they regain it in this relationship. Each one of them can decide to maintain or end their relationship. In this sense, they are subjects who have the power to control their bodies and their fates. Thus, this balanced relationship creates possibilities of love and prospective future.

In the novel, the patriarchal and heterosexual subject is melancholic. The melancholic subject refuses to recognize the loved object and the loss of it. Without the right to love and to be loved, the patriarchal and heterosexual subject is dehumanized. When Offred says, “neither of us [Nick and Offred] says the word love, not once. It would be tempting fate; it would be romance, bad luck,” she expresses that the possibility of love will not be admitted because it would be too dangerous to expose oneself unreservedly in front of the others (270). As Offred herself says, the best way to protect oneself is to keep the core of oneself away from the others.

“Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.... I can see now what it’s for, what it was always for: to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected. I’m sad now, the way we’re talking is infinitely sad: faded music, faded paper flowers, worn satin, an echo of an echo. All gone away, no longer possible.... I knew it might only be once. Good-by, I thought, even at the time, good-by [sic]. (262)

According to Butler, subjects within patriarchal and heterosexual culture will not avow the loved object and the loss of it (Butler 139-40). This culture educates people to enclose themselves. As she says this, Offred realizes what she used to have in the past – her genuine expression of affection, her right to love and to be loved, her loved ones, her free will and her independence – has been all lost under the regime of Gilead. This statement might be her only chance to recognize and mourn for what she has lost. Without the existence and recognition of love, people are dehumanized and isolated from each other.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the notion and experience of love makes Offred less of a melancholic subject. Moreover, love expresses her desire for representation and recognition. In searching and remembering loved ones and the way love feels, the narrator wishes to represent her past, present, and future. Only by knowing and negotiating with the past dead and by being able to mourn and to love, can one become less of a melancholic subject. In fact, Offred tries to preserve her loved objects as a part of herself by remembering her past. The loved ones become a part of her ego. She wants her beloved and therefore herself to be expressed and recognized through narration. For example, when she repeats what Moira says, “I [Offred] tried to make it sound as much like her [Moira] as I can. It’s a way of keeping her alive” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 244). Offred believes that story-telling makes her acquaintances alive. Even though she does not know whether they are still living in the present, they might become alive through narration. This “negotiation with the dead” is a hallmark of Atwood’s narrative writing: in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Margaret Atwood hypothesizes that “all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (Atwood, *Negotiating* 156). Writing, as “a reaction to the fear of

death,” is “an intimation of transience, of evanescence, and thus of mortality, coupled with the urge to indite” (157-8). Atwood also suggests that writers will have to deal with things from “previous layers of time”: “Even if that time is only yesterday, it isn’t now. It isn’t the *now* in which you are writing” (178). For Atwood, “[a]ll writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there” (178). Here, Atwood implies that what runs past the “*now*” means “the past” – the realm of the dead. Bringing back something from the dead into “the land of the living” and allowing the dead to “enter time once more” mean to enter them into “the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change” (178-9). In this sense, “the dead” referred to by Atwood actually is transient, evanescent and mortal – that is, the past, the lost or the absent. The urge to indite creates immortality. It demonstrates the living characters in the story, the narrator in the present, and the coming audiences in the future.

The memory of love shows recognition of the past and the present. Furthermore, it reveals how the present and the future might be changed because of it. As far as Offred is concerned, the narrator and the audience might come into existence by telling the story. For instance, she once clarifies her motivation of story-telling:

after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they’re not here. By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there. I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are...you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth.

(Atwood, *Handmaid* 268)

The truth indicates what has happened in the past. Her wish to be acknowledged

unfolds through her demonstration of memory and past, either to the person in the present or the audiences in the future. Every time she sneaks to Nick's place, she tells Nick about things of her past so that she can be recognized. "I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known" (270). Her desire to be known symbolizes human intention to be recognized. The characters in her story, the narrator herself, and the prospective audiences are all referred to and therefore exist in the tale. Although she might be ashamed of the truth, she tells her story in order to understand how she is traumatized and what she forgets. By telling the story, the narrator is constructing the past but also recognizing the present.

Moreover, by recording her memories of love, the narrator enables the story-teller and the audience prospective futures of multiplicity. In the process of telling the story, Offred shows that she believes in the possibility of escaping into "some other place," not "here" (268). Besides, Offred believes that she and her audiences can have the chance of fleeing to somewhere else. For example, she says, "I must be telling it [the story] to someone.... *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Even when there is no one. *You* can mean more than one. *You* can mean thousands" (40). Here, the narrator is creating her audiences in the future. Her ambition is to create not only one audience, but thousands of them. The existences somewhere else belong to both the narrator and the listener. There is always the potentiality of multiple existences in the process of telling her story. If there are thousands in her audience, there will be thousands of stories and possibilities. Offred's motivations are to tell the truth about the past and to escape from "now" to "not now", from "here" to "not here". By trusting imagined audiences or readers, the narrator or the writer believes in the possible future. There is the future of being away from the nation of Gilead, the haunted past and the reformable present. The future is not singular, but plural. It can involve fleeing away, living happily thereafter, or dying

with the loved one. It can be anything. Retelling the story of the traumatic loss is either an “act of larceny” or “else of reclamation” (Atwood, *Negotiating* 179).

Atwood’s female protagonist is actually creating a new subject, her own version of story, and the prospective futures she expects.

The female protagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale* expands her story by telling and negotiating with her history. That is to say, she brings back her history to the realm of living and creates “herstory.” According to Atwood, a text can only grow, change and reproduce “through its interaction with a reader, no matter how far away that reader may be from the writer in time and in space” (140). She considers writing as the process of bringing back something from the dead into the land of the living, namely to the reader, and the realm of change (178-9). Ruta Slapkauskaite also suggests in “Postmodern Voices from Beyond: Negotiating with the Dead in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*” that writing is “an act of resistance” which “reaches us long after its narrator has passed away” (Slapkauskaite 143). The interaction among the process of writing and reading qualifies the biological definition of living things which “grow and change, and can have offspring, whereas dead things are inert” (Atwood, *Negotiating* 140).

Throughout the narration by the narrator as well as the writer, Atwood’s female protagonists “speak the unspeakable, reveal the secrets of the living and the dead, subvert the received notion of ‘history’ and undo ‘the work of death’” (Davies in Howells 69). Hence, Slapkauskaite concludes in her essay that “[t]here is no *beyond* its controversies: readers and writers are accomplices lost in a state of a limbo, in which the future cannot open up but in a form of the past retold...storytelling is our only way of going *beyond* – beyond the present and the past, beyond the real and the imaginary” (Slapkauskaite 145). Writing is a way to get to know the truth in the past. Telling the story of love in the past helps one to see how he or she is traumatized by

the previous experience. Knowledge about the past reframes knowledge of the present. It also reconstructs the way of understanding and imagining the upcoming future. It offers chances to change.

Indeed, to understand the meaning of love is to uncover what has been missing in the patriarchal “history.” The discourse of love underscores the “herstory,” which opens up the possibility of various gender and sexuality. Because one’s ego is made of identification or internalization of the love object, it might be possible that love is the central way to understand oneself and the other. The love object in patriarchal heterosexuality stems from a male’s desire for masculinity or a female’s desire for the mother, according to Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*. In patriarchy, homosexual desire – such as male love for another man or female love for another woman – has never been avowed and therefore never been lost. This love is preserved in prohibition of possible femininity or homosexuality. By understanding the notion of love, one is able to realize what is or is not allowed to be presented and, more importantly, why. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there are various forms of love according to Offred’s narration: the love for Luke and Nick and the love for her mother, her daughter, and her friends. The understructure of patriarchal heterosexuality and the potential of homosexual desire in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are revealed through analysis of love in the novel.

II. Trauma, Patriarchy/Heterosexuality, and Gender Melancholia:

Melancholic Masculinity

Love does not only grant autonomy, but also it reveals gender melancholy.

Gender in the patriarchal heterosexuality of Atwood's novel is undoubtedly performed and melancholic. The heterosexual masculinity is melancholic because of the inability to acknowledge the loss of same-sex love and to grieve for this loss. Men lose their possibility to acknowledge homosexual desire, which might only be transformed into the denial of femininity. There are different kinds of heterosexual masculinity in *The Handmaid's Tale*: those of Luke, the Commander, and Nick. On the one hand, Luke in the pre-Gilead period of time seems to represent a male figure within an equal relationship to women in a democratic nation. When the balance shifts, however, he embodies the model of heterosexual masculinity. The Commander, on the other hand, might not be even aware of ungrieved love of any kind: what kind of love has been lost in the tale? It might be heterosexual love or homosexual love: male naturalized ownership over women constitutes no possibility of genuine love between men and women. Yet, Nick represents a certain process of sharing. He recognizes June's ungrieved love and loss and offers the chances to mourn and recreate. The three masculinities are different but yet all melancholic. In fact, the performativity of masculinity and heterosexuality is "the 'acting out' of unresolved grief" (Butler 146), even without recognition.

To initiate and strengthen a heterosexual masculinity, a man must start by negating the possibility of his homosexual desire. According to Butler, heterosexual gender is acquired through denial of homosexual attachment. "Becoming a 'man' within this logic requires repudiating femininity as a precondition for the heterosexualization of sexual desire and its fundamental ambivalence," Butler argues (137). She further contends that "[o]ne of the most anxious aims of his desire will be

to elaborate the difference between him and her, and he will seek to discover and install proof of that difference.... That refusal to desire, that sacrifice of desire under the force of prohibition, will incorporate homosexuality as an identification with masculinity. But this masculinity will be haunted by the love it cannot grieve” (Butler 136-8). This is to say, the patriarchal and heterosexual masculinity is preconditioned by the denial of homosexual desire toward another man.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is scarcely description of male fraternity. In fact, there is only one passage which talks about men generally in the whole novel. Even at the time when the Commander is making this comment about men, he distances himself from the men he is talking about by using “they” and “them” instead of using “we” and “us.” He uses the generic terms of “men” and the third person plural pronoun which seems to separate him apart. He claims that “the main problem was with the men” and their “inability to feel” in front of Offred (210). In this conversation, the first person pronoun “I” does not appear until the subject shifts from exclusively homogeneous “men” to heterosexual “us,” namely the Commander and Offred. The Commander’s extreme distance from male connection is omnipresent in the novel due to the absolute absence of this attachment. Men in the novel are isolated and alone. The male detachment that is so prevalent in the novel and the patriarchal world is self-evident to the disavowal of homosexual desire.

The denial of male homosexual attachment is the precondition of heterosexual masculinity. Moreover, femininity is the opposite “otherness” to be disavowed by heterosexual masculinity. Butler carefully analyzes “melancholic gender” within the heterosexual context: a man is not going to desire another man within the heterosexual context, nor will he identify with any women. The most fierce anxiety and dreadful desire of a patriarchal and heterosexual subject is to distinguish men from women. (Butler 137) The emphasis on masculinity and femininity is to differentiate men from

women in order to strengthen the notion of heterosexual desire and negate the possibility of homosexuality. For example, when the Commander invites Offred to his study, he observes Offred as if she is a special animal in zoo. He examines her “with that same air of looking in through the bars” of a spectator of a caged animal (159). She seems to be a quirky creature, different from him. He looks at her “not unbenevolently, but with curiosity, as if I am a puzzle to be solved” (184). This usually makes her feel like “an old Edwardian seaside postcard: *naughty*” (175). Indeed, she is considered by the Commander as a spectacle to be observed, someone who dares to go beyond, something different from “we men” despite the potential disgust at the male homosexual attachment. The Commander wants to understand the difference between men and women. Yet, this difference is created by the heterosexual community. The definition of and the difference between masculinity and femininity are both elaborated meticulously by heterosexuality, and have not existed since the very beginning. They are imaginary. Thus, the difference becomes a puzzle that confuses the community. Men wonders about what women think (210). Here, femininity is a product created by patriarchal heterosexuality in order to highlight masculinity and reinforce the notion of heterosexuality. The more differences between masculinity and femininity that can be performed and observed, the more secure the notion of heterosexuality becomes. The Commander’s obsession with, and differentiation from femininity is obvious: he clings to female characteristics. However, due to the double disavowal principle of heterosexuality, he repudiates any possibility of ever having loved, and therefore of ever having lost the love objects.

In this sense, the Commander seems to be fascinated by the femininity of Offred. In fact, he is turning his male homosexual desire into love of women, even though he might not recognize the homosexual attachment. The distinction between men and women is the underlying foundation to reinforce the notion of heterosexuality in

Gilead. Consciously or not, the elaboration of difference between men and women or masculinity and femininity has been emphasized in patriarchal heterosexuality. Take literacy as an instance. Offred explains that one of the distinctions between men and women is that men are allowed to read: “He has something we don’t have, he has the word” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 88). In Gileadean society, only men are endowed with the power of word, namely the power of knowledge. Literacy is considered to be a male characteristic. Yet, the Commander asks Offred to play Scrabble, a forbidden game about words. Offred wonders:

What had I been expecting, behind that closed door, the first time?
 Something unspeakable, down of all fours perhaps, perversions, whips, mutilations? To be asked to play Scrabble, instead, as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation in its own way. As a request it was opaque.... This was something he certainly had not done. I thought he might be toying, some cat-and-mouse routine, but now I think that his motives and desires weren’t obvious even to him. They had not yet reached the level of words.
 (155)

Following her doubt, she traces the Commander’s loss of his homosexual desire that cannot be mourned and recognized. In the nation of Gilead, women are forbidden to read; only men have access to literacy. In this sense, using words and being intelligent are male characteristics while the inability to gain knowledge through words and being innocent characterize femininity. The Commander’s allowance or even fondness for Offred’s reading and playing with words like Scrabble manifests his desire for homosexual attachment. He clings to characteristics of masculinity within a patriarchal context. He even desires to find masculinity in female figures. The Commander and the narrator do not understand his motivation for this request at first

because homosexual attachment is disavowed. Homosexual desire is preserved in fondness for (finding masculine characteristics in) females. “The fact is that I’m his mistress,” says the narrator, “I am the outside woman. It’s my job to provide what is otherwise lacking. Even the Scrabble. It’s an absurd as well as an ignominious position” (163). To be an outside woman, the narrator plays the role of a mistress who offers what has been lacked by the Commander, that is, the homosexual attachment. The love and loss of homosexual desire is outside the norm of heterosexuality. In fact, her position is ignominious because the quest and desire is ungrievable. What the Commander wants to fulfill is his homosexual desire, the attachment for masculinity.

Furthermore, the existence of the phrase left by the former unknown handmaid also represents a nostalgic homosexual attachment of the Commander. For instance, when the narrator is printing the phrase and copying it down for the Commander in order to ask him about its meaning, the Commander starts to laugh unexpectedly. This phrase recalls his memory in school because it is actually a joke schoolboys make. “You know how schoolboys are,” the Commander says to the narrator. Offred recalls:

His laughter is nostalgic, I see now, the laughter of indulgence towards his former self.... Forgetful of me and of himself, he’s turning the pages.... I can see why she [the former handmaid] wrote that, on the wall of the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learned it here, in this room. Where else? She was never a schoolboy. With him, during some previous period of boyhood reminiscence, of confidence exchanged. I have not been the first then. To enter his silence, play children’s word games with him. (186-7)

First of all, the way the narrator describes that she copies this phrase “from inside my head” and “from inside my closet” implies the homosexual desire (186). The phrase is

a memento from the “closet,” which usually symbolizes the place where homosexual desire hides. Meanwhile, this collateral structure of this sentence intimates that closet (homosexual desire) parallels head or human desire. The homosexual desire might be muffled for a while but not forever. Then, when the desire comes up, it will be irresistible. It will be a spontaneous overflow of emotion. It will be nostalgic because it is a love and a loss that cannot be avowed and grieved. The Commander’s nostalgic laughter of “indulgence towards his former self” is a longing toward his homosexual self. He recalls his memory in school with schoolboys. The handmaids, either the former or the present one, are just someone enabling him to reveal his male attachment implicitly. They are the medium for him to remember his boyish camaraderie. The notion of breaking through male silence indicates the Commander’s homosexual attachment and the need to liberate it.

The most fearful heterosexual anxiety is the possibility of homosexual desire. The distinction between men and women is elaborated by patriarchal heterosexuality in order to prohibit homosexual attachment and maintain the heterosexual precondition. According to Butler, the more extreme the heterosexual strength is, the more masculinity and femininity are differentiated from each other because these gender identifications and differences are formed through the disavowed grief of homosexual desire. For instance, when Offred and the Commander are playing Scrabble, he specifically “likes it when I distinguish myself, show precocity, like an attentive pet, prick-eared and eager to perform. His approbation laps me like a warm bath. I sense in him none of the animosity I used to sense in men, even in Luke sometimes. He’s not saying *bitch* in his head. In fact he is positively daddyish. He likes to think I am being entertained” (184). The Commander likes Offred to distinguish herself, to show her intelligence. He praises her when she demonstrates her knowledge in spelling. He likes it when she plays well in game. The narrator does

not sense any of the hostility that she usually senses in men; she even feels that the Commander is “daddyish.” This is because he is actually infusing his homosexual passion toward men into her. To prohibit women from reading indicates the fear of homosexual love. Thus, the Commander’s breaking of the taboo not only demonstrates his attachment to so-called masculinity, but also blurs the difference between men and women, masculinity and femininity. This obviously reveals homosexual desire within patriarchal and heterosexual context in the nation of Gilead.

Therefore, Offred’s performance of male characteristics can be seen as an acting-out of the unacknowledged grief. This demonstrates that gender is performative. The problem to recognize ungrieved and ungrievable love and loss is what makes patriarchal and heterosexual masculinity melancholic. Still, there is one thing about masculinity that is problematic: the disavowal of gender as performative. For instance, when Offred narrates her experience of reading, her being the subject to read and yet the object to be watched by the Commander, she says:

[o]n these occasions I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished; if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere. While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it, without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it. I wish he would turn his back, stroll around the room, read something himself. Then perhaps I could relax more, take my time. As it is, this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance. (184)

The commander seems to be interested in her hunger for reading. In fact, he is interested in her performance of masculinity. He watches her desire for knowledge or

her desire for reading, which is considered as masculine characteristics in Gilead. It is the commander's desire to know what it would be like to be a woman, what she wants, what she thinks. Yet, he does not realize that the distinction of one gender from another is made of and performed within the patriarchal and heterosexual context. The melancholic subject of patriarchal masculinity not only disavows gender performativity, but also is unaware of his occupancy of the world and repudiation of the other.

As a heterosexual subject, the Commander sees the biological difference between the two sexes. Therefore, he always keeps the notion of gender difference in mind. Everything he sees has been gendered. He does not recognize that gender itself is performative. A woman's femininity, her womanhood, motherhood, sisterhood, her act of being, or her reading of books is a kind of performance. Whether it caters to the patriarchal standard or not, the definition of femininity in the eye of beholder is controlled by those who see and those who clarify. The Commander fails to apprehend that all of Offred's femininity is performative, not natural as he assumes. He fails as well to understand that it is masculinity he wants to see in Offred. The distinction between masculinity and femininity is imagined and exaggerated by the heterosexual community and acted out by the female characters. The Commander's failure to recognize gender performativity is because of his denial of the lost of homosexual love. Furthermore, the masculine melancholic subject usually does not recognize his homosexual attachment or repudiation of femininity. Take the Commander as an example. He ignores "the real conditions under which we [handmaids] lived" (159). He does not understand the fact that women and men are both living within a rigid confinement, and lose their freedom and their desire for freedom. Nevertheless, the Commander is haunted by the unresolved grief and desire which are even unclear to him. In order to resolve the grief and become less of a

melancholic subject, the Commander must understand that the loss of homosexual love traumatizes him. To recognize the traumatic fact is the only way to mourn properly and become less traumatized and less melancholic.

III. Trauma, Patriarchy/Heterosexuality, and Gender Melancholia: Melancholic Femininity

In order to mourn properly, the melancholic subject must memorialize the loss of homosexual love and understand that this loss traumatizes the patriarchal and heterosexual subject. The story of the handmaid demonstrates the memory of historical and political as well as personal trauma. Personal trauma is also named as “family trauma” by E. A. Kaplan, “quiet traumas” by T. M. Luhrman, or “common traumas” by D. Barrett. Both Kaplan and Barrett argue that, “the similar experiences of shock, grief, destruction of security, and the induction of disturbing dreams is the reason the term ‘trauma’ can be applied to such common or quiet events” (Kaplan 149).

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred suffers from political and religious dramatic change and is imprisoned in the nation of Gilead. The Pre-Gilead period of time and nation constitute the political and religious “otherness” that cannot be mourned in Gilead. Moreover, Offred is not only politically and religiously traumatized, but also personally traumatized by the Gileadean totalitarianism. Melancholic subjects disavow unrieved love and loss yet keep being haunted by the unresolved grief. When Kaplan discusses the event of 911, she describes that people in the street “made visible the need for closure, the awfulness of not knowing if a loved one is dead, and if dead, if one would ever have a body to mourn over” (Kaplan 7). In fact, Offred has the similar situation as those who are traumatized in 911. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred can be seen as a melancholic subject because she is not able to mourn over her loss. There is definitely the need for closure in the novel. Offred does not know if her loved families, her husband, her daughter, her mother or her friend are alive or dead. For Offred, not being able to know produces her trauma. This experience of trauma impairs her ability to perceive, to feel, to remember and to depict.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, daughters have high expectation for mothers. These exceedingly high expectations are consequence of extreme and repressive heterosexuality and patriarchy. These expectations are what cause gender melancholia. The expectation for and the failure to fulfill the expectation between mother and daughter in the novel reflect self-identification and self-beratement. This phenomenon demonstrates homosexual attachment. "Consider that gender is acquired at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments," Butler contends, "the girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as a part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification" (Butler 136). Heterosexuality is produced first through the presumption of the impossibility of homosexual attachment, and then the forbidden taboo of incest. Through the daughter's double disavowal of never having loved the mother and thus never having lost the mother, the homosexual desire is hence unrecognized and ungrieved. Because the never-never stage has denied homosexuality, the daughter's heterosexual incestuous desire for her father then can be prohibited and turned into identification with the same-sex, namely the mother.

In this sense, the daughter's homosexual attachment has been incorporated into identification with femininity. Ruth McElroy draws upon Toni Morrison's argument in her article about surrogacy, "Whose Body, Whose Nation?" and stresses that surrogacy plays the similar "enabling role" with "race" (McElroy 337). Morrison asserts that race and Africanism enable and structure the American Self. She states that "the Africanist character [acts] as surrogate and enabler.... Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny"(Morrison 51-2). On the other hand, McElroy

argues that surrogacy enables and structures the narrative about surrogate motherhood (McElroy 337). The narrative of surrogacy is constructed by the underlying ideology of gender differences and repudiation of homosexual desire. Gender, according to Butler, “is acquired at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments” (Butler 136). The truth is that the narrative of surrogacy is structured by heterosexual repudiation of femininity and homosexuality and elaboration of the difference between men and women, masculinity and femininity. The daughter refuses to admit the object of love and loss, that is, homosexual desire and the figurative mother. The mother, therefore, is a part of the daughter’s identification and internalized as a part of the daughter’s ego. Yet, the ideal masculinity and femininity do not actually exist. They are created by imaginary ideals. In fact, the high expectation and disappointment between mother and daughter in *The Handmaid’s Tale* come from the double disavowal of heterosexuality. Hence, the pursuit of the ideal is destined to fail.

Moreover, the mother/daughter expectation and denial are actually self-expectation and self-denial. Either self-expectation or self-denial is the manifestation of homosexual desire. For example, when Offred’ recalls the memory of her own mother-daughter relationship, she says:

I admire my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she’d made. I didn’t want to live my life on her terms. I didn’t want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 122)

We can tell from this passage that the mother expects the daughter to live up to her own ideal, while the daughter also expects something from her mother: “I wanted

from her a life more ceremonious, less subject to makeshift and decampment” (181). When the subject wants something from the object he or she identifies with, the subject is internalizing the object into the ego. For instance, the narrator wants the ideal model of motherhood from her mother. Even so, the ideal is imagined under patriarchal and heterosexual context. The ideal does not even exist. The vindication of oneself from the other, the hope for incarnation of the ideal is originated from the desire for the loved object and the refusal of the loved and lost object as an internalized identification.

However, the expectation inevitably results in the failure of it because of the disavowal of the loved and lost object. “No mother is ever, completely, a child’s idea of what a mother should be,” Offred says, “and I suppose it works the other way around as well” (181). The failure of reaching the ideal demonstrates a certain way of self-reproach: the daughter identifies with and internalizes the mother as a part of ego because of the disavowal of homosexual attachment and the incestuous taboo. The daughter who reproaches the mother is actually accusing herself. “[T]he self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted on to the patient’s own ego,” Freud argues in “Mourning and Melancholia”. He states that in the case of self-beratement, the patient berates not only himself or herself, but “some person whom the patient loves, has loved or ought to love” (Freud 169). Being marked by the experience of self-accusation, Offred’s femininity therefore is melancholic without recognition of the loved and lost object.

In addition, there is one more explicit instance of self-rebuke in the novel. When the Handmaids are at the Red Center in which the Aunts edify and regulate Handmaids, they are taught to pray for “emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 194). Only after reproaching herself can a handmaid be fulfilled with semen and babies,

namely female value of reproduction within the patriarchal and heterosexual context. A handmaid needs to empty herself first and then fit into the heterosexual structure and find her own position and her own way of living. Here, self-reproach implies and reveals as well homosexual desire that has been forbidden and internalized into the ego. Self-negation operates either implicitly through the mother-daughter expectation and repudiation or explicitly through educating females how to deny their own feelings and their own existences. The existence of self-negation is actually a manifestation of the forbidden homosexual attachment. In the cases of self-denial above, we can realize in the extreme state of patriarchy and heterosexuality that women in the novel cannot mourn for the grief of lost object of love.

Moreover, the performativity of femininity can be seen as acting out the unrieved loss of homosexual attachment. From the analysis above, we can see how a self-reproaching feminine identification is composed through denial of homosexual desire and differentiation of men from women, masculinity from femininity in order to maintain heterosexuality. In the following analysis, we are going to see how this melancholic femininity is performative, and how the performative femininity demonstrates the ungrivable love and loss of homosexual desire. Take female subjugation as an example. As one of characteristics of femininity, it has been shown that gender is performed through heterosexual imagination. When Offred thinks of her experience of walking in galleries in the Pre-Gilead period of time, she recalls “the obsession they had then with harems.... Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who’d never been there. These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom” (69). As far as the narrator is concerned, the paintings were erotic from the patriarchal point of view when she has not even noticed that she has

internalized the prevalent view of patriarchal heterosexuality. At that time, she has shared the heterosexual masculine imagination with the painters who have never been to this imaginary world of owning harems. However, when she becomes one of them, one of “harems,” she comes to understand that sex is not the central theme of those pictures of harems. When she is trapped in the plight in which the notion of patriarchal heterosexuality simplifies women only as tools of reproduction, she realizes that the paintings were not erotic; they are about female subjection. It is a world where men dominate and women reproduce. When she becomes one of women in the harems pictured in the prospect of Gilead, she finally understands that this female subjugation imagined by heterosexuality is a performance. Women are forced to act out being submissive to men and being fruitful by men.

To be more specific, the narrator’s demonstration of femininity and motherhood in the novel is an example of gender performativity. When she takes a bath, for instance, she inevitably sees, visually and symbolically, the role which she is forced to take on. “I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource.... I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (65-6). The tattoo here is like “a cattle brand” which means “ownership” (254). In the republic of Gilead, Offred is a resource which belongs to the nation and the patriarch. It is motherhood she has to take on, or to be more specific, the role of the surrogate mother that she needs to play. Giving birth is the most feminine capacity that cannot be replaced and from which Offred cannot be exempt. Still, it promises her existence but as well confines her value only to reproduction. Thus, her being in Gilead is something she must compose and perform according to a rigidly heterosexual

structure: to be a silent vessel to carry life, to be a female figure that presents femininity, to be an innocent person who knows nothing and feels nothing.

In the nation of Gilead, gender (femininity) is melancholic. It is performative and so is space. Both the performative femininity and space demonstrate the ungrivable love and loss of desired object. For instance, femininity in public area in Gilead is performative. Women act out to correspond to heterosexual ideal of femininity. When Offred and Ofglen, the other handmaid who partners Offred at public area while shopping, walk in the street, they always pretend to be pious and prayerful. When they stop in front of a church, Offred narrates that “Ofglen’s head is bowed, as if she’s praying. She does this every time. Maybe, I think, there’s someone, someone in particular gone, for her too; a man, a child. But I can’t entirely believe it. I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act. She does such things to look good, I think. She’s out to make the best of it. But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise?” (31) In the household or public area other than the handmaid’s personal room, Handmaids are supposed to act properly. Their heads are always down, they avoid looking straight into the other’s face or eyes, and they are almost always in silence.

In the passage above, Offred clearly recognizes the performativity of Gilead femininity. Both Offred’s and Ofglen’s femininities are acted out in order to look docile and meek, modest and prayerful, impenetrable and silent. These qualify them for feminine characteristics which are set up by extreme patriarchal heterosexuality. Offred and Ofglen pretend to be prayerful as they mourn for the loss of a loved one in front of the church. Yet, no one really knows about their love and loss. This is because the grief of any loss is not allowed at public area in Gilead. Loss and grief, then, cannot be mourned properly. Even though there might be someone or something that Ofglen mourns, Offred has no access to her disavowed grief. All she can access is the

performance presented externally, the seem-to-be pious look. The ungrieved and ungrievable love and loss is not recognizable in the public area, in front of the other.

However, personal or private rooms indicate multiple possibilities and heterogeneity while the public area represents rigidity and homogeneity. On the one hand, masculinity and femininity represents strict discipline, homogeneity and segregation within the context of patriarchal heterosexuality. People in the public field, like on the street, at places where people assemble, or even the domestic house where other family members live, must follow the masculine form of order. The feminine or homosexual form, on the other hand, creates more fluidity and variety in the personal sphere of life. These private spaces include the personal room of the narrator, the study of the Commander where only handmaids are allowed unofficially to enter, or the lady's room where females exchange information.

For instance, the narrator is allowed to enter the Commander's study and read books and magazines. Her entrance to his study and reading books should be prohibited; yet, "[i]n here [the Commander's study], it [reading] is [permitted], he said quietly. I saw the point. Having broken the main taboo [of being in men's study], why should I hesitate over another one, something minor? Or another, or another; who could tell where it might stop? Behind this particular door, taboo dissolved" (157). The private space is where unrestricted possibilities grow. After breaking one taboo after another, the melancholic subjects are endowed with what has been lost in extreme patriarchal heterosexuality. It is possible to mourn the loss of love for femininity and homosexuality in personal spaces. Compare the personal area to the disciplining and homogenizing aura in public spaces, there is fluidity, variety and possibility. Therefore, the personal space provides a way of creating a new reality, a new object and a new subjectivity.

As a postmodern time and space of monotheocracy, the nation of Gilead is

fictionally set up in late-twentieth-century America in which a Christian middle-class patriarchy dominates the nation. The bourgeois family in modern society becomes “the site for female hysteria (caused partly by that family’s patriarchal and puritanical codes)” (Kaplan 25). Indeed, women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* suffer from the patriarchal plight and so-called “female hysteria”. The inability to recognize and mourn the loss of the loved ones makes the melancholic subject preserve the loved objects in ego. It is Kaplan’s and also my focus to see “the impact of trauma, the subjects it produces, its implication in ideology, and in searching for ways in which trauma can be ‘translated’” (Kaplan 36). Therefore, the examination of the symptom of trauma, especially hysteria, is crucial when we want to find out the influence of trauma.

Following the patriarchal notion of mental disorder, the narrator almost considers herself hysterical while confronting the conflict between strict patriarchal heterosexuality and the desire for transcendence. Hysteria, the phenomena of trauma, in fact represents the loss caused by men, yet the compressed possibility to transform. For example, there is one specific episode in which the narrator depicts her symptom of hysteria. In this episode, the narrator first recalls a documentary film in which the mistress of a man who supervised a concentration camp was interviewed. Offred’s mind flashes back to the heavy make-up of this mistress. She wonders if the mistress had ever loved him. It is the Commander’s request that reminds her about the mistress – he asks the narrator to play Scrabble with him and kiss him goodnight if she means it –to be his mistress (Atwood, *Handmaid* 163). In the second half of this episode, the narrator suddenly suffers from an irresistible impulse to laugh:

I stand up, in the dark, start to unbutton. Then I hear something,
inside my body. I’ve broken, something has cracked, that must be it.
Noise is coming up, coming out, of the broken place, in my face. Without

warning: I wasn't thinking about here or there or anything. If I let the noise get out into the air it will be laughter, too loud, too much of it....

Judgment: emotion inappropriate to the occasion. The wandering womb, they used to think. Hysteria. And then a needle, a pill. It could be fatal....

I stifle it in the folds of the hanging cloak, clench my eyes, from which tears are squeezing. Try to compose myself....

After a while it passes, like an epileptic fit. Here I am in the closet. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. I can't see it in the dark but I trace the tiny scratches writing with the ends of my fingers, as if it's a code in Braille. It sounds in my head now less like a prayer, more like a command; but to do what? Useless to me in any case, an ancient hieroglyph to which the key's been lost. Why did she write it, why did she bother? There's no way out of here.

I lie on the floor, breathing too fast, then slower, evening out my breathing, as in the Exercise, for giving birth. All I can hear now is the sound of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening (146-7)

In this significant scene, the contrast between patriarchal heterosexuality and desire for any other possibility has been shown through the symptom of hysteria. The symptom itself is the demonstration of masculine desire to dominate and regulate everyone within the norm and the manifestation of feminine desire to go beyond masculine imagination. There are various symbols.

In "The Laugh of Medusa," Helene Cixous states that women are taught to ignore their bodies. In order to break away this "stupid sexual modesty," she argues that "[w]omen must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they

must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word ‘silence,’ the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word ‘impossible’ and writes it as ‘the end’” (Cixous 256). It is, Cixous argues, the unconscious deeply rooted in women’s bodies that is “impregnable” (248) – the unconscious is irremovable and strong, and productive and multipliable as well. The noise coming out of the narrator’s body symbolizes the unconscious that has been brainwashed, stifled and muffled for a time only. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, unconsciousness has been confined to a narrow and rigid room, to the night and the dark, to the individual in private. Yet, it can only be incarcerated for a while, not forever. It surges spontaneous even when one is not “thinking about here or there or anything” at all (Atwood, *Handmaid* 147). With the rise of the unconscious desire, the body is no longer a unity, not a heterogeneous unity composed according to the patriarchal and heterosexual framework. On the contrary, it is a body of “broken” fragmentation (146), of outlaw desire and of possibilities. It is fragmentary because it cannot be defined or enclosed by the discourse of “phallogocentric system” (Cixous 253), and because it will deconstruct the orthodox heterosexuality.

The noise of laughter breaks out the silence of patriarchal heterosexuality. The unconscious has been silenced first; however, it becomes a noisy voice that might speak up and laugh loud by the force of instinct and desire. While women start to speak, Cixous suggests, they regain their name (247). The unspeakable that is going to be told by the unconscious, by the bodies and by the noise will turn out to be a burst of laughter. When Offred hears the noise out of her body, she feels an urge to laugh. “If I let the noise get out into the air,” Offred says, “it will be laughter, too loud, too much of it” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 146). It is a strong and overflowing emotion. She understands that if she bursts into laughter, it would be diagnosed by masculine

medical authority as emotional inappropriateness, female hysteria, or “the wandering womb” (146). Within the patriarchal and heterosexual context which demands only silence and reproduction from women, hysterical laughter can be fatal. In order to regulate the disorder, masculine authority will treat by penetrating the patient with needles and pills. “[W]riting,” as well as derivational medical discourse, “has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy; ... this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated” (Cixous 249). The ill feminine bodies are to be treated and penetrated by sound masculine authority for the following reason: the wandering womb would not be an appropriate and healthy vessel for babies and for all “partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes” (248) to grow according to masculine doctrine. However, it can be fertile in a feminine term. “The wandering womb” can be the origin in which nurtures fluidity and multiplicity. Indeed, the hysterical process is described by the female narrator as an exercise “for giving birth” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 147). It creates an urge to laugh – a compulsion to laugh at indifference, ignorance or negligence in the need for sharing and love.

The compulsion to laugh signifies a creative movement as well as writing. The laughter challenges the “impossible” and all those boundaries set up in heterosexual context and calls them “the end” (Cixous 256). “Men have committed the greatest crime against women,” Cixous states in “The Laugh of Medusa:”

[t]hey have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove. We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the beavies – we are black and we are beautiful.... [L]aughes exude from all

our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lack. (248)

Here, the notion of antilove echoes the doubt of the narrator: she wonders has the mistress in the documentary film ever loved the male supervisor of a concentration camp. She unconsciously questions the existence of love within patriarchal and heterosexual structure. The image of "mouths gagged with pollen" (248) visually symbolizes how women are choked muffled by their female value and ability for reproduction. When the unconscious flows out of the mind, it becomes laughter. It laughs at ignorance and negligence of the embarrassment and pretending.

Several chapters earlier than this episode, there is one scene which also illustrates the disregard and pretense. During the ritual before the Ceremony (of insemination), Serena Joy the Wife bursts into tears. "The tension between her lack of control and her attempt to suppress it is horrible," the narrator says. "It's like a fart in church. I feel, as always, the urge to laugh, but not because I think it's funny. The smell of her crying spreads over us and we pretend to ignore it" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 90). On one hand, the tear in this passage embodies the pain of the loss, the embarrassment, the grief and disavow of recognizing them. The Wife suffers from the humiliation of not being capable to fulfill her "responsibility" to give birth as a wife and as a female. Yet, the pain has been and must be neglected by the entire household assembling in the sitting room. It is a loss that is not allowed to be grieved, to be mourned or even to be avowed. On the other, the laughter in this passage as well as with the one in later episode represents the refusal to the indifference to the grief and the desire to acknowledge the grief. The laughter is "nostalgic" (186) of the past, of the loss, of the primary desire even of the male character, the Commander. It comes from both male and female, from melancholic subjects within heterosexual culture who do not

necessarily know about the loss and the mourning. When Serena starts crying, the narrator acknowledges Serena's pain and grief. Yet, the family members pretend to ignore her grief. The indifference dehumanizes the family members because of their inability to feel and to love. It also shows that women must not grieve, must be silent, and must be an empty and useful vessel in order to realize the ideal of femininity in patriarchal heterosexuality. The urge to laugh is a refusal to dehumanize and to exaggerate of "all the signs of sexual opposition," (Cixous 249) to silence of "the margin or the harem" (251), and the inability to love. It is a quest for sharing, equality and love.

Like the laughter burst out of female bodies, the handmaids represent the repressed in the culture which is always multiplied and waiting for transformation. The narrator finally comes to realize when the Commander explains to her the meaning of phrase carved in the closet of her room by the former resident, the "unknown woman, with the face of Moira," the former handmaid who lives in the Commander's house and commits suicide in her room under the chandelier (Atwood, *Handmaid* 91). "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*," the Commander explains to Offred, "It meant, Don't let the bastards grind you down" (186-7). The phrase and spirit of the former handmaid actually means the resistance against the status quo. After a series of events that break up the surface peace and rushes her life in the Commander's household toward the unknown end, the narrator suddenly sees the presence of the unknown woman. Offred narrates:

Behind me I feel her presence, my ancestress, my double, turning in midair under the chandelier, in her costume of stars and feathers, a bird stopped in flight, a woman made into an angel, waiting to be found. By me this time. How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us. Get it over, she says. I'm tired of this melodrama, I'm

tired of keeping silent. There's no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. I want it finished (293).

The unknown woman in the Commander's house is an ungrieved lost. Her death has never been mentioned in the family. The Commander only mentions her once to Offred in his study. The existence of the former handmaid found by Offred represents the acknowledgement of plight in patriarchal heterosexuality, the resistance against it, and the doubleness of the female characters in the story.

The appearance of the unknown handmaid reminds the narrator that she dies because of heterosexual oppression. The phrase left by her, however, has been found by Offred. It is the evidence which proves that the former handmaid has ever lived here, in the Commander's house in Gilead. This evidence inspires Offred to resist against the extreme patriarchal heterosexuality and fight for her own fate. "Don't let the bastards grind you down," says the former handmaid in the closet. She asks Offred to over the silence, the oppression, the injustice in this nation. Offred finds out that she and the former handmaid have the similar position: they are handmaids subject to the Commander. If Offred does not fight against the status quo, she might die as the former handmaid does. However, Offred might have a different fate if she acts. The existence of the unknown woman makes Offred realize that she is not alone; in fact, "there were always two of us" (293). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the narrator's position is always plural, always first person plural. "We" means you and I, the object and the subject. It is always plural, not singular, full of voices and obscurity, and double-ended. It could be ended in one way or another, not always the same.

This multiple fates suggested through narration bring out the possibilities that will never reach the end. When Julia Kristeva analyzes Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* in her work, *Time and Sense*, she raises the notion of multiplicity through narrative. While the character confronts with a new event, he or she will incorporate

the present experience with the former one and create a new subject out of experience. In her discussion of the use of cornerstone and paving-stone in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Kristeva shows that Proust shifts from the religious symbol into a personal appropriation (Kristeva 104-110). She demonstrates that there are always two spaces and times in which the narrator's desire in *In Search of Lost Time* is emerged into experience. Proust's narrator externalizes his consciousness in to the object, such as the paving-stone, and makes the object a reality. The second meaning has been created from the original one through the narrator's experience and narration. The co-presence of two kinds of stone in Proust's work shows there are always two kinds of reality, so does the co-presence of two female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The doubleness in *The Handmaid's Tale* can be seen in Offred and the unknown woman, Offred and Ofglen, Offred/June and Moira, June and her mother, or June and Offred. The meaning is always doubled. "All narrations form links between events – between a succession of 'nows'" (Kristeva 323). The linkage and the continuity of narrative between the two are created by the author and the narrator – by the narration. The story is multiplied and subverted at the same time by the way of narrating.

Therefore, the co-presence of the self and the other or the previous experience and the present one in *The Handmaid's Tale* shows various possibilities. Each co-presence of two female characters shows double meanings in the story. The previous "now," namely, the previous existence of the other characters implies a part of Offred's desire. Her desire has been emerged into experience and creates a new reality, a new "now". For instance, the presence of the unknown woman, on one hand, is signal of what Offred is: she is a handmaid in Gilead. On the other hand, the absence of the unknown woman reminds Offred of what she might become: to resist or else die, to finish the melodrama or else being finished, to speak out or else stifle. Offred infuses the previous experience of the unknown woman and creates a new

subject and a new reality. She decides to make some change: to flee, to go away from the heterosexual oppression. Moreover, the doubleness of June/Offred and Moira illustrates two different styles of living and two different realities. Moira's existence or word is more "like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 222) which shows "what we might be capable of" (275). She embodies what Offred lacks but wants: "gallantry... swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat" (249). In others words, Moira completes the narrator.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, each set of two female characters demonstrates , such as Offred and the unknown woman, Offred and Ofglen, Offred/June and Moira, June and her mother, or June and Offred, reveals double meanings and multiple possibilities and endings. The unknown handmaid foreshadows the narrator's fate and her resistance. Ofglen mirrors Offred and shows how others see the handmaids: prayerful and obedient. Yet, Ofglen also shows the rebellious potential of the handmaids when she declares her position as a member of "The Underground Femaleroad," an underground organization which rescues people from totalitarian persecution in Gilead. June's mother implies the impossibility for June to achieve the ideal model, vice versa. Even Offred herself symbolizes what has been lacked in June in the past: Offred represents recognition of the status quo, of heterosexual occupancy and oppression, and of the will for freedom. With the doubleness in narration, there is always double-sided ambiguity which promises potentiality.

Conclusion

It is the obscurity of narration that makes the story open-ended and full of uncertainty and possibility. “As for the ultimate fate of our narrator, it remains obscure,” says James Darcy Pieixoto, one of keynote speakers in the symposium at the very end of the novel. “Our document, though in its own way eloquent, is on these subjects mute,” he continues, “We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. As all historians know the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day” (311). It is clear that in Atwood’s writing, the written characters or things, fictional or genuine, have entered the realm of the past and the dead right after the moment of writing. What has been written down, the person, the event, the reconstruction or the representation are embodied in the figure of Eurydice – the one who has been brought back from the Underworld by the writer. They speak out the unspeakable, the unknown, and the ungrieved love and loss in the past to the reader.

The purpose of bringing back the dead to the living is to know what has happened, to understand both the past and therefore the present, and to change and go beyond the future. However, the dead cannot speak for themselves. Only the one in the realm of living present has the chance to voice. The past is a dark site full of indistinct echoes and memories. The obscurity is what remains from the past through the narration of memory. It makes multiplicity and fluidity possible. It is the place where heterogeneity is born and grows. At the end of the novel, the readers do not know the fate of the narrator after she leaves the Commander’s house and records the handmaid’s tale. What comes thereafter could be anything: Offred might flee from the

nation of Gilead, reunite with her family, remarry, or give birth to the child of Nick. Without a clear end of the story, readers or audiences have chances to create or imagine their own prospective ending. They are the ones in the realm of the living, recognizing the world through the dead and making all changes.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *Negotiating with the Dead*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- . *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor, 1998.
- Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs*, Summer 1976.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1953-74.
- Howells, Coral Ann, ed.. *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- McElroy, Ruth, "Whose Body, Whose Nation?: Surrogate Motherhood and Its Representation." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5.3 (2002): 325-42.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. London: Picador, 1987.
- Slapkauskaitė, Ruta. "Postmodern Voices from Beyond: Negotiating with the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*." *Literatura* 49.5 (2007): 138-146.