

**Sorority without solidarity:
Control in the patriarchal utopia
of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

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*Received 1.12.2017,
received in revised form 2.08.2018,
accepted 30.08.2018.*

Abstract

Despite all variables, the subjugation of the female figure has always been the constant in the conceptualisation of patriarchal utopias. To ensure that subjugation women must undergo a process of reformation and surrender into normative sororities that are at the mercy of the state. It is argued here that such patriarchal utopias involve the elimination of solidarity with and between members of the sororal collective. This ensures the isolation of women and, consequently, eliminates the emancipation of womanhood from patriarchal idealisations. Sororities without solidarity are subjected to a comparative analysis of various classical utopian/dystopian texts and Atwood's feminist dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to foreground the problem concerning the construction of normative female beings. Moreover, the figure of (e)merging women in contemporary feminist utopian/dystopian discourses paves the way for female empowerment within patriarchal society by combining sorority *and* solidarity.

Keywords

sorority, solidarity, desexualisation, patriarchal utopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (e)merging women

**Żeński kolektyw bez solidarności:
Kontrola w patriarchalnej utopii
Opowieści podręcznej Margaret Atwood**

Pomimo najróżniejszych zmiennych, fakt podporządkowania postaci kobiecej był nieodmiennie stałym elementem patriarchalnej utopii. Kobiety zmuszone są przejść proces „reformacji” podporządkowując się normom żeńskich kolektywów całkowicie uzależnionych od woli państwa. Niniejszy artykuł stara się dowieść, że taka sytuacja pociąga za sobą rozbitcie solidarności pomiędzy członkiniami żeńskiego kolektywu oraz pomiędzy nim a resztą społeczeństwa. Prowadzi to do osamotnienia kobiet, a w konsekwencji uniemożliwia emancypację kobiecości w ramach patriarchalnych utopii. Zjawisko żeńskiego kolektywu pozbawionego solidarności zostaje omówione na przykładzie analizy porównawczej klasycznych tekstów utopijnych/dystopijnych oraz feministyczną dystopią Margaret Atwood *Opowieść podręcznej*, która ma na celu ukazanie problemów pojawiających się podczas próby konstrukcji normatywnych modeli kobiecości. Ponadto postać kobiety wyłaniająca się ze współczesnych feministycznych dyskursów utopijnych/dystopijnych zdaje się sprzyjać umocnieniu pozycji kobiet w patriarchalnym społeczeństwie, poprzez stwarzanie możliwości uczynienia solidarności niezbędnym czynnikiem spajającym żeński kolektyw.

Słowa kluczowe

żeński kolektyw, solidarność, deseksualizacja, utopia patriarchalna, *Opowieść podręcznej*, kobiety

If utopias are based on the imperative of order, we must ask:
Whose order is it? At whose expense has it been constructed?
At what cost is it maintained?
(Bammer 1991: 17)

Even though the word ‘utopia’ is open to interpretations, if we were to understand classical utopia as a patriarchal space whose order falls under male-defined terms (Bammer 1991:

19), we could easily respond to the first two questions by saying that men's control in the utopian dream is only possible at the expense of women. However, the answer to the third question may vary among scholars, producing as a result a wide range of possibilities (e.g. women's bodies, voices, freedom, equality, etc.). Without questioning earlier attempts at answering such a question, this study suggests that patriarchal utopia is maintained at the cost of female solidarity, this being the one quality that, when lost, causes the distortion – but not complete removal – of the aforementioned features.

The aim of this essay is to discuss the origins of the loss of female solidarity in the conceptualisation of patriarchal utopias as well as to analyse the process of the enforced distortion of female nature that converts sorority into a patriarchal instrument rather than an empowering bond. Secondly, I consider the deconstruction of the stagnation and essentialism of patriarchal utopia that Margaret Atwood undertakes in *The Handmaid's Tale*, revealing its true nature as a feminist dystopia. Consequently, the latest movements in feminism may consider resorting to new forms of utopianism and, accordingly, of solidarity, in order to restore sorority as the (e)merging power for women to fight, rather than serve, patriarchy.

The lack of solidarity with women characterised fictional utopian lands and permeated the historical realm too. The French Revolution, regarded as the pivotal impulse to put utopia into political practice, clearly excluded women from its motto *Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité*, (French 2008b).¹ “Definitions may be constructed in such a way as to exclude that which should be included” (Sargisson 1996: 14), and by reducing solidarity to the fraternal bond patriarchal utopias largely ignore the female collective. Thus, the solidarity contract is

¹ However, French (2008b: 398) continues saying that the French Revolution constituted a major event in women's history considering that it occasioned their first mass protest as a caste. Women were never again silent, but men continued ignoring their demands for over two centuries. This reflects the ideas presented by Ardener (1993) in the theory of mutedness, which I apply in what follows in order to examine the lack of solidarity with women in utopia.

flouted inasmuch as there is a failure of the “presumption of reciprocity” that defines solidarity (Laitinen and Pessi 2014). Moreover, Boparai also claims that this quality must emerge from a conjoining of visions (2015: 5), and yet, the elimination of women from decision-making in the state clearly shows that utopia proves functional for only one segment of the society (Gordin et al. 2010: 1).

The most appropriate definition of solidarity in patriarchal utopia² is the one provided by Dean, when she characterises traditional or conventional solidarity. For her, traditional solidarity has usually operated “within a notion of membership that is both exclusionary and repressive” (1996: 15). Likewise, Sargisson (1996: 74) shows how repressive the patriarchal idea of difference is, since it is conceived as a deviance from the established norm and therefore justifies inequality. Given that he is the Absolute and she the Other (Beauvoir 2010: 28), woman’s deviance from the patriarchal norm justifies her exclusion from solidarity.

Nonetheless, this does not presuppose the banishment of women from the utopian land. Quite the opposite, the female collective turns out to be a crucial element in the conceptualisation of the patriarchal utopia, the womb being the lacking organ in the fraternity. Thereby, patriarchal utopias engender the idea that gives title to this essay: sororities without solidarity. Not only is this quality denied to women in general, but the success of patriarchal sororities consists also in the elimination of solidarity *among* women. The creation of antagonistic feminine archetypes and the lack of communication between them prevent empathetic feelings and solidary reciprocity, leaving sororities at the mercy of patriarchy’s desires.

As has been previously said, the elimination of solidarity does not divest sororities of their bodies and their voices nor

² When I refer to patriarchal utopia here I do not only have in mind classical literary utopias, but also any utopian movement in history that, despite its democratic intentions introduced in a more or less revolutionary way, ultimately undermined the position of women as a result of patriarchal mentality.

does it deprive them of freedom and equality enjoyed in the patriarchal utopia. However, the distortion of these elements is necessarily effected in order to fully integrate women as compliant members of the patriarchal society. Although it might seem illogical or paradoxical to observe that patriarchy *engenders* sorority, when it is usually sorority that carries out the reproductive labour in the system, women are in a way “re-born” after they have undergone this process of enforced adjustment (distortion) turning each of them into *the* ideal patriarchal woman.

1. The origins of (in)consistency in patriarchal utopia

Classical utopias have often been described as imaginary perfect societies. In order to achieve such perfection in the state, social organisation and stability must take precedence, and the patriarchal system ensures that these requirements are met. Even so, “the generic conventions of utopian fiction have on the whole been inimical to women” (Bammer 1991: 12), since patriarchal utopias rely on traditional exclusionary solidarity. As Dean claims, this notion always involves three persons: “I ask you to stand by me over and against a third” (1996: 3). The eternal third in patriarchy is a woman, if we understand patriarchy as

a set of social relations between men, [...] which though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. Though patriarchy is hierarchical and men of different classes, races, or ethnic groups have different places in patriarchy, they are also united in their shared relationship of dominance over their women; they are dependent on each other to maintain that domination. (Hartmann 2017: 219)

Emil Cioran suggests that “utopia is essentially anti-Manichean. Hostile to anomalies, deformities, irregularities, it tries to secure homogeneity, tradition, repetition and ortho-

doxy. But life is rupture, heresy, the exemption from the norms of the subject” (1960: 110)³. Though I reject the idea of patriarchal utopias as anti-Manichean, considering that Manichaeism shares with the patriarchal utopia an opposing dualist view, I agree with Cioran that patriarchal utopia aims at the eradication, or at least partial elimination, of any kind of imperfection or deviation that endangers the homogeneity of the system. Moreover, patriarchy, just like utopia, defies life itself as it tries to attain timelessness.

Marilyn French in her four-volume work *From Eve to Dawn* (2008) explores how history undergoes a shift from anarchic nature-centred communities to new highly organised societies that confer “symbolic immortality on a man and his descendants” (2008a: 68). This change assumed the end of the so-called matrilineal societies⁴ in favour of the establishment of the patriarchal state, ensuring the continuity of male supremacy. Consequently, the first megalomaniac utopian dreams invariably reflected this desire for static consistency:

although utopias may sweep away such fundamental existing institutions as private property, money, or the Christian religion, they rely as heavily on the maintenance of patriarchy for their distinctive character as on the abolition or transformation of other aspects of society. (Ferns 1999: 64)

³ The translation is mine. The original passage reads as follows: “L’utopie est d’essence antimanichéenne. Hostile à l’anomalie, au difforme, à l’irrégulier, elle tend à l’affermissement de l’homogène, du type, de la répétition et de l’orthodoxie. Mais la vie est rupture, hérésie, dérogation aux normes de la matière”.

⁴ Marilyn French (2008a: 43) insists on the difference between matrilineal families and matriarchal organisations. In matrilineal clans, people were gathered around the female figure and the offspring was thought to come from the mother, not the father. But, according to her, there has never been a fully matriarchal regime that implied an institutionalised organisation of state members under female order. Such matrilineal bond was caused by the worship of Nature being incarnated in goddesses of fecundity and rebirth. The change to sedentary life and the consequent discovery of man’s contribution in the process of procreation would entail the beginning of new phallogocratic religions.

Solidarity's withdrawal from sorority does not exempt women from contributing to the utopian dream. The reformation of female identity so as to create new submissive members of the patriarchal regime is of utmost importance to guarantee such perpetual hierarchy.

It is war and religion, the two major patriarchal instruments (French 2008b: 12), that brought about the end of solidarity between people and the struggle for dominance between civilisations. The same factors were also responsible for the emergence of sororities without solidarity. Apart from the infliction of hatred and fear through violence, the new patriarchal religions manifested a stiff sexual hierarchy where 'man' and 'woman' were put into a binary opposition. In particular, the power enjoyed by female individuals in the matrilineal community was to be restricted, as their fluid and ambivalent identity as well as their mighty sexuality could endanger the permanence of male control in a patriarchal utopia. For this reason, all women who belonged to the system were bound to suffer strict control of their sexuality, adjusting it to the arbitrary model of the normative woman. Patriarchy did not offer any real alternative to women: to succumb to the patriarchal sororal code or be damned.

The devising of patriarchal sororities requires two steps: the demonisation of women's nature and their subsequent reformation. Firstly, the demonisation of female natural condition facilitates patriarchy's revocation of solidarity contract with women. The utopian idea of paradise finds the original woman as a parasite, guilty of the fall of humanity, hence there cannot exist any remote possibility of finding affective bonds aimed at her within the society. Afterwards, the reformation of women is carried out, which consists in the nullification of their mind and the desexualisation⁵ of her body. Such a process is

⁵ I prefer to use the term 'desexualisation' rather than 'asexuality' or 'asexualisation' attending to the etymology of the classical prefixes 'de-' and 'a-'. Whereas the Greek prefix 'a-' means "not, without", the Latin prefix 'de-' (also used for negation) originally means "down, off, away" (See *Online Etymology Dictionary*). Unlike the virgin-mother, whose sex remains untouched,

masked as a gesture of deference, leading to the salvation and raising the position of the patriarchal woman once she has been mended by the process of reformation. Notwithstanding, this desexualisation of the female body shows a certain inconsistency, for, while women's sexuality was considered a taboo, it was at the same time essential to the continuity of the patriarchal utopia.

The best exemplification of the ideal patriarchal woman comes in the form of the Virgin Mary in the Christian religion. Unlike Eve, punished because her sexuality and curiosity led her to defy the patriarchal order of God, Mary turns to be a role model for patriarchal sororities as she perfectly embodies the idea of a submissive virgin-mother. Albeit sexually chaste, she is able to contribute to the state with her motherhood. As Broussard Walker affirms, this asexual fertility becomes the "impossible dilemma of femininity under patriarchy" (2002: 136). The patriarchal utopia projects an unattainable female identity that repels the fluidity of nature and transgression. In this way, women are categorised according to their sexual status, creating archetypal female sororities, whose collective identity is "normative and exclusionary" (Butler 1990: 14). And again, the notion of exclusion appears, now as a conditioning factor to revoke solidarity among the supposedly antagonistic sororities.

Classical utopian narrative shows how women are arranged in sororities, without the possibility of intermingling with others or transcending their own condition. Accordingly, in utopian texts, female characters are "muted" by the male collective in the utopian state and/or by the narrator. But, as Ardener has noted (1993), mutedness should not be misinterpreted as silence, inasmuch as muting occurs as a social phenomenon whenever the muted group is under the dominance of another social group. In the case of sexual polarity, it is women who

patriarchal female members have to make use of their sexuality to accomplish their purpose in the utopian state. Nonetheless, their sexuality is severely restricted by male power, cutting off their sexual arousal and desires and just leaving their reproductive use.

are usually the muted group (7). Sororities may also participate in some public events of the utopian life, but they are overshadowed and dependent on male control. Likewise, the fact that the narrator does not give a voice to the utopian women does not make them naturally silent. In line with Ardenner's theory, female muting happens because of male deafness, just as female invisibility correlates with male blindness (8). Deafness and blindness result from patriarchy's initial lack of female solidarity which, as a vicious cycle, aims to prevent any possible solidary attempt considering that the chain of communication between narrative participants is broken. In so doing, the external reader might also obviate the need to re-enact the lost female solidarity.

In the process of devising *Utopia* (2006 [1516]), Thomas More did not contemplate other possibilities than the traditional patriarchal family, as was suggested by many scholars (e.g. Bammer 1992; Ferns 1999: 54; Serras 2002; Theis 2009: 2;). However, the muting and submission of women into patriarchal sororities turned this supposedly ideal society into the "first involuntary feminist dystopia" (Serras 2002: 330). Utopians are strictly separated by their sexes in every single aspect of their lives, as can be seen in the clothes they wear (*Utopia* 550), their place at the church during service (585), or at the dining table – women sitting on the outside so that they do not disturb others with nursing issues (555). Besides, other Utopian sororities are also marked by their clothes, distinguishing unmarried women from married ones. As has been aforementioned, sororal organisation depends on particular phases of female sexuality. When girls turn eighteen they reach the age of marriage, therefore their reproductive function may begin. From this point onwards, female inhabitants of Utopia will enter in the sorority of married women, regardless of whether they will ever become widows. That being the case with a Utopian woman, she will be married again until she is barren.

As “wives are subject of their husbands and children to their parents” (554), women are always dependent on a male figure and excluded from making any state decisions or performing any public role as long as their reproductive powers are still effective. Actually, only an old post-menopausal widow can have a slim chance of enjoying a similar status as men in the Utopian society, invariably limited to religious service as a result of the patriarchal desexualisation: “women are not debarred from the priesthood, but only a widow of advanced years is ever chosen, and it doesn’t happen often” (583).

In one of the letters to his daughters’ tutor, Thomas More remarked that “nature’s defect may be redressed by industry” (1518). Meaning by “nature” woman’s wit, and by “industry” patriarchal education, the idea of reforming female identity appears again in *Utopia*, and despite receiving the same education as men, women’s nature will be tamed like the gardens of Utopia in order to please the senses and endure the legacy of patriarchal dominance.

The Utopians are very fond of these gardens of theirs. They raise vines, fruits, herbs, and flowers, so well cared for and flourishing that I have never seen any gardens more productive or elegant than theirs. [...] Certainly you will find nothing else in the whole city more useful or more pleasant to the citizens. And this gives reason to think that the founder of the city paid particular attention to the siting of the gardens. (*Utopia* 549)

Utopian women are highly significant for the island too. But, just as gardens are kept in the back part of the house, women’s exclusion from the public life and seclusion into opposing sororal organisation (unmarried – married – old widows) expose the fallacy of patriarchal utopia.

With the rise of 20th century dystopias, writers like Aldous Huxley or George Orwell uncovered the fallacies of utopia. In their respective novels, *Brave New World* (1994 [1931]) and *Ninety Eighty-Four* (2000 [1949]), they presented what Gordin et al. call utopia’s doppelgänger (2010: 1). The same old patri-

archal regime is displayed, but this time it has been perfected as a result of scientific progress, which becomes another instrument employed by modern patriarchy. Through the eyes of the narrator the reader is able to see the inconsistency of patriarchal utopia. And yet, the male dissenters presented in these dystopias remain consistent in their lack of solidarity with female characters. Women still fall under the imperative classification of antagonistic archetypes: the temptress versus the patriarchal rebel; both having their discourses muted, not only by the system but also by the protagonist himself. In the case of the temptress/female rebel, it is noticeable how neither of the enemy forces (state/individual) in the story solidarises with her. On the one hand, dystopian governments encourage people to ignore and mistrust each other, suppressing any affective bond that may enact solidarity. On the other hand, female rebels and their insurrection methods are misconstrued or underrated by their allies in the rebellion, since all of them have received a patriarchal upbringing almost impossible to be unlearned, where woman is always the weak one to be blamed.

In *Brave New World*, Lenina's complex feelings are ignored by the members of the polygamous patriarchal World State, even by her female friend Fanny. On the hand, Lenina's bodily sensuality infuriates John the Savage when she declares her love for him: "Whore! Impudent strumpet!" (*Brave New World* 170). Julia from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* undergoes a similar situation: her sexual freedom is forbidden by Ingsoc, and though Winston Smith enjoys her sexuality as part of the heresy, she is reduced to be "only a rebel from the waist downwards" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 179), clearly muting her voice in his revolt. The "misbehaviour" of these female dissidents arises precisely from the break of homogeneity inside the artificial patriarchal sororities, whose sexuality is being rationalised under governmental control (Theis 2009: 27). The female rebel, an in-between figure, fails in her attempt not only to surpass the limits imposed upon these constructed patriarchal organisations, but also to find empathy either in the male rebel or in

the patriarchal woman. Once again, female solidarity is lost in translation inside a great fraternal community, always under the gaze of Big Brother.

2. Sororities in Atwood's Gilead: Coercive solidarity

The 20th century also witnessed the arrival of the first feminist wave: weary of patriarchy's deafness, female voices were united for a common end and pleaded solidarity with their collective in the factories, in the parliament, in their homes. Female 'un-muting' exposed the dystopia woman was living in and enabled several writers to venture into the utopian genre. A good example of the feminist utopias from the first wave is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (2015 [1915]) in which she depicts an ideal country governed and exclusively organised by and for women, i.e., a matriarchy.

Nonetheless, even these first feminist utopian manifestations continue to remain in the domain of the patriarchal conventions of classical utopia. Gilman retains the figure of the active male explorer that describes the matriarchal territory – a big enclosed garden. Besides, the narrative reduces all female inhabitants of Herland into a single female archetype that unites them all: the mother. Like More's *Utopia*, motherhood is assumed to be a natural predisposition being regarded as woman's ultimate contribution to the state: "By motherhood they were born and by motherhood they lived – life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood" (*Herland* 79).

However, by depicting a secret matriarchal state, Gilman was successful in elevating the old concept of the virgin-mother to its purest form with the concept of the great Mother. In this matriarchy, sexual binary hierarchy is not feasible inasmuch as there are only women in Herland. Consequently, male dominance cannot overshadow female authority. However, the great Mother becomes divinised thanks to her asexualisation, as all inhabitants of Herland come from a single virgin-mother.

Therefore, this “holy sisterhood” (76) perpetuates the patriarchal sorority of virgin-mothers, and, in so doing, it presents certain discrepancies among Herland’s citizens that are illustrated by the external narrator. While this utopia acknowledges the solidarity reserved to Woman in general, it can be observed that there is a certain lack of solidarity towards individual women inside the sorority, who are eventually muted by the female normative identity of the utopian state.

As Bammer suggests, the insistence on the idea of sisterhood as the “commonalty of woman” (1991: 90) came to be a major pitfall in feminism. By taking for granted womanhood as a “quasi-universal female experience”, this “homogenizing function” (Sargisson 1996: 84) provokes the ignorance of other factors pertinent to the construction of different female identities. Quoting Cixous, “there is [...] no general woman, no one typical woman [...]. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can’t talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes” (1976: 876). The muting of differences to accomplish the reorientation toward the normative female code applies again to the habitual loss of solidarity seen in patriarchal utopia. But now, it occurs among members of a sorority, who got trapped in their biased idea of equality and freedom.

The feminist dystopia of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2010 [1985]) can be seen as a satire on the old patriarchal utopian commandments, combined with a critique of the essentialist stance of some feminisms. In the novel, Atwood presents the dangers of female stereotypification resulting from feminist absolutism and the sacrificing of one’s own individuality within the sororal community. The patriarchal utopia hidden behind the façade of feminist slogans turns into a perfect trap: single-faceted sororities whose solidarity is taken away from female individuals coerced into serving the male supremacy of the patriarchal utopia.

In the epilogue of the novel, Professor Piexoto characterised Gilead as “undoubtedly patriarchal in form”, but “occasionally

matriarchal in content” (320). Ironically, this statement can be understood in an opposite way in relation to physical bodies – sororities in Gilead are empty vessels employed to serve patriarchal discipline which follows the same process of reformation and subjugation as the old patriarchal utopias based upon the sacred scriptures. In fact, the imposition of the principle of ‘Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity’ upon the Gileadean sororities reveals a deeply negative aspect of these abstract concepts within this pseudo-matriarchy.

In the story, Offred, the female protagonist, narrates the slow process of the “dystopification” of her contemporary society ultimately leading to the establishment of Gilead’s patriarchal sororities. The use of the confessional mode of writing allows the reader to be constantly aware of the protagonist’s thoughts and emotions, which opens the channel of communication between the fictional female dissident and her possible real-world counterpart. By this means, the reader is encouraged to show the affective bonds of solidarity which were forbidden in the narrative setting, due to the ironical distortion of freedom and equality.

When these ideals of liberation are tested upon the female collective of Gilead, they lead to actual enslavement. Defined as “the state or fact of not being subject to despotic or autocratic control, or to a foreign power; civil liberty” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), *freedom* loses its conditions of freewill and independence in the Gileadean community: “There is more than one kind of freedom [...]. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 34). Similarly, *equality* is misinterpreted as sameness. Gilead – as well as any other patriarchal utopian conceptualisation – is organised *equally* under a strict hierarchical arrangement, all members being *equal* in their clothing, schedules, and obligations, but all of them must abandon their personal ambitions for the sake of the stability of the collective.

Every member of the Gileadean society abides by the specific rules of a particular social group to which she/he belongs, although men permit themselves greater freedom. On the contrary, women must strictly comply with the roles imposed upon them by their respective sororities,⁶ which are determined primarily by their sexuality/fertility, but also, in some cases, by their former social status. The Wives function as submissive companions of their husbands. Married to the founders of Gilead, they can continue enjoying certain privileges despite their infertility. Their pious behaviour and support for the patriarchal utopian morality, together with their asexuality, turns them into embodiments of the patriarchal virgin-mother. In a sense, the sorority of Handmaids becomes the “womb” of the Wives. As will be discussed below, the Handmaids participate in the sorority without solidarity *par excellence* in the patriarchal utopia of Gilead: despite their dubious and heretical ideology, they become essential as their fertility is essential for the survival of the system. Thanks to the Handmaid, the initial discrepancies found in the Virgin Mary are solved by means of the combination of these two sororities in the Ceremony, asexuality is maintained while striving for motherhood.

Other sororities are the Aunts and the Marthas, the latter in charge of housekeeping and the nurture of children. With regard to the former, the Aunts also enjoy a position of privilege and great responsibility in the society, being in charge of shaping the identity of women to fit the normative sororities.⁷ The rest of women who are unable to yield to the pattern of this new society (either because they are infertile, lesbian, old, or

⁶ Each sorority must manifest externally their homogeneity and orthodoxy by a code of colours that delimits connections between them: wives wear blue, the colour of the Virgin Mary, while the Handmaids express their fertility with red. The Marthas wear green and the Aunts wear brown, and the Unwomen, who are eliminated from the state, wear grey.

⁷ The narrative establishes a parallelism between the aunts and female defenders of patriarchal religions. Aunts are the collective in charge of spreading the morality of Gilead upon other women. However, this proves to be incongruous, as the message they divulge actually silences sororities in this society, in the same way as many Christian women unconsciously “helped to eradicate women’s voice in the church” (French 2008a: 252).

because they are simply regarded as immoral) are called Un-women, being condemned to forced labour in the colonies or to death.⁸

However, women from the poorer classes that were married and fertile before the creation of Gilead disrupt the desired stability among these sororities. Bearing the name of Econowives, these women have a multi-faceted and complex identity represented by the multicolour dress they wear. Gilead is a utopia in transition, but “when times improve, says Aunt Lydia, no one will have to be an Econowife” (54). The reason why the Econowives are unwanted and dangerous to the system is twofold: on the one hand, having a complex and dynamic identity permits them to question the static and archetypical tenets of Gilead, and on the other hand, econowives can enact a process of understanding and solidarity towards all the members of the different sororities which may strengthen women through major compliance. Econowives are a sorority that embraces all sororities at once, and in embracing their differences, these women constitute a form of utopian transgression, following Sargisson’s terminology (1996).

The prevention of female solidarity is not only achieved by the separation of women into traditional patriarchal sororities, but also by the rules applied to their inner organisation. Women, whatever the sorority they belong to, are isolated and secluded at home, with the exception of celebrations organised by the state of Gilead, such as prayvaganzas, particutions, or births. Particularly, these rules of surveillance and confinement are strictly followed inside the group of the Handmaids. Whenever outside the residence, a Handmaid must be always

⁸ In the story, we also find the presence of the Jezebels, who satisfy the sexual fantasies of the Commanders that come to Jezebel’s secret brothel. Since the brothel does not officially belong to the realm of Gilead, this female collective does not follow a homogeneous communal identity nor a strictly prescribed way of dressing. Nonetheless, their relative individuality and freedom of its members are at the expense of their sexual subjugation to the desires of the Commanders. Eventually, all women in the narrative are facing the question of survival inside the patriarchal utopia: conforming to Gilead’s sororities, the brothel, the colonies, etc.

accompanied by another Handmaid, but they cannot gather themselves in bigger groups. A single Handmaid is prone to self-awareness and dissenting thoughts, while the connections made in a large group of Handmaids may lead to cooperation and empowerment, possibly leading to their rebellion against the state: “We aren’t allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: *we are well protected already*” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 29, italics added). Like in other dystopian narratives, the indoctrination of distrust together with male surveillance thwart any possible collective action. The Handmaids are encouraged to watch over other Handmaids, to question them and to report on them. This illustrates perfectly the oxymoronic character of sororities in the patriarchal utopia: there is multitude, but no union; there is solitude, but no privacy; there is sorority, but no solidarity.

Atwood revisits the symbol of the garden as an instrument of women’s taming and reclusion in the patriarchal utopia. However, this command is concealed under a heap of pseudo-feminist slogans:

For the generations that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family [...]. Women united for a common end! [...] Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn’t reasonable or humane. *Your daughters will have greater freedom. We are working towards the goal of a little garden for each one, each one of you.* (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 172, italics added)

During the indoctrination of the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Center, Aunt Lydia refers to the false ideas of freedom and unity which paradoxically isolate each single women of Gilead from public life. However, this quote clearly shows the coercive solidarity imposed upon the Gileadean sorority of Handmaids. If we follow Laitinen and Pessi’s ideas on solidarity (2014), this mode of social integration should be opposed to

chaos and conflict, as well as to coercion or maximisation of self-interest. We witness how the Handmaids' reformation in Gilead is depicted as an act of kindness or solidarity by the Aunts, who channel the oppressing authorities' policies, because women have been saved from anarchy and damnation. However, women are forced to solidarise with Gilead's preservation and aggrandisement too. They are even trained in submissive altruism when they arrive at the Rachel and Leah Center so as to ensure their contribution to the interests of the state. Thus, Gileadean women are coerced into obeying patriarchal utopian tenets in order not to face the horrible fate of the Unwomen. This solidarity becomes an illusion with enforced harmony and submission to the interests of the state as key characteristics of the sororities in Gilead's patriarchal utopia.

As has been previously stated, by means of the politisation of patriarchal religion, the transition from the pre-Gileadean society into this new utopian community entails the initial demonisation of the female figure. Their heresy needs to be redressed not only by the desexualisation of their bodies ("arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary" / *The Handmaid's Tale*, 105/), but also by the nullification of their minds. Women learn how to become "hollow vessels" at the Rachel and Leah Center ready to be filled by Gilead's commandments and sons. In the process of the nullification of their minds, the Handmaids must assimilate distrust and accusations, erasing any trace of solidarity with their friends in order to survive and avoid punishment. The choral cry in unison "her fault, her fault, her fault" (82) against Janine, who was gang raped in her adolescence, exemplifies the demonisation of female sexuality and the violation of affective solidarity before entering the Gileadean sororities.

In short, Gilead's harmony consists in the replacement of freedom by claustrophobia, equality by uniformity, and solidarity by survival. And, as Offred's story clearly demonstrates, survival in a patriarchal utopia can only be achieved after

women have endured the humiliation and scorn from their dearest friends: “friendships were suspicious” (81). Hence, the more advanced the indoctrination is, the more perfected the sorority. And the stronger the sorority, the weaker the female solidarity.

3. (E)merging women: The decisive sisterhood

In both the patriarchal utopia and the essentialist matriarchal regime, it is eventually the imposition of their radical stand what impedes the mutual understanding of our complexities and idiosyncrasies in society, which, as a consequence, prevents any bonds of affective solidarity. Sororities without solidarity were not simply one of the aspects of the fictional world of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In fact, the “realness” of fiction (Melzer 2006: 4) can be seen as a magnifying glass that evinces the social flaws of our contemporary identity politics. As Atwood claims in her lecture “The Curse of Eve”, it is necessary “to take the capital W off Woman” (1979: 33) first in order to empower women from within sisterhood. For this, the feminist stance of equality and difference standing in direct binary opposition has been transgressed, so as to reconsider utopianism “as a conscious and necessary desire to resist the closure that is evoked by approaches to utopia as perfect” (Sargisson 1996: 226).

Despite the distress and hesitation presented by the female rebel living in the patriarchal utopia, *The Handmaid’s Tale* as well as other feminist transgressive utopian dystopias offer a glimpse at the dissident’s aspirations to succeed in the acceptance of her complex identity. Mohr argues that these transgressive utopian dystopias “refuse a logic of sameness, dissolve hierarchised binary oppositions, and embrace difference, multiplicity and diversity” (2005: 51). Thus, the protagonist stops being a victim trapped in the sorority and explores new ways of being.

This shift does not mean the rejection of the notion of sorority. Like utopianism, the concept of sorority is reevaluated by the latest feminisms with the lost solidarity restored. This new sisterhood is described as decisive for two reasons. First, its inclusionary model allows its (e)merging members to decide upon their bodies. Second, in so doing, the sororal bonds are strengthened and this empowerment can turn the sorority into a determining voice in the state decisions, acting as the loudspeaker of many muted groups.

I propose the term *(e)merging* not only to ratify the recent appearance of these female rebels in the utopian canon, but also to highlight their ambivalent and hybrid identities, with regard to gender, race, age, culture, sexual condition, etc. Furthermore, the failures presented by the first matriarchal utopias like *Herland* proved that the most effective tactic was not to escape from the system but to confront it. In this way, (e)merging women also merge (with)in patriarchy and use their positive divergence as a disruptive power to dismantle the incongruities of patriarchy: “if woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, [...] it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within’, to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers” (Cixous 1976: 887).

The (e) in *(e)merging* also stands for the acknowledgement of the importance of electronic resources that in the last decades have facilitated easier connection and cognisance of other women’s condition around the world. The understanding of different female experiences as enriching prompts women to feel mutual empathy (e) that reactivates solidarity. However, this solidarity differs from the patriarchal conventionalisms of exclusion, and approximates what Dean (1996) regards as reflective solidarity. Thanks to reflective solidarity, sorority becomes a space that embraces openness and indeterminacy, where “solidarity no longer blocks us from difference, but instead provides a bridge between identity and universality” (30).

This essay has attempted to offer a summary view of how the patriarchal utopia’s idea of Woman has been distorted and

asphyxiated by the indoctrination of constructed exclusionary archetypes in sororities without solidarity. However, the (e)merging female models in utopianism overcome hierarchical homogeneity by means of their polyvalent uniqueness. Rather than perceiving fragmentation as a negative destructive element, these new generations recognise all their facets to create a richer personality. And yet, the positive appraisal of their individualities does not clash with the concurrent female entities, forming a kaleidoscopic sorority out of variegated beings: “If [woman] is a whole, it’s a whole *composed of parts that are wholes*, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble” (Cixous 1996: 889, italics added). This fluidity between “wholes” mobilises solidarity *with* and *among* sisters, now rejoicing in the sorority that joins individuality and multiplicity.

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