



Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Envy in the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

Alina Tacu

Phd Candidate, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași

ABSTRACT: This article examines Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) through a psychoanalytic and feminist lens, focusing on the dynamics of gender envy as a structuring force within the totalitarian society of Gilead. Employing Sigmund Freud's theory of *penis envy* and Karen Horney's revision of *womb envy*, the study explores how Atwood's speculative fiction transforms these psychoanalytic concepts into a political and cultural critique of patriarchy. It argues that Atwood exposes envy not merely as an individual emotion but as a systemic mechanism that regulates gender relations, sustains power hierarchies, and fractures female solidarity. By institutionalizing reproduction, Gilead exemplifies male *womb envy*—the unconscious desire to appropriate and control women's generative power through ritualized sexuality, surveillance, and linguistic domination, a reflection of *vertical envy*. At the same time, *horizontal envy* circulates among women, manifesting in the rivalry between Wives, Handmaids, and Marthas, whose mutual hostility perpetuates patriarchal control. Through theoretical insights from Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, the analysis reinterprets envy as a textual and symbolic force within Atwood's *ustopia*—a hybrid of utopia and dystopia—where female identity is fragmented and defined through opposition. Ultimately, the article argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* dramatizes envy as both a psychic symptom of gendered repression and a sociopolitical tool of domination, revealing how patriarchal structures convert reproductive and creative power into instruments of control. Atwood portrays envy as both the consequence and the sustaining principle of oppression.

Corresponding Author:

Alina Tacu

Published Online:

February 28, 2026

License:

This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

KEYWORDS:

vertical and horizontal envy, feminism, psychosexual development, ustopia

Cite the Article: Tacu, A. (2026) *Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Envy in the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood*. *International Journal of Human Research and Social Science Studies*, 3(2), 151-158. <https://doi.org/10.55677/ijhrsss/05-2026-Vol03I02>

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a cornerstone of feminist dystopian fiction, or, as the author prefers to call it, speculative fiction, offering a potent critique of patriarchal structures, reproductive control, and the politics of the body. Set in the totalitarian theocracy of Gilead, the novel explores how systems of power use gender, language, and sexuality to discipline and define female subjectivity. Its narrative, rich in symbolism and psychological depth, provides fertile ground for psychoanalytic and feminist interpretation.

Written during a period of global conservatism in the 1980s, *The Handmaid's Tale* responds to historical events like the age of Puritanism, the rise of the Christian Right in the United States, second-wave feminism, and ongoing debates about reproductive rights, including the decree released by Dictator Ceaușescu in the year 1966, about rising demographics. Central themes include: bodily autonomy, memory and trauma, gendered power and subjugation, language and identity. Atwood crafts a dystopia where women are reduced to reproductive functions—Handmaids—and explores the internal psychological mechanisms that sustain such a regime.

The story is told through the voice of Offred, a Handmaid whose job is to bear children for elite Commanders. She is caught between her past (freedom, love, and motherhood) and her current situation (surveillance, control, silence). She carries with her a constant struggle to survive between the past and the present, adapting to a world that forces her to become an object that reproduces, which anyone can dispense with as soon as it proves to be no longer useful.

One of the most striking motifs in the book is envy, a complex emotional and social force that not only structures relationships between women but also reflects deeper anxieties surrounding gender and power. While envy among women—between Wives and Handmaids—is visible, the novel also addresses an equally potent form of gender envy. The male rulers of Gilead, though in positions of authority, are ultimately dependent on the reproductive capacities of women—a power they do not possess and cannot fully control. By institutionalizing reproduction through ritualized rape, forced surrogacy, and legal subjugation, the regime attempts to maintain and instrumentalize the very biological function it envies.

METHODOLOGY / THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The methodology of this study proceeds through a complex psychoanalytic and feminist framework that traces the evolution of the concept of gender envy. We begin by examining Freud's theory of penis envy within his model of psychosexual development, establishing the main discourse from which later critiques emerged. From there, we turn to Karen Horney's counter-argument of womb envy, which reframes the dynamics of envy and power in gender relations by emphasizing male anxieties about female reproductive capacity. Building on this, we incorporate the perspectives of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, whose powerful writings challenge phallogentrism, prioritize *écriture féminine*, and highlight the semiotic as a disruptive force within language. These theoretical approaches enable us to create a critical lens through which we can analyze *The Handmaid's Tale*, examining how Atwood's narrative dramatizes and reconfigures these psychoanalytic debates. By combining Freud's ideas with feminist revisions of psychoanalysis, our approach shows that gender envy is not only a psychological idea but also a cultural and literary force shaping the world of Gilead. Within this framework, we distinguish between vertical and horizontal dimensions of gender envy. Vertically, envy emerges in the relationship between male power structures and the Handmaids, where the Commanders' dependence on women's fertility is masked by rituals and laws that symbolically claim reproductive power as their own. Horizontally, envy circulates among women themselves, as the regime fosters rivalry between Wives, Handmaids, and Marthas, ensuring that female solidarity is fractured and redirected into mutual surveillance and hostility. Thus, Atwood's dystopia exemplifies how gender envy functions both as a top-down mechanism of patriarchal domination and as a lateral strategy of division, reinforcing the systemic stability of Gilead.

Gender envy has been a long - debated concept in psychoanalysis. With the introduction of the theory of sexual development by Sigmund Freud, the envy between boys and girls, which is related to the anatomic differences, is defined in the phallic stage (around ages 3 – 6). Freud proposed that a key moment in female psychosexual development involves the girl's realization that she lacks a penis (Freud 126). The feeling of loss results in penis envy, a desire to possess a penis, which Freud considered central in shaping the female identity. Therefore, the girl grows up with the feeling of being incomplete, and, initially, she blames the mother for this castration. Afterwards, she redirects her libidinal attachment towards the father (the Oedipus complex) and, eventually, internalizes her femininity by desiring a child of her own, as a substitute for the lacking male organ. This kind of envy generated by the feeling of the little girl that she is "wronged", by not having a penis, calls, according to Freud, to later analysis in the adult life of the woman, spending "a considerable cathexis of energy" in trying to find reasons to exist intellectually, as "sublimated modification of this wish." (Freud 126). What we understand from his argument, is that the girl, having little capacity to judge things, will be led by the feeling of envy all her life, unsuccessfully striving for intellectual or creative achievements.

Freud's ideas were harshly criticized by the female psychoanalysts, especially by Karen Horney, who challenged the male-centric nature of the theory. She argued that Freud's theories emphasize male bias, that is, in fact, the male that mostly feels envy, materialized in her concept of *womb envy*, directed towards the woman's ability to bear children. Hence, the ancient efforts of men to dominate women and their focus on achieving cultural, social, and working superiority, as compensation for their biological limitations. According to Horney, it is in this struggle to recoup biological advantage that may result in patriarchy and misogyny.

In her essay *The Flight from Womanhood*, Horney argues that some women, in response to cultural pressures and to Freud's theory of penis envy, may reject or devalue their own femininity. Instead of embracing socially prescribed roles like motherhood, nurturance, and dependence, they "flee" towards what culture considers to be masculine traits: competitiveness, ambition, intellectual achievement, or independence. Horney remarks: "*women have adapted themselves to the wishes of men and felt as if their adaptation was their true nature. That is, they see or saw themselves in the way that their men's wishes demanded of them; unconsciously they yielded to the suggestions of masculine thought*" (Horney 57).

In this perspective, the female development takes a direction that is, to a great extension, both socially and psychologically manipulated by biological destiny. As Horney argues: „*In actual fact a girl is exposed from birth onward to the suggestion – inevitable, whether it is conveyed brutally or delicately – of her inferiority, an experience that constantly stimulates her masculinity complex*" (Horney 69). As a result, Horney argues that this "flight" refers to two distinct aspects of the female development:

The first one is connected to penis envy, the feeling the little girl has when she discovers she does not possess a penis, featured to boys only. She feels “castrated” and inferior in the sense that, if she does not possess such a “superior” organ, she must be on the inferior layer of humanity. Due to the internalized feelings of inferiority, she develops an unconscious drive to escape her womanhood, rejecting and devaluing her female identity, instead of embracing it. In time, certain female processes, including childbearing and birth, may become sources of humility instead of pride, as the woman finds them degrading. The consequence is that they develop neurotic difficulties in accepting their female body, sexuality and reproductive functions.

At root, this pattern of feeling/thinking reflects the refusal to identify with the traditional role imposed by the masculine society, because womanhood has been, traditionally, devalued both socially and psychologically. Furthermore, Horney insists on the idea that maternity is viewed by men as being a burden and they have the privilege of not being subjected to it (Horney 61).

The second outcome of this “flight” is that the woman wants to become a “man”, adopts masculine qualities and behaviors to compensate for the perceived inferiority (often identified as “femininity”). In this view, Horney reinterprets Freud’s “penis envy” as a symbol of male privilege, freedom, and power, instead of the concept of literal longing for the penis. By emulating masculinity, the woman tries to achieve social recognition, intellectual authority, power, even dominance, all by rejecting her feminine role.

Therefore, “the flight from womanhood” ultimately represents a symbolic and psychic move that expresses a woman’s resistance to being limited to a restrictive model of womanhood. At the same time, it is a reflection of women’s internal conflicts, since rejecting their own femininity can bring guilt, a sense of inadequacy and anxiety. In short, it represents a defensive retreat from one’s own feminine identity, driven by the cultural devaluation of women and the unconscious wish to align with the masculine, which society treats as superior.

Horney demonstrates that this “flight” is not an inborn biological destiny (as Freud thought), but a neurotic response to cultural pressures and patriarchal values that minimize feminine and rewards masculine traits. Her analysis leads to a deeper critique of Freud’s penis envy. If women’s rejection of the feminine is socially conditioned rather than biologically determined, then Freud’s framework collapses: envy is not a one-way phenomenon. Horney reverses the narrative by introducing womb envy, arguing that men may unconsciously resent women’s reproductive capacity and creativity—powers they cannot access. In this way, what Freud considered to be a female deficiency is reinterpreted as a source of male anxiety. The “flight” that women are compelled into by patriarchal values mirrors a corresponding “envy” in men, whose control over women often masks their own sense of vulnerability before the generative power of the womb.

Feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and Julia Kristeva further critiqued Freud’s notion of gender envy as one that reinforces the phallogocentric worldview in which the man is seen as the norm and the female as a deficient version. They argue that female identity and desire should be understood not through the perspective of absence, but as expressions of multiplicity, fluidity, and maternal body (Kristeva), feminine corporeality and imaginary (Cixous), or anew language of sexual difference (Irigaray).

Luce Irigaray builds her theory on the observation that Western metaphysics and psychoanalytic discourse have historically established masculinity as the universal norm, relegating femininity to a derivative or negative position. Within such a symbolic economy, women are compelled to interpret themselves through categories that do not originate in their own embodied experience, often internalizing ideals and values that estrange them from their corporeal and subjective specificity. Irigaray therefore calls for the creation of what she terms a “positive language of sexual difference,” a language capable of expressing feminine subjectivity without translating it into masculine terms (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1985). Rather than urging women to assimilate into dominant structures or to “flee” from difference, she advocates the articulation of desires, experiences, and forms of relationality that emerge from women’s own symbolic and bodily realities.

Such a reconfiguration of language has broader implications for the dynamics of envy and rivalry that have historically shaped gender relations. When subjectivity is organized around a single normative model, difference is easily perceived as lack, and lack, in turn, generates resentment, competition, or defensive hierarchies between men and women. A new language of sexual difference would not erase distinction but would redefine it as reciprocity rather than opposition, allowing each subject to recognize the other as differently constituted rather than deficient. In this sense, Irigaray’s project is not only feminist but also ethical and cultural: by transforming the symbolic structures through which identity is named and understood, it becomes possible to move beyond the logic of envy toward a language of plurality, shared validation and symbolic space.

Hélène Cixous calls upon women to “write with the body” in her formulation of *écriture féminine*, a concept that responds to the patriarchal pressures earlier identified by Karen Horney and later feminist critics of psychoanalysis. For Cixous, the exclusion of women from literary and symbolic authority cannot be isolated from the historical repression of the female body, which has been silenced, regulated, or represented through phallogocentric discourse. Writing therefore becomes more than an aesthetic act. It is a means of recovering subjectivity and affirmation of experience. Instead of fitting into male-defined standards or setting aside what makes them distinct to be taken seriously, women are encouraged to speak about their desires and lived experiences in their own way. She famously argues, “*Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have*

been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous 875). Writing thus appears as a form of return—not a regression, but a conscious reclaiming of voice, body, and memory.

This transformation of what might be described as a "flight" from femininity into a "return" on new terms is central to Cixous's project. The return she envisages is creative and transformative, grounded in plurality, laughter, and poetic experimentation. In this way, *écriture féminine* challenges strict symbolic systems and opens space for new ways of being a subject that are not defined by what is missing or by contrast with others. From this perspective, the implications extend beyond literary form: when femininity is no longer considered as deficiency but as a source of symbolic and creative energy, the hierarchical oppositions that sustain rivalry and resentment between genders begin to weaken. Cixous sees writing as a liberating practice that can reshape both the way literature is expressed and the symbolic frameworks through which difference is understood.

A comparable reconfiguration of the feminine appears in Julia Kristeva's theory of the semiotic, which reconsiders the status of the maternal and the pre-linguistic dimensions of subjectivity. The semiotic refers to a domain of rhythm, affect, and bodily drives associated with early psychic life and with the maternal body. Drawing on and revising Freud, Kristeva argues that when one enters language, this dimension is not entirely suppressed. Rather, the semiotic continues to operate within discourse itself, emerging in intonation, rhythm, poetic language, and other forms that exceed strictly logical or grammatical meaning. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she explains that signifying practice results from the interaction of the semiotic and the symbolic, the latter corresponding to the structured order of grammar, law, and social meaning (Kristeva 22 - 24).

By emphasizing the disruptive and generative role of the semiotic, Kristeva redefines the feminine not as absence but as a lively force in artistic and cultural work. Poetic language becomes a uniquely significant space in which the semiotic can unsettle fixed meanings, exposing the instability of identity and the heterogeneity of subjectivity. From this perspective, the maternal and the feminine are not roles that need to be rejected in order to participate in culture, but sources of energy that keep language and thinking alive. Such a view makes possible a rethinking of difference that moves beyond hierarchy and opposition, opening forms of expression that resist closure and single-voiced authority while allowing subjectivity to be articulated in more fluid and plural terms. Karen Horney's revision of Freud through the concept of womb envy provides a crucial starting point for rethinking gender envy. Where Freud identified female development in the drama of *penis envy*—a supposed resentment of women's anatomical "lack"—Horney reversed the lens, suggesting that men may manifest envy of women's reproductive power (Horney 20). This inversion destabilizes Freud's hierarchy of gendered lack, changing the source of anxiety not in women's deficiency but in men's dependence on women's capacity to give life. It is thus demonstrated that phallocentrism not only marginalizes the feminine but structurally produces envy by defining difference as lack, a logic that Atwood translates into the social and psychological mechanisms of Gilead. Freud's notion of *penis envy*, reconfigured into *womb envy*, is reflected in *The Handmaid's Tale*'s reproductive politics. Gilead turns female reproductive capacity into weapons, while simultaneously envying and controlling it. Men appropriate reproductive power through ritual, language, and law, turning childbirth into a political transaction. Female fertility is no longer a source of personal or maternal identity; it is the property of the state, converted into a tool of power and surveillance. The Ceremony, for example, reduces it to an institutional ritual in which the male Commander, flanked by his sterile wife, has intercourse with the Handmaid for the sole purpose of procreation. The Wife is actively involved in this bizarre act, coercive for both the females, illustrating how the male authority is imposed, both symbolically and physically, in the reproductive process, claiming a power it cannot possess naturally.

Language and law become tools of further control that enforce ownership over reproduction: the Handmaids have names that start with Of (Of-fred, Of-warren), which erase identity and mark them as possessions of their Commanders. Fertility and medical care are tightly controlled by the state, transforming reproduction into a political show. This is evident in the birth scenes, where Wives perform ceremonial roles while the biological mother is erased from the social narrative. The Handmaid, whose body performs the act of creation, is left excluded from the child's life, highlighting how her creative power is envied, exploited, and ultimately denied. This systematic seizure of reproductive labor illustrates Horney's notion of *womb envy*: male-dominated structures both fear and desire the generative power of women and respond by attempting to possess and subordinate it.

The Handmaid's Tale dramatizes gender envy as a psychological force, showing how male insecurities over biological power can result in oppressive political regimes. Birth and biology are the only domains beyond male control; therefore, they must be subsumed and regulated within a male-dominated order. Atwood's narrative offers a terrifying fictionalization of Horney's insight: that men's unconscious envy of female reproductive capacity may drive governance structures that seek to dominate the very power they secretly long for. If we view this through Irigaray's critique of phallocentrism, the dystopia shows how the female body is reduced to a commodity in the symbolic order, and to reproductive capacities that are fetishized and stripped of agency. Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine* and Kristeva's semiotic disruptions resonate in Offred's fragmented narration, where language itself becomes a site of resistance against the enforced silence of Gilead. Thus, Atwood's novel not only dramatizes the psychic dynamics of gender envy but also reveals how these unconscious forces come together into political and cultural structures that simultaneously oppress and betray their origin in male anxiety.

This dynamic opens the way to examining how gender envy in *The Handmaid's Tale* operates along both vertical and horizontal axes. Vertically, envy flows between men and women, as male authority seeks to own and control female reproductive power.

Horizontally, envy circulates among women themselves, where structural pressures foster rivalry between Wives and Handmaids, or between Handmaids and Marthas, ensuring that female solidarity is fractured. By distinguishing these dimensions, we can better understand how Atwood dramatizes envy not only as an individual psychological impulse but also as a mechanism of social control that sustains Gilead's hierarchy.

Both vertical and horizontal gender envy reflect Freud's theory of displacement and projection: one gender envies the power and privileges of another, in a society built on hierarchical structures and power inequality. Vertical envy emerges most clearly between the ruling male power structures and the Handmaids, whose reproductive capacity represents the one domain men cannot replicate or fully command. The Commanders, though being in control of society, are haunted by their dependence on women's biological functions, a dependency that undermines the illusion of absolute male sovereignty. To neutralize this anxiety, Gilead constructs elaborate rituals—the Ceremony, medical inspections, and state-controlled births—that symbolically transfer female reproductive power into the hands of men, making it appear as though conception and birth occur under male authority. In this way, Atwood dramatizes how vertical envy transforms into systemic domination: men both covet and fear women's biological capacity, and so they institutionalize control over it to maintain their supremacy.

We find examples of vertical envy throughout the book, especially in chapters 11 – 16, which describe the Ceremony, in which the Commanders perform ritualized intercourse with the Handmaid, whose head is placed on the lap of the Wife who holds her hands. This orchestrated act is meant to symbolically erase the raped woman's agency, while the Commander is the victorious achiever of the conception. In reality, this threesome reflects the dependence of the male elite on female fertility, the very power they lack. By transforming reproduction into a ceremony under male control, the regime attempts to appropriate women's biological capacity, masking the Commanders' envy of that power with rituals that make it appear as though conception occurs within their authority.

This scene illustrates how vertical envy operates: men long for the reproductive power of women but, unable to possess it, they construct political, religious, and cultural systems that subordinate and regulate it. By turning the sexual act into a state-controlled ritual, Gilead demonstrates how totalitarianism extends its authority even into the most private and biological domains of life. The Commanders' envy of women's reproductive capacity is not acknowledged outright; instead, it is translated into laws, rituals, and ceremonies that mask dependency with domination. The Ceremony is not about intimacy or desire but about surveillance and control: the body of the Handmaid becomes a vessel through which the state enacts its power. In this sense, Atwood illustrates how totalitarian regimes appropriate natural functions and rewrite them as political performances—birth becomes a duty, sex becomes a ritual of obedience, and fertility becomes state property, just like in Ceaușescu's times, when he released his decree 770 in 1966 to regulate reproduction as state duty. The Ceremony reflects Gilead's totalitarianism in its purest form: it transforms a deeply human act into an instrument of governance, erasing individuality in order to reinforce the illusion of male sovereignty.

On the other hand, Serena Joy and other Wives may envy the Handmaids' fertility, while Handmaids may envy the Wives' status and privilege, creating a vicious cycle of horizontal violence that further mirrors Freud's insight into displaced aggression and projection. When individuals experience inner conflict and frustration which cannot be expressed towards the powerful sources that generated them, they direct it onto others who are generally equally powerless or, in the case of Wives, only marginally more powerful. Similarly, the Aunts, such as Aunt Lydia, enforce the law with cruelty and violence, reflective of their own frustration of being turned into guardians, channeling their subjugation into violence against other women under their authority. This dynamic perfectly illustrates how the real oppressor (the Commanders, the regime) is untouchable, so antagonism circulates laterally, creating conflicts within the oppressed group. Atwood shows how this system of projection and internalized hostility sustains Gilead—patriarchal domination is made stable not only through top-down violence, but through orchestrated conflicts among women themselves.

It becomes evident that women are systematically positioned in opposition to one another by the design of the society they live in. Serena Joy was once a powerful public figure who advocated for traditional values, preservation of the family and anti-abortion laws. In her new world, she finds herself trapped in domesticity and excluded from the very reproductive role she once fought to legislate. She is bitter, even violent towards Offred because she experiences womb envy herself. The Handmaid holds symbolic power as the potential mother of the Commander's child. Serena carries a battle where she both needs and hates Offred, her resentments being reflected in emotional cruelty and psychological manipulation. Feelings of frustration and inadequacy because of infertility and loss of agency make her perform a continuous projection on the Handmaid. She sees in Offred a painful reminder of her own lost femininity as regulated by a regime that she helped establish.

There are many stances in the book that reflect this kind of displaced aggression. For example, in Chapter Twenty-Five, Offred finds Serena in her garden cutting off the seed pods of the tulips with such determination that she is actually destroying the very ability of the flower to reproduce. Offred reflects on the irony of the scene which she finds relevant for portraying Serena's own ability to reproduce. The garden, a symbol of fertility and femininity becomes a site for conflict and tension, with Serena being trapped in a domestic role she once advocated for: "*She was snipping off the seed pods with a pair of shears. I watched her sideways as I went past, with my basket of oranges and lamb chops. She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up?*"

Or some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seed pods is supposed to make the bulb store energy. Saint Serena, on her knees, doing penance (Atwood 150 – 151).

This scene is an example of how the society of Gilead sets women in opposition to one another: Serena's feelings of inadequacy and envy of Offred – June's procreative capacities, sublimated in simple gestures like killing a flower's ability to reproduce. Her actions reflect a projection of her own frustrations and a displacement of her aggression onto someone she perceives as a threat.

Conversely, Offred and the other Handmaids feel envy towards the Wives for their material comfort, relative security and their belonging to a presumptive upper class. The Handmaids are constantly reminded of their disposability and lack of agency, despite having upper hand in reproduction. At this point, we can also bring into discussion Freud's concept of ambivalence, as opposing emotions of love and hate shown by Serena towards Offred, while the reverse is also true. In a way, she feels love for the Handmaid's body and reproductive system which she needs in order to fulfill her social role, but hates the emotions and hidden power that come with it. On the other hand, Offred expects Serena's approval and occasional protection, yet she resents her domination and hypocrisy. This cycle of mutual envy and aggression among women serves Gilead's patriarchal order by dividing the oppressed, ensuring that resentment is misdirected horizontally rather than vertically—a classic mechanism of authoritarian control. As such, Atwood dramatizes not only Freud's theories of displacement and projection, but also offers a feminist reinterpretation: gender envy, under patriarchal systems, becomes weaponized and internalized, driving women to punish and sabotage each other rather than confront the system that exploits them all. Poignant examples in this respect are the public executions in which the Handmaids are executioners, a moment of rare cruelty when the oppressed women pour their massive frustrations and anger onto their victims (Atwood, Chapter Forty Three).

This reciprocal envy of Wives towards Handmaids further reflects Atwood's concept of *ustopia*—the blending of utopia and dystopia. Wives appear to hold social power and privilege, yet envy the Handmaids' ability to reproduce. Conversely, Handmaids, though exploited, may envy their status and security. This tension reveals how Gilead's supposed *utopia* for order and fertility masks a dystopian reality of division, control, and suffering, where no group is truly free.

This type of two-way envy illustrates how Atwood's *ustopia* functions as a site of internalized oppression and relational instability. Gilead offers the illusion of purpose, structure, and divine order, but beneath this façade lies a fractured society where no woman is whole, and no role is fulfilling, despite the appearance of power and control on the Wives' behalf. While elevated in status, they are reduced to ornamental/functional figures, deprived of sexual agency and maternal experience, reduced to jealous spectators of the biological functions they cannot perform. The Handmaids, on the other hand, possess the reproductive capacity that Gilead prizes, yet they are confined to sexual servitude, denied autonomy, identity, and familial bonds.

This enforced interdependence between Wives and Handmaids—structured by envy, resentment, and fear—serves to dissolve solidarity among women, a feature of both dystopian control and Freudian unconscious mechanisms of projection and repression. As each group is constructed as the complement to the other's deficiencies, female identity becomes fragmented, defined only in opposition to the other. Thus, Atwood's *ustopia* is a camouflaged dystopia that exploits envy and imposes rigid, mutually exclusive roles under the guise of divine and social order. The result is a stark psycho-social landscape where envy supports subjugation, and where the promise of utopia is used to justify and perpetuate deep human suffering and violence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, envy emerges as one of the most pervasive psychological and relational forces in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, shaping both individual behavior and the broader structures of Gileadean society. The preceding discussion of Karen Horney, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva provides a theoretical framework for understanding how such dynamics are produced and sustained. Horney's revision of psychoanalysis makes visible the role of culturally constructed gender hierarchies and the notion of womb envy, helping to explain the anxiety and compensatory forms of control that structure male authority in Gilead. Irigaray argues that a symbolic order structured around masculine norms marginalizes feminine subjectivity, positioning it as secondary and, in doing so, encouraging rivalry and alienation among women rather than reciprocity and solidarity.

At the same time, the perspectives of Cixous and Kristeva shed light on the possibilities of resistance that exist within and against these structures. Cixous's call for women to reclaim the body and affirm their own experience through writing resonates with Offred's fragmented yet persistent narration, which becomes a means of preserving subjectivity under conditions of extreme repression. Kristeva's concept of the semiotic helps to explain how such forms of expression disrupt rigid symbolic systems, allowing suppressed feelings, memories, and identities to surface. Read through these feminist reformulations of psychoanalysis, the multiple forms of envy depicted in the novel—between men and women, Wives and Handmaids, power and vulnerability—appear not merely as personal emotions but as effects of a symbolic order built on hierarchy and exclusion. Atwood's narrative ultimately exposes how these divisions sustain oppressive structures, while also suggesting that new forms of language, memory, and expression may offer the possibility of reimagining relations between subjects beyond the logic of rivalry and domination.

REFERENCES

1. Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage Books, 2017.
2. Cixous, Hélène. *The Laugh of the Medusa*. *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976.
3. Freud, Sigmund. *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. Translated by James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 22, Hogarth Press, 1964.
4. Horney, Karen. *Feminine Psychology*. W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1973.
5. Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Cornell University Press, 1985.
6. Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Columbia University Press, 1984.