

Profanity of Supremacy, Memory and Sexuality in Gilead: The Potentiality of Language in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This article traces the profane play of supremacy, memory and sexuality in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by utilizing Giorgio Agamben's theoretical concerns relating to the effects of a nihilistic tendency on the potentiality of human language. Atwood's female protagonists fight their battle against tyranny, exploitation, alienation, and suppressive patriarchal constructions of the Gileadean regime. The horror of their dreadful lives results in their experience of a void in human consciousness and language. Agamben marks this annulled stage as the culmination of a schism within language; a stage of unspeakability as a condition of human discourse. His *Language and Death* marks a close relation between the functioning of language and contemporary philosophy. Agamben makes it clear that logic and ethics share a common foundation in a complex way. They appear inseparable from the perspective of metaphysics. This leads to the emergence of negative presuppositions at the ground of metaphysical tradition. Agamben insists that contemporary ontological condition has been occupied with nihilism, and the potentiality of human language has found itself grounded in negativity. He implies that it is only by existing in "language without being called there by any Voice and by dying 'without being called by death' ...that humanity can return to its proper dwelling place or ethos."¹ This article establishes that the emancipation from the play of dehumanised traps of ineffability can be possible for Atwood's female protagonists when their experience of language will get progressed from its negated existence to meaningful discourse.

Keywords: supremacy, memory, sexuality, human consciousness, language, meaningful discourse, ineffability, ethos

Introduction

Martin Heidegger traces a rare relationship between language and death. He states that mortals are those who can actually experience death, but "animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought."² Heidegger's conception of *Dasein's* experience of death and its 'ownmost' possibility refutes the prospect of "potentiality-for-Being."³ His concept reveals the fact that *Dasein* cannot explore its own possibilities, or understand its position in the world

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¹ Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), p. 28.

² Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper, 1971), p. 107.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 183.

because it cannot surpass the death which is “the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*. Thus, death reveals itself as that possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped.”⁴ It can be implied that ‘Death’ is not simply a biological phenomenon, it is a basic component of the human experience, civilization and thought. Language, on the other hand, is a sophisticated and potent instrument that *Dasein* uses to communicate, express its thoughts, and share experiences of mortality. What connects death and language is that both are profound dimensions of human existence and experience.

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*⁵ is a philosophical investigation of the relationship between language and death. The novel, a saga of gender discrimination, suppression and patriarchal supremacy, is a Heideggerian vision of *Dasein*'s experience of death. Atwood portrays the plight of women occupying a liminal place between life and death. They are alive, but have lost their ability to see, think, and speak. Atwood's artistic revelation opens a space of profound contemplation. What happens when *Dasein* [a woman] is thrown into this possibility of life without having any clear knowledge of the fact that “it has been delivered over to its death, and that death thus belongs to *Being-in-the-world*.”⁶ Her life cannot be considered as “a kind of *Being* to which there belongs a *Being-in-the-world*.”⁷ The reality of a woman's status is that she is thrown into the world in which her ‘belongingness’ remains under suspension. She is not permitted to ‘speak’ or to be part of the patriarchal society until she surrenders her life, identity and power of speech. This threshold of limbo state of life; ‘to belong, or not to belong’ opens that rare space of exclusion in which a woman is included in the “form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion.”⁸ Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the door to this zone of ‘exception’ which works by bifurcating woman's *zoē* (the life that is lived) from *bios* (biological life). It seems that patriarchal ideology has become so influential and efficacious in “keeping them [women] alive when, in biological terms, they should have been dead long ago.”⁹

Atwood highlights that a woman possesses ‘the possibility of life’ till her body is biologically alive and fit for toil, fertility and sex. Her female protagonists fight their battle against tyranny, exploitation, alienation, and the suppressive patriarchal constructions of the Gileadean regime. The horror of their dreadful existence brings a void in human consciousness and language in such a way that this negated existence seems to start legitimating itself. The hidden “bereavement,” does not permit them to forget ‘the past’ or move on to a ‘mute future.’ Agamben marks this annulled stage as the culmination of schism within language; a stage of unspeakability as a condition of human discourse. For him, language reveals its limit not only through actualization of discourse, but also dwells in the precincts of ‘silence.’ This appears true for Gileadean women who are trapped in an indeterminate state of silent denial, but preserve their potential for ‘meaningful discourse’ by displaying disinclined withdrawal of compliance.

⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 294.

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985)

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 295.

⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 290.

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 11.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2007), p. 248.

Speech in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Agamben's *Language and Death*¹⁰ marks out a close relation between the functioning of language and contemporary philosophy. He clarifies that logic and ethics rest on a single ground in such a complex mode that they appear inseparable on the horizon of metaphysics. Agamben recognises a close relationship between the fundamentals of ethical reasoning and rational thinking. According to this viewpoint, these two areas seem to be entangled when examining the central elements of reality, aiding in the development of a comprehensive understanding of existence and morality. The investigation of their connections is a challenging task because each discipline includes complicated mental processes and a range of viewpoints. Any dilution of reason and morals leads to the emergence of negative presuppositions at the ground of metaphysical tradition. Agamben insists that contemporary ontological condition has been occupied with nihilism and the potentiality of human language has found itself grounded in negativity. He implies that it is only by existing in "language without being called there by any Voice' and by dying 'without being called by death'...that humanity can return to its proper dwelling place or ethos."¹¹ The emancipation from the play of dehumanised traps of ineffability is possible for Atwood's female protagonists when their experience of language will get digressed from its negated existence to a meaningful discourse. This article traces the impact of the profane play of supremacy, memory and sexuality in 'silencing womanhood' in Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by utilizing Agamben's theoretical concerns relating to the effects of nihilistic tendency on the potentiality of human language.

In Atwood's Republic of Gilead, the sovereign power of patriarchy exerts its influence and maintains supremacy by exploiting language as a manipulative tool to cast a shadow on speech, sexuality, memory, moral code, and rationale. The relation of sexuality and discourse, Michel Foucault claims, is determined by the power which is further supported by two key factors: first, what was said and second, who did the speaking. According to Foucault, "the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said."¹² For Foucault the main concern is "'discursive fact', the way in which sex is 'put into discourse.'"¹³ As the subject of 'sex' is intricate and multifaceted and has historical, social, and cultural implications, it has the capacity to generate an impact on perceptions, individual behaviour, and societal norms. Offred and other handmaids in Gilead are not only sexually exploited, but also forced to bear children to the Commanders-in-Chief for their wives. The power dynamics of patriarchal ideology constructs a new 'discourse' of conditions which are powerful in shaping new absurd propositions by twisting the realities. For women like Offred, the realm of the logical and illogical intersects to the extent that every absurdity appears normal: "Is that how we lived then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now."¹⁴

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹¹ Mills, *The Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben*, p. 28.

¹² Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 11.

¹³ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 109.

Atwood's Republic of Gilead is like every society where a specific number of processes simultaneously govern, choose, arrange, and disperse discourse production. The role of these procedures "is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality."¹⁵ Gilead is an abode of this profane play of domination which extends so profoundly that it strips the civilians from their freedom of speech. Agamben identifies this stage of 'unspeakability' as a void state of isolated 'human discourse.' On one occasion, the Commander-in-Chief asks Offred about her desires. It is anticipated that she will disrupt the veil of 'unspeakability' by seeking deliverance from the horrific sexual exploitation, awful agony, and endless oppression she had gone through all her life by serving Commander. Offred replies: "I would like to know...whatever there is to know...what's going on."¹⁶ It is shocking to notice that she has lost her abilities to decipher what is actually happening to her and other handmaids. Her rational mind accepts the authority of 'the other' to the extent that it modifies her consciousness and judgement.

Heidegger differentiates humans from animals because the former can experience death and has the potentiality for language. This relationship between death and language needs contemplation in context to Gilead where socio-political apparatuses function by equating the level of human beings especially handmaids with animals. These women, living like corpses, have lost not only the ability to speak, but also the vision to differentiate between life and death. They are breathing until their wombs are fertile. The infertile women are called "unwomen,"¹⁷ whilst "HOPE and CHARITY"¹⁸ have no place in their lives. These poor women are not even provided sufficient food to satisfy their hunger. Even a small cup of coffee is considered "a valuable commodity that is increasingly difficult to obtain."¹⁹ Ironically, they are accustomed to hearing such phrases: "Be thankful for what you are given" and "It's disrespectful not to finish."²⁰ Gileadean handmaids have learnt to seek happiness in trivial offerings. When Aunt Lydia gives permission to dye eggs in baby pink and blue colours, these women find an escape from their gloomy existence, "You have no idea what delight this brings...Our diet is monotonous and a little variation is welcome, even if only a variation in colour."²¹ A woman in Gilead is not a "being" but "a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy."²² Thus, it appears that Atwood is describing a dynamic barrier inside a patriarchal setting whose permeability is modified by ideological restrictions. As a result of practises or indicators that are part of this social paradigm, gender roles and distinctions are constructed and reinforced. This border is implicated in a system of gender hierarchy.

In George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,²³ the totalitarian regime employs official language 'Newspeak', with selective vocabulary, to facilitate an acute party

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "Orders of discourse," *Social Science Information*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1971): pp. 7-30.

¹⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 198.

¹⁷ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 20.

¹⁸ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 119.

¹⁹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 173.

²⁰ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 323.

²¹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 33.

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 139.

²³ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

control in the nation of Oceania: "In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it."²⁴ The philosophy of the party strengthens by shrewdly refuting the legitimacy of every new experience, and the very subsistence of external reality. Irving Howe argues that Orwell seeks to give a view of the world in which the worth of 'self' has been violated to such an extent that the concept of uniqueness has become outdated and "personality a crime."²⁵ Atwood's vision of futuristic world bears close similarity to Orwell. Her concern is to trace the profane play of the apparatuses that deny the worth of 'self' and 'being.' Atwood takes the reader to a fictional milieu which appears exactly the replica of our real world. She lays bare the void space of socio-political intricacies, prejudices and oppressions. Atwood asserts:

Fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves.²⁶

In Gilead, Atwood shows how the citizens are forced to survive in a primitive state of darkness and obliqueness. The question is not what they can know; the issue is What should they know? Common people are purposely purged of their reading/writing proficiency. All publishing houses, hospital evidences, texts, historical records, newspapers and movies are obliterated by rulers of society. If the objective of 'Newspeak' in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is to control 'human speech,' Gilead's power politics advances one step further and intends to slay 'human thought.' In Gilead, a television broadcaster appeals to Offred as the only reliable mode of information: "they only show us victories, never defeats . . . [and guide] us what we long to believe."²⁷ Atwood realizes the fact that the technological and material advancements can barren the feelings of empathy and affection in human beings. In the competitive and biased regime of Gilead, realities are manipulated and belief system is recreated.

According to Arnold Davidson, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights that the way we select to create the past "partly determines the history we are likely to get."²⁸ Gilead is a world where the past is devalued, and the present takes its foundation from false hopes and possibilities. Distorted reality is glorified to generate forged impression. Historical facts and religious norms are manipulated to impose control on speech and thought of the citizens. Even access to holy book Bible is shrewdly prohibited in such a way that only commander enjoys the right to read and interpret verses for general masses. Gilead's power politics do not introduce a new language like 'Newspeak;' its focus is primarily on the fabrication of even more dangerous form of language whereby proxy illustrations and placards are used as a dominant mode of communication. This assortment can be equated to what Agamben

²⁴ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 63.

²⁵ Irving Howe (ed.), "1984: History as Nightmare," In *Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), pp. 320-331.

²⁶ Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* (Ontario: ECW Press, 1998).

²⁷ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 106.

²⁸ Arnold E. Davidson, "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, eds Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 113-121.

identifies as 'Voice', the negative foundation for language.²⁹ He equates 'Voice' to the status of a no-longer (voice) and of a not-yet (meaning), it necessarily constitutes a negative dimension. These picture forms are the symbols of 'Voice' as they have neither voice (vocal/spoken element), nor meaning (connotation dimension). These placards, tattoos and images are those symbolic 'Voice' forms of language that exist as in-between state of dialectics "which is no longer a natural sign and not yet meaningful discourse."³⁰ It is the politicised form of dialectics that boosts the profane interplay of patriarchal power by weakening the borders of memory, identity, and femininity.

Placards and the Voice

In the absurd world of Gilead, the crime is politically determined, and the reward of indiscretion is only execution or punishment. To avoid the recurrence of future noncompliance, the offenders are forced to wear placards. It also helps in keeping the memory of their crime alive in the heart of every spectator. An image of "human fetus"³¹ is draped around the neck of an executed doctor, homosexual crimes are given purple placards for "gender treachery,"³² priests wear inverted crosses for their non-compliance. Every placard is the selective emblem of new dispatched identity. It purposely eradicates the memory of former 'self' and replaces it with 'new-personality.' In the words of Offred: "Whatever it meant, he's just as dead."³³ Her proclamation projects the concealed relation of language and death. The loss of memory, self and speech culminates into loss of existence. When someone loses one's ability to speak, remember, or identify, it can be viewed as a gradual loss of one's being. Existence in this refers to more than merely being present physically. It includes the depth of one's sense of self, the capacity for interpersonal interaction, and the ability to comprehend the experiences of others.

Gender discrimination and sexual exploitation validate the subtle play of patriarchal power in the Republic of Gilead. Handmaids experience the worst form of nonexistence at the pretext of sexuality. Their bodies are pierced to sketch permanent tattoos. These identification marks make sure that these poor women "will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape."³⁴ Stăncuța Ramona Dima-Liza insists that what separates human beings from machines is the liberty that they enjoy for their development, speech and expression of inner thoughts and emotions³⁵. Handmaids are not considered human beings in Gilead; they are devoid of the right to speak, know, experience and comprehend. Their worth is only their bodies, which are used like machines to give birth to Commanders' children. Offred declares: "We are two legged wombs, that's all."³⁶ They are tolerated until their reproductive organs are working properly. Once Handmaids become barren, they are isolated and rejected.

²⁹ Agamben, *Language and Death*, p. xii

³⁰ Agamben, *Language and Death*, p. 47.

³¹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 43.

³² Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 47.

³³ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 260.

³⁴ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 85.

³⁵ Stăncuța Ramona Dima-Laza, "A Dystopian Society or the Moral Decay of Humanity", *Society and Politics*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2011), p. 42.

³⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 176.

It is an irony that the infidelity of these insignificant women is considered a punishable crime against the state. The reality is that these handmaids are forced to live in a state of exception, stripped of every right to live a dignified life. They are doubly victimised. Their bodies are used as objects of sexual gratification and their 'self' is emptied. There is no external reality for these Handmaids. The life that is projected through the publications of stories in the newspaper stories appear like bad dreams to them. This whole experience appears dreadful and incredible for them because that was never the aspect of their "lives."³⁷ To these Handmaids, newspapers are "awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives."³⁸ These helpless women have lost the memory of their existence. Their past haunts them, and their main concern is survival in the present. In the patriarchal society of Gilead, women are either considered sex objects for the gratification of men, or birth machines. Handmaids are considered the 'sacred vessels' who offer their wombs for surrogate children of affluent white families. Mostly the wives of C Commanders had become infertile due to heavy exposure to radiation. The women of Gilead are in two categories: either they are fruitful or they are "barren, that's the law."³⁹ Atwood's proclamation can be interpreted in two ways: first, she refers to the unproductive situation of law for women in society; secondly, she highlights the absurdity of Gileadean society where not the woman, but the law decides her fertile/barren status. What if a woman, capable of bearing child, decides not to give birth? Will she be declared barren and punished by law?

A Handmaid can neither claim for her 'body' nor 'self.' Offred recalls her real name which nobody knows because "it's forbidden."⁴⁰ Handmaids like Ofglen, Ofwai Ten and Offred are not only stripped of their true identities, but also of the fundamental right to speech. The personal conversation of these women is expurgated. Commanders' wives, guardians, surrogates and handmaids are not allowed to converse casually with each other. But ironically, thrice a day recitation of Republic's code of belief is compulsory for them: "From each according to her ability; to each according to his need."⁴¹ Atwood implies that the place of a woman in a patriarchal society is like a slave whose duty is to take care of the needs of her master. For these suppressed women, language remains neither the "manifestation of an organism nor the expression of a living being."⁴² They fear the repercussions of their disobedience and rebellion. Offred remarks: "It's safer to make things up than to say you have nothing to reveal."⁴³ Through her statement, Atwood advocates that women should realise that there is no redemption in 'silence,' their 'speech' has the potential to reveal their inner strength and determination. Their silent suffering and tolerance will bear no results.

Agamben opines that the experience of the Voice can help *Dasein* in the attainment of its own possibility and death. The Voice might be interpreted as a kind of inner voice encouraging *Dasein* to face its most extreme potential and live authentically. According to Agamben, this silent call of conscience reveals to *Dasein* its authentic thinking of death i.e., it can die and not simply cease. Heidegger contends that actual living, which necessitates facing

³⁷ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 109.

³⁸ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 109.

³⁹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 108.

⁴¹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 151

⁴² Agamben, *Language and Death*, p. 55.

⁴³ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 92

one's own existence, options, and mortality, is where *Dasein's* true potential rests. A parallel analysis of Agamben and Heidegger reveals that the *Dasein's* inner voice is that 'true potential' which gives meaning to human existence. It dwells in 'Language' in the form of silence and meaningful discourse. This is the true power of human consciousness which according to Agamben, never ceases. As Offred "begins to be more aware of the power of spoken language, she is realizing the significance of the private and unspoken thought."⁴⁴ The fact cannot be denied that the patriarchal power has the tremendous influence to silence the naive and helpless women like Offred, but one should not overlook the truth that the ability of 'innate thought' never dies. Wisdom ingrained in our collective intellectual past endure despite how societies transformed and evolved. It is not simply a deceasing, but a person's insurmountable opportunity, the possibility of her "freedom."⁴⁵

In Gilead, the empire of domination, favouritism and suppression flourishes by controlling freedom of expression. In the case of Handmaids, their exploitation is twofold. They are treated as the property of the commander/owner who provides them their new name and identity. The name of every handmaid starts with 'Of' and then the short name of her owner is added. Ofglen, Ofwai Ten and Offred have no name of their own. They are stripped of not only their speech but also their identities. Offred shares her pain: "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not. I want to be more than valuable."⁴⁶ She longs not for wealth, precious jewellery or costly clothes, she just wants her 'dignity' back. Offred represents every woman who aspires to speak for herself. When Commander expresses his romantic feelings for Offred, she finds herself torn into an awful past and unsure future: "We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely."⁴⁷ Atwood's Offred wants to leave the dreadful past behind, and desires to fly high in the sky. Her 'flying' signifies the freedom from the pangs of slavery, silence, loss of self and identity. Offred has the apprehension of impediments, but she has faith in the strength of her wings. Similarly, Aunt Lydia tries to redefine her identity through inscription of the dark enigmas of Gileadean empire in her record. She is aware of the accompanying dangers to her life, yet she dares to hoard a record of incriminating documents. Aunt Lydia contemplates, "I've been hoarding for so many years will have featured not only at my own trial – should fate prove malicious, and should I live to feature at such a trial – but at the trials of many others. I've made it my business to know where the bodies are buried."⁴⁸

Agamben identifies Voice as a pure intention to signify and classifies Voice as a limbo state of dialectics which is neither a natural sign, nor yet meaningful discourse. It is the pure logical dimension whereby humans willingly "pronounces his 'yes' to language and consents that it may take place."⁴⁹ No doubt, the exercise of free will in making meaningful personal, social, political or ethical decisions becomes difficult when people are reduced to nothing more than biological life. But both Agamben and Atwood promote a critical analysis

⁴⁴ Angela Michelle Gulick, *The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood: examining its utopian, dystopian, feminist and postmodernist traditions* (Ph.D Dissertation. Iowa State University, 1991).

⁴⁵ Agamben, *Language and Death*, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 186

⁴⁷ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 292

⁴⁸ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Agamben, *Language and Death*, p. 87.

of the factors that restrict human agency. They provide a means for thinking about the intricate interactions among will, speech, freedom, power, and the capacity for meaningful action within current political and social frameworks via their examination of socio-political structures.

Atwood's artistic acumen is her pursuit for new possibilities when no hope for the salvation of helpless women is left. Her works open a new space for the contemplation of human endurance and courage. Although Offred has accepted her servitude, but at last she displays courage by showing her willingness to know what is knowledgeable, "what's going on."⁵⁰ Offred, Moira, Rita, Cora, and the Marthas dare to start their journey towards 'meaningful discourse' through little gestures like exchanging smiles and offering food. They become ready to show their desire to share their sufferings, sickness and feelings. Although these women are unable to utter words, they soon realise the importance of nodding, giving a signal that 'yes,' they understand and feel the pangs of suffering through which they have all gone through. Offred senses a feeling of bond with her fellow friends. She tries to understand the implied meaning of what others want to say.

Offred does not despise, but rather acknowledges, the old-fashioned expressions that she heard from the older generation: "I hear where you're coming from, as if the voice itself were a traveller."⁵¹ She admits that she used to scorn that type of conversation, but now she cherishes it. Offred has realised that their conversation was a bonding link for them. According to David S. Hogsette, Offred discerns that the power politics of Gilead uses language as a tool to create diverse and adaptable version of reality. She apprehends that she can also employ language "to construct another subversive or, at least, counter version, one that directly attacks the version that Gilead promotes."⁵² Offred breaks the shackles of ineffability and opens a meaningful discourse by sharing her knowledge, experiences, thoughts and feelings through her own story. She recreates an unusual and different reality and offers new prospective to the world. Offred plays an instrumental role in bringing historical, "social and political change."⁵³

Conclusion

To conclude, for Agamben, unspeakability is a condition of human discourse. He advocates opening thought to a new experience of language that does not presuppose an ineffability or negativity and instead thinks language as such. His concept of "thinking language as such" calls for a readiness to reevaluate the nature of language itself and to challenge presumptions that might restrict our comprehension. This method promotes experimentation, inventiveness, and an appreciation of the numerous uses and experiences that language can have. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* implies an openness to new linguistic experiences that are not constrained by the restrictions frequently associated with expressing the indescribable or highlighting the negative. Through Offred's realization, Atwood opens doors to this unique experience of language that crosses all the boundaries of unspeakability. Moira, Rita, Cora, and Marthas and other handmaids are what Agamben calls 'Voices' that remain submerged in the ocean of

⁵⁰ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 198.

⁵¹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 14.

⁵² Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p. 270.

⁵³ David S. Hogsette, "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*: The Reader's Role in Empowering Offred's Speech Act", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 38, no. 4 (1997), p. 270.

suppressed memories, subjugation and control, but once they understand the potential of their 'voice,' they cross all the boundaries of silence and start their redemptive journey towards freedom.