

Gender in Science-Fiction

The representation of gender roles and gender performativity in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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Kristel van Kesteren

s4262107

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Supervisor: Dr. Dennis Kersten

ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teacher who will receive this document: C. Louttit

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Signed

Name of student: Kristel van Kesteren

Student number: s4262107

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine the representation of gender roles and gender performance in the science-fiction novels *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood. By conducting analyses through close-reading the selected case studies, this thesis will be structured as follows. In the first chapter, the thesis will introduce Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Sandra Bem's enculturated lens theory. After that, the second chapter will be dedicated to analysing *The Left Hand of Darkness*, looking especially at the concept of androgyny and how this juxtaposes gender performance theory. The third chapter will focus on *The Handmaid's Tale*, paying close attention to the subdivision of gender and how gender is performed within the society. In conclusion, this thesis claims that in *The Left Hand of Darkness* gender does not exist and that therefore gender performance theory cannot be applied and that in *The Handmaid's Tale* the categorising gender on the basis of fertility enforces gender roles.

Keywords: feminism, gender roles, gender representation, gender performativity theory, enculturated lens theory, Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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Introduction

Science-fiction has had a reputation of being an exclusively male genre of fiction, but in the last few decades, women writers have taken to the stage to create their own worlds. Such an author is Ursula K. Le Guin, who wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969, which is one of the novels in her science fiction series *Hainish Cycle*. In her 1969 novel, Le Guin created a planet where gender does not exist which attracted a lot of attention, both positive and negative. While *The Left Hand of Darkness* has won multiple prestigious awards, like the Nebula and Hugo awards, the most criticism has come from feminist critics reprimanding her for using male pronouns for her alien species. As a response, Le Guin wrote her essay “Is gender necessary?” (1985) in which she explains that she did not choose to come up with gender-neutral pronouns in the story as she feared it would jeopardise the language (164). Despite the criticism, Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* challenges all notions of gender.

Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is more a feminist dystopian novel than a science-fiction novel, as she argues in the article “Aliens have taken the place of angels”: “Some use speculative fiction as an umbrella covering science fiction and all its hyphenated forms - science fiction fantasy, and so forth - and others choose the reverse. I have written two works of science fiction or, if you prefer, speculative fiction: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*” (2005). Despite Atwood’s disfavour for the term, she is considered to be an influential author within the genre. In her novel, Atwood takes the reader into a society that separates men and women and classifies them on the basis of their fertility. Through *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood attempts to warn society for a similar situation happening in reality, as it could become an actual issues as she states: “speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand, such as DNA identification and credit cards, and that takes place on Planet Earth” (2005).

The subject of this thesis is gender representation and performance, which will be examined by looking at the science-fiction novels *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin and *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood. This by utilising two theories, namely Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory and Sandra Bem’s enculturated lens theory. With these case studies and theories, the following question will be answered: In which ways do *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* represent gender roles and performance according to Sandra Bem’s encultured lens theory and Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory? To explore both Bem’s encultured lens theory and Butler’s gender performativity theory, this thesis will focus on two specific works of these theorists.

For Butler, her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988) Then, Bem’s 1993 book *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* will be the focal point of this theory, as the book delves into the enculturated lens theory in great length.

The preliminary hypothesis is that *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* both represent gender in a very different manner. While the society in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is heavily gendered, the society in *The Left Hand of Darkness* has a complete lack of gender. Consequently, their representation of gender will differ significantly.

In order to answer the research question, the structure of the thesis will be as follows: Chapter 1 will have an in-depth explanation of the two theories by Judith Butler and Sandra Bem, to set a foundation for the analyses of the case studies and to set apart the most important concepts within the theories. The important concepts in Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory are the performance acts through which she believes gender can be constructed and that gender is not a biologically determined notion, but rather a concept constructed by society through cultural and historical norms. Sandra Bem’s enculturated lens theory explains how one can see gender through three specific lenses, those of androcentrism, gender polarization and biological essentialism. These lenses will be explained in detail with fitting examples. Together these two theories will form a cohesive theoretical framework that will help to establish whether the two case studies deal with gender performances in their characters and whether these societies can be viewed through the enculturated lenses. Chapter 2 will focus on the first case study, namely the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin. It will mainly analyse the novel’s protagonist who finds himself lost within a society where there is no gender. The androgyny of the society will be a focal point of discussion, as well as how the protagonist perceives that society from an outsider’s perspective. Another main element of the chapter will be to answer whether the society still performs in a certain way while there are no ingrained gender roles. Chapter 3 will focus on the second case study, the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood. Within this dystopian society, women and men are divided into categories. Women are judged on their fertility while men are solely categorised on social rank. In this chapter, the focus will mainly be on the differences in power between men and women, the protagonist’s lack of agency and whether the important characters perform accordingly to the society’s strict gender roles. The thesis will end with a conclusion, giving a short overview of the theory and a summary of the

findings of the analyses. After a short compare and contrast on the way in which the two novels represent gender, the thesis will conclude in an answer to the research question.

Chapter 1 – Theory and Methodology

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis. Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, as explained in her essay: "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988), will first be explained, after which Sandra Bem's enculturated lens theory as found in her book *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (1993) will be explained. Since both these sources deal with the way in which gender is perceived (either through performance or through a lens), they might either strengthen or challenge one another, which will help view gender in the two case studies, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in a different light.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity was first introduced in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988). Butler's main claim in this essay, which is also the bottom line of her performative theory, is that "gender is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (520). Performativity, in her opinion, is performing certain acts in reality. Through this act of performance, gender is constructed on the common acts of the body, and through these performative acts, gender is constructed. This means that the body is not the foundation of gender, according to Butler's theory, since gender develops overtime through sociocultural and historical influences. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir addresses this as well when she says that "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman" (qtd. Butler 519). Butler quotes this statement by de Beauvoir to pinpoint that gender develops when an individual performs according to certain acts of the body. In essence, when a man would act out specific "masculine" acts it would establish his gender according to these masculine acts while women act according to feminine acts. An example of gendered acts could be being emotional for women versus being stoic for men. These masculine and feminine acts are a social binary; a forced gender polarity that comes from a gendered culture like most societies worldwide (520), therefore these acts are not inherent but constructed. Through historical events, this gender binary has been a determining factor of how individuals either copy gendered male or female behaviour. However, Butler claims that if gender is as coherent as it is perceived, there is room for different repetition of acts, which could result in the development of a different gender, as Butler states; "In [acts'] very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting [their] reified status" (520). This, however, comes with certain restrictions and is where the whole concept of social

sanction and taboo emerges, which forms a major part of Butler's argument. According to the gender binary and the social pressure of performing according to either masculine or feminine acts, any act that deviates from the norm is subjected to punishment. For example, David Barash argues in his book *The Whisperings Within* (1979) that in mainstream culture the colours "blue" and "pink" are gendered. The colour blue belongs to boys, while the colour pink is reserved for girls. Through this binary divide children's products usually, are divided in "for boys" and "for girls". Products like toys, shampoos and clothes. Often when children voice their preference for a product that does not correlate to their gender identity they are punished, and therefore these cultural sanctions forbid anyone from nonconforming (71-72). What Barash means when he says nonconforming is that one would fail to conform to the social norms. Performing gender in a different way than is culturally acceptable or seen as radical, like for instance cross-dressing, is often looked down upon. As Butler says: "These possibilities are necessarily constrained by available conventions" (521). Here Butler tries to establish that people are expected to perform their gender. These performative acts may seem like individual agency, as if one has control over how to act their gender, but are actually heavily influenced by historical conventions, of how gender has been performed and executed for centuries through a "shared social structure" (522). Butler then adds that unlike actors, who consciously act out characters, people do not. Gender is seen as something natural, therefore it is often forgotten that gender is a construct. The bodily or biological sex is a natural phenomenon and is not tied within the cultural meanings that will be labelled to later in life. Butler believes that through a "legacy of sedimented acts" (523) bodies become gendered, and rejects the notion that gender comes internally or is predetermined. This legacy of sedimented acts are the performative acts combined with the gender norms within society.

In the last paragraph of her essay, a quote sums up exactly what Butler means by gender performativity theory;

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performance of various kinds. (Butler, 531)

This statement thus shows a difference in seeing gender as a natural phenomenon bound to one's biological sex and perceiving gender as a construct coming from cultural and historical ideals, meaning it is reinforced by gendered acts. As mentioned before, Butler sees gender as a constructed reality, heavily influenced by historical and cultural conventions. Individuals copy gender roles and carry out those roles, however, once one rejects these gender roles they are subjected to punishment for not conforming to a certain culture-bound norm.

Butler's gender performativity theory focuses on how gender is not biologically given but a construct influenced by social restraints and historical conventions. In *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (1993), Sandra Bem analyses this gender performativity perceived through her enculturated lens theory. This theory entails lenses that influence everyday experiences of gender, namely the following three lenses; androcentrism, gender polarization and biological essentialism. Bem argues that the culture of any society is composed of a hidden set of assumptions about how the world works, and about how members of the society should look, act, think and feel (2). Enculturated lens theory suggests that the culture within a society implements individuals with various principles of thought and behaviour that is acceptable, through these three lenses, which are ingrained in social values and structures. According to Leanne Lamke, Bem stresses that "biology has been overemphasized in explaining and justifying sexual inequality, while the historical and contemporary social context of male-female differences has been underemphasized by biological theorists" (*Journal of Marriage and Family* 1052). Important to note is that Bem does not look at gender through these lenses, but rather looks *at* these lenses from an outside perspective. The following three paragraphs will aim to define Bem's three lenses respectively.

The first lens, androcentrism or more often seen as male-centeredness, which is the belief that men are seen as superior to women and that the male experience is used as a norm while the female experience is "otherised" (41), which entails that women are made a sex-specific deviation from that norm (2). Through this lens, the world is often perceived through the experience of men or seen from a male point-of-view. As an example of this androcentric lens, Bem quotes Simone de Beauviour who elaborated on the "otherness" of women:

man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity [...] humanity is male and

man defines woman not in herself but as a relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being [...] He is the Subject, he is the Absolute -- she is the Other. (qtd. Bem 41- 42)

To Bem, the concept of androcentrism originates from men being perceived as the centre of the universe, as she states: “[men] looking out at reality from behind their own eyes and describing what they see from an egocentric – or androcentric – point of view” (42). Therefore, the female experience is something that deviates from what men see as reality, which forces women into that position of the Other.

The second lens is gender polarization, which refers to the fact that not only males and females in society are considered fundamentally different from one another, but also that these differences constitute a central organising principle for the social life of society (2). Bem opens her chapter on gender polarization by stating an assumption if the lenses the androcentrism and biological essentialism would be eliminated, only sexual difference would remain (81). However, that would still leave gender polarization. According to Bem, “the all-encompassing divisions between masculine and feminine would still pervade virtually every experience” (81), even when the other two lenses would be invalidated. This division does not only include how men and women ought to dress differently or how they ought to behave according to certain gender roles, but also a difference in sexual desire and expression of emotion. For Bem, this lens functions in two ways: firstly, it defines “mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female” (81), and secondly, it defines “any person or behaviour that deviates from these scripts as problematic” (81). When combined together, the lens constructs and naturalises a “gender-polarizing link between the sex of one’s body and the character of one’s psyche and one’s sexuality” (81).

The last lens, biological essentialism, is the lens that serves to rationalise and legitimate the first two by portraying them as the natural and inevitable products of inherent biological differences between sexes (2). Of all the three lenses this lens is the closest related to sociobiology, basing gender inequality to sex linked characteristics that are seen as genetical and promote certain sex based traits. Examples of these traits are the aggressive nature of men and the nurturing nature of women. According to Bem, sociobiologists link men with “sexual promiscuity, rape, the abandonment of mates and children, intermale aggression, an intolerance for female infidelity, the sequestering of females, the killing of stepchildren, and universal male dominance (17-18), while they link women with “the coy

holding back of sex, the careful selection of sexual partners, the investment of time and energy in parental care, the preference of at least serial monogamy, and the deceiving of males with respect to paternity” (18). All these examples sociobiologists put forward on male-female differences show a clear divide in active and passive, where the male traits are all in favour of men’s self while the female traits always include others. Therefore, biological essentialism is based on the concept that men and women are biologically different and that to each gender certain traits are typical – active for male and passive for women.

What brings these lenses together to form the encultured lens theory is that these lenses continuously reinforce male power. Bem argues in the introduction that these lenses systemically reproduce male power in two ways (3). The first way is that, through certain discourse and social institutions, men and women are automatically divided in “unequal life situations” (3). When the social norm is to value the male experience over the female experience, it creates an unbalanced power dynamic, where men are once again superior both in the biological sense (through biological essentialism) and the sociocultural sense (through androcentrism and gender polarisation). The second way is that through “enculturation” (3) one internalises the cultural lenses which results in motivation to construct an identity that corresponds with these lenses. In short, Sandra Bem’s enculturated gender theory claims that when these lenses are actively equipped in society, men will continuously be seen as superior to women, therefore progressively reinforcing gender inequality.

The combination of the theories by Butler and Bem will function as the theory and methodology of this thesis, this in order to analyse the representation of gender identity in both *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Butler’s gender performativity theory will help to establish how both these case studies portray the main characters and if they perform their gender according to examples in Butler’s theory. Bem’s enculturated lens theory will be used to see the gender dynamics in both case studies through the lenses of androcentrism, gender polarization and biological essentialism. This theory will also aid in demonstrating how these lenses reflect on how the main characters can be perceived. These theories will be applied while analysing the two novels, remaining close to the essential factors introduced in this chapter. The most fundamental elements that will be explored are the way in which gender is represented and performed, how the books deal with gender inequality and how Bem’s lenses can be equipped to look at gender. In the end, with the help of the theories by Butler and Bem, this thesis will attempt to answer the research question: In which ways do *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* represent

gender roles and performance according to Sandra Bem's encultured lens theory and Judith Butler's gender performativity theory?

Chapter 2 – The Left Hand of Darkness

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, author Ursula K. Le Guinn takes the reader to the alien planet of Gethen, a world where its inhabitants are androgynous. That means that the Gethenians have no gender, and are therefore neither male nor female. The protagonist Genly Ai, a Terran envoy, sets out on a journey through Gethen in order to persuade the country of Karhide to join the intergalactic union of Ekumen. Yet, this diplomatic mission does not seem to be the central focus of the story. Instead, Genly Ai's road to acceptance of and understanding for the androgynous Gethenians' culture and society appears to be. This chapter will focus on the concept of androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and how his influences gender on Gethen, as protagonist Genly Ai perceives the Gethenians through the lenses of gender and whether the Gethenians do or do not perform certain gendered acts despite their lack of gender. As stated in Chapter 1, the theories by Judith Butler and Sandra Bem will be applied alongside the analysis.

When looking at *The Left Hand of Darkness* through a gender perspective, a dilemma ensues. In the book *New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction* (1978), author Pamela J. Annas gives a definition of what androgyny means, and claims she sees it as a "condition under which the characteristics of the sexes and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned" (146). This gives room to individuals to differentiate from gender norms. For example, an instance where women can be aggressive and men be tender (146). Annas then argues that Le Guin initiated the concept of androgyny in other speculative works. She did this by "creating alternate worlds based on an image of unity in which "male" and "female" elements are poised in harmony within the individual and/or society" (146). When looking at the inhabitants of Gethen, the Gethenians, Le Guin reveals that their androgyny is not biologically determined, but rather the result of experiments. Nevertheless, this androgyny does not make them asexual, as Annas explains:

A Gethenian may be either or alternately male or female, may bear a child one time and father a child the next. She/he has no control over the form sexuality may take. Full sexuality occurs only during three or four days of the lunar cycle and this period of estrus is called kemmer. During somer, the rest of the month, a Gethenian is neither interested in nor capable of sexual intercourse and, for all practical purposes, is an androgynous neuter. As one commentator in the novel remarks: "Four-fifths of the time, these people are not sexually motivated at all. Room is made for sex, plenty of

room; but a room, as it were, apart. The society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and in its continuity, is without sex.” (150)

In this period of kemmer, a Gethenian’s urge for mating and their gender will temporarily be determined by the sexual partner, whether they have a more active or passive nature – either male or female. For this reason, it is possible for Gethenians to be both the mother and the father to several children. Therefore, Gethenians are both androgynous and ambisexual, meaning that they are not specifically one gender and can have sexual relationships with either a male or female partner. The result of a society functioning without sex or gender roles is that the Gethenians focus more on important issues like politics or other affairs on Gethen. Because of this their history and culture knows no wars, and due to their androgyny and them only being able to mate once every month, rape does not exist. This is the complete opposite to the world the narrator, Genly Ai, hails from which would be comparable to actual Earth. Annas comments on the consequences of ambisexuality in androgynous societies: “If we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem, then society would be a very different thing” (172). In a way, all these elements of equality are present on Gethen. Aside from their social status and personality, there seem to be no differences between Gethenians.

Another aspect of Gethenian culture that resulted from their androgyny, is the concept of *shifgrethor*. Shifgrethor is a Karhidian communication device that is all about treating each other with honour and keeping up an appearance of oneself. Once a conflict arises, shifgrethor is used to defuse any possible disagreement in a civilised manner. Genly Ai tries defining shifgrethor as “prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilizations of Gethen” (Le Guin 10). Following that definition, shifgrethor can be seen as chivalry. In a society with a social binary, people are aware of the standard they have to uphold according to their gender, whereas men can be aggressive and prideful in their judgements, women are more often expected to be compliant. On Gethen, however, due to the lack of gender, the Gethenians do not behave according to these sex based traits. Though in order to have some sort of social discourse, they need a different medium. Genly Ai struggles with the concept of shifgrethor, while Gethenian characters like Estraven, prime-minister of Karhide, have trouble understanding Genly Ai’s masculine train of thought: “He, after all, had no standards of manliness, of virility, to complicate his pride. On the other hand, if he could lower all his

standards of shifgrethor, as I realized he had done with me, perhaps I could dispense of the more competitive elements of my masculine self-respect, which he certainly understood as little as I understood shifgrethor..." (168). Where gender roles and gender dynamics would normally influence language and communication, shifgrethor fills this vacuum. Sex and gender are important notions of modern society, where people try to impress others of the opposite sex on a daily basis. On Gethen there is no way they can play into gender dynamics as there are none. This does not mean that their society does not need guidelines and standards. They need a different type of discourse, as they cannot communicate through notions of masculinity or femininity. What both the genderless nature of the Gethenians and their need for shifgrethor convey in order to understand Le Guin's aim is that once gender is no longer a part of society there can be no social binary and discrimination based on gender, as Annas argues: "There is no division of humanity into strong and weak, protective and protected, dominant and submissive, owner and owned, active and passive" (151). This is exactly what happens on Gethen.

In a sense, it can be said that Genly Ai embodies Bem's enculturated lens theory, as he is the one that looks upon the Gethenians from an outsider's perspective. As Bem argues, the lens of androcentrism is otherwise known as male-centredness (2). As a biological male, Genly Ai is culturally conditioned to see a social binary where men are perceived as superior and aggressive in nature (81) while women are inferior and seen as passive (18). Once this social binary is ingrained within the culture. This social conditioning makes individuals unable to see what else differentiates human beings aside from being male or female in the purely physiological form and function (159). Because these concepts of gender are no longer present on Gethen, Genly Ai's conflict of not understanding this new society becomes apparent. From his perspective, Gethenians are sexual deviants, because they do not conform to his ideas of gender, which becomes clear when he says that: "A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. On Winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience" (Le Guin 73). His insensitivity towards this new form of humanity haunts him for the greater part of the novel, as he states towards the later chapters in the novel: "Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes" (9). As an outsider, Genly Ai utilises his own perspective to see these differences through a negative experience, therefore forcing the Gethenians into the position of the Other, while in reality

Genly Ai himself is treated as the Other by the Gethenians. Annas notices this as well, as she states that the conflict of understanding the Gethenians comes from his inability to see them as equal to himself, solely because he cannot define them as men or women (151). The Gethenians on their turn judge Genly Ai because he deviates from the norm that is upheld in their society (151). At certain instances in the novel, Genly Ai realises that the Gethenians alienate him for his secured male sexuality as well as that they believe him to always be in kemmer because of his biological sex. Rebecca Adams, author of the essay “Narrative Voice and Unimaginability of the Utopian ‘Feminine’ in *Hand of Darkness* and ‘The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas’” argues that Genly Ai’s interpretation of the Gethenians is unreliable due to his masculine point-of-view (43), as his gendered perspective does not allow him to see Gethenians as humans. This unreliability is the result of the androcentric lens, permitting Genly Ai to only accept the male experience as positive and deny the experience of the Gethenians. If Le Guin would have considered using an omniscient narrator instead, readers would have had an external view on Gethen which would have caused the story to be of a more objective nature. Instead, Genly Ai grants readers an internal view of his experiences with the Gethenians and how his anxiety of his inability to categorise the Gethenians on gender creates a lack of understanding of this alien society.

On Gethen, the lens of sexual polarization does not exist, which is the result of gender not being present. As explained in Chapter 1, Bem argues that the lens of sexual polarization acts in two ways, firstly it defines “mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female” (81). This does not apply to Gethen because there cannot be exclusive scripts for men and women as there is no gender binary. The only instances where Gethenians may show any signs of belonging to a certain biological sex is during kemmer and during pregnancy, where the Gethenian who carries the child can be defined as female until the child is born, this is what Genly Ai discovers over time:

If the individual was in the female role and was impregnated, hormonal activity of course continues, and for the 8.4-month gestation period and the 6- to 8-month lactation period this individual remains female. The male sexual organs remain retracted (as they are in somer), the breasts enlarge somewhat, and the pelvic girdle widens. With the cessation of lactation the female reenters somer and becomes once more a perfect androgyne. (Le Guin 70)

Therefore, only in kemmer and during pregnancy will a Gethenian ever be gendered. Yet these periods of kemmer do not weigh into the political and social climate of Gethen: “The society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and in its continuity, is without sex” (72). Another aspect of this that Genly Ai notices is that he cannot treat Gethenians as bisexual individuals in his understanding, as this would force them into male or female roles “while adopting towards him a corresponding role dependent on your expectations of the patterned or possible interactions between persons of the same or the opposite sex” (73). Gethenians’ pattern of sociosexual interaction is non-existent (73). Even with this in mind, Genly Ai remains at a loss for how to define the Gethenians. From the start of the novel Genly Ai uses male pronouns to refer to the Gethenians, which he justifies by saying the following:

Yet you cannot think of a Gethenian as “it”. They are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals. Lacking the Karhidish “human pronoun” used for persons in somer, I must say “he”, for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. (73)

His assumption is partially acceptable. It would indeed be improper for Genly Ai to refer to the Gethenians as “it”. Yet instead he chooses the male pronouns and condones this by arguing it is the same as referring to a God or an entity of a high rank in society. This, again, points out that Genly Ai’s ingrained ideas of gender do not allow him to value anything outside his male-centred experience. Through this, it becomes clear that the lenses of androcentrism and gender polarization are closely related to one another. Genly Ai still sees masculinity as a superior characteristic, as a result he misgenders the Gethenians. Secondly, gender polarization defines “any person or behaviour that deviates from these scripts as problematic” (Bem 81). One could consider Genly Ai’s incapability to use a non-gendered pronoun, like “they” and “them”, is actually a failure of Terran’s gendered language. The absence of gender causes Gethen to not have gendered behaviour, as there are no scripts that the Gethenians have to comply to based on their gender. This does not mean that there are no behavioural scripts at all, however. The country of Karhide has shifgethor, as argued earlier in the chapter, this is the way in which Karhidians communicate. In order to defuse any situation from developing into a full fledged war, shifgethor is utilised to make the Gethenians respect others. While shifgethor can be considered a behavioural script it does not correspond with concepts of gender and therefore cannot be compared to Bem’s second notion of gender polarization. There are, however, times when Genly Ai argues that

Gethenians can be categorised as “masculine” and “feminine”. On a political level, Gethenians show various masculine traits. For example, when Genly Ai has his first audience with the Karhidian king, King Agraven, his attitude towards Genly Ai can be seen as hostile and dismissive as he refuses Genly Ai’s proposal to join Ekumen. These characteristics could be seen as masculine. Yet Genly Ai perceives Agraven as effeminate: “Agraven was less kingly, less manly, than he looked at a distance among his courtiers. His voice was thin, and he held his fierce lunatic head at an angle of bizarre arrogance” (Le Guin 24). This quote is a clear example of how Genly Ai tries to link sex based traits to individuals that are androgynous. Even though Gethenian politics can be perceived as masculine, in the end, it does not really matter. Masculine and feminine traits on Gethen simply do not exist, so there is no need to attempt to gender them as it does not carry any meaning. Therefore, trying to apply a gender theory to an androgynous civilization is pointless.

Biological essentialism is another hard concept to place within the society of Gethen, mainly because this lens tries to rationalise and legitimate the first two by portraying them as the natural and inevitable products of inherent biological differences between sexes (2). This lens is based on the concept that men and women are biologically different and that to each gender certain traits are typical – active for male and passive for women. But Gethenians cannot be defined as such, as Genly Ai states: “They do not see one another as men or women” (Le Guin 73), meaning there are no differences between them on the basis of biological sex. One could argue, however, that the Gethenians do judge Genly Ai on his masculinity. According to Bem, sociobiologists refer to men as sexually promiscuous (17). This could also be a conception the Gethenians have about Terrans solely because they are not androgynous like themselves. This would mean that the Gethenians apply biological essentialism, yet simply not on themselves as there is no need to do so. There is no biological difference between Gethenians based on their sex. They all have the same cycles of sommer and kemmer and they do not see any importance in which sex they become during kemmering. Genly Ai discovers this as well: “I suspect that the distinction between a maternal and a paternal instinct is scarcely worth making; the paternal instinct, the wish to protect, to further, is not a sex-linked characteristic” (Le Guin 77). In Bem’s research on the enculturated lenses, she proposes an idea on the elimination of androcentrism and biological essentialism(81). For this concept, that would entail that the world would no longer be viewed from male-experience and that men and women are different on a biological level. What Le Guin attempts in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is to eliminate all these lenses, as she

states in her essay “Is gender necessary” (1976): “I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human” (160). Through this idea of eliminating gender, Le Guin has created a world liberated from sexual norms, dominance based on gender and sexual inequality. All that is left now are political, environmental and cultural issues that are no longer influenced by a sexual discourse. Gethenians have agency and are able to live their lives without being marginalised. Le Guin’s concept of a genderless society stems from the idea of alienation (172). In a gendered society, marginalised groups are always pushed into otherness. Le Guin argues this as follows:

Our curse is alienation, the separation of yang from yin. Instead of a search for balance and integration, there is a struggle for dominance. Divisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied. The dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used, might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity. (172)

While gender might not be a dominating factor in Gethen, political power does still enforce a divide of some sort, but this solely has to do with their social rank – not based on gender differences. Le Guin shows through *The Left Hand of Darkness* that the world improves when discrimination based on gender is discarded, creating an equal society.

The last few paragraphs explained how Sandra Bem’s lens theory can be applied to look at the Gethenians, mainly through the eyes of the protagonist Genly Ai. So far this chapter has established that Gethenians are androgynous and therefore lack the criteria to be perceived through these lenses. However, can a genderless society still deal with the concept of gender performance? Judith Butler argues that gender identity is a concept that is not biologically predetermined. Instead, gender identity and performance is learnt, something that develops over time from exterior sources (523). Even though the Gethenians do not have a biological gender it could still mean that they perform in a certain way, that could be comparable to the gender binary. But there are no genders, therefore, no gender roles can be forced upon individuals, which leaves out punishment. The only character in the novel who tries to force the Gethenians into certain gender roles is Genly Ai. As stated earlier, Genly Ai perceives the Gethenians through his own male experience and as he is unable to link any of the individuals he meets to his own ideas of gender and the way people should act in certain situations. One of these instances is when Genly Ai and Estraven journey through the icy

wastelands back to Karhide: “Estraven had figured these differences into the food-ration calculations, in his scrupulous way, which one could see as either house-wifery or scientific [...]” (184). Characterising an androgynous individual as a house wife is rather questionable, as there is no criteria that would make Estraven feminine in his assumption. The way the Gethenians go about their lives and their behaviour are not historically or culturally grounded as it is for a Terran like Genly Ai. Then what is the actual source of the Gethenians’ behaviour? Gethenians do not act exclusively feminine or masculine, which grants them a wider spectrum of acts and emotions that can be performed without fear of punishment when a performance is not according to a historically ingrained role. With shifgrethor, communication is not bound to a certain gender performance, but a social performance. Therefore, it can be said the Gethenians have been emancipated to allow any type of behaviour, whether considered masculine or feminine. Through this understanding, Gethenians are individuals that have control over their own performance and have the agency to act in any way they desire. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory is hard to define, since there is no gender to be performed.

Gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, or rather the lack thereof, is a key factor of the story, as it shows how a world can exist without gender norms and roles. The androgyny is particularly hard on the protagonist Genly Ai who, as a Terran biological male, is used to experiencing a social binary which obviously lacks on the planet Gethen. Though the surprising element of Genly Ai’s character development is that the Gethenians are slowly but surely becoming “normal” to him. Once he starts to spend more time with Estraven he starts to understand the benefits of their androgyny. This change becomes clear at the end of the novel when Genly Ai completes his diplomatic mission and his ship arrives to retrieve him: “But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species [...]” (Le Guin 226-227). Due to his time spent with the Gethenians and becoming aware of how their society works, his perception changes completely. No longer does Genly Ai see them as sexual deviants. Therefore it can be said that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the story of Genly’s gradual coming to consciousness, his own conceptual transcendence of dualism and sexual polarization (Annas 151). Genly Ai unlearns seeing everything in binary and instead accepts that his conceptions are all due to the rigid ingrained gender binary he was taught in his life.

Through Bem's enculturated lens theory it becomes apparent that Genly Ai's perceptions of Gethen and its inhabitants are heavily influenced by the lens of androcentrism and gender polarization. Gethen is a culture-shock for the protagonist, and due to his outsider's perspective, he is unable to come to terms with the differences between his own ideas and the way Gethen's society operates up until the very end. Judith Butler's gender performance theory has shown to be more difficult to establish as there is no gender binary. Genly Ai tries to force the Gethenians into certain behaviours, yet slowly realises that this is ineffective, which eventually results in Genly Ai coming to terms that his binary views are not applicable on the Gethenians which allows him to become more open-minded. Through *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin experiments with the idea of a genderless society and how beneficial a society without sexual prejudice would be. By putting a short-sighted outsider within that society she tries to shed a light on actual modern society and gender equality.

Chapter 3 – The Handmaid’s Tale

The story of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood follows narrator Offred through her life as a handmaid in the theocratic, totalitarian Republic of Gilead, formerly the United States of America. In the aftermath of the assassinations on the President and most of Congress, as well as a kickstarted revolution by the fundamentalist movement “Sons of Jacob”, Gilead is ridden with infertility due to war, chemical disasters and venereal diseases, which causes many women and men to be sterile. Through the eyes and experience of the narrator, the handmaid Offred, the story reveals the excruciating reality of a heavily gender-divided society where the top priority for handmaids is to birth as many children as possible, with the aim of creating a stronger nation. The aim of this chapter is to analyse how the society of Gilead categorises men and women respectively, how Gilead’s gender differences can be analysed through Bem’s enculturated lenses and how Butler’s performativity theory plays into the main characters acting out their gender.

What becomes clear from the start of the novel is the uncanny division in gender. Gilead’s society is based on the concept of men as leaders and women as child bearers, as seen in Sandra Bem’s enculturated lens theory, which can be seen in the hierarchical class structure the characters are divided in. Bem’s argument that women have mostly been defined either for their reproductive and domestic functions within a male-centred world or for their power to satisfy men’s sexual needs (43) seems to correspond perfectly with Gilead’s view on women’s place in society. Fertility plays the most important part for women in Gilead due to their placement in society. Atwood goes even further by creating a degradation based on colours, as Fiona Tolan argues in her book *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (2007): “Social status is colour-coded, and the women of Offred’s household are easily inventoried: ‘One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green ...’“(15). Men are not colour-coded, however. Offred notifies the reader of the division of women early on in the novel:

There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimp, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they’re called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can. (Atwood 33-34)

Here it becomes clear that women are divided into sub-groups that are bound to a certain task. The most important category is that of the Handmaids, these young fertile women are placed in the homes of upper-class infertile couples to birth children. The ability for women to conceive is a biologically given which corresponds with Bem's concept of biological essentialism. One of the reasons women and men are often set apart is their biological sex based traits. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is applicable in the sense that these Handmaids are the only ones left to provide children as men are unable to. Offred and Ofglen are the handmaids central to the story. Once assigned to a family, Handmaids are branded with the names of the Commander's they serve under, which is why Offred's name simply means "Of Fred". This loss of identity further emphasises the handmaids' lack of agency and is just one of the ways in which Gilead marginalises women. Handmaids are the ultimate passives, from their identity to their bodies they are the possessions of men. This passivity is often connected to the female gender role, whereas male gender roles are often associated with male dominance which is active (Bem 17-18). The Wives are the highest possible position women can have in Gilead. Despite their infertility, Wives are safe from prejudice due to their marriage to the most powerful men in Gilead, the Commanders. Serena Joy is one such wife, who Offred often depicts as scornful and vain (Atwood 56). Even though they are considered the women who are best off in the social hierarchy, their infertility has made them defeated women, as one of the Aunts says to Offred; "You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling like. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural" (56). Women who are infertile and often of an ethnic minority will become Marthas. These women serve as housekeepers to the Commander's house and often help to raise the children within the household. When it comes to the lower ranks of women in Gilead, women are divided into three groups: Econowives, Jezebels and Unwomen. Econowives are the wives of lower class men, due to their lower rank Econowives have to fulfil all roles of women at the same time, if they are fertile (34). When these lower rank women are in fact infertile and do not have a solid purpose within Gilead's society, they become Unwomen and are either send off to the colonies to do hard labour until they die or are killed instantly. Hence, every woman in Gilead can become an Unwomen, as Offred says in chapter eleven: "He could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility have me shipped off to the Colonies, with the Unwomen. None of this has been said, but the knowledge of his power hangs nevertheless in the air as he pats my thigh" (71). Women are forced into these roles, and seemingly whenever one does something unfavourable for men they can easily be categorised as Unwomen, without even a valid reason. This will be further explained later in the chapter. The last group of women,

who are perceived as evil or corrupted are Jezebels. These women are often forced into prostitution to entertain upper-class men. Since sexual deviance is prohibited in Gilead, Jezebels' descent into prostitution can be seen as a form of punishment (Butler 521).

Unlike women, men in Gilead hold the positions of power. However, they too are subcategorised in different groups. These groups are not so much based on their fertility like women, but rather on which military branch they are a part of. Men who are not affiliated with the military are lower class citizens. The group with the most influence is the Commanders, these men are most likely the ones who kickstarted the revolution and founded Gilead. Commanders were often already married before the founding of Gilead, but their Wives have become infertile and are now unable to conceive their own children. For that reason Commanders are allowed to have handmaids at their disposal, but for the sole purpose of intercourse for conception. The Commander central to *The Handmaid's Tale* is Commander Fred, who slowly starts to elope with his handmaid Offred, which is obviously against the rules since even these men have to follow the law. Hence, it is easier for an upper-class man to get away with disobedience than for example Offred, as a Handmaid. As their secret affair develops, Offred realises that the Commanders' position is rather dense: "It strikes me that, although I know he's a Commander, I don't know what he's a Commander of. What does he control, what is his field, as they used to say They don't have specific titles" (195). Then, a group of men called "Eyes" are considered Gilead's secret police force. Their goal is to rat out the rule breakers and arrest them. Aside from their intent and position Atwood reveals little about this group. Another military branch are the "Angels". These men are only one tier lower than the Commanders, and their high status gives them the right to marry. Comparable to the "Eyes, there is not much information about these men throughout the novel. The last military branch is that of the "Guardians of the Faith". The importance in their name is a misimpression to what they actually are. These Guardians are the lowest branch and are merely appointed to a Commander's household much like the Handmaids. The Guardians in a way resemble Marthas, since they make the Commander's house tidy and are often ordered to escort the Handmaids when they go out shopping. Offred emphasises in the second chapter that the Guardians are not real soldiers (30), "They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden or instance, and they're either stupid, or older, or disabled or very young" (30). Although these Guardians might solely be the lowest rank, these men are more privileged even in their physically crippled states.

What can be drawn from these differences in men and women and how Gilead executes gender roles on both genders respectively, is that Gilead is seen through the androcentric lens meaning that everything is seen from a men's perspective and therefore force women in the role of "Other". The notion of the Other is what Bem discusses when explaining this androcentric lens, where she quotes de Beauvoir (41-42). Bem builds on Beauvoir's idea that "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute -- she is the Other" (qtd. Bem 41-42), to a definition of how men see women as Other:

[...] in defining woman as the other, man has traditionally focused on three aspects of woman's relationship to him: (1) her difference from, and her inferiority to, the universal standard or norm that he sees himself as naturally representing; (2) her domestic and reproductive function within the family or household that he sees himself as naturally heading; and (3) her ability to stimulate and to satisfy his own sexual appetite, which he finds both exciting and threatening. (46)

All these three aspects can be utilised to pinpoint the gender inequality in Gilead. The first aspect shows that women are made the inferior. This by taking away women's agency, and as mentioned before, subdividing them on whether they are fertile or not. Men are never condemned for their infertility, while it is often hinted in the novel that Commander Fred might be. Therefore, there is a different standard to uphold for men, due to their position of power in society. One of those instance is when Commander Fred engages in a secret affair with Offred, which is forbidden as Handmaids are for reproductive purposes only, as Offred states: "If I'm caught, it's to Serena's tender mercies I'll be delivered. He isn't supposed to meddle in such household discipline, that's women's business. After that, reclassification. I could become an Unwoman" (146). In Gilead, Men are never held accountable, which further indicates that Gilead's androcentric view deems women inferior to men. Therefore, men's experience is still seen as positive and neutral, while women's experience is perceived as negative (Bem 41). Though even for men there seem to be restrictions in Gilead, as can be seen in a scene in chapter twenty-three, the first time Offred visits the Commander's office:

My presence here is illegal. It's forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favours are to be wheedled, by them or us, there

are to be no toeholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices (146).

What becomes clear in this quote is that Gilead's handmaids are definitely seen as broodmares. Their biological nature of the ability to birth children is the only quality that defines them. According to the lens of biological essentialism, this should not come as a surprise as this lens looks at the genders from a biological standpoint (Bem 18). The sex based traits Bem talks about in her theory are easily determined. Women's sexuality is extremely repressed as only sexual intercourse in means of reproduction is celebrated as it results into childbirth, while sexual pleasure and lust are strictly forbidden. "No room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lust" (Atwood 146), Offred says, hinting at the fact that sex for pleasure is prohibited, for women at least. Men are allowed to be sexual promiscuity (Bem 17), only strengthening the male aggressive nature. But their promiscuity only comes out in private. Whilst "The Ceremony", a monthly attempt to impregnate the handmaid, can almost be seen as a public event as the Wife is a part of the ordeal and therefore monitored, Offred's affair with the Commander and their visit to the Jezebel's in chapter thirty-seven are restricted – only the Commander and Offred know.

The dynamics between Offred and Commander Fred show a clear example of the relationship between subject and object. However, not for the fact that Commander Fred dominates Offred for the largest portion of the story. The most interesting element of their relationship is the moment the Commander allows Offred to indulge into the forbidden. According to Cornier Michael, Offred's relationship with the Commander "undermines the designated limits of her role as handmaid restricted to breeding purposes: the 'functions' of wife and handmaid 'were no longer as separated as they should have been in theory'" (153). From that point on, Offred is often taken out of her position as a handmaid and becomes a companion to the Commander. Allowing Offred to read, join him in playing games and even accompany him to a brothel, the Commander grants Offred entrance out of the private sphere and into the public sphere. Moreover, he holds power over her by doing so. For a moment it almost seems as if the Commander no longer sees her as an "Other", but as an equal. However, there is a paradox in the power relation between Offred and the Commander, a paradox that Cornier Michael considers as well. She argues the following: "On one level, the Commander's desire for intimacy demonstrates that he himself wants to be recognized as a subject. The paradox is that only another subject can recognise him in those terms so that Offred is both the object of his desire and the subject who can substantiate his subjecthood"

(153). While women are definitely the most marginalised group in Gilead, men too have severely lost most of their freedom. Even the Commander needs that confirmation of being in control. This does not mean, however, that Offred holds no power over him in return. She can deny him intimacy, as they both risk being arrested for their illegal practices, meaning that the Commander is to some degree under Offred's control all the while he allows her to become a subject at times (153). This power dynamic shows that regardless of the inequality in gender, relationships between men and women have remained intact, as Michael Courier states: "men still dominate, and yet women's desirability disrupts male power (152). Aside from their sexual encounters through the "Ceremony", their secret affair is far from sexual. Instead, they engage in activities that women are forbidden to partake in, like playing Scrabble. Even Offred herself, who had expected the Commander to ask her for more questionable sexual favours, is confused about his motives at first. However, them playing games becomes a recurring secret encounter. In chapter twenty-five, the Commander gives Offred a gift, namely a women's fashion magazine from pre-Gilead times, as in Gilead women are not allowed to read or partake in any other type of educational practices. The Commander, in this sense, becomes some provider for Offred, but he also indulges her in taboo and brings her in danger to be sent off to the colonies if they are not careful. What strikes in the relationship between the Commander and Offred is that while they are involved on a sexual level, their secret affair is much more meaningful. He provides Offred of some freedom she has lost since the fall of the United States. Moreover, yet, aside from the Commander's remarkable giving nature, he still controls. As in his position he possesses more freedom than Offred and is willing to allow her some of the luxuries she no longer has, it is through him that she receives such luxuries. This is different when Offred is ordered to have intercourse with Nick, the male servant in the Commander's household. The Commander's wife, Serena Joy, worries that her husband might be infertile as well – as they keep having ceremonies without any success – and so orders the handmaiden to try with Nick. Through the whole story, it does not seem to matter at the end whom Offred gets with, as the ultimate end goal is to provide children for the declining of childbirth. This is something Commander Fred realises as well:

I'm not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy. Anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage. (221)

Here, the Commander accuses the empowerment of women and gain of women's sexual freedom during those times of men becoming less dominant in their position as subjects, as women were gradually claiming their own subjecthood. To Tolan, this acclamation of subjecthood is what makes feminism of that time a utopian project (151), as she states that "it demands the most radical and truly revolutionary transformation of society" (151). Before the establishment of Gilead, women had become more equal to men, and had claimed agency over their own lives and bodies. Therefore, one could say that this world before was already a transformed society in the way Tolan sees it. Throughout the story, Offred is seen through a male-centred point-of-view, but as her relationship with the Commander evolves she is slowly elevated out of that otherness, regaining some sort of identity even if it is through the aid of a man.

In Gilead, the performativity of gender is motivated to an extreme. Through the divide in gender roles and subcategorising, gender is severely restricted and anyone who disobeys these roles is subjected to punishment. An assumption by Butler that "gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure" (531) fits perfectly with the concept of gender conformity of Gilead. Offred often reminisces about her Pre-Gilead self, and often compares how she used to be raised by a very radical feminist mother to how she has been brought to an inferior status within Gilead. Offred, before she was a handmaid, was a woman who had a family, husband and child, and seemed to have her life figured out. Though after the war broke out and Gilead was established, she was captured by the Angels before she could flee to Canada with her husband and daughter. From that moment onwards Offred is trained to become a handmaid. However, as mentioned before, once a woman becomes a handmaid she no longer has agency over her life and body, as Offred states:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (73)

Offred feels alienated from her body, and no longer in control over her life. However, as the heroine of the story, Offred does not seem willing enough to step up and fight her way out. Throughout the story, Offred talks about the women in her life who progressively fought for women's rights, as her mother and her best friend Moira were radical feminists and activists.

Stephanie Barbé Hammer argues in her article “The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (1990) that despite these examples of female power she succumbs to the Gilead’s gender norms:

Significantly, the rebellious females of Offred's world are all defeated: Ofglen commits suicide in order to protect the May Day under-42 ground; Moira's escape attempt is thwarted and she is imprisoned in the city's brothel; Offred's own mother is glimpsed in a film-documentary about the dreaded toxic-waste colonies. To survive, Offred seems to suggest, one must surrender. (6)

Offred, therefore, succumbs to what Gilead forces onto its citizens. While she knows what freedom feels like as she has lived in pre-Gilead times, she meekly complies to the new rule. As Peter Stillman and Anne Johnsson state in “Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*” (1994): “Offred’s accommodation of herself and her life to the misogyny of the contemporary United States, her acceptance of such conditions as ordinary and usual, is mirrored by her gradual succumbing to the conditions of Gilead” (78). It can, therefore, be said that Offred conforms to the forced gender roles to survive. In this situation, therefore, Offred’s performativity as a Handmaid is her way of surviving Gilead’s horrible circumstances, fitting perfectly to Butler’s argument that “hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punishment” (522). With the threats of being caught and shipped off to the Colonies, Offred secures her safety by obeying to the acts of a handmaid.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the Commander’s wife Serena Joy lives an entirely different life from Offred. Yet she is by no means better off in her position. Before the fall of the United States, before the war, Serena Joy was a television preacher who advocated for traditional values. As an anti-feminist, she took on the modernised woman and praised those who stayed true to their role as the mother in the home. She is often resentful towards Offred, as she is unable to bear a child. Due to her status and marriage to the Commander, she does not suffer the same fate as most infertile women. Through the narrator, the reader gets an image of the woman Serena Joy was before the war started:

By that time she was worthy of a profile: *Time* or *Newsweek* it was, it must have been. She wasn’t singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about sanctity of the home, about how women should stay

home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all. (55)

As mentioned before, Serena Joy was an advocate for the traditional gender roles for women before the war. Her conforming ideology, however, turns against her the moment Gilead's rules start to oppress her as well: "She doesn't make speeches anymore, she has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she has been taken at her word" (56). In the world before Gilead, Serena Joy still had her voice and had the freedom to express her opinions even if her values were preaching inequality between the sexes. Now, in her visions of how the world should be, she has lost as much of her freedom as a handmaid like Offred. Moreover, yet, she still is envious and particularly foul towards Offred as she is to bear Commander Fred's child and not her. Hence, the different fates of Atwood's female characters show that women are the marginalised sex in Gilead, and that through the fertility dilemma in the state women are vile towards one another. Neeru Tandon and Anshul Chandra quote Mario Klarer in their book *Margaret Atwood: A Jewel in Canadian Writing* (2009), as he says that in Gilead "being a woman means become preliterate and to follow the prescriptions of men" (136). This becomes apparent, mostly, in the way women are forced back into their roles as objects. Therefore the identity of the women in Gilead is repressed by men, reduced to merely being men's possession (141). Serena Joy is the perfect example of traditional values retaliating. She vowed for conservative women's acts, such as staying in the home and taking care of the children, but in the end got swept up by the patriarchal system as well.

This chapter aimed to explore the concepts of enculturated lens theory and gender performativity theory in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. What has become clear through utilising these two theories is that in Gilead, gender inequality is based on the superior roles men play in this society, while women are marginalised into subcategories, solely on the notion of fertility. Through Bem's theory, it has become apparent that from the androcentric perspective Gilead women are made into the "other", meaning that Gilead's patriarchal society deems women as deviants from the norm. *The Handmaid's Tale* exploits women's fertility as the only characteristic that has value. If women cannot meet the standard of conceiving offspring for the Republic, they are no longer of any benefit to Gilead. According to Butler's performativity theory, *The Handmaid's Tale* plays with the concept of a pre-Gilead identity versus the lack thereof in the republic. The narrator supposedly was a woman with an identity, who had full control over her life and body. Once Gilead's regime

commenced, her name and identity were stripped and she became a mere servant and broodmare to her assigned Commander Fred, therefore named Offred. Not conforming to these new gender roles would result in being sent to work camps or being sentenced to death. As Butler argues, punishment is expected when an individual does not perform their gender, which are concepts Margaret Atwood puts to extreme proportions, since violating gender roles comes with a death sentence. *The Handmaid's Tale* shows a good example of a dystopian regime that operates through enculturated lenses, especially through an androcentric point-of-view where the male experience is valued over the female experience. Gilead forces specific sex based traits on its citizens, threatening any violation will not go unpunished.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to show how gender roles and gender performance are represented in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. To achieve this goal, the thesis has analysed the two novels through the lens of two theories; Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Sandra Bem's enculturated lens theory. The theories created an ideal framework that was needed to answer the research question. The question central to this thesis was: In which ways do *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale* represent gender roles and performance according to Sandra Bem's encultured lens theory and Judith Butler's gender performativity theory?

The theory chapter introduced the two main theories that would be used to analyse the novels and answer the research questions. These theories were Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Sandra Bem's enculturated lens theory. Butler argues that gender is not biologically predetermined, but rather a performance learnt through the influences of historical and sociocultural construct. Gender is more an act than an internal concept, and through historical and sociocultural norms of how one should act their gender, gender is time and time again reproduced and acted out accordingly. Once an individual to act outside of the gender norms ingrained in society, for example, if a woman would adopt more masculine characteristics, the individual can be subjected to punishment. According to the gender binary and the social pressure of performing according to either masculine or feminine acts, any act that deviates from the norm is subjected to punishment. In short, Butler's idea of gender is that it is not something biologically predetermined. Gender is something that is put on under heavily constrained circumstances, on a daily basis, either willingly or forced. Any constraints that are defied are punishable.

Sandra Bem introduces three lenses in her enculturated lens theory, namely androcentrism, gender polarization and biological essentialism. These three lenses all create a specific point-of-view on gender. The lens of androcentrism can be described as male-centredness, meaning that men are perceived as superior to women. The male experience is seen as the positive, or the norm, which forces female experience to be seen as negative – this results in women being “otherised”. This lens enforces a gender binary based off of men receiving more power in society. The second lens of gender polarization refers to men and women being perceived as fundamentally different. Aspects of difference that are central to this lens are not only gender specific clothing or gender specific behaviour, but also differences in sexual desire and emotional outlets. These aspects create gender specific

scripts and see anyone who deviates from these scripts as problematic. Biological essentialism is the last lens Bem introduces, this lens rationalises and legitimises the other two lenses as a product of inherent biological differences between men and women. Bem argues that this lens promotes sex based traits and sees this as the source of gender inequality. Men are seen as active beings while women are seen as passive. Together, these lenses form Bem's enculturated lens theory. This theory claims that if these lenses are used to evaluate society, men's dominance will be continuously reinforced. This thesis has used both these theories to analyse *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to come to an answer to the research question.

The chapter on *The Left Hand of Darkness* analysed the way in which protagonist Genly Ai comes to terms with the androgynous society of Gethen. From the start of the novel, it became clear that Genly Ai applies Bem's enculturated lenses on his perspectives of the Gethenians – especially the androcentric lens. The chapter explained the concept of androgyny, as the Gethenians are biologically androgynous and only once per month, during “kemmer”, these individuals will become either male or female. Due to their lack of gender, the Gethenians' society differs tremendously from what Genly Ai is used to. As a result, Genly Ai cannot see the Gethenians outside of his own perspective, he accepts his own experience as positive according to Bem's androcentric lens. However, as he is unable to assign certain gender roles to the Gethenians, Genly Ai keeps clinging to his ingrained idea of gender binary. As Genly Ai travels through Gethen he becomes familiar with the society's social customs and sexual cycles, which eventually leads to him accept the Gethenians in their androgyny. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a story of a man becoming aware of his close-minded ideologies of gender, as well as an experiment of how a society operates when it is not heavily influenced by gender.

The chapter on *The Handmaid's Tale* showed how a totalitarian society categorises genders on the base of fertility. The story follows handmaid Offred, who is one of many chosen young women that are forced to birth children for infertile upper-class couples. Men and women are assigned different roles within society, though women are especially marginalised. In the Republic of Gilead, men are seen as superior while women are made into the Other – making them defiant of society's norm. When these women fail in conceiving children and have no other purpose they are exiled, this shows that gender roles are deeply ingrained into Gilead's social system. Handmaids seem like the category that is pressured the most, as they have to conform to a variety of strict rules. The most striking aspect is that

Handmaids are stripped of their identity to become the perfect vessel for society. The chapter has analysed Offred's relationship with Commander Fred, as the rendezvous they indulge in are the only instances that Offred is granted power. However, the anxiety of being punished for not conforming to the roles of a handmaid keep haunting Offred until the very end of the book. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a clear example of how gender inequality manifests itself within a society.

What brings *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale* together is that both novels show how Bem's androcentric lens can jeopardise gender equality. Le Guin uses Genly Ai as a tool to show how socially ingrained ideas of gender differences and roles can lead to sexual prejudice. When Genly Ai looks at the Gethenians he is unable to classify them as male or female, simply because they are neither. Atwood does this by keeping men at the top of the social hierarchy in Gilead. This can be seen in the way women are judged because they are women, while men are only divided by their social status.

The most striking difference between *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale* is that gender in Gethen is non-existent while in Gilead gender defines everything. Gethenians are not bound down by sex based traits and conforming to gender roles while the citizens of Gilead are forced to act accordingly. Therefore it was challenging to link Butler's concept of gender performativity to individuals who are genderless. Le Guin's Gethen is a society that is not influenced by gender and therefore Gethenians do not have to conform to any specific scripts based on gender. Atwood's Gilead, however, is rooted in the idea that men and women are different biologically, socially and historically. As a result, the citizens of Gilead are expected to act according to male and female gender roles. Here the gender difference of the men as Subject and women as Object comes into play, as well as positive male experience versus negative female experience.

In the introduction of this thesis, the hypothesis was that *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Handmaid's Tale* deal with gender and gender performance differently. Through the close-reading and analysing of these novels it has become clear that Le Guin tries to challenge the concepts of gender and performance by creating an androgynous society, free of the concept of gender specific scripts, while Atwood shows that gender performance and male dominance have a negative effect on women. This thesis has proven that on the one hand, Le Guin completely abolishes gender, which in result eliminates gender roles and performance as well. On the other hand, Atwood demonstrates that when the male experience

is valued more than the female experience, a society like Gilead can oppress women and strip them of any form of agency.

Future research could focus on how other science fiction novels represent gender roles and performativity, as the genre gives authors the freedom to create a society that deals with gender, race and social status in a completely different way. Though this should not only be limited to the science-fiction genre, but could spread across multiple genres. Gender has been a recurring theme in literature as feminist movement have been fighting for gender equality for centuries, therefore there should be more novels suitable for such a research. More research could also be done on Le Guin's concept of an androgynous society, by comparing it to another novel that deals with the same concept. The focus could then be shifted from analysing how androgyny influences how gender is perceived, to analysing how androgyny works on a political level. Unfortunately, due to the scope of this Bachelor Thesis, the thesis could not elaborate on the wave of Feminism the two novels were a part of, namely Second Wave Feminism. If it had been possible, some interesting links could have been made to how Atwood was influenced by Second Wave Feminism and how it could be recognised in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Another addition could have been the criticism Le Guin received after *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published. Here the thesis could have elaborated on the use of the male pronouns Genly Ai uses to refer to the Gethenians.

The writing process of this thesis came with some challenges along the way. While Butler's gender performativity theory was familiar, Sandra Bem's enculturated lens theory was something entirely new. In the end, it became apparent that Bem's theory complimented Butler's theory perfectly, which aided in establishing a suitable framework for this thesis. Analysing the novels turned out to be uncomplicated, as the framework made it easy to pinpoint important sections of the case studies. All in all, while the process was tough at times, the final result hopefully shows the hard work put into it.

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