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1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is an author who is very well-known throughout the whole world for her brilliant and extraordinary writing. Her novels have been translated into many languages, and she has won many awards, among them the Booker Prize for the novel *The Blind Assassin*. Despite the fact that Atwood has grown up in a highly sophisticated and loving family, in fostering surroundings, she depicts dysfunctional families, presenting an interesting contrast to the typical portrayal of happy and harmonious families. Most researchers who analyze Atwood´s novels focus on the feminist depictions of her characters and societies, while others analyze her dystopian novels. Surprisingly, very few scholars study the place of the family and the importance of relationships in her novels.

Atwood employs a very vivid portrayal of familial relationships, which are mostly dysfunctional. A dysfunctional family is defined as a family in which the parents misbehave, are in conflict, neglect or abuse their children repeatedly and on a regular basis (Stoop and Masteller 1). The main characters in Atwood´s novels analyzed here either live in, or have grown up in dysfunctional families, where the parents´ marriages are unhappy and unsuccessful ones, or where they grow up with a single parent or with some relatives. Moreover, the main characters as well live in dysfunctional marital relationships. Although the dysfunctional motif is a minor one, it is recurring in many of the novels. The main characters are highly affected by their relationships to their parents, siblings, relatives, children, and spouses. Goldblatt maintains that

> Margaret Atwood relies on a collection of ordinary people that carry her tales: university students, museum workers, market researchers, writers, illustrators, and even housemaids. In her novels, almost all dwell on their childhood years in flashback or in the chronological telling of the stories. […] Their backgrounds suggest an unhealthy, weedy soil that causes their young plants to twist and permutate. (275-276)

This scholar has taken notice of the importance of familial relationships in Atwood´s novels; however, this might be explored in more detail. Approaching

Atwood´s novels from this perspective will therefore be a new contribution to the field of Anglophone literature.

Interestingly, the topic of dysfunctional familial relationships has already been addressed in literature before, in the plays *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, or *Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley, just to name a few examples. Further, the film industry has also started giving importance to the depiction of difficulties in relationships, most importantly families. Two such examples are the movies *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *A.C.O.D* (Adult Children of Divorce). *Crimes of the Heart* has even been adapted for the screen, going by the same name, *Crimes of the Heart*. This shows that writers and directors, as well as readers and viewers, are interested in the more difficult and dark sides of people´s everyday lives.

At this point, it is also crucial to mention that the nuclear family model and the home are no longer the core of our modern society as they were from the beginning of the Victorian period, up to a brief time after the Second World War. Toward the end of the twentieth century every second marriage ended in divorce, and today the situation has not changed much (Simons 217). Alternative family models such as remarriage of divorced spouses, with children from both former marriages, as well as lesbian or gay couples and their children as well as multigenerational bonds have become more important than the typical nuclear family with a mother, a father, and their respective children (Bengtson 4-5). Despite the fact that many children live in alternative family models, the changing family, brought about by industrialization and modernization (Bengtson 3), marital distress and divorce still have a negative impact on the well-being of partners as well as children (Simons 18, Strohschein 490). In addition, it is significant to state that some researchers are of the opinion that feminism is the reason for the decline in family values, since women cannot find a balance between their family and their work. Therefore, it will be of interest to see what families look like in Atwood´s novels and why they are dysfunctional.

In the three novels analyzed here, Atwood lets her characters unravel their past, letting traumatic childhood experiences come forward, forcing the characters to deal with and strengthen their identity and place in society. Atwood´s female

characters are expected to be solid ground for their family members, a safe haven for their family, a person who will always be there for them. A wife is supposed to support her husband “in sickness and in health”. Motherhood is also characterized like this in Atwood´s novels; a mother is supposed to live up to patriarchal ideals of motherhood, more specifically, to always be there for her children. Patriarchal ideals say that women have to be wives, mothers, and nurturers. However, Atwood´s main characters manage to cut themselves loose from these ideals, doing what they think is right for them and their families.

The texts dealt with in this thesis have been chosen by virtue of their similarities in the depiction of families, as well as their differences. Those texts are *The Handmaid´s Tale (1985)*, *The Robber Bride (1993)*, and *The Blind Assassin (2001)*. My point of interest lies in finding out why families are dysfunctional in these novels. In order to do this, I will analyze the depiction of marital relationships, the way society looks at marriage, family and women, as well as the portrayal of the relationship between parents and children. The two main research questions of this thesis are to find out the reason behind the decline in traditional family values in Atwood´s novels, and in turn, for female unhappiness, and secondly, to find out how her characters are (de)formed by their families, in other words, whether they prosper despite traumas that they endure in their childhoods. The thesis is structured in five chapters, of which the first one is the introduction and the last one is the conclusion. The subchapters 2.1. and 2.2. deal with the historical and sociological changes of the structure of the family in the United States and Canada from around 1900 to the present. Further, in the subchapters 2.3.1. and 2.3.2. an explanation of the theoretical approaches employed in this thesis, namely feminism and psychoanalysis, will be given. Chapter 3 focuses on the effects that marital conflicts have on children, and how parent-child relationships influence children, viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective, while chapter 4 is dedicated to the analysis Atwood´s marriages, discussed from a feminist point of view.

2. Background

2.1. Family Structure Development in the United States and Canada

2.1.1. Historical and Sociological Changes

In the West, the nuclear family has been seen as the most important social institution consisting of a mother, a father, and their respective children. Bengtson states that before the "´modern´ nuclear family form", which emerged after the Industrial Revolution, the extended family was a pervasive family structure (1). An extended family, as the name suggests, extends beyond the nuclear family (*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* ch. 2). It mostly consists of a couple, their offspring and the husband´s or the wife´s parents living in the same household (*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* ch. 3). Both the nuclear family structure and the extended family entail traditional family values, for example typical male/female gender roles; men working outside the home, and women being housewives, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. Furthermore, in a traditional nuclear family the spouses are faithful to each other, and have a satisfactory marriage based on mutual understanding.

On the one hand, traditional family values seem to have disappeared, while on the other, scholars claim that the family is a very significant institution for children. Waite and Goldscheider explain that "[t]he home is the primary site for interaction between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, residents and guests" (267). Thornton maintains that, despite different social institutions for children, such as peer groups, schools, the mass media, and work groups, the family is still the place where children are mostly influenced (247). He further states that

> [t]he family provides children a set of values and norms that may be important in the formation of attitudes and preferences. It provides children role models that they can refer to as they develop their own ways of doing things. It provides children an emotional environment in which their own personalities are nurtured and formed. (Thornton 247)

Thus, it might be assumed that children feel most comfortable in a family, and that a family provides the conditions for a healthy identity formation.

The family has been researched a lot since the 1970s and some sociologists even claim that the changes in the size, formation, duration, and dissolution of families have brought about a great disturbance in the West comparable to the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution (Somerville 1). This disturbance can be reflected in the number of marriages being delayed, less children being born, and higher divorce rates. These points are some of the most important reasons for the decline in traditional family values. Therefore, it is important to take a look at the changes that occurred after the second baby boom in the size, formation, duration, and dissolution of families. It is also crucial to mention that a decline in traditional family values does not necessarily mean that it is something negative, or that family values are unimportant. On the contrary, family values are still important, but families are valued differently. Families still exist but will have one form or the other, and will probably not disappear altogether because of the advantages mentioned by Thornton. The changes mentioned above will be explained in the following paragraphs.

The first change was in the size of the families which came during the 1920s and 1930s, when campaigns were held both in the United States and the United Kingdom in order to increase married women´s awareness of the importance of contraceptives (Somerville 53-55). With contraceptives, it became possible for married women from both the middle- and working classes to control the number of children they were having. For these societies, this meant that fewer children were being born, one of the reasons for the decline in traditional family values. Bengtson states that in the 1950s, the number of marriages being formed stayed the same, however; that families remained small (4). Hence, the size of families is smaller now than it was before.

The decline in traditional family values can also be observed by the fact that numerous nuclear families were dissolved in the United States and the United Kingdom as a result of the First World War and the Second World War; however, it needs to be indicated that the nuclear family regained its importance at the end of the 1940s (Somerville 56-57). This dissolution of families and the decline in traditional family values can be noticed in literature, more specifically in the families that Atwood portrays. Most of her characters were born before

the first baby boom, namely before the 1940s. So, this was the decade of post-war baby boom and women who were born in the 1940s married earlier than previous as well as succeeding generations (Somerville 2). This, in turn, led to a second baby boom of the 1960s (Somerville 2). However, Brass notes that there was a striking decline in marriage in the 1970s and 1980s and he further notes that women born in the 1960s married later and began having children later than their mothers, who were born in the 1940s (qtd. in Somerville 2). This decline in marriage has subsequently influenced the decline in traditional family values. This piece of information explains that the formation of marriages has radically changed since the 1960s.

A couple of significant sociological changes that occurred in the West during the past few decades and have influenced the formation of marriages need to be mentioned. Society has become industrialized, many people have moved, and still move, to urban areas, and children are frequently born out of wedlock (Simons 218-219). Moreover, marriage is no longer necessary in order to satisfy sexual needs. In western societies, young people experienced a cultural revolution in the 1960s, leading to new freedoms, including the combination of "sex as a symbol and an activity" (Somerville 62). What is more, young people learnt more about contraceptives. "´The Pill´" became available to (more) women, which resulted in a separation of sex from reproduction (Somerville 63). Thus, people marry because of mutual support and intimacy; they want their spouse to be their best friend (Simons 218-219). In addition, Waite and Goldscheider point out that the household work which had to be done in the home was equally divided between the spouses before women entered the workforce (268)[1]. Now, they explain, it is anything but equal. Women work both at home and at their job, while most men only work at their job, something that makes women insecure about entering a marriage. The points mentioned above have resulted in a delay in marriage, subsequently causing a decline in traditional family values.

Additionally, it is crucial to mention that women formerly entered marriages because of the financial security that they got. However, many socioeconomic

[1] They are talking about times when people lived mainly in suburban areas and worked as farmers (Waite and Goldscheider (268).

improvements from the 1960s onwards have made it possible for women to remain single mothers and still manage financially (Simons 218-219). Nowadays, both boys and girls get a public education, more women work outside the home (Simons 218), and more women have started attending universities (Somerville 6). All of these changes happened from the 1960s onwards (Simons 218, Somerville 6). Another important factor for which women are delaying marriage is that they find it difficult to combine a career with household duties (Waite and Goldscheider 268-269, Somerville 6). A great number of women probably postpone marriages because they are afraid of being trapped in a relationship that will oppress them (Simons 4). Thus, women are no longer forced to marry in order to secure their livelihood; they can manage on their own, as will be noticed in the depiction of Atwood´s female characters. All these aspects have brought about a change in the formation of marriages.

Considering the growing divorce rates, it might be assumed that the duration of marriages has drastically changed within the last sixty years. It is not certain whether marriages last shorter than around the 1950s, a time when the nuclear family was something sacred, nevertheless, it might be assumed that the duration of contemporary marriages is shorter, since people divorce more often than before. This change in the duration of marriages, and subsequently, intact families, can be explained by analyzing the decline in traditional family values. In fact, Bengtson argues that the nuclear family model has been in decline since the 1960s (4), the decade of the second baby boom. The reasons for this decline might be that marriage is a different way of life, which is stressful and, on top of that, it takes a lot of time and energy to create a fulfilling marriage for both spouses (Simons 214). As already mentioned, women started working more outside the home, creating an imbalance in families. It is precisely this that has been a problem for women for a long time, namely to find a balance between their job and their family. Because of these problems, marital partners tend to divorce more often, which in turn makes the duration of marriages shorter.

The dissolution of marriages is comparable to the formation of marriages, more specifically; the reasons for ending a marriage are similar to those for not entering or postponing a marriage. For instance, sociological changes in American society made it possible for women to “escape oppressive marital relationships and seek more satisfying lives” (Simons 4). Further, Bengtson states that the social institution of the nuclear family has been changing in the past fifty years with “the growing divorce rate in the 1960s, which escalated to over half of first marriages in the 1980s” (4). In addition, Simons maintains that around 50 percent of all marriages in the United States end in divorce (217). Critics frequently attribute this to a decline in family values (Simons 217). In Canada, the situation is similar. Statistics expect that 4 out of 10 marriages will probably end in divorce before they reach their thirtieth wedding anniversary (Rotermann 33). Thus, it might be the case that the dissolution of families has an effect on the decline in traditional family values.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to state that people still marry, or seek a partner to share their life with, although it might be true that nearly half of the marriages in the West end in divorce. Studies show that most Americans “are committed to the institution of marriage” (Simons 217). Crompton also states that most Canadians still want to marry and have children (2). Accordingly, people are of the opinion that marriage is a positive way of life.

A number of authors believe that feminism is the main reason for the decline in traditional family values. Somerville states that “[f]or some, feminism is the major cause [for the decline in family values] in that it is thought to promote interests of women before those of others, including children, a promotion which is seen to be incompatible with the health of families” (1). Some theorists even claim that declining family values can only be restored if societies go back to traditional gender roles (Simons 6). Does this mean that western societies should be more patriarchal than they already are? Although we live in modern societies and politicians might claim that societies are not patriarchal, women are still paid less than men for the same job, women still work more at home, and women still take care of children more than men. Interestingly then, patriarchy might be the cause for the decline in traditional family values, because more equality between men and women might bring more satisfaction

to both sexes, and in turn, healthy and functional families for children. In Atwood´s novels, female characters live and work in modern patriarchal societies, and they struggle to become accepted and equal to men, without being attributed traditional gender roles. In the further analysis of the novels, it will be discussed whether or not patriarchy is the cause for the decline in traditional family values.

It might be assumed that one of the constant topics brought up for discussion between husbands and wives is the household chores. As already pointed out, women find it difficult to combine family life with work outside the home, meaning that women perform more household duties than men. Accordingly, Waite and Goldscheider state that the household responsibilities are not equally divided in today´s two income families (268). They further argue that women have higher expectations concerning the share in domestic responsibilities than men, which is a reason why women delay marriage (Waite and Goldscheider 269). Possibly, women might be seeking more fulfilling marriages, where both spouses´ responsibilities will be equal. Interestingly, Somerville writes that "[t]he age of the New Man has not yet arrived though there are some new-ish ones around" (7). Gender roles need to be equal, where both partners share the responsibilities for the household and for childrearing, in order for our future generations to live in healthy familial relationships.

One last point needs to be brought up, namely how a society values different family structures. For a long time, the nuclear family was the pervasive family structure, nevertheless, today the situation is rather different. Being married has historically been seen as the norm, while unmarried people were considered to be "sick, immoral or neurotic" (Crompton 6). Even today, the situation seems to be similar in Canada, despite different family structures, such as single parents, blended families, unmarried people and gay couples (Crompton 6). According to Crompton, unmarried individuals complain of being stigmatized by their married friends and even of being excluded from employment advantages just because they are single (6). Although the sociological articles and books that are mentioned in this chapter do not discuss how the attitude to married and unmarried people is in the United States, it might be assumed that it is similar to

the trend in Canada. Traditional family values may be obsolete; however, people still search for love, and possibly, a partner to share their life with. Interestingly enough, Atwood invites a re-negotiation of traditional family values, by positively painting different ways of structuring a family.

2.1.2. Statistics

Considering the information regarding the decline in traditional family values, it will be of interest to see what the statistics for marriage, divorce and single parenthood look like in the United States and Canada. Norton and Miller show that the rate for first marriages in the United States was the highest in 1945 (2). Interestingly, they demonstrate that divorces up to 1990 were still not significantly high; however, that first marriages dropped almost 50 percent from 1945 to 1988 (Norton and Miller 2). Hence, although the divorce rate was not very high before 1990, people started entering marriages later than they had before. When it comes to divorces in the United States nowadays, they still make up 50 percent of all marriages (Simons 217). Norton and Miller claim that "the percentage of marriages in the United States that end in divorce will probably continue to be among the highest in the world" (Norton and Miller, U.S. Census Bureau 5). Like the United States, Canada also has high divorce rates (Bélanger, Dumas, and Smith 27, 36).

One of the reasons for the decline in marriage in the United States and Canada needs to be pointed out. As fewer people decide to marry and approximately half of today´s marriages end in divorce in the United States, more and more couples cohabit. Correspondingly, cohabitation in Canada has also increased (Cooke-Reynolds and Zukewich 7)[2]. In the United States, 4.8 percent of all households in 1997 were cohabiting households (Somerville 5). Somerville further states that today there are five times more cohabiting households than in 1970 (3). This is also a reason why people marry later; hence the average age for American men to first marry is 27.1 and for American women it is 24.8 (Somerville 5). Similarly, Cooke-Reynolds and Zukewich state that people in Canada do not make a direct transition from the parent home to a marital relationship (7).

[2] People who cohabit are not counted as married couples in statistics.

When it comes to single parenthood, most children who live with a single parent live with their mothers. In 1998, United States statistics showed that 84.1 percent of the children who lived with a single parent lived with their mother, and out of these, 40.3 percent lived with a mother who had never been married (Lugaila 1). Further, 27.1 percent of all children under 18 live with one parent (Lugaila 1). Likewise, most children who live with a single parent in Canada also live with their mothers (Rotermann 37). According to statistical information on marriages and divorces, along with sociological analyses of the same topic, it might be the case that the institution of marriage cannot recover; nevertheless, the majority of people in the West still think that it is valuable to have a family, no matter how it is structured.

2.2. Effects of a Dysfunctional Family on its Members from a Psychological Perspective

From the reading of several psychological and sociological articles and books, it can be concluded that there are vague or no definitions at all of a dysfunctional family. Stoop and Masteller do note that a dysfunctional family is a family in which the parents misbehave, are in conflict, neglect or abuse their children repeatedly and on a regular basis (1). Additionally, researchers state that numerous factors make up a dysfunctional family, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal or emotional abuse and parental alcoholism, which are all aspects of traumatic experiences (Harter and Vanecek 447). In my analysis, I will mainly focus on verbal or emotional abuse. When necessary, I will take sexual and physical abuse into consideration. The next few paragraphs will survey how marital conflicts might deteriorate, what should be done in order to avoid conflicts, and how a dysfunctional marriage affects the well-being of children.

Christensen, Heavey and Shenk emphasize that a “marriage is a prototype of close relationships” (222), which means that different opinions, experiences, worldviews, and aims have to be united in mutual harmony. Obviously, both men and women search for mutual harmony in a marital relationship, which might be difficult to achieve when equal responsibilities do not exist. In contemporary societies, it is usual that both men and women work; however, it can bring problems for the marital couple when only women are responsible for

the children and the household chores. Somerville points out that female employment “can provide the basis for truer partnership between men and women, but also for personal and domestic conflict. Western countries with the highest levels of female employment also have the highest levels of divorce” (232). Somerville may be correct in saying that a woman has to put her needs aside in order to care for her family, something that feminism wants to remove (Somerville 238). Women certainly have less free time to find their own self-fulfillment, which might be the cause for numerous marital problems. Thus, it may be presumed that in today´s modern societies, it is even more difficult to find mutual satisfaction in a marriage where both spouses work, especially full-time and with children that need to be taken care of. The fact that many housewives feel unfulfilled is not put into question; however, the authors of these books and articles have not dealt with the satisfaction of housewives, and therefore it will not be possible to write an account of that point.

Now we will go on to show how dysfunctional relationships affect a marriage. Fuller and Fincham´s hypothesis is that negative communication between spouses leads to marital distress (61). Further, they explain that studies have shown that couples are more satisfied with their relationship if their communication is positive (Fuller and Fincham 61). However, there are other factors that also influence the quality of a marital relationship. Christensen, Heavey and Shenk assert that depression, as well as other mental illnesses, may cause strains on a relationship which could lead to conflicts between the couple (223). They further explain the difference between structural and open conflicts, whereby structural conflicts are based on different interests of two human beings and open conflicts are explicit disagreements between two people (Christensen, Heavey and Shenk 221-222). If a couple does not reach a mutual understanding in the structural conflict, this will pave the way for future open conflicts (Christensen, Heavey and Shenk 222). In turn, it will lead to the couple´s discontent in the marital relationship (Christensen, Heavey and Shenk 222). Despite the fact that Atwood´s portrayal of families in the three novels is not in-depth and does not depict the marital relationships very closely, it can be noticed that the couples do not communicate very well and that they have many unresolved structural conflicts that should have been taken care of before.

Burgess further stresses that the troubles of one family member cannot be understood when analyzed individually but have to "be understood […] in *relationship* to other family members, their ongoing patterns of interactions, and personalities developing and changing in such interactions" (qtd. in Bengtson 3). As can be seen from this quotation, every individual in a family has a high influence on the other family members. This information is crucial for the discussion of Atwood´s dysfunctional families, because the main characters all dwell in their traumatic childhoods and remember their parents´ disagreements, which had a great influence on their identity formation.

A marital relationship in distress can be observed by stressors that are specific to the different stages of divorce. Strohschein states that these stressors are "hostile and volcanic or emotionally detached and brittle" feelings (490). All these stressors can be identified in Atwood´s depictions of marital relationships. Even though marital conflict and disruption is distressing for parents, it is even more painful for children. Simons explains that conflicts between parents are irritating and exasperating for children (18), and Strohschein further argues that the stressors that are present between marital spouses preceding a divorce may also affect the mental health of children (490). Furthermore, Harter and Vanecek show that children who have experienced abuse also have increased symptom distress, which includes "anxiety, obsessiveness, depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and somatization for those with histories of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse" (464). Moreover, studies have revealed that children who have experienced abuse and parental alcoholism described their parents as in general dysfunctional (Harter and Vanecek 465). Those dysfunctional families were "conflictual and less emotionally close and expressive, less socially open, less idealized, and less democratic" (Harter and Vanecek 465). Atwood´s novels show numerous traits of dysfunctional families that are mentioned in this paragraph, which will be analyzed in coming chapters.

It is crucial to specify how parental behavior affects the identity formation of a child. As might be assumed, positive behavior will yield positive behavior, while negative behavior will yield negative behavior. Roberts and Bengtson report

findings that demonstrate that children and adolescents who receive affection, acceptance, and support by their parents are “likely to report higher self-esteem, lower anxiety and depression, greater happiness and scholastic achievement, and fewer behavioral problems” (263). Further, it has been concluded that marital distress may be negative for children´s well-being; however, other difficulties that a divorce carries for children need to be stated. As already indicated, a divorce is dysfunctional for society because it increases the number of distressed people (Simons 220). Additionally, Somerville states that, although extended families can enrich children´s lives, “there is no replacement for a parent” (240). Simons demonstrates that children of divorced parents are at high risk for criminal behavior, early sexual intercourse, pregnancy, school failure, and emotional difficulties (125). These “children tend to exhibit lower socioeconomic attainment, greater marital instability, and poorer psychological adjustment than persons who grew up in continuously intact families” (Simons 125). Interestingly, Simons reveals that these troubles continue into adulthood, especially for adults who themselves went through parental divorce when they were children (125). As we will see in the analysis of Atwood´s novels, the characters are adults who constantly remember their traumatic childhood experiences. Atwood´s characters show evidence of emotional distress and depression.

Financial difficulties affect single mothers, and in turn, children´s happiness. Although children are emotionally influenced by their parents´ marital conflicts, the socioeconomic condition plays an additional role in children´s welfare. Most single parents are women who usually experience a remarkable reduction in financial benefits (Simons 10). It is said that, due to economic hardship that follows a divorce, women are emotionally distressed and show cases of disrupted parenting (Simons 222). What is more, studies have shown that divorced women are more frequently depressed than married women, which negatively influences their parenting (Simons 83, 207). Likewise, Strohschein stresses that “[p]arents who later divorced reported higher levels of family dysfunction and parental depression and lower levels of marital satisfaction relative to continuously married parents” (495). A study has also shown that single parents experience negative life changes even several years after divorce (Simons 11). Thus, it can be assumed that people, mostly mothers, feel

depressed after a divorce, which in turn affects their parenting. In Atwood´s novels, children are mostly raised by their mothers, in some cases by their fathers, or even relatives. Therefore, it will be of interest to analyze how these characters are affected by their upbringing.

Furthermore, David Popenoe, a prominent family sociologist and a supporter of the family decline hypothesis, claims that the decline in traditional family values is negative for child well-being (qtd. in Bengtson 3). It is important to maintain that studies have shown that divorce can be positive, but only when it helps the child break away from an abusive or alcoholic parent (Simons 220). In addition, Popenoe states that two fundamental functions cannot be nurtured in another place: “Childrearing and the provision to its members of affection and companionship” (qtd. in Bengtson 3). Similarly, Somerville argues that nothing can replace a parent; children from a family with conflicts feel a sense of loss (240). Moreover, Simons maintains that “divorce is dysfunctional for society to the extent that it significantly increases the number of troubled individuals” (220). Thus, contemporary psychologists and sociologists agree that a family is the best place to rear children and that marital breakup is disquieting for both parents and children.

One more factor that plays an essential role in the upbringing of children is the role of the father. As previously stated, most children of divorced parents live with their single mother, who takes the toll in the rearing of children. When nonresidential fathers spend time with their children, they tend to focus on mutual entertainment (Simons 212). However, even fathers in intact families spend their time playing with their children, rather than engaging in parenting activities (Simons 212). Residential as well as nonresidential fathers still play the role of a friend or a close relative rather than the role of a parent (Simons 16). Nonresidential fathers should “engage in parenting activities such as monitoring academic progress, emphasizing moral principles, discussing problems, providing advice, and supporting the parenting decisions of the custodial mother” (Simons 224). Findings have shown that both parents need to provide emotional support, set up and explain standards for behavior, and administer constant discipline (Simons 16).Residential fathers need to engage

in parenting activities just as much as mothers. Only in this way can children develop strong and healthy identities. It will therefore be interesting to see how fathers bring up their children and how this affects the characters´ identity formation in Atwood´s novels.

On the basis of these considerations, my own definition of a dysfunctional family is a family where the marital partners have problems with their communication; they have constant disagreements, they cannot communicate with the children and vice versa, they neglect and abuse their offspring, and the children are negatively affected by these relationships. In addition to this, in a dysfunctional family one of the partners leaves the family and, in doing so, creates even more traumas in the child. All this affects the identity formation of the child. From Atwood´s description of her characters´ childhood experiences, it is rather evident that they grew up in dysfunctional families and that these experiences have a negative effect on their identity formation. In their adulthood, the characters constantly remember their childhood experiences and are haunted by these negative events.

2.3. Theoretical Frameworks

2.3.1. Feminism

This subchapter will present a brief summary of the history of feminism, name a few leading critics within the theory and describe aspects such as patriarchy, sexism, and traditional gender roles, which will then be used for the further analysis of Atwood´s novels. Brooker notes that the beginnings of the feminist movement are set in the late eighteenth century, associated mainly with the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who wrote *The Vindication of The Rights of Women* (1792) and *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman* (1797) (93). The movement grew in strength with the suffragette movement during the mid nineteenth century (Brooker 94). Tolan explains that the first wave of feminism dates back to 1830 up to 1920, and these years are best known for the suffragette movement (319). The second wave concerns itself mainly with women´s rights, such as equal paychecks, and it dates from the 1960s up to the present day (Tolan 319-320). Simone de Beauvoir´s prominent book *The Second Sex* was published in 1947, a time when abortion and contraception were still prohibited or inaccessible in most parts of the world, and it dealt with

women´s oppression (Tolan 320). Tolan likes to call de Beauvoir a bridge between the two waves, since she expressed the social vision of the first wave, and began to articulate crucial thoughts about femininity and gender that would in the future concern the second wave (319).

In *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir gives thorough explanations for the reduction of women to a second and less important sex, which is highly relevant even in today´s modern but patriarchal societies (Tolan 320). Further, de Beauvoir claims in *The Second Sex* that women had always been second-class citizens because of biological differences between the two sexes (Tolan 320-321). Women were linked to the body and tied to the domestic sphere, and were consequently associated with animals and nature. Tolan states that

> Just as man considers himself superior to nature, so he considers himself superior to woman. Over the centuries, the concept of the female´s passive maternal role has become so deeply entrenched in culture and society that it was presumed to be woman´s natural destiny. De Beauvoir argued that there was nothing natural about the hierarchical division of men and women into a first and second sex. (321)

Atwood has grasped these thoughts brilliantly in her writing. Although most of her novels are set in contemporary societies, while some are set in the future, most of those societies are based on patriarchal ideologies and consider women to be the second sex.

Tolan further notes that de Beauvoir´s writing was highly influenced by existentialism, a theory which rejects the existence of a predetermined ´human nature´, emphasizing “the freedom and responsibility of each person to create him or herself as a self-governing individual” (321). De Beauvoir grounded her argument, that a woman is always placed as the other to man, in the German philosopher´s G.W.F. Hegel´s thought that every human being seeks to recognize him- or herself with another individual, and that each individual comes to the conclusion that he/she is “the essential subject (the ´self´), whilst all others are the inessential object (the ´other´)” (Tolan 321). This is how human beings attain a “sense of identity” (Tolan 321). De Beauvoir continues by claiming that a woman is always the object, while the man is always the subject, something that has been at the core of human history (Tolan 321). Additionally,

de Beauvoir maintains that this way of thinking is even central to Sigmund Freud´s psychoanalytic theory of sexuality, which argues that a man is a man because of his possession of the phallus, while a woman is a woman, because she does not possess the phallus (Tolan 321). Tolan continues

> [t]herefore, a woman is a lack, a negative–she lacks the phallus that confers subjectivity. This lack of the female self can also be detected in art and literature, where women frequently appear as objects of men´s desires and fears–metaphorical virgins or whores–but never complex autonomous individuals. Women are always associated with the passive body, and men with the active mind […]. (321)

A woman is made believe by patriarchal societies that she is happy and protected when she has a man around, de Beauvoir claims (Tolan 321). Moreover, Patterson states that women have been forced by Western societies to marry and have children for more than sixty years of the twentieth century (88). Those women who rejected those values forced upon them would feel inadequate and incomplete (Patterson 88). De Beauvoir´s thought of women´s decision to marry and have children is equated with as “selling oneself into slavery” (Patterson 87). Additionally, de Beauvoir thinks that marriage is “an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement, which reinforces sexual inequality, and binds women to domesticity” (Tolan 321).

Thus, de Beauvoir introduced the concepts of ´transcendence´ and ´immanence´ (Tolan 321). According to de Beauvoir, a human being is content and fulfilled only when he/she is free to do as he/she wishes (Tolan 321-322). De Beauvoir indicates that a human being needs to overcome basic desires such as hunger or lust, and pursue his/her full intellectual and emotional potential (Tolan 322). Hence, following de Beuavoir´s line of thought, a man is transcendental because he is free to pursue his full intellectual and emotional potential, by working and inventing things that will be of use to future generations, and in turn, make him immortal (Tolan 322). A woman, on the other hand, is immanent, because she only contributes with her bodily functions, namely to give birth to the next generation, without affecting the future in an intellectual manner (Tolan 322). A woman is not allowed to pursue knowledge, because she is given limited freedom by someone else, therefore she has no freedom at all (Tolan 322). The concepts of transcendence and immanence can also be related to the societies portrayed in Atwood´s novels

analyzed in this thesis. Frequently, Atwood´s female characters are supposed to find happiness in marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. Seeking intellectual self-fulfillment is frowned upon, even in some of the modern societies that Atwood depicts.

De Beauvoir and Kate Millett were two of the first feminists to address how women were portrayed in works written by men, and with this, introducing phallocentric criticism (Tolan 326). Millett argues that a

> [p]atriarchal society […] works to inculcate male supremacy through a variety of covert means: politically, women have negligible representation; the biological sciences legitimize chauvinistic beliefs in female inferiority; and social systems – particularly the family – entrench political and social inequity in the private sphere. (Tolan 326)

Despite the fact that Atwood portrays contemporary societies, modern and intellectual women, it is evident from her depiction of the societies and the characters that patriarchal ideologies still are prevalent.

A crucial problem addressed by feminism and closely tied to how women are perceived by society, is essentialism. Essentialism assumes that every individual, object, or text, has a fundamental essence which identifies their nature, i.e. something that is supposed to be natural for that person, object, or text (Brooker 85-86). Men are seen as impersonal, violent, power-seeking and competitive, according to a feminist interpretation of essentialism (Brooker 86). Further, Lynne Segal notes that feminism used essentialism to look at how women were observed by society, namely as nurturers, mothers, co-operative and peaceful human beings, which is very dangerous (qtd. in Brooker 86). An essentialist view of society would, for example, argue that the family is very significant, especially the nuclear family. Brooker notes that “[t]he [popular] appeal to family values is driven by an attempt to return men, women and children to their true ´natural´ state – which is then deemed good for ´society´” (86). Atwood´s societies are mostly driven by essentialist views of how human beings should behave.

The novels analyzed in this thesis are all set in patriarchal societies, therefore, a brief definition of what patriarchy is will be provided. Tyson explains patriarchy as a society in which men occupy most or all positions of power (139). In

literature, there are different ways of illustrating patriarchy (Tyson 140). Brooker further explains that patriarchy is

> used synonymously with ´sexism´ to indicate prevalent attitudes towards women, to refer to kinship system and the organization of the family, to refer to systematic inequalities in employment opportunities, recruitment patterns and pay, to poor social, health and child-care provision for women, and the supporting evidence in the world of literature, art and media representations which reinforce some of the above. (183)

A patriarchal text, Tyson explains, is a text which promotes damaging beliefs about men and women, for example, by positively depicting characters that follow traditional gender roles, and by negatively depicting characters that violate these gender roles (140). However, there are also antipatriarchal texts, which portray characters that are damaged by following traditional gender roles, or also texts that portray the negative consequence of patriarchal stereotyping (Tyson 140). In addition, there are antipatriarchal texts that positively illustrate characters that go against traditional gender roles, e.g. independent female characters, or sensitive and nurturing male characters (Tyson 141). Tyson names basic concepts that are examples of patriarchal ideologies that have been present for centuries (141). These are *patriarchy, traditional gender roles, the objectification of women, sexism,* and *the cult of "´true womanhood´"* (Tyson 141-143), which will later be used in the feminist analysis of Atwood´s novels.

So, the first basic concept is patriarchy. As already mentioned, a patriarchy is a society in which men hold most or all positions of power (Tyson 141-142). People who follow patriarchy, consider other people (who do not adhere to patriarchal rules) abnormal, detrimental, or even immoral (Tyson 142). All other basic concepts are actually just different dimensions of patriarchy, all originating from this same form of society and way of thinking. Ott and Mack claim that patriarchy considers women subordinate to men and that this can be noticed in America, for example when it comes to the economic situation of men and women (195). Women still get less paid than men for the same job (210). Further, they say that

> [t]he logic is that women often lack the (traditionally masculine) qualities of assertiveness and rational thinking that management positions require. Thus, media representations of femininity that position women as meek, subservient, or overly emotional contribute to a culture where it is

> permissible for women to earn less and have fewer occupational opportunities. (Ott and Mack 210)

Although Atwood´s female characters are described as strong and independent women, they are given attributes such as meek, submissive, or emotional at the same time. Atwood might be showing her readers that women are still oppressed by patriarchal societies.

The second basic concept is traditional gender roles, which define women as the weaker sex (Tyson 141). This basic concept thus involves binary oppositions, such as strong/weak, rational/irrational, protective/nurturing, and decisive/submissive (Tyson 142). Additionally, Hélène Cixous, a French feminist, argues that male reason is ordered according to binary oppositions, such as male/female, activity/passivity, culture/nature (Tolan 336). Precisely as in Tyson´s binary oppositions, women are always the lesser half of the equation (Tolan 336). By following these binary oppositions, oppression of women is invited. Women are, for example, thought not to be fit for leadership positions, in the family as well in industry (Tyson 142). Tyson further explains that

> […] traditional gender roles still tell women, among other things, that they are not cut out for careers in areas such as mathematics and engineering and that, regardless of the job a wife holds outside the home, she has primary responsibility for the children and for domestic chores. (142)

Atwood´s female characters are affected by this way of thinking, regardless of the fact that most of the novels are set in modern societies.

Tyson goes on to describe what the objectification of women means. This basic concept puts so called “good girls” on pedestals, considering them virginal angels, and selfless nurturers, if they adhere to traditional gender roles, while so called “bad girls”, women that dress or behave sexually provocatively, are considered nags, gossips, and seductresses (Tyson 142-143). However, both “good girls” and “bad girls” are viewed according to their usefulness to their husbands, fathers or brothers; consequently, they are not viewed as independent human beings (Tyson 142).

The fourth basic concept is sexism, which is closely related to patriarchy. Tyson describes sexism as the idea that women are by nature subordinate to men, in

other words, that men are more intelligent, more rational, more courageous, and so forth, than women (143). Furthermore, Tyson reports that

> […] sexist individuals believe that traditional gender roles–which cast *men as decision-makers* and *women as dutiful followers*–are right and natural because men´s innate superiority dictates that they should be in charge, not only in the family but in business, politics, and all other important institutions [emphasis added]. (143)

In Atwood´s novels, women behave obediently towards their husbands and/or fathers, while they neglect their own wishes and needs. The male characters that she portrays, no matter which type of patriarchal/antipatriarchal text it is, are frequently making decisions.

The cult of "´true womanhood´" is the fifth and last basic concept, which is also prevalent in Atwood´s writing. This concept means that women are supposed to be delicate, obedient, sexually pure, and keep themselves in the private sphere, namely the home, in order to be worthy of patriarchal men´s protection (Tyson 143-144). Atwood portrays women who are delicate, obedient, and sexually pure; however, she also depicts women who only encompass some of the traits of "true womanhood".

2.3.2. Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis began to be observed when Sigmund Freud introduced the distinction between the id, the ego and the super-ego in the 1920s, saying that instinctual drives of people (the id), and the constraining mores of society (the super-ego) could be reconciled in the ego (Brooker 203). The first attempts to analyze literary works with the use of psychoanalysis were mostly motivated by Freud´s essays on art and literature. What Freud argued was that anything that was written, any form of creative writing, was a product of unconscious processes happening in the ´mental apparatus´, as Freud called the mind or the psyche (Surprenant 200-201). He found evidence for the existence of the unconscious in "obsessions, symptoms, word association, everyday slips of the tongue and above all dreams" (Brooker 251). Further, Brooker says that

> [t]hese revealed gaps in conscious life whose missing content psychoanalytic practice showed was disguised or covered over – and thus only indirectly expressed – through such mechanisms as condensation and displacement characteristic of dreams. This repressed or censored content of the Unconscious comprised both early memories

> of the individual and of general humanity originating in primal fantasies or scenes involving forbidden sexual knowledge […]. (251)

Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, further developed the concept of the unconscious, saying that it was "a ´censored chapter´ in the history of the subject […], traces of which could nevertheless be read in the ´documents´ of neurosis, surviving childhood memories, personal vocabulary, traditions, legends and dreams" (Brooker 251). Childhood memories are continuously coming up as a topic in psychoanalysis, making evident the importance of childhood relationships and events for the identity formation of a person.

Condensation and displacement are two mechanisms (observed by Freud) which operate in dreams, and consequently give expression to the unconscious (Brooker 44). Brooker explains that a person´s anxieties or desires can be condensed in multifaceted symbols or displaced and expressed through connection (44). On the one hand, if a person uses condensation as a mechanism, then he/she sees him/herself in a dream, violently encountering a figure that bears a resemblance to numerous persons in real life, or he/she might say an ambiguous phrase several times (Brooker 44). On the other hand, if a person uses displacement, and is not able to directly convey emotions of profound grief or desire, these emotions may then be displaced "in a dream image of a related object or in a narrative of looking for a name or destination" (Brooker 44).

Freud argues that the interpretation of dreams is the "*via regia* of the interpretation of the unconscious" (21). He further distinguishes between the manifest dream-content and the latent dream-content, the first being the things that we remember only confusedly the morning after, and the latter being what we actually dreamt and which is assumed to be in the unconscious (Freud 22). "The manifest dream, which we remember after waking, may then be described as a *disguised* fulfillment of *repressed* wishes" (Freud 23). Moreover, Freud notes that it is possible to come to terms with the latent dream-content, in other words the unconscious, through a process named dream-work (23). In addition, Freud mentions how childhood memories reside in our unconscious and how important it is for the interpretation of dreams (24). He further explains everyday mental phenomena which could be read as symptoms in the treatment of

patients, and are similar to dreams (Freud 24-25). These mental phenomena which Freud mentions are the bungling of acts, forgetting of things which people are supposed to know, and really do know at other times (forgetting proper names), mistakes in speaking, writing, and reading, and the loss or breaking of objects etc. (24-25). Dreams and symptoms alike carry a meaning for the patient which

> either express impulses and purposes which are repressed, hidden if possible from the consciousness of the individual, or that they spring from exactly the same sort of repressed wishes and complexes which we have learned to know already as the creators of symptoms and dreams. (Freud 25)

Thus, the childhood of an individual is highly relevant for the identity formation of that person, and also, for the healing of problems which the individual might have in his/her adult life.

Now, it is important to give a brief account of what trauma theory is and why it is important for this thesis. Nowadays, trauma theory "includes many fields, focusing on psychological, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic questions about the nature and representation of traumatic events" (Luckhurst 497). Early definitions of the words trauma, traumatic, traumatism, or traumatize in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are all related to physical wounds, rather than mental ones (Luckhurst 498). Only one scientific magazine from 1895 refers to this condition as a "´psychical trauma, a morbid nervous condition´" (qtd. in Luckhurst 498). Victims of railway accidents could experience difficult mental sufferings long after the event, making doctors realize the importance of mental distress, through which the terms "´traumatic neurosis´" and "´nervous shock´" were coined in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Luckhurst 498). Moreover, Luckhurst states that Ian Hacking, a historian, named "*diseases of memory*" in the 1870s and 1880s, conditions that appeared independent of the physical conditions, namely hysteria, double or multiple personality, hypnotic and other trance states, and amnesia, which began to be examined seriously for the first time (498).

Further, it is significant to mention that, although mental disorders were scientifically unknown before the nineteenth century, once they began to be treated in the latter half of the 1800s, they were regarded as degenerative and

considered a hereditary weakness (Luckhurst 498). So, when Freud published the essay called ´On the Psychical Mechanism of the Hysterical Phenomena´ in 1893 together with his colleague Breuer, in which they defied the notion that hysteria was connected to physical degeneration, it caused bewilderment (Luckhurst 498). Freud and Breuer argue that "*memory* of the traumatic event acts like an *agent provocateur*" (qtd. in Luckhurst 499), in the sense that mental trauma is so overwhelming that it falls out of our conscious memory, because our ordinary mental processes cannot process it, and it ends up behaving like an intruder or a ghost in our mental apparatus (Luckhurst 499). In Atwood´s novels, the characters dwell in the past, and their traumatic experiences haunt them precisely like Freud and Breuer explain.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (henceforth PTSD) as a term emerged after the Vietnam War, when doctors realized that war veterans experienced flashbacks, re-experiencing of the traumatic event, and nightmares, among other things (Luckhurst 505). However, since this first definition, a new definition has appeared. Luckhurst explains: "It now includes direct experiences of assault, accident, and disaster, or of proximity to these, or of indirectly learning or being informed of family involvement in such events" (505). The latter point can most easily be tied to Atwood´s novels. Most of the characters have experienced traumatic events in some sense, and the majority of them have also had family members involved in even more serious events. Additionally, Luckhurst notes that Multiple Personality Disorder (henceforth MPD) differs from PTSD in the sense that the traumatic event remains absent from the psyche, which causes the individual to form multiple personalities (505). Atwood´s characters grow up in difficult circumstances, later remembering their childhood experiences, and interestingly enough, most of them create other personalities, which help them go through their difficult childhood events.

Tyson explains that psychoanalysis is highly relevant for literary theory, because we all go through childhood memories that affect our mental development and later play out in our adult lives (81). He further states that psychological problems, such as sibling rivalry that occurs very often, other types of jealousy, insecurity or self-doubt, or loneliness or isolation, are normal

and a part of being human, but that they turn into dysfunctional behavior when “we put ourselves unnecessarily at risk, get ourselves into trouble, or hurt the ones we love” (Tyson 81). Moreover, Tyson adds that dysfunctional behavior is harmful when people do not recognize that they have it, and consequently, play out this behavior on other people (81). Psychoanalytic theory tells us that it is crucial to identify and understand the problems that we have, in order to heal those problems (Tyson 81).

According to Tyson, most literary works tend to portray different aspects of human experience, which is usually the darker side of people´s lives, and thus, psychoanalysis, which also focuses on the dysfunctionality of people´s behavior, is a way to analyze literature (82). In order to do this, Tyson introduces basic concepts, which are based on Freud´s observations from the treatment of patients (82). These concepts will be helpful in the analysis of Atwood´s characters´ dysfunctional behavior.

The family, which is the first basic concept mentioned, is the most significant place of people´s early emotional experiences, whether positive or negative (Tyson 83). A family can be anything from a nuclear family to children growing up in an orphanage (Tyson 83). Further, he clarifies that “[…] it is in the family that our sense of self and our way of relating to others are first established” (Tyson 83). Tyson also writes that all human beings have gone through damaging emotional experiences in their childhood, no matter how loving the family might have been. (83). As recounted above, Atwood portrays more or less traumatic childhood experiences of the main characters, which in turn paint a negative picture of the family as an institution.

Repression and the unconscious, making up the second basic concept, mean that all human beings are inclined to repress difficult experiences into their unconscious (Tyson 83). Tyson explains the unconscious as “[…] the psychological storehouse of painful experiences we don´t want to remember” (83). Moreover, there are signs which can be noticed in people when they repress an emotional problem, for example “[…] repetition of a self-destructive behavior, such as choosing unhealthy friends or romantic partners, displaying inappropriate social behavior […],” among other things (Tyson 83). These destructive behaviors come up when people communicate with others, because

psychoanalysis says that people tend to play out their problems with other people (Tyson 83). Another clue to people having an emotional problem that they repress into the unconscious is the reappearance of an upsetting dream (Tyson 83).

Human beings use defenses in order to keep themselves from becoming conscious of all the difficult experiences they repress into the unconscious (Tyson 83). Tyson explains that this basic concept is positive when children use it, e.g. the defenses protect them emotionally; however, that the defenses become negative once a person is an adult and does not understand that he/she has emotional problems that need to be healed (83-84). Tyson names four defenses, the first being *denial*, a state when people do not believe that an emotionally difficult situation occurred, or that an emotionally painful situation exists (84). The second defense involves *avoidance*, staying away from people or places which might bring back memories of experiences that one has repressed (Tyson 84). *Displacement*, the third defense, is when people take out their negative emotions about one person on someone else in order to revive the pain and anger that they feel, without knowing the real reason of the repressed feelings. The fourth and last defense that human beings use is *projection*, a state when people think that someone else feels the way they do, and in turn, attack that person for having that problem, wanting to prove to themselves that they do not have that problem (Tyson 84).

Apart from the defenses, Tyson also explains core conflicts, psychological problems that are the cause of frequent self-destructive behavior (Tyson 84). *Low self-esteem, insecure or unstable sense of self, fear of abandonment,* and *fear of intimacy* are the four core issues employed in the analysis of Atwood´s characters. *Low self-esteem* is the first core issue. It means that a person thinks less of him-or herself, and that he or she does not deserve attention. The second core issue is *insecure or unstable sense of self*. This core conflict means that a person has difficulties in sustaining a feeling of personal identity, resulting in vulnerability to the influence of other people (Tyson 84). People with this core issue frequently change their clothing and hairstyle, or behavior (Tyson 84). *Fear of abandonment* is the third core conflict, which means that people are

afraid that their friends and loved ones are going to leave them or that they do not care about them. This core conflict can sometimes "express itself as *fear of betrayal*", meaning that the person who has this core issue is afraid of being betrayed by his or her loved ones, or merely does not trust his or her friends and loved ones (Tyson 84). The fourth and last core issue used in this thesis is *fear of intimacy*, which means that the person in question is afraid that emotional closeness will destroy him or her (Tyson 84). This will keep the individual from fully enjoying a relationship (Tyson 84).

Having said this, it also needs to be pointed out that it is not my intention to psychoanalyze the characters in the novels. This is not possible, since these are only fictional characters. However; Atwood´s depiction of these characters is very close to reality, and we may gain a better understanding of them by recourse to some psychoanalytic concepts.

3. Atwood´s Families

> Det som eventuellt gör det lättare i min familjekonstellation är att jag bara har mig själv att förlita mig på, ingen man att slösa energi på i ständiga gräl som min mamma fick lägga ned sin själ på. Hon undrade ständigt var hennes man höll hus och vad han gjorde av sina pengar, det slipper jag. Min pappas svek var att ha levt dubbelliv och han hade ytterligare fyra barn. Det knäckte min mamma, att ha anat och frågat i alla år men blivit förd bakom ljuset. Det har också genomsyrat hela min bild av kärnfamiljen och säkert min syn på mannen. (*Vi är den Nya Familjen: en Antologi av Ensamstående Föräldrar* 39-40)[3]

The above quote is a brilliant example of everyday families in the West, where frequent dysfunctional families make children learn from their parents´ mistakes and realize that the nuclear family is not a constant. The primary purpose of this chapter is to discuss different kinds of families portrayed in the novels *The Handmaid´s Tale*, *The Robber Bride*, and *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood. The majority of the stories are filled with negative childhood memories

[3] My own translation from Swedish into English. What makes it possibly easier in my family structure is that I only have to count on myself, I do not have to lose energy on fights with a husband like my mother had to. She wondered constantly where her husband was and what he did with his money, I am spared that. My father´s betrayal was that he had lived a double life and that he had another four children. That ruined my mother, suspecting something and asking for all those years, but having been deceived. That has also influenced my view on the nuclear family, and definitely, my view of men (*We are the New Family: an Anthology of Single Parents* 39-40).

about a lack of communication between marital partners, quarrels between spouses, lack of communication between children and parents, and traumatic experiences for children. Marital conflicts are rather in the background of the stories; however, they have such a great impact on the characters in these novels that they also influence their identity formation. As mentioned above, each family member is important for the happiness of every other individual within the family. The same goes for the characters in Atwood´s novels. All the characters are affected by the way they grow up, and also by their relationships to other family members. Everything that the characters do is influenced by their past and the past is a constant shadow following them in the present. Here, I will examine the changing family structure in Atwood´s novels, the disappearing traditional family values, and the marital relationships of the main characters, including the marital relationships of the protagonists´ parents.

3.1. Changing Family Values

In the three novels that are analyzed in this thesis, Atwood depicts different kinds of families which can be described as dysfunctional. Decidedly, in her books the nuclear family has negative connotations. When she depicts a nuclear family, the family members are unhappy and in constant fights. The family typically dissolves through the divorce of the partners, which seems to imply that traditional family values are disappearing. Additionally, Atwood introduces new structures of families, for example single mothers, single fathers, and gay couples. In all three novels discussed in this thesis, traditional family values are questioned in different ways; either by painting a negative picture of the nuclear family, showing its failure, or presenting new family structures. Although these themes are not very obvious when the novels are read, they permeate the whole stories, and therefore, leave place for analysis and discussion. It is important to maintain that Atwood does not claim that familial relationships are unimportant or unnecessary, but that following the norm of the nuclear family can be detrimental for individuals, and that families can take other forms apart from the typical nuclear family as well.

Just as the changes in size, formation, duration and dissolution of families have brought about a great disturbance in the West, so they have transformed the family values and family structure in Atwood´s North American and Canadian

societies. The first change is family size. Atwood´s families are all rather small, regardless of the time the stories are set in. The three main characters from *The Robber Bride*, Tony, Charis and Roz, have no siblings. Iris´s parents from *The Blind Assassin* have only two children, her sister Laura and her; thus their family is also a small one. Offred in *The Handmaid´s Tale* does not have any siblings, and Charis also has only one child, making her family a small one. Iris, although she had her daughter before the fifties when people had more children, has only one child. Thus, most families that Atwood depicts are small, which reflects the development in the societies that they are set in.

Interestingly, the children born in Atwood´s novels are not planned. The majority of the children are born out of accident, as the reader is informed: “Tony had come to suspect something of the sort: a pregnancy, a hasty wartime marriage. Her mother was a war bride, her father was a war husband, and she herself was a war baby. She was an accident” (*The Robber Bride* Atwood 174). Sadly enough, the same seems to be true for Charis. They were all war babies, accidents, as their parents would call them.

One of the reasons for small families in Atwood´s novels is the use of contraceptives. As the use of contraceptives became available for all women in the twentieth century, it also became possible to control the number of children they were having. Thus, the size of families changed radically, as reported in the background chapter. The same seems to be true for Atwood´s female characters. Tony from *The Robber Bride* has no children at all, although she does think of having some. Moreover, Offred´s mother from *The Handmaid´s Tale* had only Offred, although she could have had more children, had she wanted to. Consequently, it might be assumed that these characters used contraceptives.

Furthermore, women working outside the home also influences the size of the family in Atwood´s novels. The main characters in Atwood´s novels that are discussed in this thesis are mostly modern women, working outside the household, being fulfilled in different ways than through family life. Tony, for example, works as a university professor, and her career-orientation makes it difficult for her to have children. Although she does not mention her thoughts of having children to her husband West (*The Robber Bride* 199), her job as an

academic might be a reason for not having any. Further, Roz has three children, which makes her family the biggest in the contemporary society that Atwood portrays. Perhaps she would have had more children, if it were not for her magazine and all the work she has to do there. Additionally, Offred´s mother is fulfilled in other ways than by being a nourishing mother. Thus, the main reason for Atwood´s female characters to have few or no children at all may be that they find fulfillment in other places rather than their families.

An interesting notion when discussing marriages is always the reason for entering into matrimony. Unfortunately, the formation of marriages in Atwood´s novels is rarely based on love, but formed on the basis of interest. Mostly, it tends to be a premarital pregnancy, money, or power of some kind. Atwood typically portrays characters that have to marry because they are expecting a child. Thus, the reason for entering a marriage is not love. Tony is tired of listening to her father´s complaints: “if it weren´t for Tony he never would have married her mother, and if it weren´t for him, Tony never would have been born” (*The Robber Bride* 174). So, Tony´s parents married because they had a war baby, and it would have been immoral for them to stay together without forming a marriage. Also, it would have been difficult for a woman at that time to raise a child all by herself. Consequently, the reader is not surprised by the tensions and fights that exist between Tony´s parents. Indeed, Tony is amazed at the way West and Zenia love each other: “She has never been in the presence, before, of two people who are in love with each other” (*The Robber Bride* 178). It is rather obvious from this quote that love does not exist between her parents, and consequently, is not the reason for them to enter into matrimony.

Further, some couples marry out of other motives, for example to gain power. Iris in *The Blind Assassin* marries Richard on her father´s request, namely to save his factories. She could have turned Richard down; however, she feels obliged to help her father. In other words, she feels compelled to help herself and Laura. The reason for this is that Avilion is mortgaged, and the factories are also in debt. Richard in turn does not marry Iris out of love, either. He just needs a woman to be there by his side because of his political career, and also, to bear him children. Offred´s mother in *The Handmaid´s Tale* has a boyfriend out

of egotistic interest as well, namely to conceive a child. Offred never meets her father, because her mother did not live with him. She tells Offred that her father was only there to get her pregnant: “Not that your father wasn´t a nice guy and all, but he wasn´t up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. Just do the job, then you can bugger off, I said, I make a decent salary, I can afford daycare” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 131). Thus, Atwood´s couples frequently get a partner on the basis of interest.

On the other hand, some couples do form a life together (supposedly) out of love. Roz narrates the story of how her mother and father met, saying that “[m]aybe he fell in love with her, this screaming, silent woman who had come to his aid” (*The Robber Bride* 377). Also, Roz apparently marries Richard out of love for him. “If Roz had been able to get it over with, get Mitch out of her system, maybe she wouldn´t have married him. Wrong: she would have, because after that first evening she was in over her depth and no was not an option” (*The Robber Bride* 345). Throughout the novel, Roz narrates that she loves Mitch, even after his death, despite his behavior toward her. The reader suspects that Richard married Roz only for her money. “She knows by this time that her money has to have been a factor” (*The Robber Bride* 346). Some readers might think that Tony and West marry out of love for each other; however, it might also be the case that West agrees on being together with Tony, because he is afraid of being without Zenia. It is very interesting how Atwood depicts West´s “love”—if it may be called so—for Tony: “´You´re my best friend,´ West tells Tony, stroking her hair back from her forehead. ´I owe you a lot.´ Tony is touched by his gratitude, and too young to be suspicious of it” (*The Robber Bride* 199). Tony further narrates that Zenia is always a presence among them; however, that neither she nor West ever mentions her (*The Robber Bride* 199). West seems to be with Tony out of pity for himself, which is later confirmed when he leaves her for Zenia. Thus, some characters only supposedly marry out of love, which is verified afterwards by the portrayal of their problematic relationships.

The reader may assume that Liliana and Norval in *The Blind Assassin* marry out of love and mutual understanding. However, young people at the turn of the twentieth century who were in love were supposed to marry, although they

perhaps did not want to. Iris is told about the way her parents got to know each other by Reenie, who seems to have idealized both Liliana and Norval. Interestingly, Reenie retells Norval´s proposal to Liliana to Iris and Laura, which was set at an idyllic pond at wintertime, saying that Liliana did not reply immediately, which had to mean consent (*The Blind Assassin* 86). The narration of their proposal is definitely romanticized, and the reader may ask him- or herself whether all of it is true. Further, Iris retells what Reenie has told her: "Love, then marriage, then catastrophe. In Reenie´s version, it seemed inevitable" (*The Blind Assassin* 87). From this quote, the reader might assume that there was no love in the marriage, because, according to Reenie, love is an emotion that precedes marriage. Thus, Liliana and Norval may have loved each other before they married, but after they got married, the love seems to have disappeared.

It might be assumed that Offred and Luke are the only couple that truly married out of love for each other. Luke actually divorces his former wife in order to marry Offred. Offred´s best friend, Moira, was displeased about the fact that Luke was a married man when he was seeing Offred, saying that she "was poaching […] on another woman´s ground" (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 180). Furthermore, Offred narrates that she waited for him for two years, until he could "pry himself loose" (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 181). Although it may have been the case that Offred was stealing another woman´s husband, the two loved each other and married. Offred, now living in the totalitarian regime of Gilead, thinks of her husband and longs for his love: "I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name" (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 108). Here, it is evident that she still loves her husband, although they are not together anymore.

It is crucial to take a look at the duration of marriages and relationships between partners, and how they dissolve, in order to analyze the attitude toward traditional family values. The majority of marriages or relationships depicted in Atwood´s novels analyzed here do not last very long. Nearly all of Atwood´s relationships tend to end in divorce or breakup. Tony´s parents are one such example. Tony´s mother Anthea leaves Tony´s father because of their

unsatisfactory marital relationship. Similarly, Roz endures her husband´s unfaithfulness for many years, but leaves him in the end. Charis is left by her boyfriend Billy; however, Charis does not find out why he actually leaves her. Evidently, Zenia has a hand in it, which Charis suspects, but she never finds out what actually happened to him. Iris leaves her unfaithful husband Richard after many years of putting up with a marriage which was solely based on interest. Moreover, Offred´s mother leaves Offred´s father, never having the intentions of living with him. On the other hand, some marriages and relationships end in death. For instance, Charis´s father dies even before the birth of Charis, so she never gets the opportunity to meet him. Liliana´s and Norval´s marriage also end with the death of Liliana. Thus, numerous marriages and relationships end in divorce, breakup, or death.

Interestingly though, the majority of the marriages or relationships that end in Atwood´s novels, end even before the divorce or breakup is actualized. Most of the couples endure unsatisfactory years before they decide to leave each other. Iris´s parents´ marriage, for example, does not last very long, at least in the sense of them loving each other throughout their marital relationship. Their marriage lasts for at least ten years; however, Norval left to fight in the First World War soon after he and Liliana married. After he comes back from the war, they are both changed people. Norval starts drinking and seeing other women, while Liliana tries to please him in every possible way. Thus, it may be accurate to say that their marriage ends before Liliana´s death. Another example of a couple who does not stand each other even though they were married for a while are Tony´s parents. It is rather obvious to the reader that her parents detest each other, even before Tony´s mother decides to leave Tony´s father. Accordingly, it may be concluded that their love, if there had been any, dies even before the relationship of a couple ends.

Thus, it may be stated that these relationships come to an end because of new opportunities for these women, such as freedom or happiness. The women portrayed in marriages in Atwood´s novels that are examined here do not live a satisfactory life with their husband and children in a traditional nuclear family. Hence, De Beauvoir´s thought that marriage is oppressive for women, reinforcing sexual inequality, is certainly true for Atwood´s women, because

they do everything in order to please their families, neglecting their own happiness and wishes.

3.2. Atwood´s Dysfunctional Families

In chapter 2.1. it was stated that a nuclear family consists of a husband, a wife, and their children. Additionally, a nuclear family is supposed to bring satisfaction and respect to the couple and their offspring. However, Atwood illustrates societies in which families struggle to live together, couples who are unfaithful to each other, relationships between partners that are not based on love and mutual understanding. The majority of Atwood´s nuclear families are dissolved by separation. Charis from *The Robber Bride* talks about the nuclear family, saying that "[s]o much has changed. It´s the married people, now, who are considered immoral. *The nukes*, they are called, for the nuclear family. Radioactive, potentially lethal; a big leap from Home Sweet Home […]" (*The Robber Bride* 243). Atwood´s nuclear families, instead of providing a safe and sound environment to its members, are precisely the opposite; potentially fatal. Frequently, the family members in the novels analyzed here feel unsatisfied and unhappy. Rather than families creating loving surroundings, and being a safe haven to their members, Atwood´s characters perceive their families as detrimental.

Although Charis approves of the nuclear family, the society in which she lives has changed so much that those who adhere to traditional family values, by getting married, for instance, are laughed at. Interestingly though, Charis herself never marries, but only cohabits with her partner, Billy. Tony, for example, is skeptical about entering into matrimony, because of her parents´ disastrous marriage. She, too, lives together with West before they decide to get married. Roz, who marries before Tony, and is already pregnant with her first child at the time of Tony´s wedding, is seen as a sister by Tony, a person whom Tony could rely on. She says that Roz´s presence at her and West´s wedding "reassured [her]: although her own parents´ marriage was a disaster, marriage itself must be possible and even normal if Roz is doing it" (*The Robber Bride* 199). Hence, although marriage is not seen as the norm anymore, Atwood´s characters see it as something positive; something that can bring joy and fulfillment into their lives.

Interestingly though, Atwood´s societies have put up a façade of nuclear families, making people believe that a nuclear family is something sacred. So, even in *The Robber Bride*, where marriage is no longer seen as the norm, people do get married, going along with the trend in modern societies in the United States and Canada. Moreover, the families in *The Handmaid´s Tale*, for example, only seem to be nuclear. Since former diseases have made men sterile, it is very difficult for them to make women pregnant. Nevertheless, the state makes people believe that men cannot be sterile; therefore, a handmaid is brought to the family, in order for the husband to make her pregnant. So, what seems like a nuclear family is in fact nothing like a nuclear family with a mother, a father, and their children. The families in *The Handmaid´s Tale* are made up of a husband, a wife, children (if they have any), and a handmaid, who is necessary for this structure of families. It needs to be stated that the handmaid is sent away when a child is born, or if she cannot conceive a child. However, most families do have a handmaid for at least a few years, since it is difficult to become pregnant. In addition, people´s second marriages are against the law; therefore, it might be assumed that the regime wants the norm to be traditional nuclear families. Thus, the state has put up a façade for the population, and interestingly enough, people believe in it.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the situation is similar. Also here, the families are nuclear, but only on the outside. People in this novel appear to believe in the myth of the nuclear family, and they raise their children according to this myth. Reenie, Iris´s and Laura´s housekeeper, makes remarks about people who cheat on their wives, but Iris and Laura are brought up to be pure and obedient women, who are supposed to get married when they come of age. Moreover, it might be presumed that the parents of both Tony and Roz only stayed together because it was the custom to live in a marital relationship. These are just a few examples of the changes in family values. Traditional family values are not respected in Atwood´s novels, although the societies make people believe that the rules are not broken.

However, this pretense is ironic because even the people who are at the highest ranks, such as the Commanders and the Wives in *The Handmaid´s Tale,* constantly break rules, while they follow other rules just for the sake of the

façade. Offred´s Commander is just one example. He wants to meet Offred alone, which is strictly forbidden, but not for “kinky sex”, as one of her shopping partners expresses it, but just to talk and play board games. Surprisingly, he takes her to something like a brothel, which is even more forbidden, where she has to wear a costume, and here he actually wants to have kinky sex with her. This is the only place where men and women are allowed to intermingle; however, this is also ironic because it goes against their religious beliefs and is against the law. Like the Commander, the Wife breaks rules. She gives Offred the permission to sleep with Nick, the driver, which is against the strict rules set by the regime. Furthermore, in *The Blind Assassin*, Richard cheats on his wife Iris. Also, Roz´s husband in *The Robber Bride* cheats on her several times, which seems to be like a hobby to him. So, although the societies want the people to believe that the families are sacrosanct and that they all function properly, they are far from that.

Atwood´s families do not provide a safe environment to their members, although her societies imply that a nuclear family is the place where affection and safety are provided. In *The Robber Bride*, the parents of the three main characters all lived unhappily ever after. Roz´s mother lives with Roz but without her husband, who comes back to Canada after the Second World War and immediately takes his place as the patriarch of the family. The reader never notices his affection toward his wife, if affection ever existed between them. Tony´s parents´ marriage seems to be the most tragic one. Her parents appear to be miserable with each other, and in the end, her mother decides to leave her father. She dies a tragic death somewhere in South America, while her father commits suicide. Despite the fact that societies make people believe that a nuclear family is a safe haven to its members, Atwood´s novels show evidence that a nuclear family might not be necessary for a happy life anymore.

Atwood unravels crucial aspects of family life by shedding light on new constructs in today´s societies with the portrayal of couples without children, single mothers and fathers, and homosexual couples. *The Robber Bride* is a novel that depicts a society with a few, yet happy families. In this novel, there are several single mothers and single fathers, a couple without children, and a

gay couple. Atwood presents an encouraging outlook on homosexuality by the positive depiction of Larry and Boyce. Roz is happy that her daughters take Larry´s homosexuality easy: "for them, the fences once so firmly in place around the gender corrals are just a bunch of rusty old wire" (*The Robber Bride* 502). Although homosexuality is still not a given, even in the West, this passage by Atwood proves that the nuclear family is something that is constructed, like new structures of families in contemporary societies in the West. Likewise, Atwood illustrates that single parenthood and absent fathers are something normal by depicting Charis´s daughter, who says: "´[…] Mom, this is the twentieth century! Fathers come and go—a lot of kids on the Island didn´t have them. I know some people with three or four fathers! I mean, it could have been worse, right?´" (*The Robber Bride* 498). Consequently, she shows that different family structures are equally good as nuclear families.

Atwood´s portrayal of single parenthood in *The Handmaid´s Tale* is rather positive. She does mirror society´s negative views on single parents and mothers over thirty; however, it is clear that she ridicules those views.

> And stuff about how hard it was to be a single parent. Fuck that shit, I told them, I´ve started this and I´m going to finish it. At the hospital they wrote down *´Aged Primipara´* on the chart, I caught them in the act. That´s what they call you when it´s your first baby over thirty, *thirty* for godsake. Garbage I told them, biologically I´m twenty-two, I could run rings around you any day. (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 130)

Atwood´s opinion seems to be that it is not a problem for a woman to be single and still be a mother. Thus, a positive connotation is put on all of these modern family structures, showing that the norm does not have to be the nuclear family only. Atwood may be saying that, although life can be difficult without a partner, it can as well be satisfactory.

3.3. Atwood´s Children

> "My advice is simple: Keep harsh words and sour thoughts entirely between the adults. Your kids are little sponges, soaking up the energy you put out. Their grown hearts will be full of the things they hear as children. And their future will be shaped by the decisions you make. […]" Mary Katherine Backstrom (Wong 1+)

> "My parents went through a divorce when I was four. I was young enough to not fully understand the ramifications but old enough to resent my father for it. During those early times, I wish my father would have decided to choose love and find a way to stay in our lives. When my mother was angry beyond

> belief, I wish she would have decided to choose love and let us talk to my father on the phone. What I wish my parents knew – and what I want parents to know now – is that even though a marriage is over, kids still love and need both of you in their lives. If you can find a way to co-exist (even if it's facilitated through the courts), do it. I wish someone showed my parents that love isn't a feeling. It's a decision." Kimanzi Constable (Wong 1+)

These two authors have written what they wished their parents should have known at the time of their divorce. Their quotes verbalize what Atwood´s characters are feeling and going through. Atwood´s characters have problems in their relationships with their parents, something that also affects them in their adulthood.

As Tyson claims, the family is the most important place for people´s early emotional experiences; however, if these experiences are negative, they will leave negative traces in the individual. A crucial aspect of a child-parent relationship is how this relationship works. Atwood´s families are dysfunctional and characterized by emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. The emotional neglect of children can be demonstrated in the ways parents show emotions toward their children, including how they speak to them, and how they treat them. An additional indicator of emotional neglect of children could be that the parents´ work or hobby is more important to them than their relationship with their children. Children in Atwood´s families seem to be unhappy, neglected, and emotionally abused. When her characters remember their childhoods in flashback, their memories are not a bed of roses, but rather, are filled with pain and trauma. PTSD seems to be a frequent problem that Atwood´s characters are suffering from. Atwood mirrors her concern for the lack of attention parents give their children in many of her characters.

It is striking that nearly all of the characters feel unloved by their parents. "Home", a key word when talking about the dynamics in a family, ought to be a place of protection to its members. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines "home" as "the place where you came from or where you usually live, especially when this is the place where you feel happy and comfortable" (778). Thus, home does not have to be the place where a person lived as a child with his or her family. Interestingly though, Atwood´s homes do

not provide a feeling of happiness and comfort, as should be the case. Tony says that

> [a]fter her mother died [she] went to boarding school, by her own request. She´d wanted to get out of the house, which she did not think of as home, where her father lurked and drank and followed her around, clearing his throat as if to start a conversation. She didn´t want to hear what he had to say. (*The Robber Bride* 174)

Sadly enough, the place that should have provided her with comfort, love, security and satisfaction, resembles more of an orphanage than a home. Similarly, Charis does not feel comfort and love from her own mother, believing that she was born to the wrong parents, as her grandmother says is possible (*The Robber Bride* 257). Further, Charis remembers that she "was used to smiling even when she didn´t feel like it" (*The Robber Bride* 258). Thus, home for Tony and Charis is not a place that "provides children an emotional environment in which their own personalities are nurtured and formed" (Thornton 247), but a place where they feel unloved and unwelcome. Other characters also feel rather unloved and unwelcome in their childhood homes. Below, a discussion of each of the main characters´ identity formation follows.

3.3.1. Offred

The only character that seems to have been happy as a child is Offred in *The Handmaid´s Tale*. Despite this, Offred and her mother have their differences and fights. "No mother is ever, completely, a child´s idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well" (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 190). Although her mother loves her, she has a life of her own; she is fulfilled in other ways than through motherhood. Offred wants more routine in their daily life, probably as other children her age have (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 190). Her mother is used to moving around a lot, is politically active, and she frequently behaves like a young person, something that Offred despises. All of this is exasperating for her. Offred thinks: "I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy" (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 132). Her mother wants her to be more like herself and to behave like she does; however, Offred does not want that. As an adult, Offred remembers her mother saying that despite their contrasting characters, they did not do badly

(*The Handmaid´s Tale* 190). Most of all, Offred would like to be close to her mother in order to tell her that she now knows this, but it is too late now.

Offred´s relationship to her mother has its ups and downs, but it can be stated that, on the whole, she had a happy and healthy childhood. Nevertheless, she is unhappy about her mother´s political activism; she wants her mother to be more stable, to behave like her friends´ mothers, and to not move all the time. The effect of this is that she tries to be more feminine, and do the opposite things of what her mother tells her to do. She does not learn to appreciate the things her mother fought for so that her generation could have a better life. Further, her relationship to her father is reduced to the receiving of "Christmas cards" (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 131). Offred´s mother sometimes talks of her father; however, she makes it clear to her daughter that he is not needed in their lives. Interestingly, as recounted above, Offred´s relationship with her mother is depicted rather positively, and she seems content without having had a father around. However, the result of insufficient attention Offred receives from her mother, and the lack of a father-figure in her life, might have made it difficult for her to be alone. Thus, she shatters another relationship by getting involved with a married man. Also, she might have yearned for love from a father-figure, but having not received it from a father, she does not see it as problematic to take another woman´s husband. Instead of saying no to herself and looking for someone else to love, she has to have Luke, a married man.

Interestingly, despite all cruelty and injustice Offred goes through in Gilead, she still possesses humane qualities. For instance, she feels sorry for the Commander when she gets arrested, although she knows that he does not deserve it (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 306). Offred´s life after her last appearance in the novel is not revealed to the reader. Her tale of her life in Gilead survives, yet the reader does not find out what happens to her after the Eyes take her away. The reader knows that she suffers in Gilead; however, whether she survives the regime or not, is a mystery to the reader. Thus, it cannot be concluded whether life in a polygamy (de)forms Offred´s identity, although it might be stated that it had a negative effect on her identity at the time when she lived in Gilead.

3.3.2. Iris

Iris and her sister Laura do not feel happy at Avilion, the place where they live with their family. They are constantly reprimanded for doing things the wrong way, they are never hugged or kissed by their parents, and are practically raised by their housekeeper. Their mother is constantly sick while their father is frequently drunk, or not at home. It may be the case that they are loved by their parents; however, this emotion is not spoken of, neither by the mother, nor the father (*The Blind Assassin* 126). As for Iris and Laura, no matter how many questions they have, they are never given answers to them (*The Blind Assassin* 167). Iris remembers that she wants her mother to hold and reassure her; nevertheless, she recounts that her mother "had always been instructive rather than cherishing" (*The Blind Assassin* 105). It may be assumed that this has a negative effect on Iris´s emotions. Further, Iris feels that she is obstructed from doing what she wishes to do by all the older people around her, including Reenie (*The Blind Assassin* 220). Iris is constantly told that she has to be a good sister to Laura, and take care of her, because she is the younger one, which is a burden to Iris (*The Blind Assassin* 116). Thus, Iris feels that her mother loves Laura more than she loves her (*The Blind Assassin* 116). Instead of providing a loving home for Iris and her sister, their parents neglect them and raise them according to strict rules only.

The emotions that Iris has for her father are a mixture of reverence and fear. Iris´s father does not criticize her, nor does he praise her endeavors to learn new things, though he wants her to be taught the "right" subjects, such as Latin, mathematics, and so forth. A week before Iris´s mother dies, she tells Iris that her father loves her "underneath it all". This kind of love, which is "underneath it all", is a burden to Iris, not happiness (*The Blind Assassin* 126). Thus, the reader may assume that Iris´s father does not show his emotions; more specifically, he puts on a negative appearance, and behaves like a strange person toward his family members. Also, he controls what Iris is supposed to wear, and what she is allowed to do. Iris complains that she is not allowed to travel, although she longs for it (*The Blind Assassin* 220). He is an authority figure in the lives of Iris and Laura, exactly as Richard is to them when Iris marries him. It is important to emphasize that Iris cares for her father, something that might be assumed from this quote: "It hurt me to see my father

agreeing with sentiments I felt he didn´t share" (*The Blind Assassin* 275). As for marrying her off to Richard, Iris says that he did what he thought was best for her and Laura, though she thinks that he was ashamed of being in debt, in other words, of being forced to ask her to marry Richard for this reason (*The Blind Assassin* 276-277). Thus, it might be concluded that Iris feels rather neglected by her father, and that their relationship is not based on love and understanding.

The traumatic events of Atwood´s characters are like a shadow in their lives. Iris´s father, for instance, got wounded in the war, and his one bad eye and one bad leg are a vital part of him.

> He drank and paced the floor, his bad foot dragging. […] Light step, heavy step, light step, heavy step, like an animal with one foot in a trap. Groaning and muffled shouts. […] Then there would be footsteps descending; then silence, a black outline looming outside the closed oblong of my bedroom door. I couldn´t see him there, but I could feel him, a shambling monster with one eye, so sad. I´d become used to the sounds, I didn´t think he would ever hurt me, but I treated him gingerly all the same. (*The Blind Assassin* 97)

Iris sees her father as a monster, for whom she shows wary respect, though she sees him as one who would not hurt her. The traumatic experience of her father affects all the family members, not only him. Thus, Iris is careful of what she does and says in front of him, in order to keep him calm. Also, Iris´s sister Laura drives off a bridge, committing suicide, something that may have caused an even greater trauma in Iris, especially after finding out what Richard had done to her sister. Iris has constant flashbacks, remembering her father and his wounded leg and missing eye, but also thinking of her sister Laura and the way she died. Iris´s grief over her mother´s death is compared to emptiness and absence. "I did remember the wrongness of her bed when she was suddenly no longer in it: how empty it had seemed. […] I could remember her absence, now, much better than her presence" (*The Blind Assassin* 173-174). Consequently, several experiences in Iris´s childhood (de)form her identity.

Iris employs different defenses in her childhood, in order to repress the negative feelings that she has. She uses denial, a defense mechanism that helps her repress the fact that Laura is sexually abused by their tutor, Mr. Erskine (*The Blind Assassin* 200). She also makes use of displacement, by being cruel to

Laura (*The Blind Assassin* 117). This may be the effect of Iris´s thoughts that her mother loves her sister more than she loves her. Once an adult, Iris does not notice that her sister is being sexually abused by her husband, Richard (*The Blind Assassin* 464). The effects of Iris´s strained relationship with her father may be that she endures a husband who is similar to her own father. Her father neglects her emotionally, and so does her husband, who also abuses her both physically and sexually. She may be thinking that she deserves to be punished in some way, and for this reason, endures an abusive husband for many years. However, she manages to cut herself loose from an abusive husband and cruel sister-in-law, even though she suffers from several emotional problems.

All the traumas that Iris has to endure play a great role in her life. Iris has low self-esteem, a core issue that makes her think of herself as insignificant and unworthy of attention. Although she knows that both her husband and her sister-in-law are cruel and unfair toward her, she only leaves her husband after she finds out that he has been sexually abusing Laura. Also, she thinks that she is unworthy of Sabrina´s attention. “But on second glance – no, on third – it was not Sabrina at all; only some stranger. Who am I anyway, to deserve such a miraculous outcome? How can I expect it?” (*The Blind Assassin* 167). In her adulthood, Iris suffers from her disastrous marriage to Richard, and the events that follow Laura´s suicide. She tells herself that Aimee´s death is not her fault; however, on other occasions she understands why Sabrina does not want to speak to her. As already mentioned, she is in denial that Laura is sexually abused by Richard, something that she could have found out, had she wanted to. All of these events haunt her in her adulthood, and she cannot do anything to change the past. Unfortunately, Iris suffers from the choices she made when she was younger, and thus, does not prosper after she has left her abusive husband.

3.3.3. Tony

Tony in *The Robber Bride* also feels that her parents fail to give her the attention that she needs, her mother especially. Her relationship with her mother is characterized primarily by negative emotions. Tony´s mother, whom Tony calls Anthea, does not express her love for Tony in the first person, but in the third, as if her “Mother is someone else” (*The Robber Bride* 156). The

reader may only guess that Tony´s mother was not happy about having a child that she did not wish for, and unhappy also about moving across the ocean; however, it may be assumed that she could have done more to improve her relationship with Tony. Sadly, Tony narrates a memory of her mother telling her that she was a premature baby who had to be kept in an incubator for a few days after her birth. Her mother would say this with regret in her voice, "as if it was a pity that she was eventually taken out […]" (*The Robber Bride* 151). From Tony´s viewpoint, she was motherless, not only during her first days in the incubator, but even after that. Tony´s mother does not abuse Tony verbally, but blames her more subtly for her problems. Also, she shames Tony frequently. When Tony does not want to play the piano in front of her mother´s bridge club friends, her mother mocks her by putting up an appearance of scorn and hopelessness (*The Robber Bride* 159). At one point, Tony longs for the relationship that existed between her mother and herself when she was a baby; however, she does not receive this kind of affection from her mother anymore (*The Robber Bride* 157). Also, Tony is sometimes physically abused by her mother. She says that her mother slaps, or shakes her, if she does not comply with her commands (*The Robber Bride* 152). Further, Tony is forced to play the piano because her mother "wants her safely occupied, somewhere out of the way" (*The Robber Bride* 155). The accomplishment of Tony´s chores, is in Tony´s eyes, a reason for receiving love from her mother; however, it does not seem to work (*The Robber Bride* 155-156). Evidently, Tony feels rather neglected and unloved by her mother.

The relationship between Tony and her father seems to be slightly better than the relationship that she has with her mother. Atwood depicts their bond by showing the lack of communication that they have, yet the respect that Tony has to show toward her father. For instance, Tony knows that she has to knock at the door if she wants to go inside her father´s office, and that she needs to wait for her father to begin talking to her. On the one hand, he does not shame her or call her names as her mother does; while, on the other hand, he makes it clear to her that other things are more important to him than she is. Her father wished for a boy, so she is in some sense a second grade child. Tony thinks: "What he does with these pencils is beyond her, but she knows that it´s

something of the utmost importance. More important—for instance—than she is" (*The Robber Bride* 159). After her mother leaves, Tony remembers that it was worse than when her mother was there. She tries to impress her father in different ways, in order to receive affection and love, something that should be given. When her mother dies, Tony decides to leave for boarding school, mostly in order to stay away from her father, who had by then started drinking. However, she still wants to show him love, and to receive love in return. Unfortunately, she feels rejected and intimidated by her own father.

In a sound and happy marriage, communication is very crucial. As explained in chapter 2.2., if the partners do not communicate with each other, this will lead to further problems and fights. Tony remembers only negative aspects of her parents´ marital relationship. They do not spare Tony their conflicts, but frequently argue in front of her. Thus, Tony is convinced that her parents´ marriage was a "disaster" (*The Robber Bride* 199). Tony´s mother does not care for the self-respect of her husband, but uses every possible situation to provoke him, causing more hostility between them. Atwood does not portray Tony´s father as a provoking man; however, the reader does not find out whether he does anything to appease their arguments, or to improve their marriage. Their communication is often characterized by contempt. Although Tony´s mother is the one who frequently starts their arguments, neither of the spouses do anything to reconcile. Moreover, Atwood illustrates their looks and voices in order to portray the resentment and grudges that they harbor against each other. "It´s the voice she uses for mimicking happiness, when she´s angry with Tony´s father and wants to show him she doesn´t care" (*The Robber Bride* 156-157). Their hostility and disrespect toward each other is brilliantly depicted in the following passage

> ´At the end it was just children,´ says Griff. ´Children in men´s uniforms. We were killing children.´
> ´Lucky you,´ says Anthea lightly. ´That must have made it smoother for you.´ ´It didn´t,´ says Tony´s father. They stare at each other as if no one else is in the room: tense and measuring. (*The Robber Bride* 159)

This passage is a typical example of Tony´s parents´ relationship, which is a usual everyday situation for them.

Tony´s close family members were involved in traumatic events. First, both of her parents were involved in traumatic experiences in their childhood, which they recounted to Tony when she was herself a child. Second, her mother drowns, and her father commits suicide by shooting himself in the head. Luckily, Ethel, the housekeeper, is the one who finds her father, not Tony. For Tony, the absence of her mother is compared to emptiness.

> […] Tony is at a loss: how can she describe emptiness? Acres of vacancy, which Tony filled up with whatever she could, with knowledge, with dates and facts, more and more of them, pouring them into her head to silence the echoes. Because whatever had been lacking when Anthea was there, it was much worse now that she wasn´t. Anthea was her own absence. She hovered just out of reach, a tantalizing wraith, an *almost*, endowed with a sort of gauzy flesh by Tony´s longing for her. (*The Robber Bride* 170-171)

Thus, Atwood´s readers understand what kind of effect emotional neglect has on children, as well as the death or absence of a parent, especially a mother.

Tony uses different strategies in order to survive the traumas in her childhood. She starts calling herself Tnomerf Ynot (*The Robber Bride* 153), using a reversed language for herself. Interestingly, Atwood contrasts Tony´s parents´ fights to war battles. Tony apparently uses this strategy to avoid hearing what her parents are saying to each other during their fights (*The Robber Bride* 163). She creates a whole battle, in which she features as the leader. This helps her evade her parents´ fights; however, she is aware that they have an argument. “In the morning there will be broken glass” (*The Robber Bride* 164). As a child, Tony was able to repress their fights for a short time, although she knew that they were having aggressive arguments. Her method in dealing with these traumatic experiences may have turned Tony into a successful historian.

It is common knowledge that people repress difficult events that they do not want to deal with into the unconscious. Thus, Tony says to the intruding memory of her mother: “[b]egone, Mother” (*The Robber Bride* 9). She seems to be in denial that the traumatic events of her childhood bother her. She says that she does not think about her mother in “trailing wet skirts and salt water, her hair hanging over her face like seaweed”, or of her father, “with half of his head blown off, still with something to tell” (*The Robber Bride* 175). On another

occasion, already in college, Tony narrates that she sang “Oh my darling Clementine” backwards to her colleagues.

> The truth was that she didn´t find it funny, this song about a woman who had drowned in a ludicrous fashion, who was not mourned, who was ultimately forgotten. She found it sad. *Lost and gone forever*. Why did they laugh? (*The Robber Bride* 130)

Her own mother dies in this way, and in addition, is not mourned. Her mother´s boyfriend only sends her the ashes, which Tony keeps for a long time. It seems that she represses the fact that she misses her mother, which is made rather evident by the above quote. Consequently, repression is a common problem of Tony´s.

The effects of Tony´s negative childhood experiences are both positive and negative. On the one hand, she manages to concentrate on a subject that she likes, and becomes a history professor at a university. On the other hand, she becomes rather introverted and keeps to herself in her college dormitory. One of Tony´s core conflicts is fear of abandonment, meaning that she is afraid of being left alone. She avoids getting into intimate relationships, something that is noticed when she ponders on the option of becoming West´s girlfriend. Up until her relationship with West, she had never had an intimate relationship with a man. Thus, her other core issue is fear of intimacy, believing that emotional closeness will destroy her. Her lack of self-confidence and willingness to tolerate emotional abuse by men may have been the consequences of having grown up in a dysfunctional family.

Tony, although she still has psychological issues which she has not dealt with, is doing fairly well. The three friends, Tony, Charis, and Roz, help each other out and manage to get out of difficult situations by supporting each other. Also, Tony cares for other people, despite the fact that they hurt her. So, she lets West come back to her, and when Zenia dies, she scatters her ashes in the lake together with Charis and Roz. She even does Zenia justice by putting a sprig of a flower, as a token of Zenia´s bravery in the war that she fought, in her scrapbook (*The Robber Bride* 519). Thus, she is rather fair toward the individuals who have hurt her, and she does rather well despite her emotional difficulties.

3.3.4. Roz

Roz, the third character from *The Robber Bride*, also has a difficult relationship with her mother. Her mother obviously does not care about Roz´s needs, but only about the chores that need to be taken care of in the apartment house. Unfortunately, Roz feels contempt for her mother because of the way she behaves toward her. She remembers the way her mother would scream at her from the foot of the stairs, telling her to stop reading at night. Also, Roz thought of herself as "Roz the toilet cleaner, Roz the down-market Cinderella, sullenly scrubbing. *You eat here*, said her mother, *so you help out*" (*The Robber Bride* 80). Moreover, Roz spends a lot of her pastime with Mrs.Morley, who was one of the residents in the apartment house, and who calls Roz "´honey´" and "´sweetie´", something that her mother never does (*The Robber Bride* 357). Obviously, Roz yearns for more affection and devotion from her mother; however, she never receives it. Verbal abuse of Roz is a common characteristic of Roz´s relationship with her mother. She calls Roz a "sneaky brat" for reading books at night (*The Robber Bride* 80). Lack of understanding for what Roz needs in her childhood mars the relationship between her mother and her.

Roz´s father, a mysterious, yet significant man, is a person who has a great influence on Roz´s identity formation. He is absent during the most part of her early childhood, living in Europe during the Second World War, but he still participates in the upbringing of Roz. As he comes back from Europe, he mysteriously "turn[s] rags into riches" (*The Robber Bride* 80). He comes back as a hero who had apparently done great deeds during the war, such as saving the lives of many people; however to Roz he is "the Great Unknown" (*The Robber Bride* 352). It seems that her father swindled money and valuables from refugees, although he says that helped Jews escape the war. He is celebrated as a hero by some people for this, among them Roz´s two uncles. As soon as Roz´s father comes back from the war, he replaces her mother in the respect that Roz is supposed to show her mother, and admiration Roz shows her father. She still has to help out around the house, although, as Roz remarks, "[…] [her] father never has to clean up. ´Help your mother,´ he tells Roz, ´in this family we help each other´; but Roz doesn´t see him helping" (*The Robber Bride* 368). She says that it "wasn´t that easy, growing up with one hero and one martyr. It

didn´t leave much of a role for her" (*The Robber Bride* 80). Her father takes his place as the patriarch of the family, who always has to be asked for permission, who needs to be respected; however, he is unfaithful to Roz´s mother. He does not earn his respect in the family, as Roz´s mother might have done. Despite this, Roz says that he was the one that she admired, even though he might have been a "scoundrel" (*The Robber Bride* 376). Though Roz´s father is an odd person, she cherishes him more than she cherishes her mother.

Roz´s parents, although they supposedly married out of love for each other, also have frequent arguments. The first time that Roz hears them fight is when Roz´s mother finds out about her father´s mistress. Here, anger on the side of Roz´s mother is portrayed, while Roz´s father is defending himself. He pretends to be sorry, and tries to put things right; however, his smile at Roz betrays him: "Then she knows that all of this—his misery, his hangdog air—is an act, or partly an act, and that he´s all right really" (*The Robber Bride* 375). The reader can easily realize that Roz´s father has little or no respect at all for Roz´s mother. At other occasions, Roz´s mother´s feelings toward her husband are shown rather subtly. She just "clenches her lips and says nothing" (*The Robber Bride* 368), trying to avoid arguments. Roz´s parents have their disagreements; however, they do not leave each other, as opposed to Tony´s parents. Yet, Roz´s mother is not happy, and as for her father, he has his work and mistresses, and a warm home to come back to, which apparently makes him content enough.

While growing up, Roz learns to deal with the difficulties in her childhood. She reads books at night, probably in order to escape into a fantasy from all the chores that she has to do at home. At school, Roz is teased for being Catholic, and then, when her father comes home, for being Jewish. Although she does not manage to make friends, she manages to joke about everything, something that makes her valued by some people. She is rather outgoing, despite her difficulties to fit in. As an adult, she shows that her character traits helped her become so successful. Also, she changes her name and identity when her father returns to Canada, from Rosalind Greenwood to Roz Grunwald, and once more, when she marries Mitch, to Roz Andrews. These few examples may have

been coping strategies that Roz used in order to escape emotional problems in her childhood.

Roz´s mother teaches Roz the values of a clean house, by showing her worn hands; however, this is not of importance to Roz (*The Robber Bride* 355). On the other hand, her father teaches her business, which later turns her into a successful woman (*The Robber Bride* 340). The constant nagging of Roz´s mother makes Roz dislike her, while she likes her father, who pretends to be a hero but is in reality a criminal. Roz´s father is more affectionate toward Roz than her mother is, although her parents´ relationship is a disaster. This might have helped Roz to be a good parent, despite the fact that she herself had a disastrous marriage. Roz´s core issue is that she has an unstable sense of self, meaning that she finds it difficult to sustain a feeling of her individuality. She frequently changes her looks, her clothing style, and also the decoration in the home. The question remains, whether Roz lets her husband treat her like a doorstop because she had seen her parents´ marriage work in the same way, or because she feels insecure about herself. Further effects of Roz´s difficult childhood may be lack of self-confidence and self-worth. Other core conflicts of Roz´s are that she fears to be deserted by her husband, and that she cannot trust him. She, like Tony, is willing to endure an abusive relationship, although she could end it, something that she does only in the end. Roz does everything for her husband, even though he does not deserve it, exactly as her mother did when her parents were alive.

Despite Roz´s rather difficult childhood, she prospers very well. As already mentioned, her father teaches her business, which helps her run her magazine. As she has three children of her own, she has the need to protect her friends as well, though she knows that they are not small children.

> She wants to spread her hen wings over them, reassure them, tell them that everything will be all right, they just have to be courageous; but these are grown-ups she´s dealing with, both of them smarter than she is in their different ways, and she knows they wouldn´t believe a word of it. (*The Robber Bride* 113)

Interestingly, although Roz almost commits suicide after the death of her husband, she copes rather well afterwards. Her friends, Tony and Charis, are

there to help and support her, and she gets better. Obviously, she has her good and bad times as all people do, but considering her childhood and later, her devastating marriage, she is doing relatively fine.

3.3.5. Charis

Charis is another character who is severely abused and neglected by the people who are the closest to her. Her mother blames Charis for the situation which she is in, which Charis overhears by listening to Aunt Vi. Charis appears to be an illegitimate child, a fact that they try to beat around the bush about in front of Charis: “There was something in Aunt Vi´s tone of voice that alerted Karen: she was an embarrassment, someone who could only be spoken of obliquely. She wasn´t quite an orphan but she had the taint of one” (*The Robber Bride* 258). Charis remembers that her mother seemed to require a long rest in the summer, “because of her nerves”, recollecting that her mother and Aunt Vi behaved as if it was Charis´s fault that her mother was depressed (*The Robber Bride* 258). Sadly, Charis has to take all the blame for her mother´s psychological problems.

Charis´s mother probably suffers from severe depression, having lost a partner, and being forced to raise Charis on her own. This should certainly not be a reason for physically abusing her daughter; however, as recounted above, Charis is a disgrace because she is illegitimate. Charis´s mother obviously abuses Charis because of her own problems, not because Charis has done something wrong, which is made evident in this passage:

> Karen cried a lot when her mother hit her, not just because it hurt but because she was supposed to show that she was sorry, although she was confused about why. Also, if she didn´t cry her mother would keep right on hitting her until she did. *You hard girl!* But she had to stop at the right moment or her mother would hit her for crying. (*The Robber Bride* 260)

Charis does not know why her mother hits her, and she has to know the mood swings of her mother, who would otherwise continue hitting her. Interestingly, Charis makes herself understand her mother´s behavior, because her mother apologizes for hitting her, and tells her that she loves her. She is not allowed to complain about the wounds which she receives when her mother hits her. However, something that changes Charis forever is the sexual assault by Uncle

Vern. Charis goes to live with her aunt and uncle after her mother dies, where her uncle abuses her sexually. “It hurts, but Karen knows that people who love you can do painful things to you, and she tries hard to believe that he does love her. He says he does. ´Your old uncle loves you,´ he tells her, scraping his face against hers” (*The Robber Bride* 288). Apart from the physical and sexual abuse that Charis endures, she also suffers from verbal abuse. Charis´s mother calls her names, by telling her that she is “[s]tupid” or a “hard girl” (*The Robber Bride* 259-260).

Atwood´s characters learn how to deal with their traumatic childhoods by creating new identities for themselves. This reveals that the protagonists in Atwood´s novels seem to be negatively affected by their dysfunctional relationships. During Charis´s time at her aunt and uncle´s, she decides to become Charis. “After the third time Karen knows she is trapped. All she can do is split in two; all she can do is turn into Charis, and float out of her body and watch Karen, left behind with no words, flailing and sobbing” (*The Robber Bride* 291). Charis sees no way out of her trauma than by going out of her body and watching herself from a safe spot.

As an adult, Charis is a rather withdrawn person. She is afraid of hurting other people, and she frequently yearns to make everyone else happy, while neglecting herself. Charis´s core conflict is certainly low self-esteem. As a college student, “[s]he had stayed in the shadows, but it turned out that Zenia at least had spotted her there and had considered her worthy of notice, and she was touched” (*The Robber Bride* 250). Thus, Charis needs someone to notice her and give her compliments, something that she only receives from her grandmother. In her adulthood, Charis represses her traumas into the unconscious. She has a dream in which Karen, her former self, wants to speak, although Charis does not want to let her into her life again (*The Robber Bride* 256). A further effect of Charis´s childhood abuse may be that she feels that she can receive love by devotion and labor, something that is seen in her relationship with both Billy and Zenia. She takes care of Billy and lets him live with her, although he does not pay his own bills, and she lets him do things to her with which she feels uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, although Charis has been affected negatively by her childhood abuse, she still possesses positive traits. She is a nice person who manages to help other people. When she sees Zenia with a black eye in one of her yoga classes, she wants to heal her, even though she does not remember her. And, indeed, she helps her, as she helps other people as well. After the yoga classes on Fridays, she lends a hand at the “Furrows Food Co-op” (*The Robber Bride* 222). Consequently, she manages to prosper despite the traumatic experiences from her childhood.

3.3.6. Zenia

Zenia is a rather shifting character, who probably uses lies and conceit in order to gain the confidence of her friends. She lies about having had several different childhoods, seeking compassion and sympathy from other people. So, the reader does not actually know what her childhood was like. To Tony she says that she was a White Russian child prostitute (*The Robber Bride* 181-182), while Charis learns of her Roumanian gypsy mother, who was stoned to death for being a spiritualist (*The Robber Bride* 301). To Roz she tells that she was saved by Roz´s father during the Second World War, because she and her family were Jewish (*The Robber Bride* 399). West gets to know a frigid Zenia, who was sexually molested by a Greek priest in her childhood (*The Robber Bride* 449). Zenia´s childhood stories, probably well fabricated lies, are much worse than either of the three friends’ childhood experiences. Interestingly, Tony notices that Zenia talks of her past “as if it´s a piece of casual gossip” (*The Robber Bride* 182). Moreover, Roz observes how contemporary the picture of Zenia´s family looks like, but she does not ask her about the accuracy of it (*The Robber Bride* 398). The fact remains that Zenia is rather unstable; nobody knows her real identity or her past, she never has a steady job, she constantly borrows money, and even steals it, and she also steals other women´s partners. Thus, it might be the case that her childhood traumas deformed her to the extent that she becomes a rather unstable person, who has the need to lie herself into other people´s lives, in order to receive their confidence, affection, money, a place to stay, and even a job (Roz´s magazine). Although she has a rather high self-esteem, she certainly does seem to need other people in order to gain things that are of importance to her, namely money, a roof over her head, and a workplace.

4. Atwood´s Marriages

Atwood enables her female characters to explore their identities in order to find out what carries meaning in their lives. Her female characters frequently suffer from obligations set by patriarchal cultures, regardless of what time she portrays. A woman´s duty in Atwood´s novels is, first and foremost, being an obedient wife. Her novels are about patriarchal societies in which selfless wives do everything to please their husbands. However, her portrayal of families shows the ineffectiveness of patriarchal structures. Her female characters are drowned by the wishes of their husbands, so that they are no longer able to recognize what makes them happy. It may be the case that some of Atwood´s characters want to be married and fulfill the wishes of their husbands; however, the husbands who are selfish seem to be the problem in dysfunctional families. As stated in the second chapter, the problem for women has for a long time been to find a balance between self-fulfillment and obligations within the family (Patterson 88). A patriarchal society makes it difficult for women to work and take care of their family at the same time. Couples nowadays enter matrimony because of love, mutual understanding, and affection, so it might be obvious that both spouses need to put an effort in the relationship. Atwood mirrors the struggles of today´s modern women in her female characters that try to manage their marriages, families, and work outside the home. Nevertheless, the question is whether they are fulfilled by these duties. Here, I will take a look at how female duties imposed on women by patriarchy affect the happiness and self-fulfillment of women.

4.1. Female Duties, Satisfaction, and Self-Expression in *The Handmaid´s Tale*

4.1.1. Female Duties

In *The Handmaid´s Tale* Atwood portrays the subordination of women to men in pre-Gileadean society in which pornography and rapes of women were widespread incidents. Offred´s mother used to participate in the burning of pornographic magazines and demonstrations for the rights of women. Women did have jobs and were free to express their views; nevertheless, the prevalent

norm for women was to get married, and preferably, to have children before their thirties. So, when the leaders of Gilead decided to make a coup, they needed to make changes that would tie women to their homes. The regime fired all female employees from their workplaces, and they froze their bank accounts, making it impossible for them to use their money. Moira tells Offred that "[w]omen can´t hold property anymore […]" and that Luke can use her bank card instead of her (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 187-188). Cooke claims that "[a]lthough Gilead was a society developed to protect women, Atwood´s readers must wonder just which women it protects and what kind of protection it provides" (127), because most women do not feel protected in Gilead. Nearly all women in *The Handmaid´s Tale* are afraid of making a mistake, which they know will be the path to their death or a life in the toxic Colonies. Women in Gilead are inferior to men on the pretense of being protected by males. Even after Gilead, women seem to be inferior to men. Professor Pieixoto, who is the key speaker at a symposium on Gilead, makes fun of women, by referring to "´The Underground Femaleroad´" as "´The Underground Frailroad´" (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 313). As he says this, the audience laughs and groans (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 313), and one might ask oneself why anyone would come up with such a joke about women, even in something that we may call a rather modern and sophisticated society.

In *The Handmaid´s Tale* Atwood depicts female duties and responsibilities ironically. She mirrors her concern for women in our contemporary societies, who are only valued for their abilities to nurture and obey in Offred, Fred´s handmaid: "It´s up to me to repay the team, justify my food and keep, like a queen ant with eggs" (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 145). Offred thinks of her duty as a handmaid, which is to give birth to a healthy child; however, not for herself, but for the Commander and his Wife. Women are literally objects that are used for the "production" of more children. Offred ponders on her role as a handmaid:

> 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 by us, there are to be no toeholds for love. We are *two-legged wombs*; that´s all: *sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices* [emphasis added]. (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 146)

Atwood uses figures of speech and irony in order to convey her thoughts of what women are in the majority of contemporary societies, even those in the

West. Offred is aware of her duties at the Commander´s office, knowing that she cannot reject him. Politely enough, the Commander says: “I´d like you to play a game of Scrabble with me” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 148). However, although both of them have crossed a forbidden territory, Offred understands that she has to be submissive.

Paradoxically enough, the Commander´s Wife as well is used as an object in the Republic of Gilead. As second marriages and divorces are illegal now, the Commander and the Wife cannot divorce. Thus, her role in their family, as well as in the society of Gilead, is to perform her duties as the Commander´s wife. Her presence at the Ceremony is purely symbolical, although it is her duty to be there. Other duties of the Wives are to participate at births, particicutions (mass killings of rapists), and mass weddings, among other things. They have no right to work or political power in the regime. They, too, are inferior to the men in Gileadean society. Interestingly, they are given mansions to govern, something that should keep them busy. Offred says: “This garden is the domain of the Commander´s Wife. […] Many of the Wives have such gardens, it´s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 22). Ironically, these women probably did not want to be tied to the home, where they would take care of flowers in a garden. Women who are at the highest ranks in Gilead are forced to be nurturers, stay at home, and obey their husbands.

Sadly enough, Offred is only valued for her ability to produce a child, nothing else. Offred compares the regime´s view of a handmaid dying to what people would do if their dog dies; they would buy another one (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 197). The Wife tells her: “As far as I´m concerned, this is like a business transaction.” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 25). She can easily be replaced by another handmaid. Women in Gilead have to wear long dresses, especially the fertile handmaids, who also have to cover their hair, in order to appear modest (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 72). The dress code in Gilead is introduced in order to prevent women from being attractive. On the other hand, the leaders of Gilead have a brothel in which they exploit women. Here, women are used for their abilities to please male desires, something that is strictly forbidden in Gilead. These

women know, precisely as the handmaids, that they have to comply with the men´s commands; otherwise, they would end up in the Colonies. Atwood´s female characters are frequently reduced to a second sex, only valued for their biological functions. These examples show that most women are valued for their different abilities to satisfy patriarchal societies, in other words, patriarchal men.

Offred´s mother, on the other hand, is a female character, who does not care for patriarchal rules of conduct and behavior. She wished for a child, and got one, but did not marry. She was aware of the ability to have a child, without getting married, something that she accomplished for herself. As for duties set by men for their own convenience, she disregards them completely. She does not think it necessary to comply with ideas that she does not agree with. So, she sees it as unnecessary to perform duties for men. As a mother, it seems that she is rather inadequate. She might have been nurturing as a mother in Offred´s infant years, but we do not know that. From Offred´s story, we find out that she wanted a mother who would nurture her, pay attention to her emotions, and be more like other mothers. Thus, Offred´s mother does not pay attention to things that are fairly unimportant to her, such as female duties set by men, and being a nourishing mother, although they are of importance to her daughter. The next subchapter focuses on the qualities and the (dis)satisfaction of the female characters in *The Blind Assassin*.

4.1.2. Female Satisfaction

In *The Handmaid´s Tale*, love is a feeling that is forbidden, like reading and discussing of topics that have no relation to the daily chores that the characters are performing. According to the Commander, love is something that has prevented marriages from working well in the time before (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 232). “Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 232). Paradoxically, despite the patriarchal regime´s attempt to erase love, Offred constantly ponders her feelings for Luke, her desperate wish to have someone who will value her for what she is, as well as her views of the lack of love in Gilead (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 108, 231). Thus, Offred narrates that “[i]t´s lack of love we die from” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 113). Offred wants to feel satisfaction, by having someone to love, preferably her

husband and daughter. At the Commander´s place, she has no one to love. Even during the Ceremony, emotions are discarded. “It has nothing to do with sexual desire […]” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 105). However, Offred still loves her husband and daughter, and she even enjoys sex with Nick, the driver.

A striking example of a patriarchal culture in which the public/private binary can be found is *The Handmaid´s Tale*. The novel is set in the future and its readers might suppose that the societies have made a progress and are not patriarchal anymore. However, in this novel, Atwood depicts a highly patriarchal society set in what used to be the United States. In *The Handmaid´s Tale*, men and women are unequal, and women are literally kept in the private sphere. They are neither allowed to work, nor are they allowed to walk alone in the streets. Work that has to be done outside the home is done by the male population, except from the grocery shopping, which is reserved for the Handmaids. Further, the Commanders own mansions and the Wives are supposed to look after those mansions. Cooke is certainly correct when she says that: “Offred remembers Serena Joy on the television before, the almost hysterical outbursts that prompted her mascara to run, her gospel that women should stay in the home. Now, ironically, she does just that in her role as the Commander´s Wife.” (116). The irony in this is that she propagated for women to stay at home and be housewives when she worked as a television host in pre-Gilead; however, now she does just that and is unhappy. Thus, Atwood brilliantly uses irony in order to shed light on the inequalities between men and women even in today´s modern societies.

Offred is rather passive as a character. She does complain silently, passively, but not as her own mother and Moira, who sacrificed their own lives for the sake of their freedom. Before Gilead, Offred used to be independent and had a job of her own; however, when the government was overthrown by the terrorists, she avoided fighting for her rights. Cooke argues that Offred is safe as a handmaid “because of her unwillingness to speak out openly against the regime”, unlike her mother and her best friend Moira (126). Offred wishes that her story was different: “I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 279).

Although Offred does not want to be in Gilead, although she is unhappy, she performs her various duties without complaint. At one point, she remembers her passiveness at the Red Centre: “For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her. Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby. We meant it, which is the bad part. I used to think well of myself. I didn´t then” (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 82). Offred knows that they are being indoctrinated at the Centre; however, she neither rebels, nor complains. The focus of the next subchapter is on the methods that female characters employ in order to gain power and success.

4.1.3. Female Self-Expression

Offred retells her memories of the society before the totalitarian regime of Gilead, in which she lived happily with her husband Luke and their daughter. Both of them worked outside the home and both of them did household chores, helping each other out (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 210). Offred remembers how her mother commented on Luke cutting carrots, saying that it took a long time to get there (*The Handmaid´s Tale* 131). Even though equality between men and women in the society before Gilead was better than it is in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, female characters still had to fight for their rights to be independent. Offred´s mother is a clear incarnation of female second wave feminism, protesting against inequalities, trying to create a better surrounding for her daughter. However, her daughter does not seem to appreciate what her mother went through in order to get to the point where Offred was at the time when she lived with Luke. She was rather independent and equal to men; nevertheless, her ingratitude shows that she has not realized how much her mother and other feminists had to fight to get them there. Thus, she is stuck in a society that is even more patriarchal and dogmatic than it was before.

Interestingly, Offred, because of the lack of self-fulfillment, complains and protests through storytelling. Goldblatt maintains that Offred´s and Grace´s (*Alias Grace*) storytelling is a way of rebellion, helping them escape their painful lives (281). Goldblatt argues:

> For both Offred and Grace, stories are ways of rebelling, of avoiding the tentacles of a society that would demean and remold them. Their stories are outward masks, behind which they frantically repair their damaged spirits. Each alters her world through language. Each woman *speaks* a

> reconstructed world into existence, herself the engineering god of her own fate. (281)

It is the view of Goldblatt that Offred, who has a difficult destiny, is using storytelling in order to heal their wounded souls. Offred´s narrative is a means used as rebellion against the patriarchal regime that suppressed her.

Other female characters; however, are fairly active, rebellious and independent. Offred´s mother, for example, was a single mother the entire time. She was a rebellious and devoted feminist before the totalitarian regime took over the United States but even after that. It could certainly be said that Offred´s mother impersonates the women of the 1980s and 1990s, who managed to raise their children without a partner. As already mentioned, Offred´s mother constantly took part in demonstrations for the rights of women, against pornography, and sexual abuse of women. She and her friends tried to make a change for coming generations of women, by fighting for everything that was worth fighting for. Moira resembles Offred´s mother in many ways. She is homosexual and is not afraid to stand out. She also fights for everything that she thinks is worth fighting for, for example, her freedom. Moira, Offred´s mother, and her friends, seem to depend on themselves for their happiness. Their self-worth does not depend on men in their lives.

4.2. Female Duties, Satisfaction, and Self-Expression in *The Blind Assassin*

4.2.1. Female Duties

Iris and her mother Liliana are supposed to do what other women also do in those societies, such as perform their duties as housewives and fulfill the wishes of their husbands. Liliana performs all her duties as a wife and mother, obeying her patriarchal husband without complaint. Similarly, Iris´s function in her marriage with Richard is to please him in different ways; she is there to be his puppet; if she does not perform her function properly, he could always get another one (*The Blind Assassin* 407). Interestingly, Atwood portrays an aristocratic woman in the second narrative of *The Blind Assassin*, who is supposed to wear what her lover tells her to, although she is an adult woman, and her lover is not her husband, who women are initially supposed to be

submissive to in a patriarchy. Still, he reprimands her for not thinking through what she should wear: “Christ, he says, look at yourself. Look around you. It´s too clean. I can´t get it right for you, can I? she says. I won´t ever get it right” (*The Blind Assassin* 130). According to this character´s lover, she is supposed to listen to him and do as she is told, exactly as in all other spheres of a patriarchy. This aristocratic woman, who the reader thinks is Iris, is the one who is listening to him, she succumbs to his wishes, and she decides not to protest.

Iris is taught to obey and nurture men around her at an early age in her life. She is brought up to be a “good girl”, especially when she becomes a teenager. She has to wear plain clothes, and look like a little girl, although she is already becoming a woman.

> My clothing should be simple and plain, with white blouses and dark pleated skirts, and dark velvet dresses for church […]. The values that he required were those of the army; neatness, obedience, silence, and no evident sexuality. Sexuality, although it was never spoken of, was to be nipped in the bud. (*The Blind Assassin* 193)

Ironically, Iris, although a young woman, is not supposed to be feminine, even though it was common for women to be rather feminine at those times. Her father tries to be the patriarch, controlling her, with which he succeeds in the end. Iris marries her father´s partner in order to save the button factories, seeing it as her obligation to do so. Girls and women in *The Blind Assassin* are supposed to be angels of the house; just for the use of their fathers and husbands. Moreover, Iris and her sister Laura are not allowed to go anywhere, although Iris, for instance, strongly wishes to travel the world. Here we see the altruistic woman who neglects herself and her own self-fulfillment for that of her father or husband. Many years later, when Iris is already a grown woman, she remembers her husband´s reaction to the news of her being pregnant: “He expressed conventional joy, and kissed my forehead. ´Good girl,´ he said. I was only doing what was expected of me” (*The Blind Assassin* 520). Furthermore, Atwood often portrays men who have a need to be looked after, men who need to be nurtured by women. Liliana does everything she can in order to look after her husband Norval; she nurtures him and pleases him in every possible way. Iris remembers that her father´s girlfriend Callista told her that he needed “´pepping up´” after the death of his wife Liliana (*The Blind Assassin* 178). Hence, women in this society are valued for their abilities to please men.

Iris´s husband Richard is a character who is a perfect symbol of patriarchy. He does not walk along with Iris, but "steer[s]" her to various places (*The Blind Assassin* 277, 298), showing his superiority. Also, he thinks it is suitable for Iris to improve her education by visiting different buildings and parks in London; however, she is not allowed to visit museums (*The Blind Assassin* 368). Ironically, Richard does not want Iris to get any ideas about freedom, sexuality, or love from paintings. For this reason she is supposed to look at buildings and parks only. Iris realizes only later that Richard thought of her as a child, a child who was supposed to be taught the right things (*The Blind Assassin* 369). Further, Iris feels that Richard was the one who formed her identity (*The Blind Assassin* 370), which is exactly what male superiority means; forming women according to their own wishes. Additionally, Iris feels "like a child excluded by its parents. Genial, brutal parents, up to their necks in collusion, determined on the rightness of their choices, in everything" (The Blind Assassin 374). Atwood shows how patriarchy is used in order to mould women according to male fashion. Once again, the man is superior, while the woman is inferior, not having the choice to choose what to do in her own spare time.

Iris does everything to please her husband, but not because of her own wish to do so. She is told by Richard´s sister, Winifred, who represents the upper classes in Toronto, how she should behave, what she should wear, how she should walk, and so on. Iris appears to be Richard´s puppet for his political career, while his sister is his right hand: "She was necessary to Richard, I on the other hand could always be replaced. My job was to open my legs and shut my mouth." (*The Blind Assassin* 407). As might be understood from this quote, Iris´s job is to please Richard sexually and do as she is told, or, as Iris herself reflects, she could be replaced by another woman who blindly obeys the rules of patriarchy.

Interestingly, Atwood depicts how her characters perceive the 1950s family idyll in *The Blind Assassin*. Here she shows that the patriarchal way of looking at the family might be contestable:

> This is what he was supposed to have been fighting for – this fireside idyll, this comfortable scene out of a Shredded Wheat advertisement: the

> rounded, rosy-cheeked housewife, so kind and good, the obedient, worshipful child. This flatness, this boredom. (*The Blind Assassin* 101)

Although numerous characters in *The Blind Assassin* take on patriarchal gender roles, passages like these prove that this is an idyll that is idealized by some people, and that it only serves for the man´s convenience. Female (dis)satisfaction in *The Blind Assassin* will be analyzed in detail in the next subchapter.

4.2.2. Female Satisfaction

Iris marries a man whom she does not know, and she never gets to know him truly. She marries him in order to help her father save the factories; nevertheless, her husband closes down the factories right after they get married and consequently, her father commits suicide. Iris thinks: "I´d married Richard for nothing, then – I hadn´t saved the factories, and I certainly hadn´t saved Father." (*The Blind Assassin* 384). Iris constantly remembers her disastrous marriage to Richard, which brought her nothing apart from grief and unhappiness. Their marriage is certainly not based on love, nor does it ever grow to resemble anything like a loving relationship. Moreover, Iris remembers her and Richard´s first trip to her former home, Avilion, right after their honeymoon. The drive takes four hours and they do not exchange a word, since "[h]e didn´t like to be interrupted – he said it ruined his concentration […]" (*The Blind Assassin* 382). The reader can only presume what kinds of feelings Iris and Richard have for each other, but it is certainly not love. As for Iris´s parents, they were devoted to each other according to Iris; however, the war had changed them so much that it was impossible for them to reach each other (*The Blind Assassin* 97).

For Liliana, male satisfaction seems to be of more importance to her than her own self-fulfillment. She successfully manages the household at Avilion, trying to be a good wife. Even when her husband returns from the war, she struggles to satisfy him and his needs, ruining her health, something that eventually kills her (*The Blind Assassin* 90). This is corroborated by Bouson, who says that

> Liliana *tirelessly devotes herself to comforting and mending the broken Norval*, forgives her husband, and *never utters a word of complaint. Risking her life to bear children*, she becomes an old, grey and

> discouraged version of her former self after the birth of Laura [emphasis added]. (255)

Liliana dies after having had a miscarriage, and Iris and her sister Laura are left in the hands of Reenie, the housekeeper. First generation women portrayed in Atwood´s novels are depicted as altruistic women, who never complain about anything.

> She did not spare herself, said Reenie. She ruined her health. She went beyond her strength, especially considering her condition. What virtue was once attached to this notion – of going beyond your strength, of not sparing yourself, of ruining your health! Nobody is born with that kind of selflessness: it can be acquired only by the most relentless discipline, a crushing out of natural inclination, and by my time the knack or secret of it must have been lost. (*The Blind Assassin* 90)

Although it might be supposed that both Iris and her mother do not care about their own self-fulfillment, they do not lead happy lives and marriages.

Because of Iris´s lack of love for her husband, she is fairly passive in her intimate relationship with him. For Iris, sexual intercourse is something that she had to bear, "in the bed that [she] hadn´t quite made, but now must lie in […], while earthly matters went on below [her] throat" (*The Blind Assassin* 375). Her passiveness is easily accepted by the patriarchal society in which she lives. Richard´s view of female sexuality is "that if a woman did not experience sexual pleasure, this was all to the good, because then she would not be liable to wander off seeking it elsewhere" (*The Blind Assassin* 295). Consequently, an overt expression of female sexuality in Atwood´s societies is frequently rejected, not so much by the female characters as by the male ones. Despite female weakness, women in *The Blind Assassin* find methods in order to express their individualities, something that is analyzed in the subchapter below.

4.2.3. Female Self-Expression

Iris finds a way to live in a patriarchal household, where her only task is to please her husband and sister-in-law. She creates another identity for herself, namely as the mistress of Alex Thomas, an escaped Communist protester. This identity helps her to endure the years in the oppressive Toronto household. It might be the case that Iris´s wedding is the "erasure of her own identity […]", as Howells states (159). Thus, Iris tries to overcome difficulties, by creating a new

identity for herself, an identity that helps her endure an unhappy life with Richard. Interestingly though, she does not confide in a female friend, for example, her sister, but a male lover. Although she does not love her husband, she needs appreciation from a man, hence Alex Thomas. Her self-esteem seems to depend on male approval.

It might be said that Iris rebels against her husband by the means of storytelling. *The Blind Assassin* is a novel which is structured in three frames. Iris´s narrative is the frame narrative, in which she tells her life story, which in turn encapsulates the other two narratives (Cooke 147-148). The second narrative is Iris´s pulp fiction story, *The Blind Assassin*, while the third narrative is a story told within this second major narrative, about blind assassins on the planet Zycron (Cooke 148). Cooke is of the opinion that the frame narrative is Iris´s confession to her granddaughter Sabrina, that will help Sabrina get to know her grandmother and, in turn, her own history (148). Iris does not rebel at the time when she lives with Richard, but only after Laura´s death. However, the pulp fiction story was written at the time when she was married to Richard, proving that this story is her way of rebellion, as is the narrative frame of the entire novel. Thus, it might be the case that some characters rebel by the means of storytelling, or at least, express their individuality in this way.

Atwood tries to provoke change through most of her novels, by illustrating women who are supposed to do what males around them find appropriate for them to do, yet who manage to work outside the home as well. Liliana, Iris´s mother in *The Blind Assassin*, has to take care of the whole household at Avilion, exactly as her mother-in-law before her did. Additionally, as recounted above, Liliana learns how to manage the button factories when her husband Norval leaves to fight in the Second World War. Farca states that Liliana is portrayed “as submissive, silent, and blind to her husband´s infidelities”; however, that she takes advantage of Norval´s absence, making the patriarch of the house, Norval´s father, believe that his decisions are sovereign (3). She further writes that “Liliana makes decisions in Norval´s name and under his signature and exposes the patriarchal original as contestable” (Farca 3). Thus, Atwood´s characters do prove that household duties are not the only things appropriate for women.

Interestingly, it is the view of de Beauvoir that men are transcendent, because they are free to pursue their full intellectual and emotional potential (Tolan 322). Ironically though, women in the three novels analyzed here are able to pursue their full intellectual and emotional potential, although it may be in a different way. Atwood´s female protagonists seem to be controlled by patriarchy and yet they express their individuality in different ways, proving that male supremacy is neither effective, nor necessary. Patriarchal views of women say that women should be silent, nurturing, and obedient toward their husbands, and these views are put to the test by Atwood´s female characters. Iris´s grandmother Adelia is almost suffocated by the tensions and uneasiness of her place at Avilion, so she finds refuge in art and redecoration of the house, expressing her individuality in this way (Farca 1). “Not only are her sculptures, decorations, and poems on Christmas cards Adelia´s means of self-expression, but they also mediate her communications with future generations” (Farca 1). Hence, Adelia is transcendent, since she leaves something for future generations; however, she is also able to express herself, questioning the effectiveness of patriarchy´s view of women. Further, Iris´s extramarital affair “perturbs the patriarchal sacrament of marriage” (Farca 5), which is Iris´s way of expressing her individuality and fighting against patriarchy.

4.3. Female Duties, Satisfaction, and Self-Expression in *The Robber Bride*

4.3.1. Female Duties

Atwood´s female characters live and work in patriarchal societies, struggling to fulfill their own dreams, those of their families, and the wishes of the societies in which they live. Tony from *The Robber Bride*, for instance, despite the fact that she is an academic who earns her own living, and has her own hobbies, still does everything to please her husband West. Although West is the one who is submissive to Zenia, leaving Tony without remorse, Tony is the one who is obedient to West. She repeatedly performs duties around the home, although she and West have a division for the household chores. When they get married and move into a larger flat, Tony is the one who buys cooking utensils, such as cook books and pans, while West buys things that he needs.

> He has a suit now, and several ties, and eyeglasses. Tony buys a coffee grinder and a roasting pan, and a copy of *The Joy of Cooking*, in which she looks up esoteric recipes. She makes hazelnut torte, and buys a fondue dish with long forks, and some skewers for making shish kebab. (*The Robber Bride* 199)

As the reader might assume, Tony, the woman, is the one who takes care of the "feminine" things at home, while West only takes care of himself.

Although Tony works as a professor, she manages to take care of her (and her husband´s) home, and also to nurture him, exactly what a female person is supposed to do in a patriarchal society. West leaves Tony for Zenia, and when Zenia is done with him, he comes back to Tony, begging for forgiveness. Tony, instead of not letting him into her life again, heals his wounded soul that is hurt by Zenia. Tony says that West is "frangible" (*The Robber Bride* 10), therefore she needs to protect him; otherwise, as Tony also says, West would break down. Additionally, she says of West that "[h]e´s easy to please, but difficult to protect" (*The Robber Bride* 16). West seems to be the weak one in his and Tony´s relationship. Further, Tony constantly reflects on her behavior as a woman. She thinks:

> Tony does not mention (and has never mentioned) this eggcup connection to West. He would be dismayed, not so much by the rotting Teutones as by her. She once remarked to him that she could understand those kings of old who used to have their enemies´ skulls made into wine cups. This was a mistake: West liked to think of her as kind and beneficent. And forgiving, of course. (*The Robber Bride* 15-16)

Women should, according to Tony´s interpretation of the society in which she lives, only show the "good" part of their personalities to men, in order to please them. Thus, once again, a female character obeys and pleases her husband, not the other way around. Tony disregards herself in her relationship with West.

The main view of patriarchy and sexism is that women are inferior to men. Roz´s husband is a character who brilliantly embodies patriarchal men´s wishes. Mitch demands feminine behavior from Roz. If he is going to be happy with her, then she has to be inferior to him, she must succumb to his wishes. Mitch wants Roz to be there for him whenever he needs her.

> In Mitch´s cosmology Roz´s body represents possessions, solidity, the domestic virtues, hearth and home, long usage, Mother-of-his-children.

> The den. Whereas whatever other body may currently be occupying his field of vision will have other nouns attached to it: adventure, youth, freedom, the unknown, sex without strings. (*The Robber Bride* 330)

In this sense, Roz is inferior to her husband, since she actually succumbs to his wishes; she forgives Mitch for his constant unfaithfulness by letting him come back to her and even nurturing him once he is back. Instead of confronting his behavior toward her, she signifies precisely what patriarchy wants from women; inferior obedience.

Considering duties imposed on women by patriarchal men, it is crucial to take a look at binary oppositions, in which women are always the lesser half. Atwood portrays male characters who behave as if they have all the right in the world to order women around, although they are rather emotionally weak and unstable. Mitch makes it clear to Roz at the beginning of their relationship that he is to be the head of their home. Roz is not surprised when Mitch tells her that they should go out to lunch, perfectly aware of the fact that he will not accept a refusal (*The Robber Bride* 334). "´I thought we could have lunch,´ says Mitch. Roz notes the formulation: not *Would you like to have lunch* or *I am inviting you to lunch*" (*The Robber Bride* 334). In addition, Mitch expects his wife to always be there for him, in spite of her modern personality. Roz narrates that it seems

> that he likes the image of Roz with an apron and a watering can, just as he likes the image of Roz with an apron and a frying pan, an apron and a feather duster […]. The constant is the apron, the Good Housekeeping guarantee that Roz will always be home whenever Mitch chooses to get back there (*The Robber Bride* 395-396).

Objects tied to the home, such as the apron in the passage above, are tokens of female obedience, female chastity, and female duties in patriarchal societies. This passage proves that the traditional gender role division of men and women only serves male needs.

Atwood depicts women acting according to patriarchal rules; they nurture those around them, while the male characters that she portrays neglect their loved ones. Roz is a very nurturing woman: "Roz looked at Tony´s face, then put her fattening arms around Tony. ´Oh honey,´ she said; then, with new-found knowledge, both personal and political, ´Men are such pigs!´" (*The Robber Bride* 205). Roz wants to nurture her friend Tony, and also Charis, exactly as

she nurtures her children and husband, while her husband is not able to protect them as a family.

Charis´s traumatic childhood experiences seem to be the reason for why she constantly tries to please other people. Although she has been sexually abused as a child, she sleeps with several men, because she does not want to be "selfish about her body" (*The Robber Bride* 231). In these relationships, she nurtures and pleases her partners. Interestingly, Charis helps Billy out of pure "hospitality" (*The Robber Bride* 236). She explains that Billy did not push her to become intimate with him, but that she thought it appropriate. Also, she says that Billy "was so lost, so wounded, how could she refuse to offer him whatever comfort she had?" (*The Robber Bride* 237). Thus, it might be understood that this comfort of Charis´s is based on the nurturing of people, especially men. Charis says of herself that she is not "an ungiving person" (*The Robber Bride* 231), which explains the fact that she does everything in order to comply with other peoples´ wishes. Further, when Zenia crosses her path, Charis does everything she can to cure her cancer, despite the fact that Zenia is not even sick. She sees it as her duty to help all people, not just men.

It needs to be stated that both Charis and Billy want to make Billy happy, not each other. It seems that, despite their love and rather positive relationship, Charis is the inferior one. She succumbs to Billy´s wishes, although they are rather subtle. Also, it is crucial to mention that Billy finds it acceptable to sleep with Charis, although she does not receive any satisfaction from it. "He thought that women were like that: without urges, without needs" (*The Robber Bride* 231). Charis does what she thinks is appropriate in the eyes of Billy, which is to please him and disregard her own wishes. The three friends´ (un)happiness will be further discussed in the following subchapter.

4.3.2. Female Satisfaction

In *The Robber Bride*, we meet female characters who love their partners very much, so much that they would do almost anything for them. The three friends´ love for their partners is characterized by their wish to nurture and obey them. Although both West and Mitch are characters who leave their wives, they come back to them, and are taken care of by their wives. The male characters seem to need sexual pleasure provided by their wives, and in some cases, their

mistresses, and nurturing care that is usually provided to children by mothers. Unfortunately, these kinds of emotions do not improve their marriages.

Despite the fact that Tony constantly thinks of West´s behavior toward her, and how he has wronged her, she tends to fulfill his wishes. She lets him leave and come back to her as he pleases. She reflects on whether she should let West into her life again, once Zenia has left him. Atwood illustrates this rather metaphorically, yet ironically.

> He looked so pitiful, so pulled apart—as if he´d been on the rack, as if every one of his bones has been disconnected from every other bone, leaving only a kind of jelly—that of course she let him in. Into her home, into her kitchen, where she made him a hot drink, and ultimately into her bed, where he clutched her, shivering. It was not a sexual clutch, it was the clutch of a man drowning. But Tony was in no danger of being dragged down. She felt, if anything, strangely dry; strangely detached from him. He might be drowning, but this time she was standing on the beach. Worse: with binoculars. (*The Robber Bride* 210)

Paradoxically, Tony makes herself believe that she will not be affected by his behavior; however, later on, she thinks: “How long can she protect him?” (*The Robber Bride* 213). Atwood very interestingly portrays Tony, an independent female academic, being able to take care of herself and pay her bills, yet who pleases her husband in every possible way and neglects her own self-respect.

Another character who constantly neglects herself for the sake of her family and husband is Roz. She remembers her husband´s infidelities with contempt; however, she thinks that “if he were still around, she´d still be trying to please him” (*The Robber Bride* 80). Atwood´s female characters sacrifice themselves in order to please patriarchal men, mostly their husbands; nevertheless, the question is still whether they feel self-fulfillment. Roz says of Mitch and herself that “[t]hey are as happy as can be, given who they are. Though if they´d been different people they might have been happier” (*The Robber Bride* 348). Despite several pieces of advice by Roz´s friends to leave her husband, she does not do so at the time. It might be the case that she is in love with the idealized version of Mitch from when she first met him.

Roz is depicted as a very strong and successful businesswoman, though a rather emotional and weak mother and wife. Her love for her husband obstructs

her in many of her endeavors. Mitch frequently leaves Roz for other women, though Roz lets him come back home; she lets him come back so that she can nurture him. When he comes back to her the last time, she refuses to let him treat her like a “rest stop” (*The Robber Bride* 420). “Because that´s exactly what he´d do, he´d move in, she´d dish out the nourishing lunches, feed him, build him up again, and he´d get his strength back and be off […] (*The Robber Bride* 420). Nonetheless, when she finds out about his probable suicide, she got devastated. “Roz is crying again. What she´s mourning is her own good will. She tried so hard, she tried so hard to be kind and nurturing, to do the best thing” (*The Robber Bride* 327). She tries to cope after the death of her husband; however, her emotions frequently get to her. Roz´s affection and grief for her late husband are depicted, but even more so, her weakness, because, once, she takes too many sleeping pills and passes out. Her love and grief for Mitch had made her weak to the extent that she was not able to think properly anymore.

Interestingly, female sexuality is frequently illustrated by Atwood as something that brings negative emotions for the female characters. Men are frequently the active parts, while women are the passive ones. Women in Atwood´s novels are often associated with the passive body, which seems to imply that women have few wishes for fulfillment. Moreover, they do not complain about this passiveness that is forced upon them. Charis remembers her intimate relationship with Billy, in which she was rather passive.

> Sometimes he did things that hurt—slapping her, pinching. Sometimes it hurt anyway, but since she didn´t mention this, how was he supposed to know about it? What had she felt, herself? It´s hard to sort out. Maybe if there had been less, less plain old sex—if she had felt less like a trampoline with someone jumping up and down on it—she would have learned to enjoy it more, in time. If she could relax. As it was she merely detached herself, floated her spirit off to one side, filled herself with another essence—*apple, plum*—until he´d finished and it was safe to re-enter her body. (*The Robber Bride* 230)

Charis is suffering from trauma since she has been sexually abused as a child, so it might be obvious why she does not enjoy the intimate relationship with her partner. Mitch is a character who brilliantly embodies much of patriarchy´s view of female sexuality. Roz retells that “[h]e´d made it clear by then that there were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kissees, and he was to be the former and

she the latter (*The Robber Bride* 346). Actually, Roz is not frigid; however, she does not argue with Mitch about his views on female sexuality. Tony, on the other hand, seems to be rather frigid. She is afraid of being intimate with West: "The thought of going to bed with anyone at all is terrifying" (*The Robber Bride* 196). When she finally sleeps with him, it seems to be for West´s pleasure, not for her own. "[N]ow at last somebody truly needs her for something […]" (*The Robber Bride* 198). However, not all female characters have sex in order to please men. Roz has several intimate relationships before she marries Mitch, but also when they get married, and he starts seeing other women. Remembering her different partners before she gets married, she says that "the sex was great, it was something she was good at […]" (*The Robber Bride* 339). Zenia, a glamorous, attractive, and cunning woman, seems to know exactly what men want. She both gets the sex and the power, without getting married.

Evidently, Zenia knows how she can get into a man´s life, exploit him, and, in the end, leave him. She knows that the men in her life depend on her; therefore, she knows that she can do whatever she wants to them. Mitch says that adventuresses live "by their tits" (*The Robber Bride* 405), something that seems to be true for Zenia. However, she merely uses her attractiveness because she is clever enough to know that men will fall for it. Thus, Roz might be correct in saying that Mitch is wrong, because "[i]t was wits for Zenia also" (*The Robber Bride* 405).

In a patriarchy, it is the norm for men and women in matrimony to stay together although they might not be right for each other. Atwood portrays characters who marry because it is assumed that it is the right thing to do. Goldblatt when discussing Atwood´s female characters, states that they seek a man in their lives who will supposedly be their safe haven (276). She argues: "In an attempt to reestablish stable, satisfying homes, these women pursue a path, as have women throughout history, to marriage. They search for a male figure, imagining a refuge" (Goldblatt 276). Despite the strength and independence that the majority of Atwood´s female characters possess, they all seem to wish for a husband. Other characters, for instance Charis and Roz, strongly wish for a relationship with a man. Roz still mourns her late husband Mitch, regretting that

she did not let him into her life again after he had left her for Zenia. Tony is still married to West; however, she always fears that he will leave her.

As mentioned earlier, Tony is a rather withdrawn person, especially vis-á-vis Zenia and West. She feels insufficient and shy in comparison with Zenia. Zenia seems to be able to give West something that Tony is not able to give him. So, when Zenia leaves West, Tony is proud of herself when she realizes that she can cocoon him, and also please him sexually, like Zenia. When West leaves her for Zenia, Tony is rather hurt, but she does not file for divorce. She apparently needs validation from a man to show her that she is adequate enough. So, after Zenia is done with West, Tony is prepared to continue nurturing him. “She remembered how to care for him, how to pat him back into shape, and she did it again; but this time with fewer illusions” (*The Robber Bride* 210). Tony´s reason for taking West back may be that she is afraid of being alone. She says that she does love him, but that the feelings are more cautious now (*The Robber Bride* 210). Consequently, her weakness is that she seems to need West in her life; she needs to feel appreciated by a man.

The beginning of chapter 12 in *The Robber Bride*, devoted to Roz, contains her memories of the various ways in which she was trying to please her husband, and to keep him for herself. Now, although he is long gone, she is still trying; however, saying that she is doing it for herself.

> […] [S]he spends a few days at a spa […] in search of her original face, the one she knows is under there somewhere; she comes back feeling toned up and virtuous, and hungry. Also annoyed with herself. Surely she isn´t still trying; surely she isn´t still in the man-pleasing business. She´s given that up. *I do it for me*, she tells Tony. (*The Robber Bride* 80)

Atwood shows, once again, how a woman is trying to satisfy men in a patriarchal society. Further, Atwood illustrates Roz wearing uncomfortable shoes all day long in order to match her outfit, rewarding her pinched feet at home with comfortable slippers (*The Robber Bride* 79). Evidently, her sense of self-esteem depends on her outer appearance which corresponds to the beauty-ideal of the society in which she lives, in other words, her attractiveness to men. Atwood makes it clear that men are setting the norms for female behavior when Zenia takes over Roz´s magazine, who then changes its content

and name from *WiseWomanWorld* into *Woman*, in order to fit male expectations (*The Robber Bride* 409-410).

> ´I´m not talking intellectuals,´ says Zenia. ´I´m talking about the average woman. The average magazine-buying woman. According to our demographics, they want to read about how to look. Oh, and sex, of course. Sex with the right accessories.´ ´What are the right accessories?´ asks Roz pleasantly. She thinks she´ll choke. ´Men,´ says Zenia. The men on the board of directors laugh, Mitch included. (*The Robber Bride* 409-410)

This passage is a clear example of women doing what men expect of them.

Tony, Roz, and Charis all say at some point that they want to be like Zenia. Zenia is their worst enemy; however, she is at the same time a person who lives without boundaries, a person who has acknowledged herself as the most important person in her own life, a woman who is valuable to herself, hence, she symbolizes the three friends´ wishes to become like her. Tony, Charis, and Roz wish that they could be the centre of the universe, they wish that everyone would adjust to them, and that they can have the ultimate freedom, like Zenia. Zenia´s self-confident and remorseless attitude toward everything that she does makes the three friends yearn to become like her, if only for one day. Howells might be correct in saying that the three friends´ unfulfilled longings and suppressed traumatic childhoods that haunt them in their adult lives are embodied by Zenia (130). “Tony looks at her, looks into her blue-black eyes, and sees her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be. *Tnomerf Ynot*. Herself turned inside out” (*The Robber Bride* 185). Thus, in this passage, Tony voices the three friends´ wishes to be more courageous and confident.

Atwood shows how patriarchal norms of female behavior are negative for women. She subverts patriarchal clichés, rather than showing characters complying with them. Female characters in *The Robber Bride* are both weak and strong. They are weak because they depend on men, and they need men in their lives. Sadly, their self-worth depends on their husbands/partners, or the wish to be attractive to men. Atwood criticizes the patriarchal view that women are happier if they have a husband. In the next subchapter, female characteristics will be discussed, alongside female self-expression, i.e. whether the women in *The Robber Bride* manage to find a different refuge other than a

relationship to a man, and whether they are able to express their individuality and (un)happiness.

4.3.3. Female Self-Expression

Interestingly enough, the protagonists in the novels discussed here are all going against traditional patriarchal structures. As recounted above, the women in *The Robber Bride* are both strong and weak at the same time. In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood portrays female characters who work in predominantly male working places, single mothers, and rebellious and independent women. These characters do not feel comfortable in patriarchal societies.

The patriarchal cultures in which the main characters´ mothers (Anthea, Charis´s mother, and Roz´s mother) live expect these women to stay at home and perform their household duties. These women do what they are expected to do according to the norms; however, they also manage to do more than just nurture, clean, and obey. Roz´s mother in *The Robber Bride* takes care of a household on her own, as well as the apartment house that brings them money. Even after Roz´s father joins his family in Canada, she manages the household on her own, proving that women can handle both their household and a job. Nevertheless, these women seem to be unhappy in their roles recommended by the cultures in which they live. Roz´s mother does not complain about all the duties that she has to perform, though she does show her dissatisfaction in a subtle manner. Both Tony´s and Charis´s mothers are unhappy about being mothers, and they show it rather visibly, especially toward their daughters. Tony´s mother ends up leaving her husband and her daughter, while Charis´s mother physically abuses her daughter because of her own dissatisfaction.

In a patriarchy, men frequently hold positions of power according to traditional gender roles; however, in Atwood´s societies, women often take on roles that are frequently reserved for men. Cooke argues that

> Atwood´s fiction also allows women to play roles usually reserved for men. In *The Robber Bride*, for example, the Robber Bridegroom of the Grimm´s fairy tale is recast as a bride. One of the implications of such feminist revision to plot is that the story lines that drive Atwood´s fictions are not romances. Rather, […] Atwood´s novels rehearse a range of different ways in which women come, with varying degrees of success, to voice and power. (24)

Thus, Atwood´s female characters are given power that women usually do not receive in patriarchal societies. Her characters frequently violate traditional gender roles. Roz seems to be a very good example of a woman being empowered, namely, she is the CEO of the magazine which she runs. Further, her daughters constantly want to transform the heroes into heroines in the fairytales that Tony reads to them. Additionally, Tony is a successful professor of military history, frowned upon by her colleagues because she teaches a "male" subject. Once again, a woman assumes a reversed gender role. These few examples seem to be showing that Atwood´s characters are able to do much more than just obeying their husbands and nurturing their family members.

As mentioned above, Tony holds a position as a history professor at a university; nevertheless, she is still frowned upon both by her male and female colleagues. According to them, she should be doing a more "feminine" type of research. Tony is content with her job, she loves it and feels fulfillment in working as a professor of military history. However, her female colleagues surprise her more than the male ones.

> Female historians, of whom there are not many, think the same thing but for different reasons. They think she ought to be studying birth; not death, and certainly not battle plans. Not routs and débâcles, not carnages, not slaughters. They think she´s letting women down. (*The Robber Bride* 23)

Although women are already in the public sphere, and like Tony, also do "male" work, they are constantly supposed to do something more traditional. According to this view, women are considered to be nurturers, and should even be concerned with this at their work. Nonetheless, Tony is capable of doing research that is usually reserved for men, proving that women can be transcendental.

In Atwood´s novels women are usually more independent than men. They leave their partners who do not meet their expectations, as Anthea in *The Robber Bride* does. Similarly, Roz in *The Robber Bride* manages to raise three children without a husband, although she actually had one. Goldblatt affirms this:

> In fact, Roz in *The Robber Bride* is quite able to combine motherhood and a successful career. Dissatisfied with traditional knowledge,

> Atwood´s women again turn inward, now avoiding masochistic traps, fully able to deviate from society´s dicta. Freed from constraining fears, they locate talents, wings that free them. (281)

Thus, Atwood´s female characters use their talents to prove that patriarchal structures are detrimental for women. Roz is also transcendental, being a powerful businesswoman and a mother, thus surely she has an influence on future generations. Like Roz, Charis raises a child on her own, since her partner has disappeared without a trace. She works at a New Age store and as a yoga instructor in order to make a living for herself and her daughter. Also, she manages to take care of countless chores in and around the house, all by herself. Despite the fact that she wishes to find out what happened to her partner, she manages perfectly fine without a man in her life. Hence, Atwood´s women are rather independent characters, who show that sexist views of women can be overcome. The three friends in *The Robber Bride* help each other, thus Atwood is propagating female solidarity in order to overcome patriarchal clichés.

> Rather than becoming cynical and devastated by society´s visions and its perpetrators, Atwood´s women forge on. Roz, Toni, and Charis in *The Robber Bride*, who have been betrayed by Zenia, put their faith back into friendship, allowing mutual support to sustain them. It is solid; it has been tested. They have turned to one another, cried and laughed, shared painful experiences, knowing that their friendship has endured in a labyrinth of twisted paths. (Goldblatt 281)

Despite their difficulties, the three friends find a way to success and happiness. Thus, it seems that, even though patriarchy is the cause of female unhappiness in Atwood´s novels, it cannot break many of these women.

5. Concluding Remarks

Few scholars tend to focus on dysfunctional families and relationships in literature, especially in the writings of Margaret Atwood. Most researchers who analyze Atwood´s novels discuss either her dystopian fiction or her depiction of women. Thus, this point of interest has proven to be a rather new contribution to the field of Anglophone literature. It is crucial to mention that the psychoanalytic approach focuses on the traumatic experiences caused by dysfunctional families. Consequently, the focus of this thesis is that women refrain from self-fulfillment and rather often do what they think is best for men, for fear of losing

them. The feminist perspective, in contrast, yields a slightly different result. On the one hand, it proves that female characters suffer from patriarchy and its norms and expectations; while on the other hand, it shows that female characters are able to overcome these boundaries, and succeed in roles usually considered as male. Also, several of these characters manage to achieve many positive things in life and find new hope despite disappointments and patriarchal pressures.

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this thesis was to investigate the importance of families in Atwood´s novels, why they are dysfunctional, and how these families affect the identity formation of the main characters. The marital spouses of Atwood´s families constantly fight, the children are neglected, and they experience anything from emotional to sexual mistreatment. Interestingly, although most of these families are nuclear, they do not function properly. Therefore, it was crucial to examine the place of nuclear families in Atwood´s societies, her look on traditional family structures, and whether it is more important for children to live in a nuclear family that is dysfunctional, or a family of another structure that is intact. In order to do this, it was equally significant to look into how contemporary North Americans and Canadians perceive the family, how dysfunctional families affect the individual from a psychological perspective, as well as the marriage, divorce, and single parenthood statistics. Several authors have stated that dysfunctional families are negative for the well-being of the child; the child is affected in various ways by emotional, physical and sexual abuse. On the other hand, the family is important for the child; however, only when it is functioning properly. Thus, divorce is only positive when the child can escape from a maltreating or alcoholic parent (Simons 220).

The discussion of *The Handmaid´s Tale*, *The Robber Bride,* and *The Blind Assassin* has shed light on contemporary families in the United States and Canada. Atwood´s societies show that families and relationships within families are crucial for the happiness of each individual. In contrast, Atwood has proven that a nuclear family is not necessary for this happiness; in other words, the nuclear family is not a constant anymore. The majority of Atwood´s characters do not live in traditional nuclear families, similar to the situation in the present

United States and Canada. The marital spouses in these families are in constant conflict, showing that they are not content with an oppressive marriage. Also, Atwood´s female characters usually want more; they are reluctant to submit to patriarchal rules of conduct and behavior.

The three main characters in *The Robber Bride* are all emotionally abused by their parents, particularly their mothers. Sadly, they do not feel the love and affection that they yearn for. Charis even experiences sexual abuse from her guardian, Uncle Vern. Roz is constantly forced to help around the house, making the relationship with her mother more and more strained. Tony was an unwanted child, which she sensed from the beginning of her childhood, because her mother always made it clear to her that she is not what she had expected. After her mother dies by drowning, Tony lives with her father, who starts drinking and never shows any affection toward her. Apart from their traumatic childhoods, the three friends also live in unhappy romantic relationships. They all perform duties forced upon them by patriarchal cultures. In *The Blind Assassin*, Iris also remembers her relationship with her mother, which is anything but loving. Her father´s behavior toward her is also strange; he tries to teach her the family business, and the proper female behavior and conduct of those days, but he does not provide her with the affection that she needs. In Iris´s adult years, she endures an abusive husband, and later, loses her daughter as well as her granddaughter. She is suffocated by the duties imposed on her by her patriarchal husband. Of all the characters analyzed in this thesis, Offred had the most loving relationship with her mother, although her mother´s behavior does not fulfill her expectations of a parent. She needs more stability in her life; however, her mother does not provide her with it. Later, her harmonious life with her husband and daughter is shattered by the totalitarian regime of Gilead. In Gilead, families appear to be nuclear; however, they are far from that. Women in Gilead are supposed to perform duties set by the patriarchal regime. All the main characters feel neglected by their parents, and several of them are also fairly unhappy with their partners, and with the duties imposed on them in the patriarchal societies they live in.

Nevertheless, Atwood´s protagonists seem to find a way to express their individuality and (un)happiness, despite the suffocating patriarchal duties that

they frequently perform. Simone de Beauvoir´s view that women find it difficult to find a balance between household duties and their work outside the home is not necessarily true, since most women in Atwood´s novels manage to do both, although they might not find it fulfilling.

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7. Appendix

7.1. Abstract

Dysfunctional families are rarely the main argument of literary papers on Margaret Atwood´s novels, although she rather often writes about disturbing familial relationships. The aim of this thesis is to find a new approach to Atwood´s novels. It focuses primarily on Atwood´s families, why they are dysfunctional, and how her female characters deal with the different duties imposed on them by patriarchal societies. The protagonists in the novels *The Handmaid´s Tale*, *The Robber Bride*, and *The Blind Assassin* have all grown up in dysfunctional families, and their relationships to their partners are frequently damaging. Intact nuclear families are rather rare in Atwood´s novels, proving that new structures of families are equally good for an individual. Atwood introduces families made up of different structures, for example gay couples, single parents, and couples without children. Further, she shows that women can do more than just nurture, obey their husbands, and take care of their household, duties that women are usually expected to perform in patriarchal cultures. Despite the unhappiness that Atwood´s female characters feel in their relationships with their partners, they are able to combine the duties imposed on them with the work outside the home. Also, they manage to express their individualities in different ways, although they live in patriarchal societies. Through these novels, Atwood shows that families and relationships are of importance to each individual; however, that the nuclear family is not a constant anymore.

Keywords: Atwood, dysfunctional, families, patriarchy, unhappiness, nuclear, relationships, duties

7.2. Zusammenfassung

Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, einen neuen Ansatz für Atwoods Romane zu finden. Die ProtagonistInnen in den Romanen *The Handmaid's Tale, The Robber Bride* und *The Blind Assassin* sind alle in zerrütteten Familien aufgewachsen, und die Beziehungen zu ihren Partnern sind oft schädlich. Die Arbeit konzentriert sich hauptsächlich auf Atwoods Familien, warum sie

dysfunktional sind und wie sich ihre weiblichen Figuren mit den verschiedenen Aufgaben beschäftigen, die ihnen durch patriarchalischen Gesellschaften determiniert sind. Atwood stellt Familien aus verschiedenen Strukturen, beispielsweise homosexuelle Paare, alleinerziehende Eltern und Paare ohne Kinder dar. Ferner zeigt sie, dass Frauen mehr können als nur erziehen, ihren Ehemänner gehorchen, und sich um ihren Haushalt kümmern - Pflichten, die man von Frauen in patriarchalischen Kulturen erwarten würde. Trotz des Kummers, den Atwoods weibliche Charaktere in Beziehungen mit ihren Partnern fühlen, sind sie in der Lage, die ihnen auferlegten Aufgaben mit der Arbeit außerhalb des Hauses zu kombinieren. Auch gelingt es ihnen, ihre Individualität in unterschiedlicher Weise zum Ausdruck zu bringen, trotz des Lebens in patriarchalischen Gesellschaften. Atwood zeigt durch diese Romane, dass Familien und Beziehungen von Bedeutung für jeden einzelnen sind. Intakte Kernfamilien sind in Atwoods Romanen eher selten, was beweist, dass neue Strukturen der Familien gleich gut für eine Person sind. Die Kernfamilie ist keine feste Norm in Atwoods Gesellschaften, genau wie in unserer gegenwärtigen Gesellschaft.