



Visions of nightmare, dreams of freedom  
Ecofeminism in two feminist dystopias

Inger Karoline F. Hagane

Supervisor:  
Assoc. Prof. Rebecca Scherr

A Thesis presented to  
the Department of Literature, Area Studies and European languages  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for  
the Master's degree in English Literature.

University of Oslo  
2009-2010



## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
The authors .....	7
Theoretical background.....	8
Utopia and dystopia: “Dreams of order and dreams of freedom” .....	8
Ecofeminism.....	13
Methodological approach and chapter outline .....	18
<b>Chapter I: The rejection of male subjectivity and phallo(logo)centrism.</b> .....	<b>20</b>
The space I claim as mine .....	24
The female “I” in perspective: Metanarratives.....	35
<b>Chapter II: (Eco)feminism and the deconstruction of (natural) metaphor</b> .....	<b>43</b>
Nature writing and nature imagery.....	47
Natural motifs as subversive tactic in the dystopia .....	55
<b>Chapter III: Ambiguous representations of technology</b> .....	<b>60</b>
Science and technology as oppression .....	65
Science and technology as empowerment.....	75
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>80</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>86</b>



## Acknowledgements

Working on this thesis has given me insight into two interesting and diverse fields which I have long wanted to explore: contemporary feminist dystopias, and ecofeminism. To have had the opportunity to spend nine months on close study of the prose of Margaret Atwood and Sarah Hall has been a privilege and a delight. The writing process has been educational and mostly enjoyable, mainly due to a few snowflakes:

I owe much gratitude to my supervisor, Associate Professor Rebecca Scherr; thank you for your patient, kind and invaluable feedback, and for inspiring my choice of primary literature.

I also owe many thanks to the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom for your kind hospitality and for freely allowing me the use of your library and facilities.

To the “support group/dream team,” Karine, Ida, and Marte, thank you for hours’ worth of inspirational-motivational coffee breaks and lunches, through the good times and the bad.

To my “partner in ale”, Mattias, and to Natalia and Ingrid, thank you for your friendship and critical thought: both excellent.

To my brother Peter, thank you for your sensibility and sense of humour.

And last but not least, I give my thanks to Åsmund, for your persistent, unconditional, affectionate support.



## Introduction

“How do women cope with a logos which basically denies their existence?” (Devine 98)

“Muffled throughout their history, [repressed women] have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts.” (Cixous 886)

“There, in the world of the mechanical greedy, greedy mechanism and mechanised greed, sparkling with lights and gushing hot metal and roaring with traffic, there lay the vast evil thing, ready to destroy whatever did not conform. Soon it would destroy the wood, and the bluebells would spring no more. All vulnerable things must perish under the rolling and running of iron.” (Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* 102)

This thesis will be dedicated to exploring ecofeminist aspects of women’s utopian and dystopian literature. Through close readings of two contemporary novels, *Daughters of the North* by Sarah Hall and *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, I will explore the ecofeminist elements in two significant contributions to the feminist dystopian class of fiction. Two important aspects of ecofeminist theory are the deconstruction of the metaphorical phenomenon of aligning woman with nature, and to provide criticism of the overarching phallogentrism which permeates such a metaphorical dialectic. In my thesis, I will argue that the two novels in question explore these tendencies on several levels, and discuss how this deconstruction of metaphor manifests itself. In this context, three issues seem especially important:

I will first of all argue that both narratives provide criticism to the androcentricity as well as the anthropocentricity of our contemporary society on the linguistic and metaphorical level. I will explore how the assertion of the feminine subjective in both narratives is in constant opposition to the oppressive nature of the dominant patriarchy, on all levels of the discourse. I will also discuss how the novels’ epilogues influence our relation to the narrative and the establishment of the feminine subjective. Secondly, I will discuss to which degree these novels portray the protagonists’ relation, and/or the perception of their relation to society and whether it is influenced by the nature/culture dichotomy. I will also discuss whether the association of women with nature and men with culture is an unfortunate stereotypical dichotomy – and whether such a tendency towards bipolar dichotomisation can be said to be amplified in the critical dystopia? Interestingly, while any reinforcement of the man/women, culture/nature dichotomies are considered almost uniformly unfortunate by feminist critics, there is also opportunity to successfully draw parallels between the way these

two authors regard the position of nature and of woman. The women's situation and the state of the environment are mirrored on several levels, and the women seem to draw strength from their natural surroundings. I hope to elaborate on this paradox. Thirdly, I will discuss whether these novels, as far as they can be considered ecofeminist, are critical to technology, and what are the implications of this? Would the symbolic association of women with nature contribute to the alienation of women from the field of technology? Even today, engineering and computer-based professions are male-oriented and male-dominated. On the other hand, if ecofeminism is technophobic, is that another manner of reinforcing the woman/man nature/culture dichotomy? I will explore the protagonists' relationship with technology in the primary literature, and relate my findings to the context of (eco)feminism and the critical dystopia.

In short, by providing a critical reading of the two primary texts, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Daughters of the North*, I will focus on their feminist and eco-critical aspects, in the dystopian context. In doing this, I hope to illustrate how the three aforementioned aspects of ecofeminist literary theory can successfully be applied to Atwood's famous work, as well as Hall's recent novel. Ecofeminism was chosen as the primary theoretical framework, as I found this comparatively recent field compelling, and I believe there are appropriate grounds for analysis of the two selected feminist dystopias from an ecofeminist point of view; the two novels appear to mourn the loss of women's liberty and loss of nature alike.

## The authors

Upon reading Hall's novel and realizing that it resonated with *The Handmaid's Tale*, the similarities and differences between these two novels struck me as interesting. Both are dystopias, and both can be considered in relation to the ecofeminist theoretical framework. Hall's novel is the more recent work, first published in 2007. Sarah Hall is a recent addition to the British literary scene, as she was born in Cumbria in 1974 and published her first novel, *Haweswater*, in 2002 (Holcrombe). *Daughters of the North*, or *The Carhullan Army* as it was originally called, is her third novel, and depicts a Britain which has collapsed as a result of pollution and geopolitical warfare. In contrast, Margaret Atwood is one of the most established and renowned modern feminist authors. She was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada, as the daughter of a forest entomologist (Turner). Atwood is a versatile author with a considerable body of work behind her, having written novels, poetry collections, critical



articles, reviews, screenplays and children's books. Her latest novel, *The Year of the Flood*, was published in 2009. *The Handmaid's Tale* is inspired by Orwell's *1984*, and, poetically, 1984 is also the year Atwood started writing *Handmaid*, which has since become her most famous work. It has since been established as a central feminist literary text, and adapted into a film and an opera. I find it interesting to explore such an established modern classic from an ecofeminist perspective, perhaps especially together with Hall's more recent work, which might be said to have found inspiration in Atwood's novel.

## Theoretical background

### Utopia and dystopia: "Dreams of order and dreams of freedom"<sup>1</sup>

Although both primary texts which inspired this thesis are distinctly dystopias, there are elements of utopia within them. The comparatively sombre genre of dystopia has a rich heritage of origin in the traditional utopia. According to Abrams and Harpham, a utopia is a "class of fictional writings that represent an ideal, nonexistent political and social way of life" (378). Utopian literature often depicts a perfect world or society, often of a parodic nature, separated from the society which it depicts by time, space, and/or physical barriers (Ferns 2). The term utopia itself is ambiguous, in fact it is a pun. The word was famously coined by Sir Thomas More, who wrote the original *Utopia* in 1515-16. It is a deliberate combination of the Greek words "eutopia" – good place, and "outopia" – no place (Abrams, Harpham 378). The utopia is an ideal world, but it nevertheless remains just that – an ideal. Its impossibility is directly connected with its perfection; it remains a wholly fictional paradise, usually even separated from the society it is meant as a reaction to. Unsuspecting travellers would come upon the utopia in the furthest reaches of the wilderness, on a solitary island, or behind natural or constructed barriers.

The early utopias were comparatively rigid narratives which portrayed society as static. The very rigidity of this class of fiction could be said to invite reactions and criticism, and the dystopia is perhaps the most widely known reaction to utopian fiction, "both [parodying] and [subverting] the traditional utopian model as a means of satirizing and warning against some of the more alarming trends in contemporary society" (Ferns 15). The dystopia emphasises and recontextualizes the already grim aspects of our own society, thereby allowing critical investigation and satirical portrayal. It is what Atwood calls the "evil twin"

---

<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the two eloquently titled parts of Ferns' work *Narrating Utopia*.

of the utopia (Atwood, “In Context” 515); instead of being presented with a subjectively perceived perfect variant of the author’s contemporary society, we are invited to witness its downfall. According to Abrams and Harpham,

The term **dystopia** (“bad place”) has recently come to be applied to works of fiction, including science fiction, that represent a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order, are projected into a disastrous future culmination. (378)

These “disastrous future culminations” have to be projected onto a fictional, often futuristic or contemporary society which might to a greater or lesser extent resemble our own, or political models or regimes we are familiar with. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this is exemplified by the rule of the Sons of Jacob, an extremist religious group whose conservative, autocratic value system might be said to be a fictional exaggeration of the more vocal representatives of Christian right-wing extremists. In *Daughters of the North*, Britain has suffered a political and environmental breakdown, and the government, which is illustrated as corrupt and ill-managed, has entered a war for resources.

More often than not, the central theme, problem or dilemma is somehow related to the reaction of the characters to a new development in science or technology. The science fiction element can be said to be present in any utopia where there are depictions of fictional scientific principles and/or technology which has significantly contributed to the structure of the society in question. Taking this into consideration, it could be argued that *Daughters of the North* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are science fiction novels. Recently developed or imagined technology is in some way significant to the maintenance of the regimes in both novels, as they are significant to the protagonists’ escape or retaliation. Although technology plays a comparatively minor part in these novels compared with popular, “hard” science fiction, there are certainly elements of sci-fi in the novels. Several criteria of the definition of science fiction in Abrams and Harpham can be applied to the novels, as they are both set on an “earth projected into the future” (323), in which there is a “drastic change in the organization of society” (ibid). In fact, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is mentioned in Abrams and Harpham as one of the examples of dystopian science fiction. However, it could be argued that technological innovation plays an indirect role in these novels. Rather, these dystopias seem to react not directly to the technological developments of an imagined future, but to the consequences of this development. Rather than observing the marvels of technology in its control and power to adapt nature, these narratives seem to mourn the negative side effects of

these developments, as long term effects of natural contamination and destruction lead to devastating consequences: infertility in Atwood and global warming and a series of deadly floods in Hall.

While the first utopias were written as “isolated bastions of sanity in the midst of a world of change and unreason” (Ferns 2), i.e. enclosed societies of safety, order and peace; modern utopias (including dystopias) tend to encompass all of society rather than the island lost at sea or the walled-up city. While the utopian narratives of the Renaissance depicted a perfect society which must not be interfered with, but remain static and securely isolated from the harsh reality of the imperfect society it means to reflect, modern utopias are more all-encompassing and progressive (Ferns 64). This is arguably true for the novels I have chosen to work with – they present a process of rebellion in the midst of a society which is changing for the worse. Whereas *Daughters of the North* shares some traits with the classic utopian travel narrative in that Sister goes on a quest for her utopia – and finds it – the dystopia is dominant in this novel. Eventually Carhullan must be evacuated, and the women are either scattered across the country or die in the siege upon Rith. *The Handmaid’s Tale* presents a more modern dystopian representation. In *Handmaid*, the only utopia resides in Offred’s imagination and memories of her past, and the dystopian setting envelops all of society save a few outcast, rebellious groups. Remnants of the attitudes of the dystopian regime remain prevalent even into the future, as we witness a 22<sup>nd</sup> century history professor dissect Offred’s narrative without acknowledging her subjective voice.

Schweickart agrees that the modern utopias are progressive rather than static, and adds that the progressive utopia took shape as hopes for technological progress were formed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (198). She also adds that:

The work of modern utopists testifies not only to their longing for comfort and happiness, but also, and perhaps more so, to their confidence in reason and our power – guaranteed by the fabulous accomplishments of science and technology – to mould nature according to our wishes. (Schweickart 198)

She seems to associate the development of the progressive utopia with humanity’s increased ability to shape the earth. This is interesting in relation to Atwood’s and Hall’s texts, as it could be argued that these narratives are reactions to the genre of the utopia as well as reactions to humanity’s ruthless shaping of the earth – especially Atwood, who modelled her novel on George Orwell’s *1984*, and thereby revolutionised the traditionally male genre of

dystopia. As Baccolini states, “Women’s science fiction today speaks to our concerns and through a series of strategies and features has renovated the traditionally oppositional nature of the genre” (519). Atwood’s novel is a good example of a work which does just that, and Hall’s *Daughters of the North* is one of the more recent additions to this tradition. It is interesting to compare and contrast such a recent novel with one which had such an impact on feminist literature.

The desire to prescribe a presumably more well-functioning doctrine on society which is conveyed through the utopia has been replaced by the dystopia’s descriptive criticism, and the systematic and often satiric questioning of contemporary society. The utopia still allows us to dream of change, but the dream is less rigid; the traditional utopian invention of a doctrine or set of rules to replace our current society has been forfeited, as there is no reason to assume that the author’s suggested set of rules would not be just as oppressive as those that already exist. Instead, modern utopias dream of change through the open-ended questioning of the rigidity of contemporary society, which could be said to be very much the case in both Atwood and Hall; both novels portray political nightmares which are bound to provoke reactions, but neither novel provides closure in that the fate of either protagonist is never revealed. What is revealed, however, either by implication or direct depiction, are the protagonists’ dreams, memories, and fantasies of freedom. As Ferns so elegantly points out, while the early utopias were dreams of order, the modern ones are dreams of freedom, and “if the overwhelming majority of utopian dreams of order have been written by men, it is equally the case that the recent resurgence in utopian dreams of freedom has been predominantly the work of women” (27). They “explore the question of what women are both free and constrained to want” (Bartkowski 4). While male novelists of the utopia wished to develop and make perfect an already existing social order, female novelists want to disrupt exclusionist power structures, and open them to a pluralist, inclusive re-structuring.

*Daughters of the North* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* both seem to reclaim the imagery of nature which has previously been used for aligning the female and the natural as resources for a male-centered culture. I argue that both Hall’s and Atwood’s novels can be easily included in the ecofeminist tradition, as both their narratives seem to take a stance against the male-centeredness towards which ecofeminist theory is so critical. As ecofeminist novels, both Hall and Atwood do indeed explore the association between woman and nature, Hall through her subversive nature writing, and Atwood through her protagonist’s analytical approach to linguistics. The protagonists in both novels take a highly critical stance to the dystopian

organization of society, its depletion of natural resources and corresponding pollution, as well as the oppression of the population in general. As mentioned, while Offred has to create her own, internal paradise, Sister goes in search for her utopia. This might, as I have briefly mentioned, be seen as a reference to the classical utopias and travel literature of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, which is augmented by Jackie's ironic comment that Carhullan is a "Shangri-la" (100). There are a few references to utopianism in Hall's novel, the farm is referred to as appearing utopian to outsiders, although depending on their perspective (48), and as Sister is recovering, she reflects that "[Jackie] did not try to describe Carhullan as any kind of Utopia" (100). Although it is not actively described as such, the play of contrast between Carhullan and Rith might in itself suggest that one is utopian while the other is its "evil twin" (Atwood, "In Context" 515). However, Sister describes Carhullan as a flawed society in itself, and eventually comes to wonder "how much [Jackie] would have failed in her original plan, how much she might have had to compromise" (100), which might be seen as a criticism of any ultimate utopian goal in the construction of Carhullan. The farm is eventually deserted in a last act of rebellion against the overarching patriarchal social structure. Hall might be commenting that this utopian dream of freedom is not possible for any length of time while patriarchy is still dominant.

Through these plot elements and overarching metaphors, there is opportunity for ecofeminist theory to manifest itself clearly and easily in the dystopian novel. Through the portrayal of societies which resemble our own, yet with an augmentation of some of the more destructive consequences of patriarchy, technology, disregard for ecology, and in Atwood, religion, the portrayal of this catastrophic culmination of events provide two ecofeminist visions of nightmare. It is perhaps easier to provoke inspiration for change through the critical portrayal of an issue, rather than provide a prescriptive, utopian alternative. In fact, I would argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts the consequences for the people who are suffering under the utopia of someone else, not necessarily a conservative religious utopia, but a utopia of a small elite, in which it can hold power over the common man and woman through excessively conservative religious practices. Taking into account that the ruling elite is excused from many of the strict religious practices and demands of piety, it becomes clear that religion is merely an excuse for oppression. Upon reading Atwood's novel, it becomes clear that the structure of Gilead was conceived by a small group which purposefully organised society in order to retain the highest possible degree of control. As I will illustrate in Chapter I, Professor Pieixoto's comments, however sexist and biased they may be, confirm

this in the coda. As such, Atwood's novel can be seen as a commentary on patriarchy as an "old boys club", an organised force in society which attempts to retain control through all means necessary. Although this tendency is necessarily exaggerated in a dystopian novel, it remains relevant as some areas of society are still male-dominated, and in some cases, even entertaining a corresponding macho-chauvinist subculture. One of these fields I will discuss further in relation to these novels in Chapter III, namely technology.

As a literary genre, the dystopia is in general a highly appropriate vessel for feminist and ecofeminist criticism alike, and it is my opinion that these novels are two great contributions to feminist and ecofeminist literature. In the chapters which follow, I will discuss how the mindset in which woman and nature are inferior to man are criticised through the retaliation of both the women and of nature, and whether this can be seen to influence the woman/nature association. The male-centered dominant culture is put under scrutiny through the depiction of phallogentrism in the male characters, and the female protagonists rebel, either internally through natural motifs and the subversion of traditionally male-centered nature writing, or externally, through escape and rebellion. As I will illustrate, this is how ecofeminist criticism manifests itself in these dystopias.

## Ecofeminism

The critical field of ecofeminism is comparatively scattered, being host to a number of different viewpoints, some of the most important of which I hope to briefly introduce. In order to give a more thorough understanding of the field, I will briefly present its origins. The term was coined by François d'Eaubonne in her first work on *ecoféminisme, Le Féminisme ou la mort* from 1974 (Gates 15-16). Ecofeminism was originally a movement which aimed to breach the gap between activism and theoretical work, working together for the rights of women and the preservation of nature in opposition to a destructive male-oriented capitalism. Most ecofeminist critics, such as Soper, Merchant, Gates, and Devine, deconstruct and provide nuanced analysis of the association between women and nature: mythological, symbolic, and metaphorical. Other critics, such as King and McGuire and McGuire<sup>2</sup> rather embrace the assumed connection between women and nature, and are wholly supportive of living the ecofeminist dream, "regard[ing] ecofeminists as pragmatic visionaries [who] feel it is [their] business to 'activate utopia'" (McGuire and McGuire 186).

---

<sup>2</sup> McGuire, Cathleen and McGuire, Colleen.

This vision, which d'Eaubonne herself recognised as “romantic idealism” (d'Eaubonne, qtd. in Gates 18<sup>3</sup>), is perhaps less important than to recognise the deep-set connection between different representations of oppression, with the improvement of society as the ultimate goal of these examinations. As d'Eaubonne says, “It is important to establish how deeply revolutionary the link [between feminism and ecology] can be, and I mean revolutionary in the word’s most authentic sense” (qtd. in Gates 18). She accuses governments of over-focusing on economy, without taking sufficient care of its citizens or the environment, and argues that women and nature alike are reduced to resources. This criticism can be seen as echoed within the novels of Atwood and Hall; the female protagonists in these novels, like the sparsely accessible natural resources, are controlled and subjected to personal limitations and humiliations. As such, the novels can be said to make the connection between woman and nature. There is a healthy dose of criticism towards the ecofeminist movement in this aspect. Some critics, such as Stabile, are sceptical to the movement due to the ecofeminist aversion to technology, and to the overall implication that any connection between woman and nature can be used dialectically in the disruption of patriarchy, when the woman/nature association seems to fit so neatly within the oppressive value system. By aligning women and nature in opposition to the cultural mode of civilized and technocratic society, it would seem more difficult to influence this society and its value systems. However, most ecofeminist theory aims at deconstructing the metaphorical relationship between woman and nature, which, as I will argue in Chapter II, also seems to be a goal of *Daughters of the North* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*; I will discuss how this metaphorical connection is not only deconstructed within the novels, but also how it is used subversively as a form of rebellion.

The field of ecofeminism has furthermore been criticised for “being so diverse as to have no center” (Gates 21), but certain facets can nevertheless be said to make out a theoretical framework. Maureen Devine delves into three aspects of society where ecofeminism is relevant: the connection between women and nature, women and gender, and women and language. She argues that our society is centered on the male experience, that it is phallogentric, thus the perception of woman *as* gender, and nature as an opposition to male-oriented culture. Or, as Devine puts it:

---

<sup>3</sup> Although Gates mentions in this article that she is working on a translation of D'Eaubonne's *Le féminisme ou la mort*, I was unfortunately unable to find this document, and as a result I resort to quoting d'Eaubonne in Gates.

[Ecofeminism] focuses on an overriding concern about the relationship between woman and nature. This has developed out of a feminist ideology [...] that wants to first come to terms with the concept of woman. [...] Given this as the ideological framework, ecofeminism begins with the assumption that from a historical perspective, woman has been associated with nature, and seeks to analyze the development of this association and how it has led to the domination and exploitation of woman and nature as resources in patriarchal society. (29)

She develops this argument into the hypothesis that the male subjective has traditionally been the linguistic centre of consciousness which both genders must consequently relate to: phallogocentrism. Men, as the dominant gender, have had the opportunity to form not only culture, but also language, with all its interrelated symbolism and metaphor. It could be argued that Hall's and Atwood's use and reclaiming of language rebels against this phallogocentrism; the women in these novels use imagery with exceeding sensibility to the traditional employment of the metaphorical connection between woman and nature, and instead make nature metaphor a resource of their own.

It could be said that the ultimate goal of ecofeminism is a pluralism which invites to a sense of respect not only for that which is different, but for the conservation of the biological diversity of nature – human or otherwise. Any dominant dialectic which does not allow for such a spectrum of variation can be considered oppressive. Ynestra King provides an interesting perspective on the interrelation of several modes of oppression in the bold “The Eco-Feminist Imperative”:

[...]we [in the ecofeminist movement] believe in the philosophy of nonviolence – that no person should be made into an ‘other’ to despise, dehumanise and exploit. As women we have been an ‘other’ but we are refusing to be the ‘other’ any longer and we will not make anyone else into an ‘other’. Sexism, racism, class divisions, homophobia and the rape of nature depend on this process of objectification. (“Imperative” 12)

King expands the ideological ecofeminist framework to include all forms of oppression, not just misogyny and the exploitation of natural resources. She observes that all oppression depends on the same process of objectification, the construction of the inferior “other”. This is an interesting aspect of ecofeminism, especially because it is interdisciplinary and virtually all-encompassing. Ecofeminist critics look to alter the structure and ideology of the prevalent



society and bring about a reform in which egalitarianism and sustainable development are core principles. Although perhaps unrealistic, at least in the short term, King's reformative thoughts seem to echo d'Eaubonne's original yearning for a "post-industrial era" (qtd. in Gates 19). This sentiment can be said to be echoed in Hall – the ecologically sound and egalitarian society of Carhullan can be said to illustrate a simultaneously post- and pre-industrial contrast to Rith. Post-industrial comforts are combined with a pre-industrial mindset of sustainability, and making the most of the available resources; industry belongs to the crowded and almost Dickensian conditions of the city.

However, not all critics are comfortable with this anti- or post-industrial mindset. Stabile is perhaps the most critical of what she calls ecofeminist "technophobia" (Stabile 49), that any distance created between women and the field of science and technology is in essence counter-productive. She states that ecofeminism has a tendency to generalise: "[t]he universalization at the center of ecofeminism's belief that technology has uniformly and necessarily oppressed women [...] relies on a reductive model of social relations [...]" (Stabile 52). Also, while recognizing that misogyny as well as natural destruction are prevalent, she criticises any association between women and nature: "By asserting that women's natural, instinctive, and primal link with nature is superior to man's rational, objective, and mediated relationship to nature, [ecofeminists] remain trapped within the dualistic logic of rationality" (Stabile 54). Stabile here criticises the portion of ecofeminist criticism which would fortify the assumption that woman and nature are differently and by implication more intimately connected than nature and man, which would reinforce the gender dichotomisation which many feminists strive to eliminate. Widening the cleft of this gender dichotomisation by implication seems to depict women as somehow morally superior to men due to their affinity to pure, unsoiled nature; this is a clumsy attempt at reverting the prejudice towards the woman/nature association, which instead acts as a reinforcement of the patriarchal value system. As Gates puts it:

Primarily because of their misconceptions of its intent, critics have insisted that ecofeminism is essentialist, that it purports that women have a biological closeness to nature that men do not have. On the contrary, inherent in ecofeminism is a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things. Since all life is nature, no part of it can be closer than another to nature. (20)

Rather, the ecofeminist movement views cultural hierarchy as a social construction, and argues that nature is not modelled on such a system of dominance: "Ecological science tells us

that there is not hierarchy in nature itself, but rather a hierarchy in human society” (King, “Towards” 124). Any perceived structure of hierarchy in nature is rather a reflection on the prevailing cultural tendency to organise the world hierarchically – instead of a hierarchy there is an interconnected and complicated ecosystem. Jordanova argues that hierarchy, and the binary structure of the “I” and “other”, is a result of the thinking of Enlightenment scholars who prescribed to an “ideology of progress” through amongst other things the careful categorization of society and the value system of imperialism:

The ideology of progress which was so deeply entrenched in Enlightenment thought meant that the growth of a humane, rational, and civilized society could also be seen as a struggle between the sexes, with men imposing their value systems on women in order to facilitate social progress. The nature/culture dichotomy thus has a historical dimension. Human history, the growth of culture through the domination of nature, was the increasing assertion of masculine ways over irrational, backward-looking women. (Jordanova 61)

Rejecting this notion of women as backward-looking and irrational, an ecofeminist society would ideally be perceived as a continuum of individuals, and not in dichotomies of male/female, gay/straight, black/white, nature/culture. Ecofeminism, then, wholeheartedly supports the pluralism which is at the heart of both ecocriticism and ecofeminism.

As a subgenre of the larger field of ecofeminism, ecofeminist literary criticism investigates the literary association between women and nature in works by female or male authors, the attitudes of male authors to woman and nature, as well as the forgotten and/or overlooked aspects of what is called nature writing in the work of female authors (Abrams, Harpham 89). Nature writing is the “intimate, realistic and detailed description in prose of the natural environment, rendered as it appears to the distinctive sensibility of the author” (87). It is the presence of subjective depictions of nature, which although they might often be metaphorical in fictional prose, are there primarily for the illustration of natural scenes – nature itself can almost be said to be present in the story, not merely as a backdrop for human reflection. This is in accordance with ecofeminist criticism, which takes a critical stance to the andro- and anthropocentric mindset of the Western hemisphere.

The relevance of ecofeminist literary criticism in relation to the two main texts becomes clearer when one considers, as I will do in my analysis, their feminist and ecocritical aspects, and the utopia/dystopian genre in general. Ynestra King phrased it like this:

“Ecofeminism supports utopian visions of harmonious, diverse, decentralized communities, using only those technologies based on ecological principles, as the only practical solution for the continuation of life on earth” (“Towards” 125). The utopian (eco)feminist dream of harmonious equality and the dystopian (eco)feminist criticism of natural destruction are intimately connected.

### **Methodological approach and chapter outline**

In reading the novels and some of the critical texts available, I settled on a tripartite chapter division: “The rejection of male subjectivity and phallogocentrism”, “(Eco)feminism and the deconstruction of (natural) metaphor”, and “Ambiguous representations of technology”. In each chapter I will be focusing on the most significant ecofeminist aspects of the novels. Although both Atwood’s and Hall’s novels touch upon several interesting subjects besides ecofeminism and feminism, such as the issue of the union of state and church, the problem of political fanaticism and cults of personalities, I will have to limit myself to analysing the aspects which I find most relevant to ecofeminism. In the first chapter, I will look closely at the texts and present and analyse imagery and symbolism, as well as the narrative techniques of the novels, and discuss what makes these novels dystopian, what makes them feminist and what makes them ecofeminist. I will look at the novels as vehicles for criticism of the phallogocentricity of language and metaphor. In the second chapter, I will present the authors’ use of nature writing and imagery – whether thematically or by the use of recurring imagery as motifs – and illustrate more closely the aspects of ecofeminism in relation to the dystopian novel form. This chapter will be oriented closer towards the aspect of (eco)feminist social criticism and how it manifests throughout the novels. The third chapter will present and discuss the element of science and technology in the novels: its presence and absence, its impact on women and the protagonists, the protagonists’ relation to technology. I will provide commentaries on this in relation to the ecofeminist theoretical framework. My findings will finally be presented in the conclusion, where I will state that the novels provide a nuanced approach to Cixous’ concept of *écriture féminine* and the phallogocentrism of language, a tendency towards which they rebel through their subversive use of language and natural metaphor. I will also argue that the same pluralism which is strived for within language should also be, and to a certain extent is strived for, within the fields of science and

technology; through the achievement of a plurality of voices within language, science, culture, society, the monopoly of phallogentrism can eventually be disrupted.

## Chapter I: The rejection of male subjectivity and phallo(logo)centrism.

“How [...] can a woman perceive herself wholly as subject – much less assert herself as subject or retain her integrity as subject – in a patriarchal society?” (Devine 103)

“I shall speak about women’s writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies [...]” (Cixous 875)

“ [...] I was not depressed. [...] Mine was a different kind of sickness. I didn’t feel listless or oppressed. I didn’t want drugs or numbness to mask my consciousness. I knew that everything around me was wrong. I could see it. I could sense it. And I had not yet found a voice with which to make my argument. It still lay somewhere inside me, unexpressed, growing angrier.” (Hall 31-32)

In this chapter, in an analysis of the language, the structure, and the use of metaphor in the primary texts, I hope to illustrate how these narrative elements strive against male dominance, linguistic or otherwise, how they struggle to establish feminine subjectivity, and how they satirize “the phallogos”. The dominance of men over women is institutionalised in the depicted societies of both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Daughters of the North*, and both novels display a woman’s first-person narrative as she struggles to retain, perhaps even to create her own identity under the full force of patriarchal oppression.

The structures of the two novels are similar: both can be said to be post-modern variants of the epistolary novel (Abrams and Harpham 228), both being intimate first person narratives related via recovered computer files or audio tapes. They might be said to break with the classical epistolary novel form by the introduction of modern media; *Daughters of the North* is a prison narrative, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as we find out in the novel’s coda, is the story of a woman who is freed from sexual slavery. In *Daughters of the North*, we are never told whether Sister’s story is conveyed through sound clips, video or text files; all we know is that file five and seven are partially corrupted. This very successfully brings about an effect of ellipsis and increased tension in the text, which adds an effect of rawness within the narrative. In *Handmaid*, the “approximately thirty tape cassettes” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 296) that constitute the narrative have been pieced together by historians at a later point, and the downfall of the dystopian society which Offred inhabited is thus not only implied, but documented. The coda to Offred’s narrative provides a satirical metanarrative to the main text, as the sexist attitudes of Gilead seem to linger on in Professor Pieixoto’s remarks and marginalization of both Offred and the female professor who acts as chair for the symposium.

In addition to the epistolary form, there are also traces of the Bildungsroman in the narratives (Abrams and Harpham 229). Both Offred and Sister are women who undergo a learning process, which is perhaps the most clear in the case of Sister, though arguably no less relevant to Offred. We follow Sister as she leaves her environmentally, politically and structurally corrupted home town, to go in search for Carhullan, the utopia within the dystopia. The novel illustrates the maturation and development of Sister in accord with the environment at, and surrounding, Carhullan, and how she learns to “[break] down the walls that had kept [her] contained” (Hall 187). She learns how to cast aside the subjugation which she has been taught, subtly and less subtly, by living in a society based on patriarchal values. We follow her as her character is broken down and rebuilt by her new natural surroundings and by Jackie Nixon, how she is gradually hardened by her circumstances, and how the emotionally self-limiting walls erected by a patriarchal culture are demolished and replaced by a healthy sense of self-definition. Similarly, although Offred is not the rebellious workhorse that Sister is, we follow the protagonist of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as she struggles with her own, necessarily internalized battle for self-definition and preservation. Both narratives’ primary issues are on this level the struggle of the internalized self to continue and fulfil a more or less silent rebellion against the cultural oppression of patriarchy.

The question of how existence is possible when one’s voice and identity is consequently denied is a feminist concern, as it is a concern in both of these novels. Devine asks:

How do women cope with a logos which basically denies their existence? What is the nature of women’s access to culture and their entry into literary discourse? To what extent must women submit to phallogocentricity as the price for this entry? How can the feminine break through the limitations of language in order to liberate it from its own boundaries? (98)

Atwood and Hall consider the consequences for women by the use of force by the patriarchal institutions of state and church (and a frightening amalgamation of the two in *The Handmaid’s Tale*). The rebellion of the novels lie in their structure as well as in their imagery, considering their portrayal of the female voice, and the female as I; there is a wholehearted rejection of the male as the wheel upon which the world turns, and masculinist folly is consequently portrayed critically and ironically. The structural, semantic and metaphorical elements of the novels work together in their effort to convey the protagonists’ feminine point of view as it struggles to tear itself from the masculine.

The phallogocentrism which Devine refers to above is the linguistic male centre of consciousness. This term signifies the tendency, which also permeates language, to perceive the world from the male point of view, and ignore or in some manner subjugate any perspective that differs from that of the masculine. It is a point of ecofeminism to disrupt the monopoly of the male perspective and provide a pluralism which is not limited to the inclusion and validation of the dimensions of race and gender, but which also includes the natural world, which is treated mainly as an inexhaustible resource under the current systems. Ecofeminism seeks to re-implement into our culture the realisation that human beings (or indeed, culture itself) are not separate from nature, but still a part of a vast and complex ecology which our present culture has turned into an androcentric table of plenty, virgin lands laid bare for the reaping of man (Merchant 99-103). Both protagonists reject the dominant discourse of phallogocentrism, and in their reaction and rebellion towards the male centre of consciousness, they strive for the establishment of their individual *écriture féminine*. What I mean by *écriture féminine* is the development of the feminine subjective through the process of writing and thereby the reclaiming of language, as illustrated by Cixous:

[...] woman has never *her* turn to speak – this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (Cixous 879)

This reclaiming of language and the body can be said to be central to both novels; both protagonists strive to tear themselves from the phallogocentric imperialism of words, thoughts and deeds. The male centre of consciousness is, in these dystopian settings, the social and cultural norm, and as a cultural norm imposes itself upon the women in every aspect of life through the silencing or trivialisation of their voices, their disenfranchisement and the removal of the right to their bodies, thereby rendering the female protagonists as insignificant and Other under the weight of the thoroughly established phallogocentrism.

On the linguistic level, this phallogocentrism represents itself primarily in the use of metaphor, on the lexical and semantic level. Common and familiar examples of phallogocentrism are the traditional masculinisation of nouns referring to leadership roles: chairman, spokesman, etc. As I have already briefly mentioned, there is a tendency to associate women and nature in a similar manner. As Devine argues: “As an element of language, metaphor is a carrier of ideology, and as such influences woman and her relationship through language to nature” (Devine 99). The linguistic association between

woman and nature inevitably influences woman's relationship to the environment, and removes her further from identifying with an already masculine-oriented culture. This linguistic connection is thoroughly criticized in Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, where Griffin reveals the prevailing cultural rhetoric as phallogentric and subverts it into an extremely extensive parody of male-centered perceptions throughout newer history:

The self is made up of three parts, it is said, the superego, the ego and the id.

And that although women have less libido, it is said, their animal instincts are less subject to control; they have less superego also. [...] That women have less of a sense of justice, that their thoughts are more coloured by feelings than those of men.

(That women are less objective.)

That men are responsible for civilization, it is stated. (Griffin 40)

This association of women with the irrational and the emphatic which Griffin here parodies, the reference to women's animal instincts and lack of self-control, are all examples of destructive nature-woman/culture-man dualisms which ecofeminism aims to deconstruct. It could of course be argued that language is a limiting medium in representing the human consciousness regardless which gender the author might subscribe to, which is perhaps what puts the challenge in writing. However, I would argue that there is a prevailing tendency to consider positive personal qualities as masculine and negative as feminine; the same tendency which associates the feminine with the weak and the trivial. Pejoratives seem to carry more force if they are associated somehow with women, perhaps especially with the female genitalia. This illustrates the presence of misogyny which extends to our linguistic value system. As a theoretical framework, ecofeminism seeks to expose the imbalances of this value system, but perhaps especially through the deconstruction of metaphor: "Woman's relationship to language in ecofeminist discourse revolves around the means and usages of metaphor that reinforce the woman/nature, man/culture dualism on the lexical, semantic, and narrative levels" (Devine 93). Ecofeminist theory aims to unveil the gender imbalance through an investigation of the lexical grounds upon which it rests, and especially in relation to the nature/culture dichotomy.



## The space I claim as mine

There are several instances of phallo(logo)centric criticism in both Hall and Atwood, either through linguistic attempts of domination, such as the arguments between Sister and her husband Andrew, or the male characters' inability to see beyond themselves, perhaps especially represented by sexual egotism. Illustrating the male-oriented nature of common discourse in *Daughters of the North*, Andrew resigns into indifference over the collapse of Britain:

When he was promoted to overseer at the refinery he seemed grateful, and told me it was madness to be anything other than complicit in Britain's attempts to rebuild herself. [...] Once stability returned, so too would the freedoms we had lost. 'We can be bitter,' he said, 'or we can just get on with it.' (31)

To this, Sister erupts in anger: "'She's a female, is she, this country that's been fucked over?'" (ibid). Her anger in this instance results from Andrew's way of distancing himself from the situation by assigning the feminine third person pronoun to the country. He puts himself above the whole situation, through an example of phallogocentric rhetoric, as if it does not concern him that the country has collapsed. On the contrary, having been broken down by the pollution and warfare of a patriarchal system of government, "she" needs to rebuild "herself". I would argue that Sister's anger at how Andrew seems to be comfortable with assigning responsibility where it does not belong – the country is in need of reconstruction due to the warfare-driven economic collapse, and the responsibility for the cleanup is directed to a fictional "she". Upon angering, Sister fails to distinguish her husband from the destructive aspects and forces in the portrayed society, perhaps because, to her, he has become part of it.

It is perhaps especially noteworthy that this episode occurs shortly after a description of how Andrew seems to approve of the new government-enforced contraceptive device implanted only in the women, because of the freedom and increased sexual pleasure it gives to him (Hall 29). This adds to the general impression that Andrew seems only to be able to consider his own point of view, with the added, ominous depiction of how he seems to find comfort (and to some degree, arousal) in this kind of institutionalized control as long as it does not affect him personally. Whereas the device silences her body, it liberates his own. Andrew is by this an example of a character without much consideration or empathy for that which lies outside the phallogocentric I – the sexual pleasure and liberty of the man can be said to be seen as more important than that of the woman.

A second example of phallogocentric criticism from *Daughters* are the circumstances surrounding the character Megan. She has been raised at the farm of Carhullan, and she is “the most confident girl [Sister has] ever met” (106). Megan has been raised outside the patriarchal system, and she has become a person devoid of shyness or self esteem issues, seemingly with a healthy sense of herself and her own significance:

If she had been created on a philosophical specimen dish then her generic beliefs had been altered to make her more resilient and assured of herself, more companionable to her own kind. She had not been exposed to a world of inferiority or cattiness, nor male dominance. (109)

Megan’s refreshing self-confidence is an example that women’s overall lower sense of self-worth, self-esteem, their shyness and self-sacrifice, are taught through socialisation processes which include of course action, but also language and metaphor. An example from Hall’s novel of the psycholinguistic imperialism of phallogocentrism is Sister’s inability to win an argument over Andrew, because she cannot “find the space to think clearly” (Hall 33). This space to think clearly is the space to formulate a rhetoric which is not rehearsed daily through what Devine calls the “images of oppression and domination” (Devine 30). It is the space to find good semantic and narrative alternatives to the phallogocentric discourse, to find a way of representing the female consciousness. “In our ecofeminist contexts, these fictional texts<sup>4</sup> confront a dualism that denies woman subjectivity and language responsive to her needs” (Devine 99). This dualism is confronted in both Atwood and Hall, by the persistently female subjective perspectives and their critical approach to institutionalised power, which is perhaps the strongest ecofeminist element in both literary works.

To further illustrate the portrayal of the feminine subjective in opposition or conflict with the male and the context of male ownership, the episode where Sister is walking away from Rith and reluctantly hitches a ride from a male civilian can be mentioned. In this passage, the narrator invites to an awareness of the power imbalance between the sexes which is a recurring theme in the novel. The man’s dialogue and behaviour seems to indicate a sense of ownership over Sister, the vague sense that she is there for his benefit, and the implication that he wants to make the most of the situation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Devine here originally refers to Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Sally Gearhart’s *Wanderland*, but the same principle applies to the primary texts which are explored in this thesis.

I felt his gaze on my legs, moving over the wet contours of my thighs. ‘Hey, listen, do you mind my asking, are they still, you know, sorting the women out, so we don’t get overrun?’ He laughed again, his face glowing. ‘That’s the one good thing about all this, I reckon, a return to the era of free love. Mmm, yes.’ His fingers flexed on the steering wheel. (Hall 16)

The fact that women are systematically denied the right to govern their own bodies in Hall’s fictional society leads to the awareness that the narration in this passage carries a sense of threat. The denial of women’s reproductive rights is a denial of a large part of their sexuality, but it also makes the need for other contraceptives comparatively obsolete. Sister’s husband seems to welcome the device, as it means the freedom to have sex “without any barriers” (31). Indeed, the men experience no barriers, and this can be said to be another instance of phallocentrism; Andrew fails to look beyond himself, as Sister seems to experience the contraceptive device as a very serious barrier from important aspects of her own sexuality.

The man in the car and Andrew seems to share the point of view that sex can now be had without consequences, and it becomes implicit that this is what the driver is aiming for. Sister’s sudden fear of him after the utterance in the car reveals that the power he has over her is physical as well as structural. As she states later, reviewing how big a risk she took when she stepped into the car, she is “not frail, but [she] would not have been strong enough to stop such a thing [i.e. rape]” (21). He is stronger than her, because she is conditioned to the limited freedom of movement in Rith, her conditioned lack of strength illustrated by her exhaustion after walking a single day with a backpack. However, his superiority of strength would be pointless if the prevailing cultural attitude were one of respect for women’s autonomy. The institutionalized control of women’s sexuality is here likened to a cultural disrespect for a woman’s right to decide over her own body. As we see this limitation and threat from a woman’s subjective point of view, there is criticism of the phallogentric rhetoric, simply by producing an illustration of the impact such a course of events would have had for her. Her subjective depiction shows how there is a struggle to retain control over herself, and not have it involuntarily delegated to the man in the car.

As Sister becomes conditioned to life at Carhullan, however, her strength develops. She learns to exert full control over herself mentally as well as physically; she is no longer subject to patriarchal influence. As she is on her way to the farm, there is an instance of retrospection in the narrative, where she recalls her childhood encounter with the rough mountainous country of the region: “It was here that I had first understood I was stable on my

feet, capable of direction and distance and stamina. It was here in the blue fells that I first knew that I was strong, and that I had it in me to be stronger” (Hall 42). Indeed, the country seems to shape Sister in the course of the novel, the organic and wholesome food which is available, in combination with the physical labour which is necessary at the farm and for manoeuvring across the countryside, shapes her body and mind: “‘There’s nothing like this place for rehabilitation,’ Shruti told me. ‘It’s working with the land that does it. Getting back to basics’” (131). This labour with the soil brings the women closer to the natural processes of living, growing things, and the physical, repetitive tasks at hand carry a meditative nature. The intimacy with the workings of the land and the fluctuations of the weather and seasons seems to bring reinvigoration and a sense of peace of its own to Sister, which adds to the relief of being outside the patriarchal system of oppression.

The reactions to the women at Carhullan even before the financial collapse seems to underline the underlying misogyny of the dominant culture. The women chose to remove themselves from the prevailing society and prescribe to their own system of values, which is met with speculation and disgust in the general public, although it would seem that especially the men are sceptical to the women of Carhullan. “They were nuns, religious freaks, communists, convicts. They were child-deserters, men-haters, cunt-lickers, or celibates. They were, just as they had been hundreds of years ago, witches, up to no good in the sticks” (Hall 48). Although the little community can be easily associated with a cultist group, formed as a cult of personality around Jackie Nixon, it would rather seem that the women of the farm have sought refuge, or just “opted out of their old lives” (49). As is argued at a later point in the novel, some of the women have come there to be shielded from further abuse from a man’s hand, such as Megan’s mother. However, many of the women have had a history of ill-adjustment or even violence, such as Shruti’s story of retaliating with murder after she was disfigured by her relatives (130). It is perhaps no great wonder that the women cast aside their old life for an egalitarian alternative, the utopia within the dystopia, where there is no longer a presence of patriarchy, silencing, abusing or violating them. Where their sexuality is their own business and not that of the public, and where movement is encouraged rather than discouraged. This, too, is rejecting phallocentrism; there is a rejection of the old system for the freedom of movement in the new.

The complaints from the men, claiming that their “wives and daughters had been kidnapped, brainwashed, assimilated, and bent” (49) are part of the phallocentric point of view for several reasons: the men might feel threatened by this new society because it is a

viable alternative to the prevailing androcentric one, they might be sceptical because they cannot understand why the women would leave the dominant culture and themselves, or they might understand that the women are leaving for a place where they are no longer voiceless, and that this is a threat to their dominance. However, the women have all moved voluntarily. Carhullan is the space they claim as theirs, and there they are taught how to reclaim their bodies and their minds.

As for Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, wordplay is one of the most significant literary aspects of the novel, as it is one of few places where the female protagonist can seek refuge; it is a space to claim as her own in the narrative. There is a general playfulness in Atwood's use of language, not only due to the protagonist's puns and symbolic digressions, but due to the wit which is also present in the novel. For instance, the name of the University at which the Gileadean symposium takes place, Denay, Nunavit (293) is a homophone of "deny none of it", illustrating how Atwood saturates her writing with puns that reinforce the overall thematic. As the coda to the novel is a transcript of this symposium, Offred's narrative is placed in an ironic context, as professor Pieixoto does indeed deny the importance of Offred's voice by his sexist remarks, and his male-oriented perspective which belittles the female narrator. Pieixoto riddles the coda with puns of his own, and perhaps he in that respect can be seen as a foil to Offred, who organises the world around her own imagery. In doing this, Offred creates a space where she can breathe and relate to the world according to her own principles, not those which are enforced upon her.

As quoted in the opening section in this chapter, Devine asks: "How [...] can a woman perceive herself wholly as subject – much less assert herself as subject or retain her integrity as subject – in a patriarchal society" (Devine 103). This concern is perhaps the main theme of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel concerns itself with the subjective consciousness and preservation of sanity for the handmaid Offred, who is essentially enslaved in a totalitarian, religious and patriarchal society, yet with strong and ominous echoes to our own present. Her freedom is extremely limited, and the discourse brings us mostly outside the immediate, oppressive surroundings and events that take place within the household Offred is assigned to. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the space which Offred claims as her own is arguably her mind and her memories: "There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 47). Although Offred in this citation originally refers to her room, not even this secluded space offers her complete privacy. Even the Commander intrudes upon this private space, she lives in fear of the Eyes and of being watched through hidden surveillance

equipment, and much of the novel consists of her retreating into her own imagination. She struggles to keep her definitions of herself clear in a society where she is continuously imposed upon. Her mind wanders, to the happiness of her past or to the few, daring dreams of the future. She occupies herself with word games and fantasies in order to deal with the alternating tedium and attempts of brain washing she is subjected to. She struggles to retain herself, her own personality, her spirit, without conversation partners, without anybody who can be wholly trusted (at least after Moira escapes), in a place where reading and writing for women is forbidden, even heretical by law, and she is frequently subjected to manipulative ceremonies aimed at altering her mind and subduing her spirit.

In this context it becomes interesting to observe how the narrative is structured. The novel can be divided into two parts, the main narrative of Offred, and the coda to this narrative in which we are introduced to the circumstances under which the text came to exist. The memories of Offred are related in a manner which is appropriately fragmented, related in a jumbled order which, until one reads the coda, seems to imply that she has written them down in the order in which she remembers them. We, the readers, are forced to piece together the fragments into a coherent whole (Bouson 136). One is tempted to compare elements of the narrative with the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique; Offred is after all attempting to convey her own stream of thoughts as they arise within her, her personal uncensored reflections on her own situation. She seems to resist her oppressors by hanging on to the true meaning of words and the associations that they bring about, her memories cannot be taken away from her like her freedom. Bouson puts it like this: "Through her dialogic wordplay and focus on words, Offred not only registers her resistance to the official speech and totalizing discourse of the state, she also signals her desperate desire to retain some sense of control" (149). This control that she struggles to retain is the power to tear her individual self away from the phallogocentric discourse and remain herself in spite of the efforts of Gileadean authorities to control her. She decides that the room which she resides in is her own, even though the door cannot be closed all the way, and there is a possibility that she is being monitored through some unseen source. She claims this space as her own, as well as the semantic space which acts as her mental playground. "Offred's assertion about the 'space I claim as mine' directly addresses questions about the feminine subject's position within a rigidly patriarchal system and a woman's possible strategies of resistance" (Howells, *M. Atwood* 99) Offred's means of resistance might not be striking or violent, but even in her situation there are opportunities for rebellion.

Even in the choice of name for Offred lies an interesting play on words, or pun, as Bouson remarks; the name is not only a patronymic contraction of “Of Fred”, designing her as Fred’s property, it could also be read as “[a]fraid,’ ‘offered,’ and ‘off-read’ (misread)” (Bouson 138). This is perhaps an illustration of phallogocentrism at its most striking; Offred’s identity is forced aside and she is reduced even in name to the property of a man. She is indeed an offering in a system which seems to disregard any remote implication of the autonomy of women altogether. This sentiment is echoed in Bouson, “Through its imposition of a rigid system of hierarchical classification, the Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallogocentric economy” (137). Indeed, the women are no more than commodities. If the handmaids fail to produce a child by their Commanders, they are assumed sterile and sent away to die, reducing their worth to their childbearing abilities. Also, the men are never assumed sterile in this instance, only the women’s bodies are allowed to be thought of as flawed in some way. “There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 58). This rejection of fault within the realm of the masculine is part of the phallogocentrism which Offred struggles to resist. At a later point, she imagines, and satirizes the sexual act of the ruling class in the following passage:

So now I imagine, among these Angels and their drained white brides, momentous grunts and sweating, damp furry encounters; or better, ignominious failures, cocks like three-week-old carrots, anguished fumbings upon flesh cold and unresponding as uncooked fish. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 219)

This is a fine example of Offred rejecting the phallo(logo)centrism, as it is an exquisite depiction of unwanted sex in the repressed circumstances of the conservative religious government. She refuses to see these ceremonies as the authorities attempt to portray them, rather she reflects on what is probably the truth, and a depressing consequence of religious totalitarian rule. Offred rebels in the only way she can: “Though she has no power to reject her Handmaid’s role and stay alive, she does have the power to defy patriarchal prescriptions by aligning herself differently through her private narrative [...]” (Howells, “Dystopian Visions 167). This defiance of the oppressive prescriptions of the ruling government is exactly what she does in the above passage, by “whispering [...] obscenities about those in power. [...] It’s like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 218). This is Offred’s means of rebellion, internally, with language and imagination.

In this context it is worth to mention the name of Hall's protagonist in *Daughters of the North*, Sister. She seems not so much to have lost her name, as having renounced it along with her past, and instead adopts a name which suggests a female alliance, companionship and perspective, and tastes of feminism. In stark contrast to Atwood's novel, Sister renounces her name voluntarily, which seems to add to the impression that Hall's protagonist aims to leave her old life entirely behind her, and exclude the dominance of men from her life, as she will not even acknowledge her old name: "It is what the others called me. It is what I call myself. Before that, my name was unimportant. I will not sign to acknowledge it. It is gone. You will call me Sister" (Hall 5). It is an interesting name choice, considering that "Sister" is a noun denoting a familial relation, as if the community of the farm is to a certain extent a parallel to the household of Offred – both of these names contribute to null out the protagonists' former identities. The difference is of course Sister's voluntary renouncement of the name which is given to her, and Offred remembers hers like a well-guarded secret: "I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your phone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong [...]" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 78-79). When she then goes on to consider her past, she states that "I'm wearing my shining name", which is like an "amulet" and a "charm" (79). Her new name does not even acknowledge her identity, but denotes her as belonging to her Commander; it is assigned by a regime which considers her a commodity. This illustrates how much disallowing her old, independent name and assigning the patronymic Offred has disrupted her sense of self. The passage also illustrates the subtle influence and power of language in defining ourselves and our circumstances. This is an extreme example of phallogocentrism, which is appropriate for a dystopia – it is not just the handmaids whose names are disallowed, all the women are reduced to the status of their husbands. The wives of the Commanders are just this: wives. The lower ranking men are assigned econo-wives, and the women who work with the indoctrinating of the handmaids and the new generation, are called Marthas or Aunts. All the women's names, and thereby an important part of their identities, are revoked. The women are no longer considered individuals; they are merely the attachés of their men. As Merchant states: "Because language contains a culture within itself, when language changes, a culture is also changing in important ways" (101). The restriction of language is in this case interrelated with the restriction of culture. In controlling language, and indeed the women's access to language, the commanding class is retaining control through not only physical limitations, but also an intellectual slavery. The male subjective is



not only the dominating discourse; the men are by law monopolizing language. The women are prevented from “writ[ing] and thus to forge for [themselves] the antilogos weapon” (Cixous 880). They cannot rally their forces as there are no grounds for organization when language belongs only to the ruling class. In this context, Offred is the “I-woman, escapee” (Cixous 879), not only through her subjective continuous escapes through her imagination and reminiscence of the past, but in a more literal sense through her implied escape through Nick at the end of her narrative.

As for Offred’s real name, it is never explicitly revealed, but Bouson makes an interesting point concerning this:

Since careful readers of the novel can deduce Offred’s name from the list of names provided at the outset – for all of the names, with the exception of ‘June,’ are assigned to other characters as the narrative unfolds – the fact that the historian who reconstructs and comments on Offred’s tale does not know her real name is a ‘sign’ of his ‘inability’ to read Offred’s story. (Bouson 138)

Perhaps Offred left a clue to her old identity amongst the thirty mixed tapes. It is indeed interesting how Professor Pieixoto implicitly might have missed this in transcribing and arranging the material, perhaps an indication that his focus has been on the men of the story, and the establishment of their identity.

Language is a significant motif in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. A wonderful passage which portrays Offred’s relationship with words and the feeling of retaining control over her language is when she plays a game of Scrabble with the Commander. She tastes the scrabble pieces, literally taking the words into her mouth, and find them tasting of lime. “The letter C. Crisp. Slightly acid on the tongue, delicious” (133-134). As she fingers the pieces, she describes the feeling as “voluptuous” (133), which is illustrative of this freedom to spell and create words and meaning, perhaps especially under circumstances where it is forbidden. The feeling of having the resemblance of a voice again is luxurious. The fact that the dominant regime denies women writing or reading altogether is an implication of the enormous power within language. A woman who is in control of language is also ultimately in control of herself, and by robbing the women of this basic freedom, they might easier restrain any acts of rebellion. When the women are denied access to language, they are also denied some of the freedom to explore their subjective selves. Similarly, Sister asserts control over herself and her body throughout her narrative, first by leaving her home town and then through the

conditioning she is subjected to at Carhullan. Sister is no less the “I-woman, escapee” than Offred, in fact her escape is physical as well as psychological. Offred, however, hangs on to her inner life and her subjective expression through wordplay and a rich vocabulary of metaphor, which reminds her who she is. As Devine argues:

Together subjectivity and metaphor frame many of the possibilities of fictional expression; they are the major elements that define the boundaries of fictional experience and so perceptualize meaning. As such, they can do much to undermine the power of the phallogos. (119)

This undermining of the phallogos is exactly what Offred is doing through her narrative, to establish a space within herself where she can be herself, unshackled.

Through the use of language and metaphor, as well as structural elements borrowed from the Bildungsroman and the epistolary novel, both *Daughters of the North* and *The Handmaid's Tale* rebel against the phallogocentric discourse of oppression by establishing or maintaining their voice and linguistic and/or physical freedom. Language and the private use of metaphor aids Offred's self-preservation and Sister's self-reinvention; it is an act of subversion, as it is an act of self-definition. Protagonists in both novels rebel against a dominant phallogocentrism, and the use of metaphor as what Devine calls a “carrier of ideology” (99), to perpetuate woman's position as a passive and faulty variant on man. Through their use of language, the protagonists claim a space of their own in the male-centered societies they inhabit, they assert their right to individuality and refuse to be the “sterile subject” (Hall 41) of such an existence. This space they claim as theirs is the space to be an individual before the member of a gender; it is the space not to be assumed a resource to control through contraception, or to exploit through state-organised rape. This space is unique for each protagonist, not only due to their different circumstances, but to their individual mode of expression.

Through the establishment and continuance of the female subjective in opposition to a male-centered culture and linguistic value system, Hall's and Atwood's protagonists deconstruct the metaphors of the dominant phallogocentrism and replace them with metaphorical specimens from their own rich inner lives. Whereas Sister successfully walks away from her oppressive surroundings in favour of life at Carhullan, Offred has to assert herself and her boundaries internally. However, Sister also fights an internal battle after she reaches the farm, in renouncing the patriarchal dialectic of phallogocentric discourse and

establishing her own self definition, confidence, strength and sure-footedness. The best Offred can do with her situation is to dream of escape, a dream which fortunately seems to come true. However, both protagonists seemingly fight not only for freedom, but for a semantic, intellectual space in which they can develop their subjective selves without the interference of the phallogos. A place where metaphor exists on their own terms, and language behaves accordingly. A place where their own opinions can take a firm and precise form without being thwarted by a “[...] language that wants to deny them a voice [...]” (Devine 110). This is how the narratives subvert the phallogos and struggle to establish a female identity.

## The female “I” in perspective: Metanarratives

Another aspect that the primary texts have in common is the recontextualisation of the narrative in a final chapter. In *Handmaid*, this manifests as a coda that comments on the main narrative, where we learn that Offred’s narrative is pieced together by a history professor. In *Daughters*, on the other hand, “File seven” offers a commentary on the circumstances of Sister’s narrative. We learn that the insurgence against the ruling government has failed, and that Sister is retelling her story to her captors. As for *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one could say that it is an epistolary novel in a dual sense of the word: the narrative of Offred is commented upon by the professors of history and anthropology about two hundred years into the future, but even the coda is a partial transcript of the proceedings at the symposium, and is a metadocument concerning the primary narrative. As it is, the implied editor of the text in the coda might be alive at any point in history after June 25<sup>th</sup> 2195 (Atwood, *Handmaid* 293), and not necessarily in the same generation as Professor Pieixoto. The coda in *Handmaid* shows us that the novel we have been reading has indeed had several diegetic levels, where the coda is on the extra- or hypodiegetic level, as it comments on Offred’s narrative (Rimmon-Kenan 92). Due to this commenting function, I would argue that the coda has an explicative function, as the “hypodiegetic level offers an explanation of the diegetic level” (Rimmon-Kenan 93). The coda explains the events leading up to its present situation, which might also explain the lasting misogyny of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century history professor. However, in *Daughters of the North*, where the very last passage in the last chapter serves as a continuation of the primary narrative, I would argue that the coda has an actional function, as it “advance[s] the action of the first narrative by the sheer fact of being narrated” (Rimmon-Kenan 93). The finalising aspect of the epilogue in Hall adds perspective and dimension to the main narrative on the diegetic level. There is a shift from the past to the present tense, and the passage starts with a summarizing line: “This is my statement” (Hall 207), which is continued with Sister’s summary of the siege on Rith. In doing this, the gaps in the primary narrative where data is lost are filled, and the plot line is restored.

These metanarratives arguably have several functions. Primarily, perhaps, to contextualize the first-person narrative and bring credibility to the main body of text, as well as provide a sense of optimism – if the narratives were lost and then uncovered at some later date, surely the oppressive regimes must have been overthrown in the mean time. However, this might not be entirely the case – in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, although we learn by the coda

that the regime of the Sons of Jacob has fallen, it seems to have been replaced with a society which is merely a marginal improvement of the subjugation and sexual slavery of Offred's time. The coda has a primarily ironic function, satirizing several aspects of the society of 2195, as well as our own society. This future situation at first seems to be a utopian counter-product or reaction to the regime of the Sons of Jacob, as the mere presence of a female doctor of Caucasian Anthropology would imply that this society is a more egalitarian one. As Bouson adds, "[...] the fact that Caucasian Anthropology is now a subject of academic study [serves] to suggest a multicultural future in which the power of white patriarchy has been successfully challenged" (155). Considering also a few of the activities that are planned as part of the symposium, including an outdoor nature walk and fishing expedition (294), suggest that there is a closeness to and embrace of nature as part of daily life in much larger degree than under the Sons of Jacob. However promising this passage might be after reading about the nature-ravaging warfare and toxic pollution of the earlier regime, we are quickly reminded that the future hardly achieves utopian perfection when we read Professor Pieixoto's opening remarks: "I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair" (295). As Davidson points out (119), the racist and sexist implications of this pun aimed at degrading his female colleague quickly puts a dent in the reader's hopes for the implied future. Davidson adds: "[H]e also spells out the differences of 'enjoy' and thereby elicits his audience's laughter. The chairwoman/charwoman thus assumes her marginal place as mere handmaiden to Pieixoto's central text" (119). Even two hundred years into the future, the marginalization of women remains consistent. As if degrading the symposium's speaker was not sufficient, Professor Pieixoto has further puns in store for us, even telling us that concerning the text

all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the world [sic]<sup>5</sup> *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (*Laughter, applause*) (Atwood, *Handmaid* 295)

The pun Tale/tail is accredited to a Professor Wade, who took inspiration from the "great Geoffrey Chaucer" in naming the narrative. This implies that the disrespectful sexism of Pieixoto is not limited to his own character, but is in fact shared by his peers in academia, and probably beyond. The pun of the "underground femaleroad/underground frailroad" which

---

<sup>5</sup> A typographical error in my copy of the text; I assume there is a superfluous "l" here and that Atwood originally wrote "word".

arose in some of “our historical wags”, underlines this sentiment. Structural sexism is then a feature even of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, almost 23<sup>rd</sup> century, and the coda no longer carries such a positive note. It could be argued that Atwood here aims to criticize the contemporary phallocentrism not only as it is present in the novel, but as it is highly relevant to our own society. The female subjective is as much ignored and suppressed in Offred’s time as it is in Maryann Crescent Moon’s, even though, two hundred years into the future, women may actually hold doctorates. This is also a good example of phallocentrism in Atwood’s text, and one which is still relevant, as it is one of the more subtle ways of expressing misogyny.

Also present in the coda in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the satirical criticism of academia. Further investigation of Pieixoto’s work on “The Handmaid’s Tale” reveals that he has a biased attitude to her narrative, as he gives a weak attempt to establish her identity, while simultaneously longing for the establishment of the Commander’s. He holds up “no hope of tracing the narrator herself directly” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 298-299), that she is “one of many” (300) and that the “woods were full of [women like her]” (300-301). This has a diminishing effect on Offred’s identity in the context of her narrative; Pieixoto seems to forget, if he has indeed ever realised, that he is dealing with an intensely intimate and personal story, and that her identity and individual struggle is firmly established in opposition to the regime, even if her historical person cannot be traced. However, as mentioned he fails to explore the list of names she provides, and work out which one is never used in the narrative – if he had, a very viable hypothesis would be that Offred’s real name is June (Bousoon 138), and that this name deserves research on its own, if the other names “drew blanks” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 301). Failing to do so, his dismissal of her identity is complete, partially from a biased attitude to the source material, and partially from plain lack of effort.

Concerning the Commander’s identity, Pieixoto feels that if at least he could be identified, then “at least some progress would have been made” (301). This affirms the value – or lack of it – which Pieixoto places on Offred’s narrative – it is not valuable as a subjective account of the regime’s oppression of women, but only as a means for him to solve the puzzle of who were responsible for what in the high ranks of the Gileadan government. He lists the qualities of other senior officials of the regime, attempting to give personality to men who have left few or no records (302-303), while simultaneously ignoring Offred’s abundantly personal narrative: “[...] Professor Pieixoto, an archivist whose remarks comprise most of the coda, focuses less on the details of Offred’s life than on the *men* who shaped it” (Rubenstein

112). Also, Pieixoto comments that one might derive more valuable details from Offred's narrative,

had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's<sup>6</sup> private computer! (Atwood, *Handmaid* 306)

In effect, he is criticising Offred for not following his phallogocentric point of view, and through implication attempting "to discredit Offred for not paying attention to significant events" (Howells, *M. Atwood* 107), by asserting the right to decide which events are significant. As Howells points out, this marks a "radical shift from 'herstory' to 'history'" (ibid), as Pieixoto attempts to claim Offred's narrative for his own purposes, drowning out her voice and ignoring the details she does provide, except as "evidence for his grand impersonal narrative of a fallen nation's history" (Howells, "Dystopian Visions" 169).

This is evidence of extensive phallogocentrism also in the future of Offred's society. Although Howells argues that the fact that there is a coda to Gilead at all is "relatively optimistic" ("Utopian Visions" 164), I find myself agreeing rather with Davidson, who draws parallels between the Gileadean society and the conference two hundred years later in stating: "Just as the conference chair in 2195 is peripheral to the proceedings themselves, so is Offred merely a marginal (and ultimately disposable) tool of the patriarchy that cannot exist without her" (Davidson 120). Pieixoto's manner of discussing the narrative he has before him robs it of authority, just as he robs Crescent Moon of her authority in belittling her with a degrading pun in front of the approving audience. Even the title of his lecture, "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*", instead of confirming Offred's precious and rare narrative, he rather deals with her tendency to not convey the specifics of her circumstances, which could be said to be done in protection of the other characters, not to mention Offred's daughter. This being said, by having a phallogocentric approach to the narrative, he "authenticates her tale by retrospectively duplicating the suppression her society inflicted upon her, by claiming the right to determine the meaning of her experience" (Davidson 120); he keenly illustrates how *The Handmaid's Tale* is still relevant even two hundred years into the future. This also functions as a reminder for the reader, that the oppression which enslaved Offred is not so easily contained within the bubble of fiction; it

---

<sup>6</sup> The assumed identity of the Commander

invites the reader to take a look around her- or himself and recognize how Atwood took her inspiration from contemporary political trends and events. However, if one is to take into consideration that even the transcript of the symposium on Gileadean studies might have been reviewed and added to the main narrative at any later date, there might be some optimism in this, merely by the implication that time moves on, and destructive attitudes are hopefully challenged and eliminated.

The presence of the coda in relation to the dystopian model is significant; Atwood has herself stated that *Handmaid* is inspired by George Orwell's *1984*, "particularly the epilogue" (Atwood, "In Context" 516). There are many similarities between these two novels; the presence of 24-hour surveillance, never knowing whom to trust or where to be safe, a "thought police" of such, as well as "newspeak" are present in Atwood's novel, as the handmaids are frequently subjected to ceremonies which are poorly disguised attempts at ideological brainwashing. As previously mentioned, language is censored as certain dangerous words have been outlawed, such as "sterile"(58) and the handmaids are forced to conform to only allowed courtesies: "Blessed be the fruit", "May the Lord open", (17) "Under His Eye" (41). These elements all echo with Orwell's gloomy dystopia. *1984* is perhaps the most widely familiar dystopian novel, and as such it is understandable that Atwood would choose it as a model for her own story with a female protagonist. The similarities between Orwell's coda and Atwood's are in this regard unsurprising, while Atwood's is a transcript of an academic history symposium held after Gilead's fall, Orwell's is an appendix on newspeak, which opens: "Newspeak was the official language of Oceania [...]" (Orwell). By implication, then, both dystopian societies have fallen, and academic research has at some later point been carried out on these old republics. Like in Orwell, the coda in *The Handmaid's Tale* is added as a source of hope. As the codas both imply that the depicted dystopian society has ended, there is room to hope for improvement in the future, although this future might still be out of reach.

However, the primary function of Atwood's epilogue is to reveal that phallogocentric attitudes permeate Atwood's novel: "What Atwood has written is not just a history of patriarchy but a metahistory, an analysis of how patriarchal imperatives are encoded within the various intellectual methods we bring to bear on history" (Davidson 120). Although Atwood does indeed portray the female subjective, she also portrays how the female subjective is silenced through the male historian looking for facts to support his own impersonal narrative. This is a criticism not only of academia, but also of historians and their



tendency to value only history seen from the male point of view. Not only does the novel explore how the female subjective voice is systematically silenced under the oppressive eye of patriarchy, it also illustrates how phallogentrism is a structural problem – and how the women’s part of history is easily forgotten because they have traditionally not been amongst the leadership – which is not only relevant in relation to Gilead. *The Handmaid’s Tale* illustrates through Professor Pieixoto how herstory is not important except when it relates the movements of great men, which is phallogentrism at its most self-serving.

In Hall’s text, the epilogue plays a different part, and it is of a different nature. As mentioned, it has an actional function in contextualizing the primary narrative as a prison narrative. That it is a statement from a female prisoner is already revealed to us in the brief prologue to Sister’s story, and as such the coda brings a sense of completion, of the narrative having gone full circle: not only because we are reminded that it is a prison narrative, but because we are reminded that there is an implied hypodiegetic level. Unlike the coda in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the epilogue in Hall’s novel does not reveal whether there is a past which is much different from the dystopian society which Sister rebelled against. The coda serves only as a finalizing link to the present, as well as a way of summing up the events which were elided in file seven. However, Sister does put her own narrative in context, if nothing else, then to firmly place it in the tradition of the Bildungsroman; the coda sums up the fruit of what Sister has been taught at the farm, in one way the coda and the rebellion are the culmination of her learning process. She rebels on her own at the beginning of the novel by leaving Rith, but at the farm she is taught how to take care of herself, and she is taught how to get rid of the culturally determined sense of inferiority and to assert her independence. The statement that she is “second in council to the Carhullan Army” and that she does not “recognise the jurisdiction of this government” (Hall 207) underlines her independence not only from the ruling government at her time of capture, but from the attitudes which belong within it.

The structure of Hall’s text arguably brings, like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a meta-dimension to the novel, as the seven more or less complete files could be said to imply that the narrative has been uncovered at some unspecified later date, perhaps long after it has been related by Sister. The fact that it is a prison narrative, and that it is a transcript which has been “recovered from site of Lancaster holding dock” (Hall, prologue) in a corrupted state, might, speculatively, signify that there has been some form of social turmoil or revolution in the

aftermath of the narrative. This could suggest an optimistic note to the novel, although it is never revealed to us who recovers these files, or under which circumstances.

It could be argued that in a dystopia, such a recontextualisation is important for the persistence of hope – if one removes the hope of improvement beyond the narrative of one which is trapped in a dystopia, then the narrative is without direction. Baccolini's comments on hope in the dystopia: "Utopia is maintained in dystopia, traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only *outside* the story: only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape such a dark future" (520). The novel, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, "by resisting closure, allow[s] readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open [ending] maintain[s] the utopian impulse *within* the work" (ibid). Additionally, the open-ended critical dystopia is that it allows the reader to have a fruitful dialogue with the text – a dystopia with a finite ending could be said to retain some of the same stasis which makes the utopia comparatively uninteresting and un-aesthetic. An ambiguous text is far more interesting and relevant to the feminist and ecofeminist discourse:

[...] by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups – women and other ex-centric subjects whose subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse – for whom subject status has yet to be attained. (Baccolini 520)

The separatist nature of the dystopia might itself be seen as a rebellion against the hegemonic discourse, but this rebellion is extra potent when written from the female point of view. *Daughters of the North* ends a rebellious narrative with a coda detailing a rebellion, and for this purpose, the dystopia is a highly suitable genre. The status or fate of Sister is not established, just as the female subjective or women's equality are not yet fully established. The establishment of the female "I" is the imperative of both novels, and to subvert the traditionally male-oriented dystopian genre to include women's voices. At a time when the same oppression which would threaten women's autonomy is about to threaten our natural habitat as well, the open question of what comes to pass in the future of Sister's narrative can be expanded to include the fate of the climate.

Even the structure of the novels can be said to underline, to a certain extent, a criticism of phallogentrism. In both works there is a brief epilogue, which recontextualizes the narratives, puts them in a new setting to different degrees. Both epilogues share the function of putting the female protagonists' intimate narratives in the perspective of either the male-

centered field of academia, or the context of the official documentation of a government which we know structurally oppresses women. In epilogue to *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is almost an attempt to discredit our relationship with, and intimate personal knowledge of, the protagonist, as the narrative is scrutinized by the 22<sup>nd</sup> century academic with an agenda of his own. In *Daughters of the North*, Sister's last words underline and summarize her dissidence from the ruling government. However their differences, the epilogues underline the female protagonists' dissidence from the dominant regimes, underlining their self-chosen removal from and criticism of the male-centered, male-privileged societies which surround them. In this manner, both narratives rebel against phallogentrism on the metaphorical, semantic and structural level, which is an important step towards establishing a pluralism which is encouraged by feminism and ecocriticism alike.

## Chapter II: (Eco)feminism and the deconstruction of (natural) metaphor

“The images are easily available to us: nature as nurturing mother, the mother earth, virgin woods, images associated with the premodern organic world” (Devine 29).

“The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, [...] Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies.” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 104-105)

“Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (Alice Walker, qtd in Devine 107)

So far I have explored the effects of phallogocentrism and phallogocentrism on the female subjective consciousness in Atwood’s and Hall’s novels, and how the main characters strive to cope with their own identity, whether they want to retain or establish it. I have looked at the imagery and metaphors which are used to associate the female with an Other in the novels, and how this use of imagery and metaphor maintain the phallogocentric rhetoric of both dystopian societies. In this chapter I want to investigate the ecofeminist issue concerning imagery which seems to associate nature and women. There is usually a duality in such imagery – although many feminists are inherently sceptical to any metaphor which seems to attribute feminine characteristics to the natural world and vice versa. In *Daughters of the North* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this is nevertheless a frequently used literary device. I explore how the female protagonists narrate nature, and how and why they find strength, solace and/or peace in their natural circumstances. I argue for the relative presence of nature writing in both texts, although nature can also be said to be reduced to the role of backdrop in these narratives. This being said, to whichever degree nature writing can be said to be a part of the novels, the narratives also criticise how nature is culturally constructed to suit a dialectic of oppression in the represented societies. The protagonists can be said to subvert this rhetoric to suit their own internal dialectic, and ultimately also the means of their escape.

Nature imagery seems to be a conscientious presence in both novels. This imagery portrays nature as a backdrop as well as an echo to the women’s own experiences. There is a paradox in the linking of nature imagery with women’s personal narratives, in that the female narrators’ focus on and intimate relationship with nature could be seen to reinforce the woman/nature dichotomy. The celebration of nature as the feminine opposite to a masculine culture is suspicious to feminist critics: “Rather than celebrate nature as a locus of feminine values, these feminist arguments tend to distrust such eulogies as inherently conservative

expressions of patriarchal power” (Soper 315). On the other hand, there is the aim for valorization of nature which in the ecofeminist body of work can be seen as parallel to the valorization of women – as part of a project to establish a voice where a voice has previously been denied. Ecofeminist theory, while sceptical to the association between women and nature in the context of assigning both as reduced only to inferior “others” to the male I, also aims to provide thorough criticism of the anthropocentric attitudes of the dominant male-oriented discourse which have shown to be exceedingly destructive. As a theoretical field, ecofeminism aims to deconstruct the metaphorical relationship between woman and nature so that one might subvert certain destructive attitudes and tendencies which are destroying our environment and holding back our progress towards equal rights: “Ecofeminism is [...] a critique of metaphors which have associated woman and nature in dualistic opposition to man and culture, images of oppression and domination” (Devine 114). Not only, then, is ecofeminism sceptical to an attitude which would place men at the centre of the subjective world, it is also a field which concerns itself with the by-products of this male-centered mode of thought. Through the establishment of the dominance of one gender (or any social group), the dismissal of anything which does not appear as belonging to this gender can be designated as “other”, which is implicitly worth less. Any deviations from the idealistic norm can then be used as ballast in a power struggle based on fictional criteria.

Kate Soper observes that although the use of the term “nature” is often used in discussions on gender and ecology, it is rarely specified how the term is used, and she distinguishes between three main uses: metaphysically, as a realist concept, and as a lay or surface term (319-320). Nature is most often referred to in a metaphysical sense in a philosophical argument, where it is “the concept referring to the difference and specificity of humanity” (319), meaning that in the metaphysical sense nature is what humanity defines itself in relation to. Secondly, in the realist meaning of the word:

nature refers to the structures, processes, and causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world, serve as objects of study of the natural sciences, and condition the possible forms of human intervention in biology or interaction with the environment. (320)

In other words, in the realist sense of the word, nature is a system to be observed scientifically, and interacted with when it is deemed necessary or interesting. Thirdly, as a lay or surface term, nature “refers to ordinarily observable features of the world: the natural as opposed to the urban or industrial environment (landscape, wilderness, countryside, etc.)”

(320). This natural environment also includes wildlife and domestic stock, as well as the foods and flora which surround us. According to Soper, all three manners of regarding the term “nature” separate the concept from humanity, or rather, removes the concept of humanity from nature. All three variants of the term do not consider humanity as a part of nature, but something external to be observed, appreciated, preserved, or as a resource to exhaust. Nature, then, is an “other” to the human “I”, and as such, any theory which wishes to deconstruct this relationship is convergent with feminist thought. Soper draws several parallels between the androcentric manners of reducing nature and women to mere resources:

[...] just as ecological valorization of the natural and animal world expresses dissent from the standard Enlightenment conceptions of the natural and animal world as a lower order to be exploited in the interest of humanity, so too does feminism dissent from the idea of woman as a lesser type of human being whose subordination is explicable and justified by reference to male superiority. (Soper 314)

This is perhaps the most important common ground of ecocriticism and feminism, and one which is illustrated in both Atwood and Hall, as I will discuss further in this chapter.

This being said, it is interesting to investigate why women originally came to be associated with nature, through metaphorical association and binary opposition. According to Merchant, this attitude has been present in our culture since “ancient times” (99), but she argues that until the Renaissance, this attitude was of a mythological nature which depicted a comparatively healthier relationship between “[...] the female’s reproductive and nurturing capacity and the mother earth’s ability to give birth to stones and metals within its womb through its marriage with the sun” (Merchant 104). Although this metaphor can be seen as an example of the “inherently conservative expressions of patriarchal power” as mentioned above, the mythological and symbolic connection between the earth and woman could be said to have carried “[a]n organically oriented mentality prevalent from ancient times to the Renaissance, in which the female principle played a significant positive role [...]” (Merchant 99). Nature, then, in its association with woman, used to carry a positive connotation, one which was seen as in balance with the rest of the cosmos. According to Merchant, this changed as humanity approached the Renaissance era: “[the positive association between woman and nature] was gradually undermined and replaced by a technological mindset that used female principles in an exploitative manner” (Merchant 99). This shift took place at a time in which technological innovation replaced the respect for nature as nurturing and life-giving with the respect for man’s abilities to mould the earth. Merchant elaborates on this:

Not only was nature in a generalized sense seen as female, but also the earth, or geocosm, was universally viewed as a nurturing mother – sensitive, alive, and responsive to human action. The changes in imagery and attitudes relating to the earth were of enormous significance as the mechanization of nature proceeded. The nurturing earth would lose its function as a normative restraint as it changed to a dead, inanimate, physical system. (Merchant 102)

Nature was no longer a dominant force; with the rise of agricultural techniques and artificial watering it became easier to make the earth yield, and there was likely a sense of having “overcome,” “domesticated,” or even “dominated” this unruly feminine power. Technological innovation, especially in the field of mining (Merchant 112), served to strip and force natural resources to yield their valuable produce, thereby subjecting nature to the advancement of human technology. It was finally discovered that by studying nature, one could strive to emulate her produce, and she would eventually not be able to hold any secrets from the scientist: “The final step was to recover and sanction man’s dominion over nature. [...] Only by ‘digging further and further into the mine of natural knowledge’ could mankind recover that lost dominion” (Francis Bacon, qtd. in Merchant 114).

In the context of the novels, I would suggest that the authors are aiming to deconstruct stereotypical assumptions about femininity, as the nature imagery in both novels is used in an unconventional way. This process is highly relevant in relation to ecofeminist thought: the oppressive nature of this kind of imagery originates with the assumption that women are closer to nature – hence the association of women with lower cognitive functions and less self-control, as well as being more animal-like than her male counterpart, and possessing an exotic rawness and sensuality. In *Daughters of the North*, however, imagery of nature seems to be closely connected with imagery and associations of female strength. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred’s play with words and association not only function as a way to keep sane, to keep her identity and connection to her past, it portrays a female subject taking in and criticising her surroundings. It could be argued that these novels are written in accord with the ecofeminist principle of disrupting or somehow deconstructing the assumptive association between women and nature as forces to be domesticated by a dominant male-oriented discourse, which is achieved in part through the subversive use of metaphor.

## Nature writing and nature imagery

Imagery of nature is deeply ingrained in both novels; in fact it plays a big part in how the protagonists relate to the world around them, metaphorically and otherwise. Nature shapes society and the female characters in different ways. When nature is tampered with, the results are devastating. In *Daughters*, the economic collapse of the UK begins with a series of floods, which are triggered by global warming. Sister is formed by the harsh environment of the north and the Lake District; her body and mind become honed for independence and survival in these rough conditions. In *Handmaid*, biological warfare and pollution have rendered much of the population sterile. This sterility forms Gileadian society around an almost fetishized cult of baby-making, where the handmaids, although they are not allowed any resemblance of status or power, are still a central part of society as they are one of the few remaining means of perpetuating it.

Structural power, however, resides with the Commanders, who are not allowed by law to be thought sterile, only women can be perceived as “barren” or “fruitful” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 58). The ruling class is ideologically perceived as immaculate, while fault is reserved for the women. It could be seen as if Atwood aims to criticise this kind of rhetoric in portraying a society where women are inferior and have a biologically determined destiny, and in failing to fulfil this destiny, they are of no further societal use other than as slave labour, exemplified by the concept of the “unwoman” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 120). This is an instance in which imagery of nature and women are associated in a rhetoric of domination: the handmaids are a resource, a commodity to be ploughed and exhausted much like the natural surroundings in the novel, they are there for the use of the ruling class. Atwood seems to criticise this attitude in illustrating how Offred is a complex, independent character who lives in deep loathing of her circumstances, and how the treatment of nature will backfire through the destructive levels of pollution. As Hengen puts it: “Nature – physical or human – seen as a commodity always represents betrayal in Atwood’s work, and betrayal has consequences” (84). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this form of betrayal is very much present.

Another interesting aspect of the novels is how the protagonists personally relate to and interact with nature. The narratives of both novels are related in a series of first person monologues, as a consequence they are represented wholly in free direct or free indirect discourse, two of the most intimate modes of speech representation on the diegetic to mimetic scale (Rimmon-Kenan 110-111). The intimacy of the narratives has an impact on how we



interpret their imagery; the metaphors carry an associative element which is natural in an uncensored flow of thought. This element is deeply personal for the characters, as it becomes for the reader who is allowed to observe them. One is tempted to compare this associative element stylistically to writing in stream of consciousness. However, I would rather agree with Campbell that it is in the nature of epistolary writing to carry traits of the stream-of-consciousness style, as it

is subjective and emotional; it reaches out as it looks inward, opening up and presenting a consciousness to a specific sympathetic listener. While it appears to be stream-of-consciousness writing, the reader of the epistolary novel is aware that within its boundaries there is another reader. (336)

There is censorship for the benefit of the reader in the epistolary genre, whereas in the stream-of-consciousness there is generally not. However, much of the same, intimate effect is achieved, and in these novels, the sense of closeness which is related formulates the intimacy of the protagonists' relationship to nature.

Both Atwood and Hall use familiar imagery of nature in an innovative manner. The universality of the imagery, which is used in unique ways by both Sister and Offred in dealing with their daily existence, could be said to be representative of the imagery which resides in a collective consciousness. The authors can be said to use this imagery as an added dimension of criticism in the already bleak dystopias; imagery of nature is used subversively by both protagonists. The imagery of nature, instead of conforming to the kind which might traditionally be used by a male author to draw similarities between a dainty woman and the fragility of flowers and grass, instead forms a metaphorical backdrop or subtext to the women's own experiences.

There are plenty of examples of the traditional manner of drawing parallels between nature and women in the poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; although this imagery does feature in works from every epoch, the age of Romanticism seems to provide the most striking examples. I have drawn upon Wordsworth to illustrate this:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
– Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky (252)

The passive, flower-like maidens, like the rest of nature, are present as part of the scenery to be admired by the active, praising, loving, writing, male poet. The contrast to this traditional employment of such imagery becomes especially startling upon reading the opening of *Daughters of the North*, and the depiction of a “wet, rotting October” (Hall 5), where the heat of summer is beginning to let go its grip on the city, and we are invited to imagine that the environment has severely deteriorated when this rotting October brings a purifying freshness with it in comparison to the summer:

The bacterial smell of the refinery and fuel plants began to disperse at night when the clouds thinned and the heat lifted. Each year after the Civil Reorganisation summer’s humidity had lasted longer, pushing the colder seasons into a smaller section of the calendar, surrounding us constantly with the smog of rape and tar-sand burning off, and all of us packed tightly together like fish in a smoking shed. (Hall 5)

Hall’s imagery of smoke, decay and all-round unwholesome circumstances culminate in the illustrative “smog of rape”, which is an interesting and subtle pun which plays on the smoke from distillation of rapeseed oil, and the act of sexual violence. The imagery of the crushing of this yellow flower into refined produce, which is used for cooking, but also for the lubrication of machinery, provides an interesting metaphorical contrast to not only environmental rape, i.e. through pollution, but to actual sexual assault. This provides a good example of subversive use of imagery – by likening the violent act of sexual assault to the manner in which the natural surroundings have been treated, Hall could be said to be metaphorically linking nature and woman in the face of a common oppressor, which includes the powerful metaphor of the smog of rape as a by-product of the running of the machine. Bluntly put, the machine is perpetuated over the bodies of women, and through the distilment of dead organic matter. When the narrator goes on to illustrate the crimes which are perpetrated against women under this system of government, this symbolism is underlined.

There are lengthy depictions of Sister’s natural surroundings in Hall’s novel. Even when she is still in Rith, there is focus on the “yellow pulp” (Hall 5) of rotting leaves, the effects of global warming, and the turn of the seasons in a post-apocalyptic setting. Hall contrasts the imagery of rot, pollution and decay to the freshness and vitality of the Cumbrian

moors, and a considerable portion of the novel is devoted to this kind of natural imagery. It could be argued that nature imagery is present in the novels, however, the imagery as mentioned also functions as a backdrop to Sister's personal experience. According to Abrams and Harpham, nature writing is "the intimate, realistic and detailed description in prose of the natural environment, rendered as it appears to the distinctive sensibility of the author" (87). Hall's depictions of nature qualify as intimate, realistic and detailed, with the extensive use of colourful and affectionate metaphor to illustrate the narrator's empathy for and delight with her circumstances. However, nature writing must also portray nature as a thing of its own, "infused with human life; nature [in nature writing is] a tangible, material reality, rather than a metaphor for human experience, or an entity through which humans realize spiritual truths" (Sarver 111). I would argue that the writing in *Daughters* and *Handmaid* alike fulfil the criteria of nature writing as well as the criteria to play as backdrop to the experience of the protagonist. The dual function of this writing aims to dissolve the boundaries between nature and culture – nature is not merely the scenery to a grand human drama, it is a complex all-encompassing system and an independent force which is ultimately in charge, no matter how human control is strived for.

This dual presence of nature imagery can be illustrated by a passage describing Sister's journey towards the farm; she takes in her circumstances, and describes them as following:

The smell of the grassland and peat was all around; open and bloody, burnt and aromatic. I'd been keeping the dry-stone wall I thought signified Carhullan's land on my right as I climbed, and it had led me through bogs and swales, up over outcrops of rock and loose bluffs. [...] All around, the wind stroked the tawny grassland; the veld darkened and lightened in waves as the air coursed over its surface. There were belts of dark yellow underneath the parted clouds, the oblique late light of autumn evening. I could smell gorse, blossoming sweetly against its spines. After the confinement and industrial stink of the town, the factory metals, human secretions, the soots and carbons of the refinery, this harsh and fragrant expanse was invigorating. It was the smell of nature, untouched and original, exempt from interference. For all my weariness, it made me feel a little more alive, both human and feral together, and somehow redeemed from the past. (Hall 56-57)

The quoted text not only illustrates the relief of having escaped the industrial confinement of Rith, but the narrator describes with affection the invigorating beauty of the autumnal

countryside, and the feelings which it evokes within her. In this respect, nature functions as a metaphor for Sister's experience; her newly found freedom is echoed in the freshness of her surroundings which invigorates the feeling of being alive. However, I would also argue that there is a feeling of the vast expanse of untouched nature rising up to greet her, in the life which lies dormant in the "tawny grassland." She even describes how it awakens her feral nature, and likens this awakening to that of her life force. There are other passages in *Daughters of the North* where nature decidedly has a mind of its own. Sister also passes through a deserted village on her way to Carhullan, and she describes nature as a determined force reclaiming its own territory: "Anybody coming back to their old rural lives would have to slash their way through foliage that had grown huge and confident, swallowing the habitations back into the earth" (Hall 22). This could be interpreted as an instance of nature writing, as nature seems to be a participating force in the narrative. Hall's novel thereby incites a new respect for the presence of nature as the only authentically dominant discourse.

One could, however, interpret the quoted passages as instances of writing which reinforces the woman/nature-man/culture dichotomy, as the mere intimate presence of nature in the mind of a female protagonist might be seen to represent an association between woman and nature. However, I would argue that this imagery rather depicts a gynocentric criticism of male exploitation. The passage where Sister takes in the "tawny grassland" is a depiction of a woman recovering her strength after years of confinement and suppression – not only in the sense of suppression through patriarchy, but also in the sense of having virtually no personal freedom, space, or possibility for movement. Sister finds strength in the untouched expanse of nature not because she is a woman, but because she has escaped from a male-centered society of oppression and bondage, as well as overpopulation, disease, pollution, and tinned foods. "Here I was breathing air that no one else's breath competed for. I was no longer complicit in a wrecked and regulated existence. I was not its sterile subject" (Hall 41). In associating the liberation of Sister with the unsoiled expanses of the Cumbrian plains, Hall thwarts the dominant rhetoric and uses it to her advantage; instead of the association between nature and women as grounds for oppression and subjugation, Sister finds strength in the open wilderness. This is an ironical parallel to the depiction of women as supple and weak, and the diminishing of nature to a financially determined resource of patriarchal culture, as illustrated by Griffin in the following passage:

He breaks the wilderness. He clears the land of trees, brush, weed. The land is brought under his control; he has turned waste into garden. Into her soil he places his plow. He

labours. He plants. He sows. By the sweat of his brow, he makes her yield. (Griffin 54-55)

After centuries of pushing the environment too far, and through the aggressive behaviour of warfare, the resulting global warming is the cause of a devastating series of floods, which cause the government to evacuate the population into the cities. This flooding can be seen not only as a consequence of destructive behaviour, but also metaphorically: nature retaliates against the abuse. The fact that Sister finds refuge in an ecological farm-society of women outside the phallogocentric system, and at some point returns in a siege on Rith, is a mirror to the flooding of Britain. The women, like nature, have been pushed too far, and like the overflowing river, they unite in a destructive wave upon the society which has oppressed them. To further illustrate the flood symbolism, Hall incorporates the anecdote of the hare which gets stuck in a flooding. There is a bout of flash rain, and the animal remains in while the water rises, cutting it off from the bank (97). When Sister asks whether it drowns, Jackie replies: “No, no, it did not, Sister. It swam to the banks and got the fuck out. All animals can swim if they have to” (98). This is a metaphor for the circumstances which arise in Rith, and Sister’s escape – Sister, like the hare, finds her ability to escape from a situation which threatens the self.

This metaphor corresponds with Hall’s seeming preference for animal imagery; the imagery employed by Hall in the passages which illustrate the disintegration of the society around her is arguably epitomised by an analogy concerning the dead dog which she discovers. As Sister has just started her journey to Carhullan, there is an instance of retrospection as to when she ventures out to excavate her father’s gun. In this passage are also depictions of Britain’s collapse, mentions of wars, epidemics and poverty (Hall 35-37). In her father’s back yard, she comes across a dog carcass, half rotted away, and maggot-ridden. “Its belly had distended and under its tail was a writhing patch of maggots. I stood over the creature until the smell that rose from it became unbearable. Then I walked away” (Hall 37-38). The dog has rotted from the core, whereas Britain seems to have been rotting correspondingly through the actions of its centralised government. Sister withstands the violations of the new regime for as long as she could bear before walking away.

The imagery the narrator uses upon depicting the Carhullan women’s strength is also easily compared with the imagery of the natural world in the novel. An instance of comparison between the country and the women occurs as Sister goes on to describe Jackie Nixon:

There was a fierceness about her, something amplified and internalised, an energy that my father would have described as Northern brio. Growing up in Rith, I had seen girls with the same quality. They had carried knives and had scrapped outside the school gates with little concern for their clothes and their looks, and there was an absence of teasing when they flirted with men. (Hall 84)

This fierceness is echoed in the imagery which Hall uses to depict the natural surroundings of Carhullan. The beauty of the surroundings, as well as the unforgiving roughness of the terrain is mirrored in the women's rough, yet hospitable society. "That was what Jackie Nixon had in her. It was a spirit bred from the landscape I was now treading" (Hall 55). Sarah Hall was herself brought up in a remote Cumbrian valley, which she states is "is remote, even by Lakeland standards" (Lowen, "Global Warming"). The inspiration for the fictional Carhullan was taken from this mountainous region, and the narrator's intimacy with the natural surroundings accounts for the expansive presence of nature imagery in *Daughters of the North*. As Hall mentions, she "continue[s] to have a dialogue with the North of England in [her] work" (Lowen, "Global Warming"). The way in which Hall has a "dialogue" with her native countryside, is that she uses the natural imagery to reinforce plot elements. As I have briefly illustrated, Hall's imagery mirrors the natural settings of the Cumbrian plains to several aspects of her writing, as well as depicting nature as a personified power which reclaims, retaliates and revives.

This nature presence which seems to resist the oppressive society of this futuristic vision of British government is the purest manifestation of ecofeminist criticism in this novel. Like Sister, nature resists the "smog of rape" (Hall 5), and reclaims whatever parts of the land are left unattended. In the dystopian society of Rith and England, nature is depicted as a living, breathing force, which revolts where it can. Mechanical patriarchy is the undisputed oppressive force in this narrative, although we are led to be sceptical of Jackie Nixon's character also – she might be portrayed as a mostly benevolent mentor for Sister and many other women, but as Hall mentions ("Sarah Hall Interviewed"), this novel raises a number of questions about fanaticism. Sister might be entranced by an ideology which gets her imprisoned and Jackie killed, but she is also taught how to separate herself from the dialectic of oppression as discussed earlier, and how to be independent and strong. She is, however, also taught to kill, which is not in line with an otherwise mainly pacifist ecofeminist movement. This aspect might imply a dystopian representation of an ecofeminist dream gone bad through a one woman cult of personality, or it might imply that Carhullan is not possible

within the dystopian frame of the dominant patriarchal societal structure. The women at the farm attempt to break away from society, and they succeed in doing so for a while. However, as long as the overarching male-oriented structure of society remains unaltered, it eventually imposes itself upon the women. The utopia in this case cannot exist within the structure of the dystopia; the dystopian society itself must be overthrown or altered. This resonates with much feminist and eco-feminist thought on how women cannot and should not settle and believe that equality has been achieved when the structure of society still functions on the principle that men are the norm, biologically, subjectively or otherwise, or that ethical business and environment decisions fail to be met. On an optimistic note, as I have mentioned in Chapter I, the frame narrative of Hall's novel might imply that the government of Britain, or at least the authorities in Rith, have succumbed to revolution, but this is nevertheless open for interpretation.

## Natural motifs as subversive tactic in the dystopia

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is an added complexity to the utopian aspects within the dystopia, as Offred's source of happiness, her personal utopia, seems to manifest itself solely in memories of her past, and her wordplay, which I have already discussed. Offred's écriture féminine mainly seems to manifest itself as a series of motifs which she uses as orientation in her monotonous, oppressed existence. These motifs are recurring imagery which seem to reinforce the novel's main thematic, and they manifest as flower imagery, animal imagery, the dwelling upon eggs in the narrative, blood imagery, fruit imagery, and about any kind of natural imagery imaginable. However, the most frequently recurring imagery is by far the floral, and this will be my primary focus. This imagery is used differently in *Handmaid* than in *Daughters*, whereas in Hall's novel it would manifest as a mirror to Sister's experience, Atwood's protagonist seems rather to use the natural motifs to symbolically organize her existence. There is overlapping between the different motifs and uses of imagery – as is only natural, as the symbols which are being used carry complex and interrelated meaning – although Offred frequently aims to provide clear separation of images in order to preserve the structure of reality according to her own mind.

The representation of flower imagery is one such instance of structural symbolism. As Offred approaches the Commander's household, she sees Serena Joy tending her garden, and reminisces that she once used to be in charge of a garden of her own: "I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 9). This garden scene can be seen as Offred remembering her lost personal freedom and individuality, not to mention how the handling of the bulbs and seeds indicate the handling of fertility, and how she has lost the freedom of being in charge of her own body and sexuality. However, now she is forced to wander in Serena's garden, without any power to tend the flowers. This motif continues with the steady association of flowers and sexuality. After noticing the household's driver, Nick, Offred observes that "[t]he tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer winecups but chalises; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 41). The sensuality of this imagery, considering its context, could seem to imply that Offred is attracted to Nick. She reminds herself that he is not supposed to talk to her, and remembers Aunt Lydia's words: "Of course some of them will try. [...] All flesh is weak. All flesh is grass, I correct her in my head" (41). Offred makes the internal distinction



between the attempted indoctrination of values upon her, and her own perception of sexual freedom. Her correction of Aunt Lydia implies that she is highly aware that the processes of human sexuality and desire have little to do with weakness, but rather the natural instinct towards intimacy, and wanting to perpetuate the species. Our flesh is like the grass in that it multiplies, grows and makes plenty under the right circumstances – however, it would seem that under the current regime, the grass and the flesh are restrained and polluted alike.

The flower motif is also used ironically to underline Serena's infertility, in a passage which further roots the function of the flower image in this novel as a mirror to human sexuality and the process of reproduction: "Even at her age, [Serena] still feels the urge to wreath herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them any more, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere, once" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 76). This idea is continued as Offred observes Serena tending her garden for autumn, snipping off seed pods. Here the narrator seems to imply that Serena is trapped in the bitterness of infertility and her own hard-earned predicament alike:

She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seed pods is supposed to make the bulb store energy.

Saint Serena, on her knees, doing penance. (145)

The penance which the narrator likes to imagine that Serena does, is due to her active lobbying of conservative Christian values in the past, which seems to have corresponded more or less with the overall philosophy of the Sons of Jacob, and so she might be partially responsible, if only by ideological association, for their current situation (Atwood, *Handmaid* 13-14). One of the great aspects of situational irony in this novel is the fate of Serena Joy. Offred is reminded where she recognizes Serena from, a TV personality whose "sprayed hair and hysteria" (42) and championing for a woman's place in the home, has at some point amused Luke and frightened herself, and she is led to imagine "[h]ow furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (ibid). In this respect, Serena can be seen as an effective foil to Offred's mother, the feminist, who resides at the opposite side of the political spectre, championing the rights of women in abortion protests.

However, the flower imagery in the novel seems, albeit from the protagonist's perspective, to be interpreted in the same way by Serena as by Offred. Flowers are a universal

symbol of fertility and abundance, and Offred also reflects that there is something “subversive about this garden of Serena’s” (145). There is the “sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (ibid). The bodies of women and *écriture féminine* do indeed struggle to be heard through the imprisonment of Gileadan society, and the handmaids leave little messages for each other. The message for Offred in mock latin: “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (86), meaning “Don’t let the bastards grind you down”, the pressed flower she finds under the mattress (94), and the match which she hides in a hole in the mattress are all messages between the handmaids. According to Hooker (294) it was a custom between enslaved women to pass each other pressed flowers in secret. In this novel, the symbolism of the flower garden is subversive, as it serves as an image of resistance to conform to the dominant dialectic where women are silenced and sensuality and pleasure forbidden. However, Offred also uses flower imagery to portray that she is tired of the whole charade of baby-making, and yet to signal sexual attraction: “It’s Nick, I can see him now; he’s stepped off the path, onto the lawn, to breathe in the humid air which stinks of flowers, of pulpy growth, of pollen thrown into the wind by handfuls, like oyster spawn in the sea. All this prodigal breeding” (177). The negative connotations of decaying organic matter in this passage might be interpreted to signal Offred’s weariness with her situation and circumstances, but it could also be said to signal sexual attraction to Nick. It is he who inspires this imagery which arguably is overrun with dormant, slightly repressed sexuality.

That flowers are still valued seems dangerous to Offred, because of their suggestive shapes and function. It is interesting, as is observed by Hooker, that flowers are such an overarching symbol of female sexuality when they have repeatedly been proven to be hermaphroditic: “Despite the empirical evidence of floral hermaphroditism, the female body is routinely troped as the vulnerable, desirable flower; sex with a virgin is figured as defloration; in recent popular discourse, gay men are derogated as ‘pansies’” (Hooker 285). Although it could perhaps be argued that Atwood is continuing this (phallogentric) tradition of comparing female sexuality and genitalia to flowers, I would rather argue that she breaks with this association at several points. She does indeed refer to the handmaids and the tulips alike as “chalises” (41), through the association of colour (both the tulips and the handmaids’ uniforms are red) and function (just a cup to hold the incoming seed), this is a continuing of the traditional imagery. However, she seems to make this connection when reflecting upon the pointlessness of her situation, and the tulips which turn themselves inside out, “to what end?”

(41). The function of the tulips and the handmaids are much the same, to have a decorative and fertile purpose for a while, until Serena Joy snips the seed pod, or the handmaid is assumed sterile. However, Atwood seems to associate the flower imagery with sexuality in general, and not necessarily gender specific sexuality, even though the protagonist making these reflections is female. As such, this is an example of an universalization of the female perspective – which is an additional criticism or subversion of the assumption of the male subjective consciousness as universal. Either way, as mentioned, the flower imagery seems especially inspired by Nick’s presence. It could be argued that Atwood seems to complicate the relationship between women, nature and sexuality, which is so often portrayed stereotypically or in line with heteronormative preconceptions. Although Offred seems to associate floral imagery with sexuality, she does not seem to believe herself quite the wilting flower. When she makes the association, it is with a certain amount of irony, and she seems to portray every aspect of sexuality, including men’s sexuality, with the same florality. It is a unifying symbol of bodily function, symbolised also by the hanged man’s tulip red, bloody mouth, perhaps signifying human fragility, perhaps signifying our carnal nature which the Sons of Jacob work so hard to repress. Either way, flowers *are* dangerous.

There is also a certain amount of fruit imagery in Atwood’s novel, which might be seen as a natural expansion on the wide selection of floral imagery. Some of the fruit imagery is connected to the already discussed floral imagery; one of the clearer examples of this is in the statement: “The pregnant woman’s belly is a huge fruit” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 26). The fruit of the blossom which is human sexuality is the child within Janine’s womb, although much could be said of the method of conception within Gilead. Floral drapes and paintings of fruit and flowers hang on the walls of the room in Jezebel’s, the brothel which Offred is led to by the Commander. The doctor who examines Offred offers her sex, as an attempt to achieve conception, in an effort to prevent her from being an “unwoman” and thereby save her life. “It’d only take a minute, honey”, he says, to which Offred reflects that this is a generic term: “We are all *honey*” (58). Honey is a by-product of the nectar of flowers gathered by bees, as such it could be argued that the nature of this term of endearment carries sexual, or at the very least, sensual undertones. Honey is sweet, somewhat luxurious, and the process of making it associates with fertilisation and sexuality. Either way, Offred seems to dislike the association between her and any floral by-product, as if she is a treat suitable for enjoyment. The disapproval of the term “honey” is in line with Offred’s rebellion against the phallogocentric manifestations of metaphor, as is her reluctance to be fertilised by the willing

doctor. This imagery is at the same time an illustration of her reluctance to abandon her self to the fertilisation machinery in which she is trapped.

The manifestations of these kinds of imagery do not only function as Offred's internal sorting mechanism, a strategy for maintaining the survival of the self, they have a thematic function. The complex floral imagery can be said to illustrate as well as complicate both human and female sexuality, as Offred uses it to illustrate her own desires, whether they are heteronormative or pluralist, and as metaphor for what she imagines are other people's desires (such as Serena Joy's). It is a motif which subtextually underlines Offred's almost preverbal *écriture féminine*, it underlines a language which originates with the body and details bodily desire. This is perhaps the most rebellious aspect in all of Atwood's novel, the preservation of the subtextual body and identity of the protagonist, the "essence" of Offred (or whichever might be her real name) through natural motifs.

This aspect of the text is highly relevant in relation to the ecofeminist theoretical framework. Through this use of floral imagery, *The Handmaid's Tale* establishes several motifs in accordance with ecofeminist philosophy; there is an internal silent rebellion with words, against the male-centered attempts at extending phallogentrism to what Bartkowski dubs an "internalized colonization" (57), in this case of Offred. Offred refuses to accept the dogma of the patriarchy, and maintains her self through what Hooker calls (fl)orality (Hooker: 280), which is the presence of the body in her narrative through the use of natural motifs. Through her use of natural motifs, she expresses ecofeminist concerns from the vantage point of the subjective individual. The expression of the subjective individual is an ecofeminist concern because the free expression of the individual is a founding pillar of the pluralism which ecofeminism encourages. As such, even the natural motifs in Offred's narrative are in resistance to the established regime.

### Chapter III: Ambiguous representations of technology

“Feminist utopists are keenly aware that science and technology have brought us to the edge of ecological disaster.” (Schweickart 203)

“Do you think God listens [...] to these machines?” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 163)

“[...] the antagonist (villain?) being modern patriarchal mechanistic society; the market economy, industrialization, technology, progress. In short, everything we identify with our present culture.” (Devine 29)

In the previous chapters, I have explored the rebellious expression of the female subjective and *écriture féminine* in the main works, in spite of the protagonists' struggle with a dominant phallogocentrism. I have also discussed the presence and impact of the ecofeminist deconstruction and inclusive reconstruction of metaphor. In this chapter, I will discuss the relationship the protagonists can be said to have with technology, and how their relation to the fields of science and technology can be said to manifest itself. What I mean by science and technology is any cultural development or sophistication of equipment, medicine or understanding of natural processes obtained through the use of advanced scientific equipment rather than the naked eye, any aspect of our culture which can be seen in contrast with organic nature, and therefore included in the man/culture dichotomy in opposition to that of woman/nature. Although these novels might successfully be categorised as science fiction, there is a lack of focus on science and technology in the narrators' intimate accounts of their experience. The focus of the novels seems rather to be on the consequences of the developments within modern technology. The extent to which technology manifests itself in either novel is primarily when it is used in some way to control the women's freedom, or the freedom of people in general, either through the “eyes” and surveillance in *The Handmaid's Tale*, or through the contraceptive device in *Daughters of the North*. However, technology is also what enables the protagonists to be heard – without the “thirty tape cassettes” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 296) and the data files in *Daughters*, Offred's and Sister's voices would be lost to the ages. In this instance, technology enables the historicity of women, although this history, in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is misinterpreted, or even sabotaged, by academics with an agenda of their own. As such, there seems to be an ambiguous comment on technology in these novels, which is echoed in much ecofeminist theory and criticism against ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism has received criticism that it is “technophobic” (Stabile 49; 55), and that this technophobia further widens the cleft between the nature/culture, woman/man

dichotomies, implying that “[...] women are more talented at feeling than thinking” (56).

Keller argues that :

[...] the same kind of schizophrenia plagues our thinking about science as plagues our thinking about gender: both fixed, natural categories in one moment, and constructed, perhaps even indefinitely plastic, categories in another. Having no good way of mediating between these two sets of insights, we manage to slip readily from one to the other – back and forth between objective realism and relativism on the one hand, and between universality and duality on the other. (“Gender” 46)

There is a tendency to marginalise the female experience, while universalising the male, in the same way that technology is assumed universally available, when in reality it is mainly constructed to serve the needs of a phallogentric culture, implying that which serves the male ideal is universally appropriate. Also, the assumed objectivity which is a prerogative for all scientific research has been revealed to be more and less biased towards a patriarchal value system: “Man’s attitude towards nature is coloured by his attitude toward woman, his attitude toward woman by his attitude toward nature. [...] Man the scientist/engineer is no exception to this rule. At first glance, scientific detachment seems to be a model of self-effacement” (Schweickart 202). However, self-effacement, as is becoming increasingly clear, is never entirely possible. Scientific research has traditionally assumed the accomplishment of objectivity, which has later been exposed as a fiction; objectivity according to modern positivism, as Schweickart argues, is “designed to maintain the fact/value distinction – what is objectively there against what the observer wants to see. [...] The fact remains, however, that scientists and engineers have been predominantly male” (201). The male dominance within the fields of science and technology can be said to influence its internal reasoning, and also how it influences society. “Even if the scientific method itself is gender-neutral, its applications reflect an androcentric mentality” (ibid).

This “androcentric mentality” can be said to be reflected in the distribution of values within scientific and technological development, and the distribution of values attributed to the genders. Keller agrees that there is an inherent bias in the male-oriented scientific tradition: “Modern science is constituted around a set of exclusionary oppositions, in which that which is named feminine is excluded, and that which is excluded – be it feeling, subjectivity or nature – is named female” (“Gender” 47). Feminine values are excluded from these fields on account of not being “solid” enough, while the romance of “hard” masculine values remains the scientific ideal. Keller continues:

The relationship between gender and science is a pressing issue not simply because women have been historically excluded from science, but because of the deep interpenetration between our cultural construction of gender and our naming of science. The same cultural tradition that names rational, objective and transcendent as male, and irrational, subjective and immanent as female also simultaneously names the scientific mind as male and material nature as female. (ibid)

This phallogocentric self-reinforcement of the fields of science and technology might lead many women to rebel on their “allotted turf”, which is to portray all technological advances as inherently damaging because this is the origin of most pollution and toxic material. I will argue that this *is* a form of technophobia; the domination of any gender within any branch of technology does not inherently make this particular branch inaccessible to others, nor does it make them inherently destructive. Rather, the self-initiated removal of women from the fields of science and technology reinvigorates and further underlines a polarisation of stereotypical male/female values, which is arguably the more destructive consequence, as it not only enhances these values in the overall culture, but it effectively closes the fields of male-dominated science further to women:

While in many circles it has become decidedly unchic to suggest that women should not be physicists, mathematicians, engineers, etc., in other circles, indeed the very circles one might least expect to hear such things, that is precisely what is being suggested. There is a growing voice among contemporary feminists reasserting the age-old dichotomy between women and science on the one hand, and the affinity between women and nature on the other. (Keller, “Women” 131-132)

To in any way wish to limit the interests of women because of gender-stereotypical dichotomies and affinities seems to me decidedly against the (eco)feminist principle. I would argue that the most efficient manner of prompting improvement of the ethical perspectives within the fields of science and technology is to adopt the pluralist perspective of much feminist literature; to include as much variation amongst the group of scientists as possible, thereby asserting that not only one, comparatively minor class of society is represented and gets to develop the scientific principle according to their own interests. I would argue that this is a more wholesome feminist goal than any wholesale boycott of scientific research.

I have presented Schweickart’s and Keller’s criticism of the male scientific assumption that objectivity is achieved in the fields of science and technology. Schweickart also criticises

the destructiveness of patriarchal science. There seems to be a connection between the attitude that male-oriented science achieves objectivity, and the phallocentrism which assumes control over women's reproductive freedom in these dystopian societies. The assumption that the male subjective experience is the standard, or most significant experience, could provide an explanation as to why the governments in the two novels do not think twice about limiting women's behaviour. As long as the male experience goes unaltered or improved by the progress of science and technology, any consequences for women or nature seem less important.

As Soper argues, there is no reason why scientific and technological development does not have to be in line with ecofeminist philosophy: "The forms of control represented by contraception and abortions are not at all at odds with the conceptions of good ecological management [...]". (315) Indeed, the development of efficient contraception has revolutionised women's lives, and the prevention of overpopulation is one of the most viable and increasingly relevant strategies for sound ecological management in our technological repertoire. As such, technology can be a positive force in society when certain considerations are made; the issue many ecofeminists have with male-centered science and technology is the unethical management of resources, and the unsustainable amount of waste which is now created through industrial production and common consumerism. This disregard for consequences is an aspect of an anthropocentric culture which just recently has started becoming aware of its own impact upon nature, and inherently its own survivability. Keller, in fact, concludes that women's previous exclusion from science might be a key to its renewal and the development of a more environmentally aware field of technology:

If women are in a privileged position to bring the epistemological critique that is equally necessary for the liberation of science and the liberation of society, it is both because we have been especially vulnerable – viewed as passive, natural objects – to the logic of domination, and because our status as inhabitants of a different (a female) culture provides us with an invaluable perspective – the view from the periphery.  
(Keller, "Women" 144)

Amongst those novels which criticise humanity's impact upon their surroundings, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Daughters of the North* make two important contributions, but neither dismisses technology as a resource altogether. Both novels portray a post-industrial dystopia, in contrast with the post-industrial utopia which d'Eaubonne envisioned (Gates 19). In this



chapter I will explore the protagonists' relationship with technology, and relate my findings to the critical nature of the dystopian novel.

## Science and technology as oppression

“All they needed to do was push a few buttons.” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 174)

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* was written in the mid-eighties, Atwood seems to have foreseen the increased integration of technology as a part of our daily lives in the course of the last 25 years. It could be argued that both authors seem to have foreseen and more or less successfully analysed the increased influence of the by-products of technology on our society. There are several representations of technology and practical applications of scientific principles in the novels, which contribute to marking these novels as science fiction. In *Handmaid*, technology is primarily present in Offred's flashbacks to her happier days as a free woman; in this instance technology is represented mostly as a tool facilitating the transition to the totalitarian regime of the Sons of Jacob. She reflects on how the US is overthrown through the use of weaponry and threat of execution, and how the complete disenfranchisement of women can be done at a keystroke through computerized, centralised banking. In *Daughters*, technology plays a more prominent, direct role, through the use of weapons by the Carhullan women as well as the government forces, and the increased industrialisation of the cities. The consequences of long-term pollution are, as I have already explored in Chapter II, criticised severely in both works. We are made aware that the deteriorated situation in Hall's Britain and Atwood's Gilead are results of the pollution of an anthropocentric society. However, the protagonists' situations have come about as a result of more than pollution and the deterioration of nature and depletion of natural resources. Technology is also an important and prominent tool of an oppressive system of government, as a means of controlling the general population. Although the whole population seems to be affected by the dire circumstances of these dystopias, these novels are written from the perspective of female protagonists, and as such portray the struggle to retain women's autonomy in the face of oppression – an oppression which can be said to be mirrored in our own society.

I have already briefly discussed the impact of the contraceptive device on Sister as a form of silencing of her body. Hall raises an important issue concerning a woman's reproductive freedom; that it is equally important to be able to choose to have a child as to have the freedom not to have one. Even more importantly, perhaps, is the right to retain control over one's own body, and not be forced to delegate it to any authority, whether that authority is the state, the church, or any person other than the self. Women's struggle for reproductive rights have often been centered around abortion and various forms of

contraceptives, yet in Hall's novel, this is contrasted with Sister's feeling of being imposed upon, or even violated, by the government-prescribed contraceptive. It is perhaps bad enough that such a form of control is imposed upon the women, however, the device is implemented crudely by a rough male physician, and is furthermore used as an excuse for humiliation. Examples of this include the manager who forces Sister to undress, "joking about dog leashes" (Hall 17), and how she is forced to prove that the device, referred to as a "coil" (17), and a "uterine regulator" (32), is still intact in the back of a government-assigned cruiser (27; 33). She arguably, and perhaps understandably, seems to react to this as if to a form of trauma: "After I was spot-checked in the cruiser, once they had finally let me go, I walked to the top of the Beacon Hill and sat through the night in the tower, holding my knees and listening to the bark and howl of the feral packs below" (33-34). She mentions later, when sex with Shruti is imminent, that: "I had not felt anything like passion for months. Since the incident in the cruiser I had not wanted to" (141-142). I would argue that this reaction indicates sexual trauma in Sister.

When Andrew questions her anger concerning the device, she tells him that "You just don't get it, do you? [...] It's not you, is it? It's never you", to which Andrew replies "Never me what? [...] Never men, you mean? Look, you know it's just a practical thing! There's no conspiracy here" (33). What Sister seems to mean by this, is that every time there is a limitation of personal freedom, it seems to affect women before men. When it is decided necessary to halt the population growth, this decision is made by a government which, if not made entirely of men, at least a government which operates with a phallogentric world view: it is the women's bodies which are limited, controlled, subjected to public ownership and humiliation. There might not be a conscious conspiracy, but there seems to be an altogether too great readiness to take away women's right to control their own bodies. There would be no need to control the women's bodies if the government of Sister's Britain had shown the will to disengage from the war effort (Hall 24-25), but this seems not to have been a priority. Both Atwood and Hall criticise this and similar tendencies towards phallogentrism, of neglecting to take into account or include other perspectives than that of the white male, thoroughly in every aspect of their novels.

It could be suggested that this imposing upon the women of Hall's Britain is an illustration of the idea that men have the right to decide over women's bodies, here manifested through the deployment of technology. Similarly, yet in contrast to the situation of Sister, Offred is in *The Handmaid's Tale* reduced to a breeding machine for the state. Here,

infertility is one of the consequences of pollution and disease, which in turn is used as excuses, in combination with religious fanaticism, to keep the increasingly few fertile women enslaved. Technology is here used to reinforce religious doctrine rather than inhibit the women's fertility; actually, in Gilead, anything which might inhibit the producing of a child is disallowed. The women's fertility and bodies are strictly controlled through the monthly fertilisation ritual, as well as the close monitoring they are subjected to throughout the remainder of the month. However, technology which might facilitate childbirth for the women (epidural, etc) is prohibited, on account of being "better for the baby, but also: *I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children*<sup>7</sup> [sic]" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 107). It is an interesting contrast between the novels, that in the case of *Handmaid*, technological innovation is renounced when it could relieve women-specific suffering, which I would argue signals an unnecessary and sadistic degree of misogyny. It might be said that the reason for disallowing the use of painkillers during births is to limit the further production and spread of chemicals, since the chemical cocktail which had been washed into the rivers and the earth had contributed to the widespread sterility:

Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody's fault, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mould could touch (105).

The extensive sterility seems to be a product of a culmination of events, and if the Sons of Jacob implicitly nurture any ideology of natural restoration, I would say that the end of warfare and chemical bombing of forests (Atwood, *Handmaid* 77) should be a higher priority than the removal of anaesthetic during birth; however, such are not the workings of a society which refuses to acknowledge women's individual identity. Rather, this ideology is a thinly veiled strategy to retain control over the female population.

In a dystopian context, both the illustration of the oppressive compulsory use of contraceptives and the equally oppressive disallowing of contraceptives and government-enforced sexual abuse are relevant exaggerations of the circumstances of our own society. These aspects of the novels provide new perspectives on the issue of enforcing control over

---

<sup>7</sup> Although there are instances where Bible citations are fabricated to fit the Gileadean regime, this particular quote is accurate according to the King James Bible, Genesis 3:16. An example of fabrication can be seen upon the Commander quoting St. Matthew 5:4 and onwards, incorporating into these passages "Blessed are the silent" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 84). These literal interpretations of the Bible, as well as invented citations, are used as grounds for further oppression.

women's bodies through technological and medical innovation. In both narratives, control over the protagonists' bodies has been revoked by an autocratic, androcentric government. If the situation of Sister and Offred are viewed as two sides of the same argument, they can easily be seen as a critique against denying a woman her right to her body and identity, whether this decision is based on religious principles, or a mere lack of concern for women's autonomy. The intimacy of the narratives evokes sympathy for the female protagonists, and the subjective and independent reflections of the women fortify the depiction of the complex individual behind the biological function of childbearing. Their reactions to the dominant culture are those of fellow human beings upon the removal of the right to themselves. Offred illustrates this in the following passage:

I used to think of my body as an instrument of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. [...] There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.

(Atwood, *Handmaid* 70)

This is how it feels to be reduced to a bodily function; her personality and individual physique evaporates around the all-important womb. The all-encompassing denial of the women's human rights, including, as I have already discussed, any means of self-improvement through the ban on reading, and the denial of identity through the reduction of the women to the property of their Commanders. In a totalitarian society the reinforcement of the women's disenfranchisement is further facilitated by technological advancements – how better to limit the women's freedom than to assume control of their bodies? It seems as if there is a connection between the way the protagonists view scientific and technological progress, and the way they regard contraceptives. As long as these advances are an available resource and not enforced as a compulsory measure by an autocratic and androcentric government, then they can arguably be considered progress.

Concerning the scientific male bias, this is represented in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in professor Pieixoto, the historian who reviews and edits the content of the thirty tape cassettes which make up his document of "The Handmaid's Tale". As I have elaborated in the second part of Chapter I, he displays an exceedingly biased attitude to Offred's narrative, slighting Offred's personal and intimate narrative on account of it not conveying enough details on her male contemporaries. By doing this it could be argued that he thereby reinforces the

downward spiral of masculinist science, including the perspective that whatever is deemed as feminine, and the female point of view is irrelevant to, or even contaminates scientific research. “In this way, the very act of separating subject from object, objectivity itself, comes to be associated with masculinity” (Keller, “Women” 137). It could be said that the implication that the female perspective is unfit for scientific exploration, whether as subject of exploration, or as the scientific explorer, has a silencing and demeaning effect on both Offred’s narrative and the position of Maryann Crescent Moon.

Another and very interesting example of the representation of technology is the “holy rollers”, or “soul scrolls” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 162-163), one of the aspects of *The Handmaid’s Tale* which could be said to bring an element of science fiction to the novel, as they provide an example of a human reaction to technological development. Ofglen’s act of subversion is seemingly a response or reaction upon reflecting on the machines which are a product of, and perform a perpetuation of the regime’s dogma. She remarks: “Do you think God listens [...] to these machines?” (163) This statement is a rebellious act, as Offred mentions: “In the past this would have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. Right now it’s treason” (ibid). Offred, however, responds in the same treasonous manner, with a “no”, and these words are the beginning of a secret agreement between her and Ofglen. The two handmaids react to the emptiness of a piece of machinery which can not only be said to be fairly pointless and wasteful, but suitably analogous to the religious and societal structure which produced it. This is an element of science fiction, as sci-fi often deals with the human reaction to technology rather than elaborations on the technology itself. The name for this equipment, “soul scrolls” is highly ironic. These scrolls are slips of paper with assortments of prayers; the prayers are ordered, printed, and instantaneously recycled after print, the machines reading them aloud as they go. The process is fully automated, and nobody need see the actual scrolls. Prayer, usually associated with a highly personal and heartfelt religious gesture, is here reduced to being the automated produce of a piece of machinery, like a sort of launderette for the soul. However, no soul is involved in the process; the prayers are ordered by telephone by the Commanders’ wives in order to promote their husbands, and by implication their own, careers. In this instance, technology perpetuates a pointless ritual which only reinforces a transparent power structure, and the soul scrolls can perhaps be said to be a symbol of the whole, empty religious structure of Gilead. These “holy rollers” are an almost sarcastic technological parody to the “Tibetan prayer wheels” (163) Offred likens them to. These wheels could perhaps, like the prayer wheels, be considered an

automated form of prayer, spun by the wind, or by the touch of a hand. The difference is that while the Tibetan prayer wheels are visual aids to meditation, the soul scrolls are wholly materially oriented, which is further symbolised by the fact that they are automatic equipment.

This being said, perhaps the most striking instance of the oppressive use of technology in Atwood is through the disenfranchisement of women through the “Compubank”, a centralised, computerised bank. Society closes for women in the course of a single day; they cannot withdraw money nor earn it. This can be said to convey a sceptical attitude towards, if not downright criticism of the centralisation and digitalisation process which now is a compulsory part of modern existence; corruption is easy if the right kind of access is obtained: “They’ve frozen them, she said. Mine too. [...] Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do was push a few buttons” (174). Technology is in this case used as a form of obtaining control over and suppressing the resources of a very specific part of the population. “I guess that’s how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand. If there had still been portable money, it would have been more difficult” (169). Centralisation and organisation of information is made easier by the standardized use of computers and the Internet, and the access to technology facilitates the coup d’état of the Sons of Jacob. These advancements in technology make it easier to assume control over Offred’s society; however, I would argue that technology itself is not the threat to social structure, as the benefits of such sophistication are numerous. The deployment of this technology, however, is. The more resources that are available and easily editable from centralised databases, the greater is also their destructive potential. As I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, ecofeminist theory is often sceptical to technological advancement, and the use of Atwood’s “Compubank” by the Sons of Jacob provides an ample example as to how technology can be used to easily control a great number of people. Technology is not only used to take away the women’s resources, but also to keep them from leaving the country: “Ours is not to reason why, said Moira. They had to do it that way, the Compucounts and the jobs both at once. Can you picture the airports, otherwise? They don’t want us going anywhere, you can bet on that” (174-175). Not only is the women’s independence taken away, disenfranchisement is followed by imprisonment and consequently slavery. Offred reflects on how this influences her identity and her relationship with her husband: “We are not each other’s any more. Instead I am his” (178). Before long, Offred will no longer be the “property” even of her husband, but of the state.

Similarly, in the post-apocalyptic setting of *Daughters of the North*, technology is used to exert control over and keep occupied the general population; they are set to work in refineries and production plants, with hazardous and repetitive labour. After the flooding, and the decision to become dependent on the United States, British citizens are herded into the cities, and travel is not allowed by anyone save government officials. As a result, the cities are overcrowded, and disease which has previously been kept in check is flourishing anew, as we find out as Sister talks to a neighbour: “Turns out I’ve got TB. That new bloody strain” (Hall 40). Medication is scarce, and only accessible to the few remaining wealthy people. The advancement of beneficial technological development, like the development of medication, is deprioritised, while resources are funnelled into war and the military police which keeps the general population under control. Technology serves as a means of controlling not only reproduction, but the range of movement of the population. They are being kept occupied by menial labour, such as by the construction of parts which are never shipped anywhere. The city in Hall’s dystopia is polluted, crowded, and ridden with disease and cheap drugs: “[t]he floors creaked under the weight of so many penalized bodies” (88). Any funds which are generated are instead funnelled into geopolitical warfare, which is seemingly waged over oil resources: “The failure of international policy was so clear. The war was geopolitical. It was not ours to fight. We had the technology to disengage from our allies abroad, but not the will to invest” (Hall 24-25). This is what prompts Britain’s dependency on the United States, and the development of a military police force (25-26). This exaggerated militarisation is a striking common feature of the two novels; in both *Handmaid* and *Daughters*, militarism and warfare are central to the oppression of the general public, and to the destruction of the environment.

This is another representation of ecofeminist criticism within the novels, as much ecofeminist theory is decidedly anti-militarist. Ecofeminist theory which relates to the issue of militarisation of society criticises the tendency to focus financially on maintaining the war industry and promoting the development of destructive technologies: “The eco-feminist analysis of militarism is concerned with the militarization of culture and the economic priorities reflected by [the United States’] enormous ‘defence’ budgets and dwindling social services budgets” (King, “Towards” 126). Although King wrote this at a time in which the Cold War had not yet ended, I would argue that this ill-distribution of resources is still a highly relevant issue. “Together, these [priorities] pose threats to our freedom and threaten our lives, even if there is no war and none of the nuclear weapons are ever used” (ibid). This



might be seen as an illustration of pacifist idealism which is unrealistic and unattainable in the near future; however, in Atwood and Hall, this sentiment is echoed with several down-to-earth and seemingly viable examples of unnecessary and irresponsible use of military force, some of them uncomfortably familiar to political situations in our own present. This could be said to be another particularly dystopian trait, and serving as a fictional warning to contemporary trends. The representation of warfare within the novels seems to be the foundation of the dystopian plot in both, and the wars which are being fought are illustrated as pointless in both narratives – political failure and greed are stated as reasons for war in *Daughters*, and religious fanaticism in *Handmaid*, as is illustrated by the passage where Offred is briefly allowed to watch the news, and describes what she sees:

First, the front lines. They are not lines, really: the war seems to be going on in many places at once. Wooded hills, seen from above, the trees a sickly yellow. [...] The Appalachian Highlands, says the voice-over, where the Angels of the Apocalypse, Fourth Division, are smoking out a pocket of Baptist guerrillas, with air support from the Twenty-first Battalion of the Angels of Light. [...] Below them, a clump of trees explodes. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 77)

This is an example of the use of unnecessary use of military force, and one is left to wonder whether the scale of the assault on the “Baptist guerrillas” is corresponding with the actual threat they represent, or whether this level of assault, as it is widely broadcasted, is just meant to inspire fear as to reduce the opposition.

Concerning the more malignant developments in technology, there are several portrayals of the use of weaponry in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The use of weaponry plays a big part in the coup d'état, in which the president and Congress are all shot and killed, and the Constitution is suspended. Weaponry and surveillance equipment are mentioned as means of retaining control many times by Offred, including in the very beginning of the novel:

Above us, I know, there are floodlights, attached to the telephone poles, for use in emergencies, and there are men with machine guns in the pill boxes on either side of the road. I don't see the floodlights and the pill boxes, because of the wings around my face, I just know they are there. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 18)

This overhanging threat of the use of weaponry as a means of controlling the general population is rooted in the extremely violent displays of force by the religious army. The president and the congress are eradicated brutally through the use of guns and automatic

weaponry, while Islamic fanatics are held to blame (169). Any attempts at demonstration against the disenfranchisement of women is met with the same violent reactions:

There were marches, of course, a lot of women and some men. But they were smaller than you might have thought. And when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire almost as soon as any of the marches even started, the marches stopped. (Atwood, *Handmaid* 175-176)

The military's function is to enforce the regime's doctrine in both narratives; even such organisations would be powerless without their high-tech tools: guns, cruisers, and helicopters. Power, then, lies with those who control technology.

If technological development is the new axis of power in society, through the disassociation of women from the fields of science and technology, women are also being disassociated from situations of power. Women are excluded from being able to define science, but they are also being excluded from the application of force – at least they are not the applicators. Pacifism and anti-militarism as an integrated part of ecofeminism is highly understandable, as the weapons industry is one which is especially self-reinforcing and inherently destructive. While non-military technology might be damaging to the environment, it is becoming increasingly common to take into consideration environmental issues in the research and development process, and hopefully increasingly environmentally sustainable options are produced as a result of this. However, the only purpose of the weapons industry is a destructive one, and although it is no longer considered an acceptable alternative, not much time has passed since “scorched earth”-policies were common in warfare. It is understandable that women in general are not attracted to militarism and the destructive developments in technology. It could be suggested that the integration of ecofeminist policies within politics would open for an understanding and a pluralism which would make these industries obsolete – at least that is the dream. Few women want to involve themselves in the androcentric nightmare of warfare – which includes our protagonists.

Although I have analysed the direct impact of technology, the main criticism of technology in these novels seems not to lie in this direct manifestation in the protagonists' lives, but rather as an indirect factor influencing (and implicitly corrupting) the environment and the women's bodies. The impact of science and technology upon women extends further than just consequences for their reproductive rights. As Benston argues, the concept of phallocentrism can be extended even to the development of technology: “The logic of ruling-

class men then leads to a technology that reflects ruling-class men's experience and view of reality. As mentioned earlier, this view of reality is, to a large extent, shared by other men in the society" (Benston 35). Technology, then, can be argued to be male-oriented. Although this is a changing trend as technology becomes increasingly accessible, it could be argued that this presence of phallocentrism, perceived or factual, is why this field is ambiguously portrayed in Hall and Atwood. Where technology is present, it is represented as a form of control, or toxic consequence of a male- and anthropocentric society, but it is also represented as something which enables both Sister's and Offred's voices to be heard outside their own time. It both enables and entraps the protagonists. Additionally, disease control, anaesthetics and antibiotics are medical breakthroughs which are sorely missed in both novels. Technology is seemingly not only depicted as a vehicle of oppression, but also as a means of relieving pain and empowering the protagonists. As such, it could be argued that technology is also represented as a form of empowerment, which I will discuss next.

## Science and technology as empowerment

As I have briefly mentioned, an interesting aspect about the two novels is the ambiguity with which technology is represented. Weaponry is used by not only the militaries of Gilead and Britain as a means of control, but also by the Carhullan women in an act of rebellious opposition. When all weaponry is confiscated by the British authorities, Sister's father buries his rifle in the garden. The gun is arguably illustrated as a source of power in both novels, and the ban on guns from the general public can be seen as a removal and redistribution of this power to the government. Upon recovering her father's rifle, Sister recovers not only a bargaining chip, but a means of self-defence under circumstances where the government no longer is a source of protection, but of oppression. There is an instance of prolepsis in the retrospective instance where Sister gives a little back story on her relationship with the weapon, and how her father has commented: "You'd make a good soldier, little tinker" (35). Sister does indeed make a good soldier, as second-in-command to the Carhullan army. The rifle is taken from her as she reaches the farm, yet she gets it back as they are training for their assault on the city (175-176). As she is mentally and physically prepared to take action against the government, she is given her gun back. This might be seen as analogous to the learning process which I have discussed in Chapter I, of Sister claiming language and her body as her own. As she achieves a healthy sense of self-definition, she also achieves the privilege of wielding a weapon.

Offred is not able to achieve any such acts of rebellion in her even more restricted existence. However, after her escape, she speaks through technology, relating her story via the thirty tape cassettes. Technology is represented as a positive force in the aspect of the women's legacy. The vocality of the women is directly dependent on technology in the form of audio cassettes and computers; while Offred's tale is related via tape, Sister's is conveyed through data files of unknown format. It is through these media that the women's historicity is achieved. Technology is in this manner an invaluable resource; without the development of these media, the women's stories would have been lost to the ages, as one of the first casualties of warfare can be said to be the voices of those who already were neglected by history.

The voices of the women are not the only thing which is conveyed through technology. In *Daughters of the North*, the women are making a statement through violence and guerrilla movements, using the same weaponry as the military, including guns and

explosives. An interesting contrast between the two novels is that, in *Handmaid*, the religious extremists provide the private military, while in *Daughters*, the private army is constituted by a group of outcast feminist women. It might be said that Hall is providing a parody of the stereotype of the militant feminist in this aspect. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the original state military is replaced with the private army of the Sons of Jacob. As Offred reflects on the removal from her job, she remembers that the soldiers which were present represented some other authority: "It wasn't the army. It was some other army" (175). I would argue that this presents an ambiguity towards the issue of militarisation; oppression is not enforced by the military of the United States, but to a third party, a militarised group. As such, perhaps the representation of militarism in *Handmaid* is instead mainly intended as a criticism of the militarism of religious groups. In *Daughters of the North*, militarism is represented by the military police force which patrols Rith, and the references to the war efforts abroad. Here, however, no religious groups are responsible, but an all-encompassing political failure is. It is this military which Jackie and the Carhullan Army face in "File seven", where the armed forces eventually put a helicopter in the air especially for Jackie: "In the end, they had been forced to" (Hall 206). In this instance, the Carhullan women form the private army, which is an interesting contrast to Atwood's novel. Both armies set out to overthrow the sitting government, but for entirely different reasons. The Carhullan Army attempts to overthrow oppression through militarisation and the use of arms, while the army of the Sons of Jacob set out to assume power under the veil of religious doctrine. Although it should not be excluded that some of these Sons of Jacob were religious believers, the cynicism behind the political organisation of the state of Gilead is later praised by professor Pieixoto as ingenious (Atwood, *Handmaid* 302), and displays a political intent which is not exactly in line with a Christian benevolence; Gilead was designed for the maintenance of control over its denizens through the threat of force.

It could be argued that Jackie to a certain degree is presented as a modern day Boudicca in her wish to overthrow the dominant government (Hall 165). She is to some extent idolised by Sister and a few others, and her past combines a Cambridge education and military training (50). This conveys another ambiguity concerning the issue of militarisation: could it be that military training might not always be ill-regarded in a feminist context? Perhaps it is a commentary that women should also become included and more engaged in this field – not necessarily on men's principles, but to turn this kind of militarism into their own. Hall illustrates no doubt that the women can be tough, as they "los[e] the ability to fear

and panic” (184), and the passivity of women is explicitly blamed on nurture rather than nature. Jackie asks Sister: “Do women have it in them to fight if they need to? Or is that the province of men? [...] Do we have to submit to survive?” (116). Sister replies: “I think women are naturally just as violent. Especially when we’re young. But we’re taught it’s not in keeping with our gender, it’s not feminine behaviour. Men are forgiven for it. Women aren’t” (116-117). There is a strong message throughout Hall’s novel concerning women’s conditioned lack of power, and their potential upon reclaiming it. This potential for violence which Sister argues is equally present in women as in men, is expressed in the violence and success with which the Carhullan Army overtake Rith, as according to the epilogue, they are able to hold their ground for weeks, with weaponry, fighting skills and explosives (207). It could be argued that the conditioned lack of aggression in women is comparative to the conditioned perception of women’s disqualification from the fields of science and technology – in Hall’s novel the mythological non-aggression and weakness of the female gender is severely criticised as the women form their own guerrilla army, employing the androcentric government’s own weaponry and tactics against them.

Concerning the control over the women’s bodies, it should be mentioned that a concern is formulated in *Handmaid* whether the medical contraceptives which are available should have any long term effects on the environment, or the human body. This is an ambiguity in Atwood’s novel; although the surrendering of the women’s bodies to governmental control is severely criticised, there also seems to be some scepticism towards freely available chemical birth control. It might be argued that there is a general scepticism towards anything which might artificially alter the chemistry of the environment or the women’s bodies, though perhaps not contraception itself. This might be considered an ecofeminist concern, in that chemical contraception to some might be considered more of a tampering with the body and its natural processes – however, the benefits of such contraception are numerous, and this medical development has a significant positive impact on women’s lives. In contrast, the compulsory uterine regulator in Hall’s novel has a positive effect only on the lives of the men, for the women it is a silencing and an entrapment.

There is a deep ambiguity conveyed concerning the issues of science and technology in Atwood and Hall. The overall comment which seems to be made is a thorough criticism of autocratic uses of technology, as a means of control, either over a people, or as a form of control over nature. There is a wholehearted criticism of the impulse which would “recover and sanction man’s dominion over nature” (Merchant 114), through the illustration of the

destruction which entails. Yet weaponry, as a representative of destructive technology, is also employed by the women of Carhullan; in her past, Offred benefited from technological progress, and even worked with the digitalising of books in a library. If we are to separate the different approaches, one supportive and one critical of technology, there seems to be a group of three main criticisms of these novels. The first is the criticism of technological development as a destructive element towards nature, and the disregard of consequences for the global environment and ecosystem with which polluting and waste-producing technology is manufactured. The excessive heat and humidity which is depicted in both novels, in addition to the illustration of environmental deterioration are the effects of global warming, which is the result of pollution and geopolitical warfare. The second is technology as a means of control, an available tool to the militaristic, totalitarian state. The development of invisible surveillance equipment, as well as sophisticated weaponry and military vehicles, are essential to the maintenance of the regimes in both novels – the general population is controlled through the fear of violent retaliation by the authorities. This is illustrated in *Handmaid* as demonstrators protesting the coup d'état of the Sons of Jacob are gunned down. The third instance of criticism illustrated in these novels is the criticism of the assumed objectivity of phallogentric science depicted in the epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Professor Pieixoto's approach to Offred's narrative is a criticism not only of the phallogentrism of academia, but of the inherent silencing of the woman within the male scientist's approach to her text. Instead of treating the document which is before Pieixoto as a historical document in and of itself, rather, this specimen of the male scientist dissects the sparse information which Offred provides in order to construct a profile on the Gileadean ruling class, the Commanders. This is a good example of the perpetuation of phallogentrism through science, or as Schweickart argues, the reflection of an androcentric mentality within the field of science (201), and the function of the character of Pieixoto can be said to provide an illustration that there is indeed interpenetration between prevailing cultural attitudes and the dominant form of scientific approach.

Although these novels provide us with a significant portion of criticism towards the phallogentrism of the fields of science and technology, it must also be said that there is no implication that technology is inherently destructive. Technology is significant to the historicity of the protagonists, as it is significant to their escape or retaliation – as mentioned, neither Offred nor Sister would have been able to tell their stories without the data files and audio cassettes upon which they were recorded. The Carhullan Army use guns, bombs and

other destructive weaponry in their assault upon Rith and the dominant government, and Offred's escape is made through the use of communication channels and the high-jacking of one of the government's own vehicles. Also, although scepticism towards medical contraceptives is made in Atwood's novel, as it is illustrated as a contributing factor to sterilisation, the free choice of the individual woman is nevertheless a fighting issue. The protagonists' relationship to contraceptives could be said to mirror their attitude to technology, when either is enforced as a form of oppression by an outside force, this is worthy of criticism. As a resource, both technology and contraception are invaluable. As such, there is a deep ambivalence towards the fields of science and technology rooted in both novels, however, neither narrative is eager to dismiss them as inherently anti-woman or anti-environmental, like some ecofeminist critics would be. Nevertheless, both novels are permeated by criticism of the phallogentric disregard for anyone suffering from the by-products of scientific and technological development.



## Conclusion

The overarching issue which has been explored in this thesis is how ecofeminism is represented in two dystopian novels. I chose to view Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Hall's *Daughters of the North* through the ecofeminist lens, and found that the novels express a longing for an (eco)feminist dream of freedom, a dream which is illustrated by the more and less subtle instances of resistance by the protagonists towards the dystopian nightmarish societies which they inhabit. The nightmares which these novels portray share a number of similarities – the fictional representations of Britain and the US are depicted as totalitarian states, and the protagonists' freedom of movement and freedom of self-expression are extremely limited. Women inhabiting these societies are denied the right to their bodies, as well as their sexual and reproductive freedom. Severe environmental deterioration, militarism and warfare provide the setting for these narratives, yet perhaps the most interesting aspect which permeates both novels is an ecofeminist criticism of language and metaphor. The same set of metaphors which would associate women and nature also contributes to the creation of a socially constructed gap between women and technology. However, these novels portray technology with ambiguity, illustrating that there is a complexity in the way the protagonists regard the field, which is mirrored in the thematic importance of technological equipment such as computers, tape recorders and weaponry.

A crucial issue which has also been explored in this thesis is Atwood's and Hall's criticism of phallogentrism within language. I opened the introduction by quoting Maureen Devine: "How do women cope with a logos which basically denies their existence?" (98). This "logos" which Devine refers to is the male centre of consciousness as represented within language, or phallogentrism. Within these novels, such criticism of language manifests itself, as I have explored, as a deconstruction of phallogentrism, and the protagonists' subjective reconstruction of a metaphorical dialectic with which they relate to their surroundings. There is an aim within the ecofeminist movement to provide "a critique of metaphors and images which have associated woman and nature in dualistic opposition to man and culture, images of oppression and domination" (Devine 30). Atwood's and Hall's texts do precisely this – they deconstruct the metaphor which would associate woman and nature in binary opposition to man and culture; the novels reject the notion that woman, like nature, becomes a resource, and a force which must be tamed.

In this thesis, I have explored how the establishment of the male centre of consciousness is deconstructed and rebelled against through the female protagonists' reclaiming of language, which I have discussed in Chapter I. This rejection of phallogocentrism and the establishment of the female subjective is achieved by the means of structural and narrative elements; in Atwood, Offred maintains her *écriture féminine* through the internal rebellion of language and metaphor, which she must continuously strive to retain as her own in the face of the social and religious conditioning she is exposed to. She struggles to retain a space to call her own, if it is only an internal one. Bartkowski calls this tendency of domination by the male centre of consciousness "internalized colonization" (57), which is the alienation from the self through the imperialistic conventions of phallogocentrism. In Hall, the rebellion against this tendency and the establishment of her *écriture féminine* manifests itself as a reclaiming of Sister's body and identity in the natural expanse of Carhullan and its surroundings. After arriving at the farm, Sister goes through a process of maturation which brings associations to the *Bildungsroman*, and at the end of her personal development she has reclaimed the strength of her body, and asserted her independence of thought. The male centre of consciousness, linguistically and otherwise, has been rejected, and a female subjective is asserted.

However, phallogocentrism is not only expressed through language and metaphor, occasionally it is also conveyed through the attitudes of the male characters, and through the very organisation of society within both works. The novels thoroughly criticise the tendency for society to be male-oriented; not only are there depictions of the men's idea of their right to a woman's body, but representations, especially within Atwood, of women and nature as mere, disposable resources for consumption by man.

I have also discussed how the female subjective experience, the woman as I, or "I-woman, escapee", is recontextualized by the presence of epilogues in both novels. The narratives are either reinterpreted through the bias and prejudice of the phallo(logo)centric historian in Atwood, or recontextualized through the summarizing actional function of the epilogue to Sister's narrative in Hall. The epistolarity and recontextualisation of both novels underlines their status as historical documents, and the fact that they are necessarily put in context by a third party at some later date underlines their historicity. The voices of the women are communicated, yet in the case of Offred's narrative, her rich intimate confessions are misinterpreted and ill-used by the phallogocentric historian who is only interested in the men in her story.

The protagonists in both novels use language as a means of rebellion against the patriarchy, which is a manifestation of Cixous' *écriture féminine* in its purest form. However, Offred does not have the opportunity to write, and the format of Sister's confession is not known. The women express themselves onto audio tapes and data files of unknown format. The main purpose of *écriture féminine*, however, is not necessarily the physical act of writing, but the act of shaping language to serve as a means of precise expression of the subjective self. While language and metaphor is phallogocentric in origin, it is difficult to form a dialectic which can adequately express the nuances of that which is different from the male centre of consciousness. The assumption that women and nature share some primeval bond in direct opposition to the cultured male, is an assumption made by those who shaped culture in their favour, and dictated these metaphors. Atwood's and Hall's novels provide a solid rebellion against the prevalent phallogocentrism through the intimate, satirical, critical voices of their protagonists, and their reclaiming of the body, the self, and language.

Additionally, I have discussed that although certain parts of the ecofeminist movement find reassurance in the assumed affinity between women and nature, this connection is ultimately a social construction in which those personal qualities which are deemed as less sophisticated and more of a feral nature are fitted to associate with the feminine. This association is rooted in a heteronormative dichotomisation of gender, and as such, is ultimately destructive to the feminist cause. In Atwood and Hall, however, any imagery which to some extent seems to make the connection between woman and nature, is in reality ironically subverting and/or criticising this tendency. This is exemplified by the reclaiming of floral imagery in Atwood, in which the florality of the narrative metaphorically illustrates Offred's state of mind and almost subjective associations of sexuality and bodily functions. Rather than metaphorically depicting female sexuality as a passive, wilting flower, Offred paints the whole of the genderless body with the same floral brush. This is an example of the universalization of the feminine subjective – human body function; blood, sex, reproduction and birth, are in this instance depicted with a florality which extends beyond the female gender. Offred underlines this by the statement "All flesh is grass" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 41) – all of human nature and the sexuality of all genders can be illustrated by this reverberation with nature; not only do we strive for the same impulse towards growth, reproduction and sustenance, but the natural biological variety within human sexual expression and preferences can be seen as analogous to the biological variation of nature. By this analogy, and all her

floral imagery, Atwood questions the heteronormative dichotomisation of gender, as enforced by the Sons of Jacob.

In *Daughters of the North*, the ironic subversion of the traditional use of imagery can be said to represent itself in the dual function of Hall's nature imagery. In Hall, the presence of nature writing, in combination with the fact that the natural imagery also serves as a backdrop for Sister's experience, seems to suggest a degree of interconnectedness between the state of Sister's mind and her natural surroundings. Sister eventually comes to be shaped by the rough, mountainous region surrounding Carhullan, physically, but also mentally – she grows sinewy and strong (204), and “los[es] the ability to fear or panic” (184) as she is subjected to Jackie's training. Rather than reinforcing the stereotypical metaphor of the resources of tender, fragile woman and nature, Sister's narrative provides a depiction of the nature of the Cumbrian plains which is harsh, rugged and unpredictable, and of a handful of women who are able to survive in comparatively harmonious relation with this nature, in addition to being capable of violence, and of fighting back.

The final issue which I have explored in this thesis is the issue of ambiguity towards technological innovation. Just as nature writing and natural imagery and metaphor are portrayed ambiguously, the traditionally male-dominated fields of science and technology are also represented within these novels in an ambiguous manner. Both novels take a critical stance to the destructive side effects of technology such as pollution and waste production, which are results of the way this field is currently employed within our society. However, technology, as represented by the data files in Hall, and thirty audio tapes in Atwood, are also the vehicles of the protagonists' expression and historicity; it is how their voices are heard. The duality of the representation of technology, perhaps especially weaponry and computer equipment, provides a more nuanced relationship to this than much ecofeminist theory would consider. I have argued that there is a certain needless technophobia within the field of ecofeminism which is a reaction to culture and civilisation, which, according to Griffin's satirical text, “men are responsible for” (40). However, these novels, although critical towards the neglect of taking into account the destructive by-products of technology, nevertheless portray technological advance as an invaluable tool when in the right hands.

Atwood and perhaps particularly Hall illustrate the importance of the infiltration of women within all fields of society, how this prevents any one field from becoming male-centered – this is in line with the pluralism which the ecofeminist movement and theoretical framework aims to promote. As I have argued, the monopolisation of technological and

scientific development by a minority group within society undoubtedly leads to a narrower perspective not only of innovation, but of consequences for the environment. It should be an aim to include scientists and industrial designers with as wide a variety of backgrounds as possible; through a process of pluralisation of science and technology many more voices might easily be heard, and the cultural monopoly of phallo- and phallogocentrism might eventually come to an end. The very passivity of the protagonists in these works signifies that they do indeed inhabit male-centered dystopias. However, Sister breaks with the expectation of docility; she escapes and returns a soldier in an army set on disruption, rebellion and ultimately liberation. Offred is at the mercy of strangers, and her only option is to run; however, by running, she is able to eventually record her unique subjective voice for the ages. Although this might seem a meagre rebellion in relation to that of Sister, she manages to thoroughly establish her feminine subjective, which can be seen as successfully rebellious in relation to the established male centre of consciousness.

The presence of ecofeminism in these two feminist dystopias manifests itself as a special attention to the deconstruction of the binary opposition which results in hierarchal dominance, in relation to language and the presence of the subjective I, and the imagery which is used to describe women and nature alike. The exploration of ecofeminist issues lends attention to the inclusion or exclusion of women within a technologically oriented society, and provides a nuanced depiction of ecocritical perspectives towards these fields. An appropriate illustration of the desire for pluralism which the (eco)feminist movement portrays, and which is also present in these novels, is made by Offred in conversation with her Commander. He remarks that “Women can’t add [...] For them, one and one and one don’t make four” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 183). Offred later remarks that “What the Commander said is true. One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other” (Atwood, *Handmaid* 188).

I would say that these novels remark upon the manner in which women have to deal with this “logos which basically denies their existence” (Devine 98). Through the exploration, deconstruction, satirical subversion, or direct criticism of language and metaphor, Atwood and Hall illustrate exactly how deeply patriarchal values and phallogocentrism penetrate our culture, and how little space is left to claim for the female protagonists. The novels also depict the struggle to expand the range of movement, intellectual and physical, for the female subjective self. Thematically, the novels depict the consequences of too narrow a perspective

upon the development of societal structure, and how this influences the development of government and other structures of authority.

It is my opinion that these works are highly appropriate for analysis through the ecofeminist critical lens, as the discussed criticisms of not only linguistic phallogentrism, but also of the over-arching patriarchal male-centered structures, are especially relevant subjects for ecofeminist literary analysis. However, in the limited space of eighty pages, there are several issues which I have not been able to explore. A discussion of the use of metaphor in *Handmaid* can take many forms, as her range of metaphor is extremely rich and varied; in relation to the ecofeminist discourse, much more than the floral imagery which is my primary focus can be elaborated upon; Atwood employs a wide range of animal and environmental imagery, and imagery which seems to illustrate the body's preverbal language. A discussion of political and religious extremism would be relevant to both novels; a critical exploration of the relationship between state and church would be especially interesting in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale*, political corruption and the mismanagement of natural resources in relation to *Daughters*. The issue of religious oppression, and to which extent there is interpenetration between religion and the dominance of phallogentric rhetoric, can also be successfully explored, as well as a discussion of cults of personality in relation to Hall's work. However, the aspects of language and metaphor which I have explored in this thesis seemed to be the most relevant in relation to both the thematic of the novels, and to the ecofeminist discourse. The novels formulate a similar message of women's lack of manoeuvring space, and of the consequences of natural destruction. Atwood and Hall provide illustrations of dystopian patriarchies, and through subversion and satire formulate an (eco)feminist dream of freedom, a dream which is never realised within the discourse, but always remembered, imagined or strived for. Like the women in Atwood's novel, the ecofeminist dream of freedom lives "in the blank white spaces at the edges of print" (Atwood, *Handmaid* 54), as a hidden, hopeful potential within these dystopian narratives.

## Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Edinburgh: Heinemann, 1993.
- . "The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake 'In Context'" *PMLA*, Vol. 119, No. 3, Special Topic: Science Fiction and Literary Studies: The Next Millennium. New York: Modern Language Association, 2004. 513-517.
- Baccolini, Raffaella. "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction" *PMLA*, Vol. 119, No. 3, Special Topic: Science Fiction and Literary Studies: The Next Millennium. New York: Modern Language Association, 2004. 518-521.
- Bartkowski, Frances. *Feminist Utopias*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.
- Benston, Margaret Lowe. "Women's Voices/Men's Voices: Technology as Language" *Inventing Women: Science, Technology and Gender*. Eds. Gill Kirkup, Laurie Smith Keller. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992. 33-41
- The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*. Eds. Robert Carroll, Stephen Prickett. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. "The Misogyny of Patriarchal Culture in *The Handmaid's Tale*" *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993. 135-158.
- Campbell, Elisabeth. "Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 3. New York: Hofstra University, 1995. 332-348.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa". Trans. Paula Cohen and Keith Cohen. *Signs*, Vol 1, No. 4. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. 875-893.
- Cox, Cat. "Ecofeminism" *Inventing Women: Science, Technology and Gender*. Eds. Gill Kirkup, Laurie Smith Keller. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992. 282-294.
- Davidson, Arnold E. "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*" *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Eds. Kathryn VanSpanckeren, Jan Garden Castro. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. 113-121.
- Devine, Maureen. *Woman and Nature: Literary Reconceptualizations*. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1992.
- Ferns, Chris. *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999.
- Gates, Barbara T. "A Root of Ecofeminism: Ecoféminisme" *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism:*

- Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. Eds. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 15-22.
- Griffin, Susan. *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2000.
- Hall, Sarah. *Daughters of the North*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007.
- Heise, Ursula K. "Review: Greening English: Recent Introductions to Ecocriticism" *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 2. University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. 289-298. 275-305.
- Hengen, Shannon. "Margaret Atwood and environmentalism" *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Coral Ann Howells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 72-86.
- Holcrombe, Garan. "Sarah Hall". *Contemporary Writers*. Online. British Council, 2007. Accessed 02.02.10.  
<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=authD4F18F62114931C08AYjK2634315>
- Hooker, Deborah. "(Fl)orality, Gender, and the Environmental Ethos of Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 52, No. 3. New York: Hofstra University, 2006. 275-305.
- Howells, Coral Ann. "Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Coral Ann Howells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 161-175.
- . *Margaret Atwood*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Jordanova, L.J. "Natural Facts: a historical perspective on science and sexuality" *Nature, culture and gender*. Eds. Carol P MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1980. 42-69.
- Keller, Evelyn Fox. "How Gender Matters, or, Why it's so hard for us to count past two" *Inventing Women: Science, Technology and Gender*. Eds. Gill Kirkup, Laurie Smith Keller. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992. 42-56.
- . "Women, Science and Popular Mythology" *Machina ex dea: feminist perspectives on technology*. Ed. Jean Rothschild. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1983. 130-146.
- King, Ynestra. "The Eco-feminist Imperative" Eds. Leonie Caldecott & Stephanie Leland. *Reclaim the Earth: Women speak out for Life on Earth*. London: The Women's Press, 1983. 9- 14.
- . "Towards an Ecological Feminism and a Feminist Ecology". *Machina ex dea: feminist perspectives on technology*. Ed. Jean Rothschild. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1983. 118-129.



- Lawrence, D.H. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2005.
- Lowen, Linda. "Book Review - "Daughters of the North" by Sarah Hall: Female-Only Carhullan Holds Last Hope of Freedom For Post-Apocalyptic UK" *About.com*. About.com, a part of the New York Times Company. Accessed 09.12.2009.  
<http://womensissues.about.com/od/feminismequalrights/fr/DaughtersNorth.htm>
- . "Global Warming, Female Utopias and Gender Roles - Interview with Sarah Hall. Novelist Envisions Grim Future to Explore Contemporary Issues" *About.com*. About.com, a part of the New York Times Company. Accessed 09.12.2009.  
<http://womensissues.about.com/od/reproductiverights/a/SarahHallInter.htm?p=1>
- Merchant, Carolyn. "Mining the Earth's Womb" *Machina ex dea: feminist perspectives on technology*. Ed. Jean Rothschild. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1983. 99-117.
- McGuire, Cathleen and Colleen McGuire. "Grass-Roots Ecofeminism: Activating Utopia" *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. Eds. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 186-203.
- Orwell, George. 1984. Online. Project Gutenberg of Australia. Accessed 10.02.2010.  
<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100021.txt>
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*" *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Eds. Kathryn VanSpanckeren, Jan Garden Castro. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. 101-112.
- "Sarah Hall interviewed". *The Lunecy Review: reviewing the arts, Lancaster & South Lakes*. Accessed 09.12.2009.  
<http://thelunecyreview.wordpress.com/2009/03/10/sarah-hall-interviewed/>
- Sarver, Stephanie. "Review: Environmentalism and Literary Studies." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 1. Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, 1995. 106-112.
- Schweickart, Patrocínio. "What If... Science and Technology in Feminist Utopias" *Machina ex dea: feminist perspectives on technology*. Ed. Jean Rothschild. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1983. 198-211.
- Slicer, Deborah. "Towards an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory: Bodies as Grounds." *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. Eds. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 49-73.
- Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature*. New York: Facts on File, 2006.

- Soper, Kate. "Feminism and Ecology: Realism and Rhetoric in the Discourses of Nature." *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 20, No. 3. Sage Publications: 1995. 311-331.
- Stabile, Carol A. *Feminism and the Technological Fix*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994.
- Stankow-Mercer, Naomi. "Dystopias" *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Vol. 2: *Entries*. Ed. Robin Anne Reid. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009. 91-93.
- Trimmer, Joseph F. *The Essentials of MLA Style: A Guide to the System of Documentation Recommended by the MLA for Writers of Research Papers*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996
- Turner, Nick. "Margaret Atwood" *Contemporary Writers*. Online. British Council, 2009. Accessed 02.02.10.  
<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth03C18N390512635243>
- Wajcman, Judy. *Feminism Confronts Technology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- Wordsworth, William. "She dwelt among the untrodden ways" *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 7th ed, vol. 2. Eds. Abrams & al. New York: Norton, 2000. 252.