



The Re-construction of Canadian National Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

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ABSTRACT

15 years after the events of *The Handmaid's Tale* book, women are still the object of the male gaze, but different from the prequel, Margaret Atwood's new book, *The Testaments*, is more revelatory and subversive. It is not just meant to help women rebel against male power, but also points out the way for Canada, which was in the same situation with women, to get rid of its "colonial mentality" and construct national identity in the context of globalization. In the novel, Atwood connects the status of the three female protagonists with Canada's national situation. She reviews how Canada set itself free from American hegemony to establish its national consciousness by writing the course in which female characters fight against the male oppression and reconstruct their identity. Atwood further predicts that, in the 21st century where the development of win-win cooperation has become a global theme, Canada can only construct a complete national identity through the unity of its "self" with its external "other"—the United States, so as to provide endless possibilities for future development.

Keywords: *The Testaments*; national identity; three female protagonists; globalization.

1. Introduction

A. The Self-identification of Narrators: Reconstructing Canada's Identity

i. Gazing back at the external "other"—exposing discourses through knowledge within the framework of power

As depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead is a totalitarian state controlled by male rulers, and women fall prey to the gaze from everywhere. The Eyes, Gilead's secret police, guarantee Sons of Jacob—the founders of the Republic of Gilead—absolute control over the nation. Aunt Lydia, one of the three narrators in *The Testaments*, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, repeatedly mentions their logo, which is an eye with wings, in which the gaze of Gilead is presented and emphasized. In the two novels, the power of male rulers is exercised through their observation of female bodies. They construct discourses related to these bodies to produce and legitimize knowledge about women, and in this way, to gain mastery over them by regulating what kind of reality they should accept. As claimed by Gilead, the bodies of girls and women are "snares," "enticements" (15), and "big booty trap" (84) whatever their shapes and features; therefore, they must have their arms covered, hair covered, skirts no more than two inches above the ankle (14). The Aunts, accomplices of male rulers, are responsible for imbuing girls with discourses and supervising them with gaze, rendering girls docile and obedient. They are ashamed of swelling breasts and hair sprouting on areas that are not supposed to dwell on: legs, armpits and private parts (83).

Gilead's discourses prevent women from developing their self-awareness by making it impossible for them to identify and love their bodies. In social and cultural construction, the body is not merely material existence but also a signifier of identity. Accordingly, women's disgust at the body implies that they have no sense of self-identity.

However, instead of being gazed passively, or just acquainting readers with the existence of the gaze, Aunt Lydia takes further steps to collect information actively through microdot cameras and microphones, and empowers another narrator Agnes Jemima, who is born by a handmaid and later becomes the adopted daughter of Commander Kyle and his wife Tabitha, to fight against Gilead's gaze. The truth about Gilead exposes to them that the male rulers construct discourses about the nation, about themselves, and also about women's body as well as their identity for the purpose of domination and oppression. In this sense, the collected information is decoded by Aunt Lydia and Agnes to change their perception of Gilead, and thus transfers to their knowledge, which empowers them to gaze back at Gilead to overthrow its hegemony. For Agnes, her anti-gaze is realized through her attempt to escape from Gilead's control over her body and self, and to further shatter Gilead's discourses with the aid of her half-sister Nicole, who transports the document cache with her body.

As one of the allies of Gilead's male rulers and the founder of Gilead's "female sphere" (174), Aunt Lydia is supposed to discipline women by instilling the ideology of the new society, which she appears to believe in genuinely, into their heads as she did in *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, her first-person narration in the sequel reveals that she is also the object to be shaped and disciplined by the male gaze. After being reduced to animals locked in the squalid cell, suffering both physical and mental torture, Aunt Lydia eventually enlists herself into the regime's newly-created female class—the Aunts, and becomes complicit in the task of calling for women's subordination by "lowering their expectations" of "achieving equality in the professional and public spheres" (ibid). Nevertheless, she actually never internalizes the gaze and allows herself to be blinded by the values Gilead propagates or the power given by the male rulers. Instead, she has "a third eye", which "was cold, like a stone", and "did not weep" but "saw" (148). This eye is embodied in surveillance cameras, and microdot cameras Aunt Lydia applies to photograph documents which record "discreditable personal secrets pertaining to various high-level officials" (390), as well as microphones whose sensitivity she increases to eavesdrop "powerful but contaminating secrets" and "lies, cunning, deceit" (298).

As Aunt Lydia recognizes, the "festers"—the "secret histories" of Gilead she collects—can be "made profitable in non-monetary way", as "knowledge is power, especially discreditable knowledge" (39). The "knowledge" here is not oppressive, controlling, and produced by power to serve the ruling class; on the contrary, it comes out of Aunt Lydia's decoding and understanding of the information; hence it is self-generated. Likewise, the "power" is not her privilege as a ruler of the "female sphere", but the possibility to resist Gilead's pervasive disciplinary gaze and to further gaze back at Gilead's ideology. "It has been so crucial for my own mental development to had the privilege of being a fly on the wall; or, to be more exact, an ear inside the wall" (243); this "mental development" is probably indicated by Aunt Lydia's return to past values, in which "equality, liberty, democracy, and the rights of the individual" are "eternal verities" and should be defended (116). The "discreditable knowledge" of Gilead arms Aunt Lydia with a clear understanding that everything Gilead claims—"God's kingdom on earth" (112), "Fallen? God Can Still Forgive You!" (48)—is a lie, which enables her to fight against the dual threat: being disciplined and thus internalizing Gileadean gaze, as well as being corrupted and overwhelmed by the privilege.

Based on this, she "capitalizes on" (39) the knowledge to remove the obstacles from her path to overthrow Gilead. For example, she prevents Agnes's step-adoptive-mother Paula and adoptive-father Commander Kyle from marrying her off to Commander Judd, a pedophilia who keeps "disposing of" his wives when they grow older, by threatening to leak out their crimes of murdering their ex-partners; besides, she stirs up internal strife among the Aunts to divide the ruling class. What's more, she reveals the information to Agnes, prompting her, or we can say, female group, to step further to destroy Gilead's discourses. It is knowledge—Aunt Lydia's collected information, which Agnes obtains on the premise of literacy—that wakes her up to male rulers' mastery over female bodies as well as their souls. Based on this, Agnes reacts against the beliefs that Gilead inculcates, making efforts to overthrow the suppressive male gaze with her and her sister Nicole's bodies as a weapon.

Similarly, Agnes can resist the beliefs Gilead indoctrinates them with the knowledge she gains from her reading and the information Aunt Lydia discloses to her. Except from the Aunts whose "mind had been strengthened enough to reject wrong ideas" (282), women in Gilead are forbidden to read and write, as their minds "were too weak for reading", and they would "crumble, fall apart under the contradictions", and "would not be able to hold firm" (292). It is the Aunts who indoctrinate girls and women, selecting, weaving and interpreting Biblical stories in such a way as to structure the way they perceive reality. Discourse is their tool to "transmit, produce and reinforce power" (Foucault *History of Sexuality*, 101). For example, Aunt Estée, after Aunt Vidala—they both work together with Aunt Lydia to indoctrinate women in Gilead, and are faithful believers—tells girls "one of the most important stories in the Bible" (78): the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces, explains that it is because "the concubine was sorry for what she had done, and she wanted to make amends, so she sacrificed herself to keep the kind traveller from being killed by those wicked men" (80). Through such discursive construction, the Aunts inculcate

girls with the dogma that women must “redeem them through the sacrifice of their bodies” (37), and that’s what Agnes used to believe. Nevertheless, her faith is shattered by the truth of the story she discovers in the Bible years later when she gains literacy as a Suppliant Aunt, and finds it “was not noble”, but in fact “horrible” (292). The girl runs away because her husband treats her like a purchased animal, and she is never willing to sacrifice herself to save him; instead, she “was simply shoved out the door and raped to death” (292). Agnes realizes for the first time that “they leave things out”, they “change”, “add” and “omit” (292) biblical doctrines to serve their regime. The world “is not the accomplice of” her knowledge/understanding, and “there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world” (Foucault “The Order”, 67) in Gilead’s favour. Agnes suffers from a crisis of belief: she feared that she “would be unable to believe in” neither Gilead nor God. Consequently, Gileadean dogmas about female body are no longer incontrovertible, and that’s why when she and Nicole escape to Canada with Aunt Lydia’s intelligence, she puts on Gileadean so-called “slippery and depraved” underwear and jeans that “touch the skin of” her legs to highlight her body shape without much struggle. Women in Gilead are required to conceal their bodies and keep them out of public view, and their loose gowns of uniform design and color embody that women’s “self” and their bodies are in a state of being covered and ignored. In this sense, the fact that Agnes changes into clothes that give prominence to her body symbolizes or facilitates the awakening of her self-awareness.

Moreover, the files put by Aunt Lydia on Agnes’s desk, which contain various crimes, enable her to realize that “the production of discourse is controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers” (ibid, 52). While concealing various dirty truths, Gilead’s ruling class sugarcoats its corruption with God’s law to construct their so-called “God’s kingdom on earth” (112). Everything Agnes is told, even though in the name of “eliminating the suffering of women” (170), is “controlled, selected, and redistributed” by the privileged to safeguard their interests. To extricate women and girls (325) from Gileadean manipulation, Agnes chooses to convey the information with her half-sister Nicole. Even though the “GOD/LOVE” tattoo Nicole gets on her arm following Aunt Lydia’s instruction is more than her passport to Gilead, but an embodiment of Gilead’s control over the female body, the document cache hidden behind the tattoo suggests the potential for subversion. Nicole’s body becomes a deadly weapon against Gilead, which also empowers Agnes who goes with Nicole at the risk of her life. The sisters are supposed to be escorted all the way to Canada on a planned trip, however, significantly, the ship that carries them across the sea breaks down, they have to manage to reach the Canadian shore on their own. Suffering from cold, exhaustion and pain, Agnes and Nicole ride an inflatable and peddle with their hands, coping with turbulent seas. The difficult voyage can be seen as a journey for the sisters to save themselves and seek freedom, and their bodies as well as souls are liberated after being baptized by the wind and waves. From saving themselves, to handing information to the Canadian media to expose Gilead’s guilt, female bodies are no longer “big booby trap” and source of all evil, but an arm to gaze back and overturn Gilead’s power, and a way to find their own identity.

By drawing on the knowledge, both Aunt Lydia and Agnes resist Gilead’s gaze, through which the privileged exercise their power. It is the truth Aunt Lydia collects with microdot cameras and microphones that reminds her that people used to believe in justice, “liberty, democracy, and the rights of the individual”, and further allows her to overcome Gilead’s ideological discipline. More importantly, the information she provides make it possible for Agnes to realize the inherent relationship between discourse and power: “the internal structures of discourse are produced through inter-relations of power and the effects of those power relations on individuals” (Mills 23), and then to react against Gilead’s gaze. Her resistance finds expression in the awakening of body consciousness (though only indirectly), and breaking away from Gilead’s repression of female bodies and souls is the prerequisite for women to find their own identity. Meanwhile, “the self cannot experience itself separately from the self-representation, and in fact, it experiences itself from within, and through, that representation...the veil of personal history is the self-representation” (Almaas 63). The gazing back, or to resist Gileadean power with the awakening of body awareness, is merely the first step to reconstruct their “self”, and they still need to go back to their personal history to reach the totality of their life, which will be elaborated in the next part.

Considering that Atwood’s “elaborate constructions of a post-colonial subjectivity encode a running parallel between the conditioning of Canada as a nation and the positioning of women within it” (Nicholson 11), in *The Testaments*, the “positioning” of Aunt Lydia as well as Agnes is also parallel with the “conditioning” of Canada. Gilead, which can be regarded as America, gazes at Canada and threatens to eliminate its national “self”, just as what it does to Aunt Lydia and Agnes. Aside from military operations, Gilead transports “Pearl Girls”—young girls who are trained to be future Aunts—to Canada to recruit more women to come to Gilead. The Canadian government too powerless to take any action against it. That’s why it has to “be neutral in a sloppier way” (196), and correspondingly, when Gilead demands that Canada return Baby Nicole, who is supposed to be the daughter of a Handmaid and a top-brass Commander yet smuggled out of Gilead by her mother, “Canada had dragged its feet and then caved in and said they would make every effort” (48). As a matter of fact, this attitude is not uncommon internationally: the French have closed the route from Gilead to its territory; so did Italy, Germany—the smaller European ones, as none of them want trouble with Gilead (192), and “they’re avoiding provocations” (193). Given

the international situation today, in which all countries live in the shadow of American dominance, what is reflected in the novel is actually the present reality.

Nonetheless, “Canada was sloppy in a good way” (196). The superficial sloppiness allows the underground Mayday to run smoothly, in which “foreign freedom fighters” are welcomed to join. In addition, Baby Nicole, the tool Gilead utilizes to intimidate Canada, is used in turn by the anti-Gilead protest in Canada as an icon, a symbol of freedom (48), and the possibility of resistance. What is most important is that, rather than being silenced by the oppression, schools in Canada teach students the truth about Gilead so as to react against its one-sided gaze. According to Daisy, they have three modules in school on Gilead: it was a terrible place where women couldn’t have jobs or drive cars, and where the Handmaids were forced to get pregnant like cows (49).

Of course, Canada can be suspected of deliberately defacing their enemy out of fear and prejudice, especially due to its past “garrison mentality”, but the following facts are likely to prove that Canada is managing to overcome such a mentality, and gathering strength with the international community to make responses: Canada takes survivors of Gilead National Homelands Genocide in, unlike what they do in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, provides opportunities for Mayday, whose members come not only from former America, but from Canada and other foreign countries, to overthrow Gileadean regime; it condemns slave labour in the Gilead Colonies and their ridiculous “Certificate of Whiteness” scheme etc. It is knowledge, or specifically their understanding of the information, that allows Aunt Lydia and Agnes to realize the constructiveness of the reality in their eyes. It then enables them to refuse Gilead’s discourses about the female body and even embed a microdot in Nicole’s body to make it the most direct and powerful weapon to destroy Gilead’s hegemony. The female body is not a synonym of “polluting” (84), “snares” and “enticements” (15) any more, but a tool to challenge Gilead’s gaze. Likewise, the knowledge of the truth about Gilead saves the Canadians from being deceived by its discursive construction of a “God’s kingdom”.

In the real world, understanding the inherent relationship between discourse and power is also necessary for Canada to construct its national identity. The Canadians’ attitude toward their American “other” used to be ambivalent. On the one hand, the statistics reveal that about 2 Canadians move to America while 1 American moves to Canada, which is quite a huge difference considering that the population of the United States is almost ten times as large as that of Canada (Emigration from Canada). In addition to the economic and political factors—better opportunities for making a living (Shore 101), the influence of American values instilled through their cultural products cannot be ignored. “American illustrations, American comic supplements, American magazines” and “moving-picture show” come to Canada (ibid, 102) with their value orientation and celebration of “ideas and values they ascribed to their own national culture” (Said 44), for example, “American films construct an illusion of good society by portraying free and open images of American community along with characters featuring heroism, idealism and pragmatism” (Li 36).

Culture, as Said sharply points out, has an astonishingly direct connection with imperial politics (8). Cultural products are also a discursive construction, which implies a certain value system. Accordingly, in American cultural products, “American attitudes to their greatness... have remained constant, have dictated, have obscured, the realities of empire” (Said 8), namely, the tendency to exclude other cultures, as if “other literatures and societies had either an inferior or a transcended value” (ibid, 44). It is probable that some Canadians internalize the discourses of “American greatness” in their cultural products, and thus abandon their own culture to embrace American culture. On the other hand, the Canadians who have a negative attitude toward Americans and their influence are not in the minority. They sniff at America, or even uglify it. “Judging, teasing and even hating America is a central part of the Canadian identity”, it is common for Canadian politicians to label ideas they don not like as being “American-style”, for example, people who support gun laws or want to tinker with Canadian medicare may be denounced as “American-style” (McCullough, “Canada in the 21st Century.”), and meanwhile, Canadians define what is not “American-style” to be their own. In other words, Canada takes America as its “other” in the mirror, which it mistakes for its own “self”, or to be more precise, the opposite of its “self”. To sum up, Canadians were tormented by colonial mentality, which means that their national confidence as well as identity has not been constructed, and that’s why they cannot exist independent of America, but only remind themselves of “why we’re better” through “anti-American jokes, gags, stereotypes, and insults” (ibid).

In fact, Canada in the 21st century is casting off its blind admiration resultant from its internalization of American values and no longer imprisoned by its reluctant support for the U.S. out of fear. This is revealed in the fact that Canada said no to the Iraq war in 2003—the first time “there was a war where the Americans and the Brits were involved and Canada was not there” (Freeman, “Canada’s ‘No’ To Iraq War”). “The Canadian public (with the exception of Alberta) was strongly opposed to an intervention” (Fiorino, “Why Canada Really Didn’t Go To Iraq”) without a U.N. resolution, and Jean Chrétien, Canada’s prime minister at that time, was not convinced that “Hussein was harbouring weapons of mass destruction”, and “ the U.S. was choosing to go after Hussein instead of Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe because Iraq had oil and the African nation did not” (Freeman, “Canada’s ‘No’ To Iraq War”). Even though “apologists for overseas American interests have insisted on American innocence, doing good, fighting for freedom” (Said 8-9), the Canadians refuse to be deluded by Americans’ discursive construction of a just cause for invading Iraq, reacting against the gaze of America—their external “other” successfully. The international

community is also becoming “less and less American” (Freeman, “Canada’s ‘No’ To Iraq War). For example, rather than renewing sanctions against Iran as the United States bids to, the U.N. Security Council lifts the arms embargo on Iran with 13 countries among 15 members expressing their opposition (Kuperwasser, “The End of the Arms Embargo”). In addition, China, Russia, Iran and North Korea—members of the 17-party Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations—have built on strategic partnerships with one another in recent days. They strive against the current attack of unilateralism, which is characterized by “isolationist and arbitrary action, including the adoption of unilateral coercive action or withdrawal from major treaties and multilateral institutions”, just as Trump administration did (“17 Countries Request U.N. Backing”). As reflected in *The Testaments* by Atwood that Canada is reacting against Gilead’s totalitarianism with the international community, in reality, various countries in the world are also working together to resist the invasion of American domination, which will finally be undermined, as the fall of Gilead indicates. On the other hand, stripped of hegemony, the United States should not be denied entirely and deliberately vilified, because there is still a lot to learn from the good examples American society offers, such as its social security system and educational policy.

Even though Canada used to confirm its identity with its mirror image—the United States, it has seen through the constructiveness of American image, and blinded by neither American value-oriented discourses nor its own prejudice against its neighbour. Since the “other” is deconstructed, Canada should not allow itself to be defined by American discourse, but to regain self-knowledge. And given that national identity is about using “resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming” (Hall 4), it is necessary to unite history with Canada’s “self” to realize a complete identity. That’s why Atwood once again returns to personal/national history, which is Canada’s internal “other”, making her efforts to unite Canada’s “self” and “other”, no matter external or internal.

ii. Developing self-awareness through integrating with the internal “other”—the prerequisite for uniting with the external “other”

The three narrators in *The Testaments*, whether Aunt Lydia whose past values shattered by Gilead’s theological doctrines, or Agnes whose foundation—everything she was told/not told about Gilead and her parents—for constructing her self-identity is destroyed by the truth, or Daisy who tries hard to accept her new identity as Baby Nicole, all face the dilemma of reconstructing their broken identity. However, they manage to realize that goal in seemingly different ways. Aunt Lydia reconstructs her identity by forming herself as, to a certain extent, “an ethical subject” (Foucault *The Use of Pleasure* 30) in the testaments to her past crimes and defence of her life, while Agnes and Daisy realize it through the “Bloodlines Genealogical Archives”, which allow them to “constitute a historical knowledge of” themselves as well as “struggles” their parents engage in for freedom, “and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics” (Foucault *Society Must Be Defended* 8). Both ways are inseparable from history, therefore, it is possible to think of them as two aspects of the same approach. Comparing their ways of reconstructing their “self” to that of Canada in the 21st century, we can detect the underlying similarities.

“Testaments” in the title of the novel can be interpreted in three ways: a person’s will, especially the part relating to personal property; something that serves as a sign or evidence of a specified fact, event, or quality; and a covenant between God and the human race (The New Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary). Given that Aunt Lydia clarifies her purpose of writing this manuscript, or “the stash of incriminating documents” (63) as she claims, to readers repeatedly, which is to “collect together all the sins of Gilead, including mine” (267), offer “a warts-and-all portrait, a definitive account of my life and times, suitably footnoted” (383), here the “testaments” can be understood as “a sign or evidence of a specified fact”. As Aunt Lydia records her own crimes in a detailed way, the manuscript appears to be her confession. “To declare aloud and intelligibly the truth about oneself—... to confess—has in the Western world been considered for a long time either as a condition for redemption for one’s sins or an essential item in the condemnation of the guilty” (Foucault *Beginning of the Hermeneutics* 20). This tradition of “redemption for one’s sins” through confession can be traced to Christianity. One way of manifesting the truth of oneself to his soul is “exomologēsis”. Tertullian, the father of Latin theology, translates this Greek word into “publicatio sui”, that is, “the Christian had to publish himself,” which “means... one has to show oneself as a sinner...as somebody who, choosing the path of the sin, preferred filthiness to purity, earth and dust to heaven, spiritual poverty to the treasures of faith. In a word, he has to show himself as somebody who preferred spiritual death to eternal life” (ibid, 60).

Aunt Lydia shows such a preference in her confession, which can be most clearly seen from a momentous choice she makes that determines the rest of her life. Before the rise of Gilead regime, Aunt Lydia was appointed a judge in a family court to uphold justice, and because her profession is considered useful to the regime, she is taken to be “educated” to pledge allegiance to Gilead. After being trapped with other women in the stadium like a filthy animal, witnessing “cannibalism”—some women are selected to shoot the blinded, condemned ones—and being imprisoned in a cell to suffer from “kicking and tasing procedure” (148), Aunt Lydia is then taken to a hotel with

clean water and adequate food, for which she feels grateful as Gileadean rulers expect. The power of Gilead finally subjects her to its rule. She chooses to put on the long brown garment prepared for female shooters and shoot other women, or in other words, she prefers “earth and dust to heaven, spiritual poverty to the treasures of faith”.

Contrary to her, her colleague Anita who is confined with her in the stadium chooses to die for faith rather than live sinfully. By confessing such a sin, Aunt Lydia shows the readers that she chooses “the path of the sin” and “the spiritual death” rather than “eternal life” offered by Jesus Christ to his believers. However, as Foucault discovers, “the most important model to justify the necessity of exomologēsis is the model of martyrdom” (*Beginning of the Hermeneutics* 60). It is through “the refusal of the self, the breaking off from one’s self”, and “self-destruction” that self-revelation in exomologēsis can be achieved. This impulse of self-destruction can be found in Aunt Lydia. She has two options after serving as an Aunt, one is to make plans for overthrowing Gilead, which is indeed her choice, and the other is to enjoy and consolidate her privilege. Even in the middle of the plan, she still has two paths to go: either “proceed with my risky and even reckless plan”, or “choose the safer course” to “hand Baby Nicole over to Commander Judd” (304). And Aunt Lydia is quite clear about the two consequences corresponding to these two options: “I will naturally be branded a traitor and will live in infamy, or rather die in it”, or “I would then reap my reward in Gilead”, and “my control over Ardua Hall would be complete and my honoured old age secure” (ibid). But this time she chooses to die, that is to say, she chooses “eternal life”, just as she herself admits: “in my end is my beginning” (384).

It seems that Aunt Lydia’s confession accords with the Christian confession, namely, “exomologēsis”. However, a significant fact cannot be ignored: Aunt Lydia records her sins through words. Here it may once again connect with another way of confession in Christianity: “exagoreusis”, which emphasizes that “the verbalization... has to be a permanent activity as contemporaneous as possible to the stream of thoughts” (Foucault *Beginning of the Hermeneutics* 72). Aunt Lydia does confide her thoughts in readers as the story unfolds. Nevertheless, there is a huge difference between “exagoreusis” and Aunt Lydia’s verbalization. The former is a “self-sacrifice”, “permanent, exhaustive, and sacrificial verbalization of the thoughts” (ibid), that is to say, a revelation of the one’s secrets and evil thoughts, emphasizing “the renunciation of oneself and one’s own will” (ibid, 12), as what is required by “exomologēsis”, while the latter, far from sacrificing and breaking off from her self, is a revelation of Gilead’s sins, which is a way to protect her life (40), and thus to ensure and reconstruct her identity.

Aunt Lydia chooses Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: A Defence of One’s Life* to hide her nascent manuscript advisedly, for what she is doing here is nothing but defending her life: “the life I have led. The life—I’ve told myself—I had no choice but to lead” (ibid). The testaments now actually more likely refers to the evidence of Gilead’s crimes instead of her own, as Aunt Lydia has always been forming herself as an “ethical subject” with a “technology of the self”. The subject, according to Foucault, “is a form, rather than a substance”, and it is “something constituted, and especially historically constituted” (Kelly 513). There are three types of subjects constituted by two kinds of technologies: subject of knowledge, subject of power, and ethical subject. The first two are formed through “technologies of power”, which “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject” (Foucault *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* 225). This definition actually reveals their passivity. The subject of knowledge highlights the role of “episteme”, which is “conditions of possibility of knowledge, as investigated by archaeology” (Foucault “The Order of Things”, 183), and “a body of anonymous, historical rules... for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area” that “discursive practice” is subject to (Foucault *The Archeology of Knowledge* 132). That is to say, a subject has to submit to, and be objectified by the domination of historical rules that define a given time and the established value system. The subject of power, as illustrated by Foucault in his *Punish and Discipline* and *The History of Sexuality*, experiences the transformation of power formations from “old power of death” to “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (*The History of Sexuality* 139) which takes two forms, namely, the anatomo-politics of the human body and the biopolitics of the population. “Power is everywhere;... it embraces everything... it comes from everywhere” (ibid, 93), therefore, the subject is under constant constraints and regulations of power. Both kinds of subjects are “the passive product of impersonal historical processes” (Kelly 513).

Different from the first two, the “ethical subject”—the concept that marks the turn of Foucault’s thought in the eighties—is constituted through a “technology of the self”. Foucault defines such technology as

which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, or to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on. (*Beginning of the Hermeneutics* 25)

It emphasizes the initiative of individuals, who actively use their own means, to “determine their identity, maintain it” (Foucault *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* 87), or transform it to help themselves lead a better and happier life. The resulting subject is formed in this “relationship of the self to itself” (ibid, 300), and is defined as the “ethical subject”. Here ethics is defined by Foucault in terms of “governmentality”, which “covers the range of practices that

constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the strategies which individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other", and the fact that it "makes it possible to bring out the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others constitutes the very stuff of ethics" (ibid). In a word, ethics is about individuals' free choice of practices to give themselves, in their relationship to others, more freedom. It is different from the contemporary understanding of ethics, which is about a matter of rules for actions, instead, it refers to the relationship one has with him/herself. To conclude, what is essential to the "ethical subject" is "the relation to self", therefore, it revolves around "care of the self", which is translated from the Greek words "epimeleia heautou" (Foucault *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* 4).

The starting point of "care of the self" is "problematization", "a process by which an aspect of reality, of one's world, one's experience, is brought into focus as a problem in need of a response" (McGushin 16). It distances the subject from the authoritative knowledge and the established rules that constitute it, the subject then acquires a reflexive perspective to reconsider the systems that shape its discourse and behavior, thereby paving the way for constituting itself. Aunt Lydia is not like a devout Christian who simply confesses her crimes, to "publish" herself as a sinner who chooses the path of sin; instead, she distances herself from the totalitarian system which constitutes her subjectivity, questioning the world in which she lives to free herself from "the process of regulation and discipline" which is "all-pervasive" (Foucault *Power, Ethics and Knowledge*). She is not blinded by the privilege Gileadean regime confers on her, but sees through its disguise, and recognizes that it is a way the regime exercises power to discipline her. She realizes that she, as one who does not have any privilege, "must be made to desire to procure it" for herself by submitting to Gilead regime—by putting on the brown gown of shooters to shoot her companion—otherwise, she will be killed; she is "offered it by supervision and discipline" (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 136). Such self-knowledge prevents her from being "tempted by the bait of gain; corrected in her morals" (ibid), that's why she chooses to abandon the power conferred by Gilead in the end and uphold her "morals", instead of continuing to be manipulated by those male rulers to serve their totalitarian regime in order to get more privileges, as other Aunts do: eager to inform against each other in order to show their loyalty to the rulers. Besides, Aunt Lydia records Gilead's sins to further disclose how the pervasive power objectifies individuals: reducing women to "two-legged-womb"; achieving the subjection of bodies through "biopower", that is to say, turning sex into a public issue so as to control population (Foucault *The history of sexuality* 140). By problematizing the set of rules Gilead makes to constitute her subjectivity and through her testaments of Gilead's sins, Aunt Lydia saves herself from being "the objective product of systems of knowledge and power" (Foucault *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* 513).

Another essential element of "care of the self" is "spirituality". It is "the pursuit, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth", and these "pursuit, practice and experience" may be "purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence", which are for "the subject's very being" (ibid, 15). Here "truth" refers to the truth of God's Word in the Christian sense, therefore, to a large extent, it means spiritual sublimation and purification. According to Aunt Lydia's defence, even though she has to be contaminated by the blood on her hands and go along with the Gileadean regime in its evil deeds, her "third eye" keeps seeing the truth about Gilead, behind which it is her determination to "get back for" what she suffers from (148). But it should be noted that her revenge is not personal, not "an eye for an eye", because she stands for a set of laws and moral codes abolished by the new regime, and that possibly explains why she reminds readers time after time of her past identity as a judge. Aunt Lydia does feel guilty about the sins she committed, and that is the reason why she always has nightmares, in which she wears the brown gown—the penitential garb—with a rifle in her hand, faces two rows of women. She recognizes each and every one of them: former friends, former clients, former colleagues, as well as women and girls in Gilead that she has judged, and all of them are smiling with fear, contempt, defiance, pity in their eyes (167). However, even though she cannot forgive herself for giving up her faith and trampling on the justice she used to defend with all her heart and soul, Aunt Lydia refuses to be overwhelmed by the sense of guilt and to confess her crime over and over; on the contrary, she is in constant "pursuit" of her spiritual "purification" and "modifications" of her "existence" to reconstruct her "self". After problematizing her subjectivity which is constructed by authoritative knowledge and established rules, Aunt Lydia persists in implementing her plan to subvert Gilead so as to atone for her crimes. She adjusts to the body of new rules created for this given "social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area" by the Gileadean regime, numbers herself among the faithful and fade into the crowd (176), while she stealthily evades the disciplinary power, brings her initiative into full play by planning her self-perfection through her own moral cultivation (Zhou 29). She takes advantage of the power to collect information, train pearl girls as a conduit for Mayday's underground activities, and performs her duties as a judge to uphold her moral code as far as possible. In this way, Aunt Lydia transforms and modifies herself to attain a state of happiness, of purity. Even though she is doomed to sacrifice herself, she provides infinite possibilities for young Agnes, Daisy and other people who are eager for freedom.

With the help of "problematization" and "spirituality", Aunt Lydia takes care of her self. She first gazes back at her subjectivity, realizes that it is the objective product of Gilead's systems of power and knowledge. Then, she

constitutes her ethical subject through autonomous practices, that is, purifications, transformations and modifications: she manages to overthrow Gilead to atone for her crimes and defend her morality, thereby achieving a certain state of happiness, of purity.

The other two characters, Agnes and Daisy, also suffer from their loss of identity, yet both of them unearth their paths from their buried and forgotten past to the present through the “Bloodlines Genealogical Archives” and then reconstruct their identity, which is the Aunts’ records of “who is related to whom, both officially and in fact” (39). Agnes, the girl who lives in Gilead, has been shackled by the rules Gilead establishes to control “discursive practice” and its all-pervasive power that disciplines people through its bio-politics. Consequently, her status at school becomes “noticeably lower” when her step-adoptive-mother exposes the truth of Agnes’s birth—her biological mother is a Handmaid, a “slut”, as “common knowledge” admits (84)—yet it then shoots upwards as the Handmaid allotted to their house is pregnant, and it finally becomes worse than it has ever been because this Handmaid dies of childbirth, which is believed to be a bad omen (107). The disciplinary power of the Gileadean regime, to which discursive practice about the Handmaid is subject, defines Agnes’ identity. Likewise, Daisy’s identity is in danger of falling apart when she learns that she is the famous Baby Nicole—the daughter of a runaway Handmaid, who is regarded by Gilead as the evidence of the “deviousness and cunning of the Handmaids” (38), and used by Canada as its icon in its anti-Gilead protests (48).

This is because the history of their parents’ struggles against Gileadean totalitarianism has been wiped out, therefore, “certain possibilities for resistance and subversion go unnoticed” (Medina 11), so Agnes and Nicole are arbitrarily shaped by the “hegemonic power/knowledge effects of discursive practices” (ibid, 19). The history of past struggles does have a great impact on how Agnes and Nicole confront their struggles in the present, and by excavating the repressed experiences and memories, they are able to challenge the established practices of remembering and forgetting (ibid, 11). But it should be noted that this kind of “return to the origin” goes further than simple “rediscoveries” and “reactivations”, as it does not just advocate “the perception of forgotten or obscured figures”, nor the “insertion of discourse into totally new domains of practices” (Foucault “What is an Author?” 134), it attempts to “transform a discursive practice deeply from the inside by resisting its silences and omissions” (Medina 16). In a word, they return to the history of their parents’ struggles for using that past to resist and transform the official discursive construction of their identity, and combine their efforts to reconstruct their self-identity.

“Bloodlines Genealogical Archives” may not be restricted to the documents locked by the Aunts in Ardua Hall which provide authoritative testimony to their birth, but also metaphorically refers to the processes in which Agnes and Nicole endeavor to understand their birth and understand their mothers’ struggles. Agnes, ever since she has learned that her mother is a Handmaid, everything about the Handmaid allotted to her house attracts her. Instead of believing without question Gilead’s stigmatization of Handmaids like before, she seizes every chance to gaze at their Handmaid Ofkyle from the sides of her eyes, so that she can know her true thoughts beneath her ostensibly blank face (92). Agnes scents out her pain and desperation even though Ofkyle tries to keep her face as still as marble, and she likes to think of her as her missing mother whom she can hug happily. Agnes’s sympathy with Ofkyle renders it possible for her to understand her real mother’s struggles in the past, which also plants the seeds of resistance in her mind.

As for Daisy, the knowledge that her real parents are part of the resistance organization Mayday rather than a “depraved” “slut” and a top-brass Commander in Gilead’s official records, extricates her from the unitary construction of Gilead’s power/knowledge network. She risks her life to get information out of Gilead, which makes it possible for the Canadian as well as international community to subvert the Gileadean hegemony. She sets her teeth to accept this formidable task after learning the truth about them: they are all Mayday operatives. From this we can see that she inherits the rebellious spirit of her biological as well as adoptive parents. This spirit forges a bond between Daisy and Agnes, who become sisters after their common experience in a boat about to be capsized by the waves, and between them and their mother, because it was their mother who risked her life to smuggle them out from Gilead, and now it is Daisy and Agnes who take pains to save her life by toppling Gilead and thus preventing it from rooting out Mayday. The “Bloodline Genealogical Archives” provides Agnes and Daisy with an opportunity to “desubjugate historical knowledges” (Foucault *Society Must be Defended* 10), thereby enabling them to oppose and struggle against Gilead’s unitary, hegemonic and official discourse. Accordingly, they look at the historical trajectories of their parents with fresh and “alternative (out-of-the-mainstream)” eyes (Medina 13). And such a history will provide them with a story beyond their own past (316), hence the multiple possibilities of the future. They construct an autonomous subject full of possibilities, which is not constituted by power and knowledge, but constitutes itself by resisting the “omissions” and “distortions” of official histories and returning to those forgotten experiences of past struggles.

Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy all reconstruct their identity by their “return to the origin”. Aunt Lydia represents her past in the testament to defend her life, hence the unity of her personal history and her self to construct an ethical subject. Agnes and Daisy identify “the raw memory of fights”, which enable them to resist the power/knowledge network and reinterpret their past in an alternative way to open up multiple possibilities for the

future. The significance of history highlights the fact that a clear self-awareness is the prerequisite for uniting with the external “other”, as it keeps the “self” from being engulfed by the “other”, which possibly refers to the knowledge/power network on the personal level, and a person can have a real and unique identity only if he/she can strike a balance between them.

The same is true for Canada. “the possibilities of critique that are opened up by unearthing marginalized past struggles benefit not only those whose experiences and lives have been kept in the dark, but the entire social body” (Medina 20). Problematizing Canada’s official history and reflecting on the Canadian’s mentality behind it is what Atwood has always been doing. She further digs out the “local, discontinuous, disqualified, or nonlegitimized knowledges” (Foucault *Society must be defended* 9) to oppose the unitary official history in which the marginalized people were ignored and forgotten. This counter-history tapped into the subversive power of a silenced historical experience and reactivated the past to create distinctive knowledge/power effects (Medina 14), and contributed to the construction of a new, unique and independent Canadian national identity. The 1990s have witnessed a boom in the publication of new general Canadian history textbooks:

a major transformation has taken place in the study of Canadian history, with the emphasis of most scholarship shifting to what we collectively refer to as “social history”. Research has most often concentrated on areas such as regional history, aboriginal history, women’s history, explorations of ethnicity, working-class life and politics, aspects of cultural history and like subjects. (Guildford and Earle 134)

These new textbooks remind the Canadians of the multiple experiences and struggles of the groups who live in marginal areas, of aboriginal people, women, ethnic minorities and working-class, and in this way challenge the collective memory of “the actions of elite white males”, namely, “politicians, businessman, railway builders”—the central unifying theme presented in the old textbooks on Canadian history (ibid). By revisiting a shared past in light of “evidence, testimony, and articulations or interpretations of facts that challenge established beliefs” (Medina 22), Canada can integrate different groups in its collective memory, therefore, Canada is on the way to constructing a multicultural and inclusive self. The openness of the past suggests a heterogeneous and plural future. Canada is establishing its unique multi-cultural identity by assimilating those “forgotten or obscured figures”, namely, the marginal groups, which provides the foundation for official discourse on behalf of elite white men to be inclusive of the disadvantaged in the future.

A. The Fall of Gilead: Moving toward a New Community

The construction of an unique and independent Canadian self therefore prepares Canada for its reconciliation with its external “other”, the United States, which is presented in the novel. The borders between Canada and America are never clear-cut: “the hills and swamps, the winding rivers, the long rock-strewn bays that lead to the sea with its high tides—all aid the clandestine”, therefore, in the subhistory of the region, rum-runners, cigarette profiteers, drug smugglers and illicit peddlers of all kinds slip in and out (112). Up to the “present” in Atwood’s novel, legal and illegal border crossings between the two countries made regularly by Mayday members continue, which reminds readers of “the fact that Canada has never been isolated from the United States” (Howells 40). Such boundary ambiguity of manifests itself in Ada, a Mayday operative. She gets her “mixed heritage”—part stealer, part stolen—from her ancestors, who bought and married girls caught from New England for trade (188). In her case, the binary opposition between America the “stealer” and Canada the “stolen” is subverted, which implies that the Americans and the Canadians are not fundamentally different, but on the contrary, their compatibility is not impossible. Moreover, the Canadians take in refugees from Gilead, or those “ex-Americans”, providing them with the means of resistance. Therefore, in this novel, the tension between the two countries can be interpreted metaphorically as the tension between freedom and totalitarianism/hegemony, and the antagonism between the Canadians and the Americans, which also manifests itself in the relationship between men and women, gradually dissolves given that Mayday operatives are both women and men, and most of them are “ex-Americans”. That is to say, if the Americans get over totalitarianism, they will be the same as the Canadians who fight for freedom. However, it is still not clear what the United States would be without hegemony in reality, therefore, the reconciliation between Canada’s “self” and its external “other”, America, can only start from bringing down hegemony to gain freedom and independence.

In the 21st century, where globalization has become a trend, environmental deterioration, terrorism, population and resource problems concerning are common challenges which requires the cooperation of all countries to cope with. The shift in the Canadians’ mentality can be detected in the change of their literary themes. From the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, in spite of its independence from Britain, the Canadians still suffered from colonial inferiority, which was aggravated in unequal agreements between the United States and Canada. Agreements on tariffs that favored America cause much trouble to Canada’s publishing industry, so that many Canadian writers chose to publish their works in the US, “squeeze their works into shapes that were not them and disguise themselves as fake Americans or Englishmen” (Atwood *Survival* 117). While in the meantime, the Canadian market was flooded with British and American novels. Consequently, the central

theme of Canadian literature at that time is “survival”, or to be precise, cultural and spiritual survival—“a vestige of a vanished order which has managed to persist after its time is past, like a primitive reptile” (ibid, 32). In the second half of the 20th century, Canada’s federal and local governments financially supported the arts, established writers’ association and various publishing houses to construct its own independent identity and then to escape from the shadow of English and French colonization, and break away from the cultural and economic domination of the United States (Xia 168). The enactment of multiculturalism policy further contributed to the diversity of Canadian literature. “In literary criticism, Regionalism, Feminism, Deconstructionism, Political Correctness, Appropriation of Voice, and Identity Politics have all swept across the scene, leaving their traces. Many new writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds have added their stories” (Atwood 13). A new cultural consciousness emerged in Canada, and marginal groups made their voices heard, which forms the basis for the construction of Canadian national identity.

In the 21st century, the theme leans toward “globalization” or “humanization”, that is, the concern about the human condition as a whole. Environmental problems caused by human activities, such as chemical pollution, global warming and reduction in biodiversity, provoke the Canadian writers’ to ponder over the consequences of ecological crisis (Xia 169). In addition, they draw attention to animal ethics ignored by capital globalization as well as science and technology to spark a series of reflections on human abuse of science and technology. What’s more, the Canadian writers make use of national narrative and ethnic writing in the multicultural context to reveal the country’s heterogeneity and diversity. There was a proliferation of ethnic minority writers who expressed their unique experience of being a member of a marginalized group. And all these works reflect the Canadians’ reflection on their national identity and citizenship in the face of globalization. From the theme of survival, which can be attributed to Canadians’ fear of the United States and lack of confidence in themselves, to the concern for domestic minority groups that was promoted by the policy support from the Canadian government, and then to the attention to human condition as a whole in the context of globalization, it can be concluded that Canada is gradually establishing its own independent national identity, and integrating itself into the world, as only the unity of the “self” and its external “other” (but not limited to it) permits the construction of a “self” with infinite possibilities.

To sum up, both Aunt Lydia and Agnes resist Gilead’s gaze and realize the inherent relationship between discourse and power beneath this disciplinary gaze. Similarly, the knowledge of the truth about Gilead saves the Canadians from being blinded by its discursive construction of a “God’s kingdom”, and in the real world, an understanding of the inherent relationship between discourse and power is also necessary for Canada to construct its national identity. But the unity of the “self” with its external “other” after gazing back at it is still based on a clear self-awareness which can only be achieved by integrating itself with its internal “other”, namely, the history of those forgotten and silenced minority groups. In the novel, the three narrators Aunt Lydia, Agnes and Daisy all construct their identity through their “return to the origin”, bringing back the history of past struggles, and thus challenging the power/knowledge network and reinterpreting their past in an alternative way to open up multiple possibilities for the future. The same is true for Canada, by revisiting a shared past in light of “evidence, testimony, and articulations or interpretations of facts that challenge established beliefs” (Medina 22), Canada can integrate different groups in the collective memory, therefore, Canada is on the way to constructing a multicultural and inclusive self, which provides the foundation for official discourse on behalf of elite white men to be inclusive of the disadvantaged in the future. The construction of an unique and independent Canadian self thus prepares Canada’s reconciliation with its external “other”, the United States, or even the whole world. In the novel, the borders between Canada and America are never clear-cut, and Canada and the United States have never isolated from each other. The tension between two countries can be interpreted metaphorically as the tension between freedom and totalitarianism/hegemony, and the antagonism between the Canadians and the Americans, which also manifests itself in the relationship between men and women, gradually dissolves. The shift in Canadians’ mentality is also reflected in the thematic change of Canadian literature. From the theme of survival to the concern for domestic minority groups and then to the attention to human conditions as a whole in the context of globalization, it can be concluded that Canada is gradually establishing its own independent national identity, and integrating itself into the world, as only the unity of the “self” and its “other”—both the internal “other”, which is the forgotten history of marginal groups, and external “other”, namely, the United States (but it is not limited to it against a background of globalization) permits the construction of a “self” with infinite possibilities.

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