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Gender in *Frankenstein*: Revisiting Otherness and Identity in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Ex Machina*

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ABSTRACT

Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus (1818) has been traditionally read as a horror story; however, the novel reveals an extraordinary complexity behind its plot insomuch as Mary Shelley's work is self-aware of gender inequalities fostered by a patriarchal world. Shelley uses fiction to critique the sexist ideologies and praxes of a century marked by scientific rationality and a burning commercial and imperial ambition, leading to some of the cultural practices that have been historically considered as extremely masculine. In this sense, the aim of this essay is to analyse how apparently two different contemporary works: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) also resort to fiction to continue denouncing the negative effects of the traditional patriarchal system on women's lives. For this purpose, the essay intends to pay special attention to issues of otherness and identity, some of *Frankenstein's* main tropes, in these two-contemporary works.

KEYWORDS: gender inequalities, patriarchy, gender stereotypes, otherness, identity

RESUMEN

Frankenstein o el moderno Prometeo (1818) ha sido tradicionalmente considerada como una historia de terror. Sin embargo, la novela revela una complejidad mayor puesto que expone las desigualdades de género fomentadas por un mundo patriarcal. Shelley utiliza la ficción para hacer una crítica de las ideologías sexistas de un siglo marcado por el pensamiento científico y una gran ambición comercial e imperialista, lo que ha conllevado al desarrollo de algunas prácticas culturales consideradas extremadamente masculinas. En consecuencia, el objetivo de este ensayo es analizar cómo dos obras contemporáneas aparentemente distintas: *El cuento de la Criada* (1985) de Margaret Atwood y *Ex Machina* (2014) de Alex Garland también utilizan la ficción para seguir denunciando los efectos negativos de una larga tradición de patriarcado sobre la mujer. Para ello, el ensayo pretende prestar especial atención a temas de alteridad e identidad, algunos de los temas recurrentes de *Frankenstein*, en estas dos obras contemporáneas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: desigualdad de género, patriarcado, estereotipos de género, alteridad, identidad

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Revisiting gender in Frankenstein in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Ex Machina* (2014)

Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus (1818), pioneered in science-fiction, uses this genre as a way to critique certain socio-political dynamics and cultural constructions of the patriarchal British nineteenth century from a feminist perspective. In this light, this essay intends to approach a more critical reading of the novel from the perspective of gender issues, encouraging to pay special attention to both how patriarchal dynamics are historically persistent in establishing power relations based on gendered differences and how Mary Shelley, through her popular gothic novel, denounces certain cultural and social practices that have largely contributed to building a masculine world whereby men have been able to perpetuate gender inequalities while exerting certain abuse on the other gender. In this line, this essay will be working on two contemporary gendered texts: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) which - despite belonging to different eras - are still suffering from patriarchal power dynamics. Firstly, this essay will be briefly studying the historical and cultural landscape of the patriarchal British nineteenth century while analysing Mary Shelley's response to this historical period. However, I would like to mention that my particular interest lies in the social implications of the sexist praxes of science and colonialism in the British nineteenth century, two fields that have contributed to the indestructible nature of patriarchal dominance. Secondly and - in an attempt to approach the different works from the perspective of gender issues - patriarchy and its operations become a main issue for this project. That is why, I will be theorizing the concept of patriarchy and observing how this practice leads to build societies whose discursivities and norms boost sex and gender differences. I will analyse patriarchy as a social construct and, for this purpose, I will be using some of Judith Butler's theories based on the relationship established among bodies, sex, gender and subjectivity and I will be quoting Gerda Lerner, a distinguished historian who devoted her academic lifetime to women's history, who argued that the conventional notion of male dominance over woman is neither biological nor natural, but it is the outcome of historical developments. Finally, as the major topic of my project, I will provide a deep analysis on how issues of otherness and identity in *Frankenstein* (1818) are found, several years later, in the contemporary works of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) as a direct consequence

of the constant abuse of patriarchy on society throughout history, which also serves to expose how mainstream historiography reflects patriarchal values.

1.2. Historical landscape of the patriarchal British nineteenth century

The early nineteenth century was a time when British colonialism was at its peak. Colonialism reinforces patriarchal power dynamics by promoting relations of superiority and inferiority found on domination. Following the line of thought of Postcolonial feminist analysis, the constant dehumanization of the Creature in *Frankenstein* could resemble the colonized subject, the racialized “Other” who feels a strong sense of inferiority in relation to the colonizers. (Burkhart, 2020, p. 63) According to Suparna Banerjee, a researcher and writer who carries out a careful and very interesting comparative analysis of the speculative fiction of Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood, and to whom I will be quoting throughout the first part of this project, Mary Shelley is making a critique of colonialism: “an evil she views as an integral part of the masculine urge toward ego-centric achievement” (2014, p. 12). Shelley seems to be criticizing the ambitious projects of colonialism in which the pursuit of wealth and success become more important than ethics. Thus, colonial mentality has had profound consequences for the history of humanity. Issues of oppression and feelings of superiority versus inferiority have arisen from said masculine practice based on domination. Hence, hierarchies and inequalities have been implemented and maintained through a historical analysis of patriarchy and colonialism. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*, unlike Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* which was written during the height of English colonialism, will be discussing these issues from the postcolonial reality. The three texts take femininity as the representation of the “Other” in patriarchal contemporary societies.

The British nineteenth century was also a time when there was a great cultural interest in science. Society was under the influence of some scientist-thinkers and their revolutionary theories like William Lawrence, Humphrey or Erasmus Darwin and also Luigi Galvani whose interest in electricity had a strong impact on Mary Shelley’s mind. At that point, scientific advancement was at once exciting and threatening. Nevertheless, this project does not aim to reduce *Frankenstein* as a mere critique against an excess of science, but to approach the novel as a criticism expressed by Mary Shelley about the sexism encrypted in the ideologies and praxes of science and their negative influence on

social constructions. Several feminists, Marxist, and postcolonial critics of science see “both the production of scientific knowledge as well as the practice and use of science as inextricably linked to power” (Sur, 2008, p. 73). Thus, it is no wonder that the world of science becomes key to male’s empowerment. Going back to Banerjee, she mentions how Shelley is rejecting the ideology of modern science based on the conventional sexist binary notions of “culture” and “nature” in relation to the separate spheres of men and women. “Nature, in this ideology of science, is conceived as a female *thing* to be possessed and controlled by man, whose affective detachment from his *object* effects a divorce between the rational-material (‘masculine’) and the affective-ethical (‘feminine’) categories of experience and values.” (2014, p. 14) Victor fails in his creation as he mainly relies on scientific rationality while lacking any form of affection and caretaking. This failure could be interpreted as a critique of the excess of masculinity in science. Furthermore, this excess of masculinity and the perpetuation of man-woman dichotomy as the basis for scientific thinking will be also denounced in the other two contemporary works, namely in *Ex Machina*.

However, the unethical scientific practices described in *Frankenstein* also leads to another important theme: monstrosity. The project avoids focusing on the grotesque appearance of the Creature as a way to stress its monstrosity, but it intends to focus on the concept of monstrosity as a critique against males’ ambitions and their despicable acts. This monstrosity will be also exposed in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* which tackles issues of (pro) creation in a totalitarian regime wherein fertile women are seen as “two-legged wombs” (Atwood, 2017, p. 146) for future generations while denying their existence as individuals and condemning their bodies as political instruments and in Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*, in which a male scientist is creating female robots, many of them working as mere sexual companions. Therefore, science and colonialism, the two major events of the nineteenth century, have fostered oppressive gender ideologies, social inequalities and perpetuate certain forms of oppression and domination that still prevail in the present days.

2. THEORIZING THE CONCEPT OF PATRIARCHY

Silvia Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.” (1989, p. 214) Likewise, Silvia presents the difficulties of trying to define the concept of patriarchy as there is a large scale of theories about said practice. However, I will be paying special attention to some feminist theories that, even though they might seem quite radical, they allow a better understanding of the type of criticism that *Frankenstein*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Ex Machina* try to make. It should be noted that patriarchal practices constantly try to draw distinctions between the gendered dichotomy of man-woman so that males can hold powerful positions. According to Brian Martin (1990), “masculinity is naturally seen to have dominance, confidence, strength, competition, and rationality as its differentiating features; in contrast, femininity is linked to submission, nurturing, caring, sensitivity, and emotionality.” (as cited in Soman, 2009, p. 254). In this line, this patriarchal ideology serves to perpetuate the imaginative idea that men are the ones valued for assuming all the power while women are surrogated to subordinate positions, which leads to gender inequality. For some Marxist feminists, there is also a close link established between patriarchy and the praxes of capitalism, since the forms of exploitation and oppression which exist in capitalist societies resemble the way patriarchal discourses are oppressing women. This is an interesting point to bear in mind, since as – aforementioned – Mary Shelley through *Frankenstein* hints at her growing concerns about the great potentiality of colonialism over society; whereas, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* are placed in the contemporary context of postcolonialism, and some of their characters are still suffering from different forms of exploitation and oppression.

However, as this essay intends to analyse contemporary works, it would be interesting to give a further twist in the way patriarchy is approached. To do so, it would be interesting to get some ideas from Gerda Lerner’s book *The Creation of Patriarchy* in which she mainly tries to demonstrate how patriarchy is a historical creation, a pact made between both men and women. She investigates how this historical social construction of what we call “Western civilization”, a concept based on inequalities and exploitation, arrives at the present state. Lerner does not intend to victimize the role of women in society, but to express certain criticism about to what extent are women helping

perpetuate these praxes. As a social construct, she clearly exposes that “once we abandon the concept of women as historical victims, acted upon by violent men, inexplicable ‘forces’, and social institutions, we must explain the central puzzle- woman’s participation in the construction of the system that subordinates her.” (1986, p. 36) Lerner tries to denounce how the entire society closely participates in the perpetuation of male dominance historicity and hence, in the future we are building for ourselves. Lerner’s work brings us to some of the themes explored in *The Handmaid’s Tale* in which women have been somehow accomplice in the perpetuation and, consequently, in the normalization of patriarchal power dynamics: “Nothing changes instantaneously [...] There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods [...] but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were about other men [...] The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others.” (Atwood, 2017, p. 66) Nevertheless, the science-fiction film *Ex Machina* will be questioning the controversial issue of women as the main victim of patriarchal historicity. The male characters in the film are sexist in the way they approach the different female robots. In fact, they are the by-product of the traditional feminine ideals of their male creator. Although at the beginning, these gendered robots seem to be passive and to be submissive to men dominance while reproducing and accepting gender stereotypes, the end of the film points in another direction.

It should also be noted that the word “construction” has been repeated several times to both understand the concept of patriarchy and to show how this practice seems to work efficiently within the fictional dichotomy of male-woman. Judith Butler in *Body That Matters* establishes a close relationship among sex, body, and subjectivity and she argues that the notion of “sex” is not just a mere condition of the body, but “sex” becomes key for the construction of gender differences. For Butler, “sex” is a social constructed norm that exerts a strong influence on the bodies, and hence on one’s identity, which becomes primordial within a gendered world. “The regulatory norms of “sex” work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.” (1993, p. 2) In this sense, bodies are no longer seen as something biological or anatomical, but they become the site of sexual differences which foster heteronormativity; a sexual condition that becomes very relevant for the plots in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Ex Machina*. Dealing with these two gendered

texts, I will be paying special attention to Judith Butler's theories on sex and gender to reinforce the fictionality of gender differences as well as the strong influence it has on one's subjectivity.

3. OTHERNESS AND IDENTITY IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

3.1. Science fiction in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: The dystopian speculation

It has been discussed the perils that an excess of masculinity might have on society; an excess that has been inherent in several practices throughout history, such as colonialism or science. Margaret Atwood presents a dystopian society, Gilead, wherein "the patriarchs of this state use fertile women as baby-making machines for infertile elite couples in a weird sort of surrogacy rationalized through an insidious use of Biblical passages." (Banerjee, 2014, p. 55) Atwood uses the dystopian speculation to deal with the fears of living in a male-dominated world and a male-dominated culture. Here the concept of "sex" becomes again key to making a clear distinction between men and women, favouring the role of males in patriarchal policies. Going back to Judith Butler's theory: "Sex' is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility." (1993, p. 2) Therefore, being Gilead a patriarchal society, women's biological capacities make them be culturally perceived as mere child-bearers. For Butler "sex" is a reiteration of hegemonic norms, which at the same time, can be read as a kind of performativity. Women in Gilead have interiorized their "natural" role as child-bearers as well as they fulfil any other function established within the patriarchal policies of Gilead. (Banerjee, 2014):

Gender roles- those of wife, daughter, child-bearers, widow, maid, and warden ('Aunt')- define and regulate women's lives in the patriarchal totalitarian state, so that their clothing, movements and language are all delimited by the roles they play [...] Women who cannot or will not fulfil any of the above functions are relegated to the 'Colonies' as 'Unwomen'. (p. 60)

This last quote reinforces again the fantasy of the binary gender system, since as it is described in Judith Butler's *Gender Troubles*, gender proves to be performative. Certain performative acts are inherent in female bodies and, consequently, in female

subjectivity. In this light, I want to highlight Butler's understanding of the body as a "passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as 'external' to that body." (1999, p. 164) This goes back to the idea of gender differences as a cultural construct, which is supported by both males and women. This fact is going to be sharply criticized by Atwood through the creation of Gilead: a dystopian place where women fall victim to its sexist policies. The fact that women partake in gender performativity within a masculine world promotes to stress sexual differences, which ends up favouring males. Serena Joy is a clear instance of this: "her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home", however, "she doesn't make speeches any more. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word." (Atwood, 2017, pp. 55-56) Serena has tried to support the traditional role of women; that in which they are constrained to the domestic sphere, nevertheless, this act has resulted in her personal failure. At this point, I will be analysing how patriarchal practices are exerting a certain abuse on female bodies, and how some issues of otherness, identity, which were once discussed in *Frankenstein*, can be now revisited in the contemporary work of Atwood.

3.2. Otherness in *The Handmaid's Tale*

As mentioned before, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* explores the disruptive potentiality of colonialism in the British nineteenth century. Hence, the Creature becomes the colonized subject. Its body falls victim to the burning ambition of its creator, which makes the Creature be compelled to feel a strong sense of otherness and endure a deep misery throughout the novel. In this light, it might be interesting to analyse *The Handmaid's Tale* from a postcolonial perspective since it allows to study the poor condition of the marginalized "Other", and it is no wonder that women become the "Other" in the patriarchal society of Gilead. At this point, I would like to analyse the close bond that exists between the praxes of imperialism and patriarchy by focusing on the negative effects both might have on women. Colonialism is a practice found on domination by which a powerful country assumes and exerts control over other less developing countries. The discourses and policies of said powerful country benefit the dominant nation while the colonized land is suffering the consequences of its inferiority. This situation can be applied to the plight of women in patriarchal societies. According to Bill Ashcroft et al. (2005): "both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous

forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence, the experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of respects” (as cited in Sadeghi & Mirzapour, 2019, para. 1).

Going back to Judith Butler’s theory on the notion of “sex”, “sex” is described as a kind of norm and regulatory practice that allows to differentiate and demarcate the bodies it governs (1993, p. 1). That is, “sex” as a social construct that promotes to stress the dichotomy between males and females through the materiality of the sexed bodies. Women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are dominated because of their condition of being women as their bodies fall victim to patriarchal notions on womanhood. In the line of heteronormativity, Gilead supports the ultimate goal of women as procreators. Hence, the bodies of the fertile handmaids can be dominated and sexually exploited by the ‘Commanders’. “The constructed character of sexuality has been invoked to counter the claim that sexuality has a natural and normative shape and movement, that is, one which approximates the normative phantasm of a compulsory heterosexuality.” (Butler, 1993, p. 93). For some feminists, the material sex problematizes conventional lovemaking, since heterosexuality is seen as the primary means whereby men can exert control over females’ bodies. Actually, women have less control in sexual encounters than do their male partners. In this sense, every month, in Gilead, a sexual ceremony is held where women have no control over their bodies as they are under the oppression of male dominance. Women’s bodies are just seen as political instruments for future generations, which encourages heterosexual intercourse. Thus, heterosexual intercourse might be reproducing colonial practices, being females’ bodies colonized by men. Offred’s description of the ceremony shows the male’s assault upon her body and how her body loses agency as it is completely taken away from her by her oppressors: “Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread [...] My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What is really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product.” (Atwood, 2017, p. 104) These lines reinforce again the idea of women being reduced to mere child-bearers, and also denounce how Serena is being accomplice in her own victimhood by supporting misogynistic ideas on the role women must play in society. Offred continues describing this sexual interact: “I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on

here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choices but there was some, and this is what I chose." (2017, pp. 104-105) This quote is quite interesting as it brings us back to Judith Bustler's theory on gender differences as a cultural construct. As Banerjee (2014) states, "Atwood, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, takes the patriarchal way of defining women in terms of their function vis-à-vis men to its logical end." (p. 60) The handmaids' bodies are maintained chiefly for the process of breeding and reproduction, a performativity which seems to be rather exclusive to femininity and which is supported and accepted by the body politic of Gilead: "You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts." (Atwood, 2017, p. 127) The handmaids cannot fail in their role as child-bearers, and this has become fundamental to the existence of the patriarchal totalitarian state of Gilead and, most importantly, this is the only way for women to survive in this regime. As Offred states: "I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance." (2017, p. 153)

Women's lives in Atwood's novel are regulated and controlled by men. They are divided into groups based on the social class they belong, being the bodies a key element for said distinction. Even though all Gilead women fall victim to male dominance and, consequently, they are marginalized from the society, the fertile handmaids, being described as "two-legged wombs" (Atwood, 2017, p. 146), are particularly more vulnerable to the patriarchal power dynamics of Gilead. In fact, the way they are described when being in public highlights their otherness and their unprivileged position within the social structure of Gilead. (Atwood, 2017):

Here there are no chairs. Our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope, like the kind they used to have in movie theatres to restrain the customers. This rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us, makes for us a corral or pen; so into it we go, arranging ourselves in rows, which we know very well how to do, kneeling then on the cement floor. (p. 226)

Living in a patriarchal society, women's biological and reproductive capacities are the main causes for them to become the "Other". This word is very important since it gave Simone de Beauvoir the conceptual scaffold for *The Second Sex* in which she tackles this concept from a feminist perspective. As mentioned before, and as it happens with the

figure of the Other in colonial discourses, women are under the oppression of male dominance. In a patriarchal world, Beauvoir (2010) argues that men can use their biological privileges “to affirm themselves alone as sovereign subjects” (p. 111) and in order to do so, they must construct the figure of the Other so as to establish an unequal relationship in which he is the “Subject”, and she is the “Other”. This type of interaction maintains women in inferior position while allowing men assuming power. However, Beauvoir (2010) makes an encouraging remark:

the woman is the Other in which the subject surpasses himself without being limited, who opposes him without negating him; she is the Other who lets herself be annexed to him without ceasing to be the Other. And for this she is so necessary to man’s joy and his triumph that if she did not exist, men would have had to invent her.” (pp. 239-240)

In other words, this reciprocity on the part of women is what enables men to enjoy their exclusive privilege in society, in the same way than the patriarchal regime of Gilead seems to work due to the submissive role women take. Thus, women are not the Other, but necessary. However, as mentioned above, women’s role as the Other is what prompts men to create a hierarchy whereby power is concentrated in their hand. This unequal relationship resembles the dynamics of the power of gaze, in which women fall victim again to sexist attitudes. For this concept, I would be referring to Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1973) in which she describes the pleasure in looking as the “split between active/male and passive/women” (p. 19) and she analyses how this division affects the image of woman in visual texts. As Mulvey says, “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.” (p. 19) Women’s bodies are objectified by men; hence, their bodies are seen as the site for male desire. According to Mulvey, woman within the narrative performs the gaze of the male characters, that is, the male gaze determines how women are presented in the narrative according to their own sexual desires and fantasies. This can be seen at Jezebel; a secret brothel club wherein certain women are set to work as prostitutes. Here, women’s bodies become part of a heterosexual fantasy and their bodies are objectified by males’ gaze. (Atwood, 2017):

The women are sitting, lounging, strolling, leaning against one another. There are men mingled with them, a lot of men, but in their dark uniforms or suits, so similar

to one another, they form only a kind of background. The women on the other hand are tropical, they are dressed in all kinds of bright festive gear [...] Some are in olden-days lingerie, shortie nightgowns, baby-doll pyjamas (p. 246).

Atwood is clearly drawing a strong distinction between men and women. Whereas gentlemen are “in their dark uniforms”, ladies “are dressed in all kinds of bright festive gear”. This scene reinforces Mulvey’s idea in which the traditional role of women in narrative is that of being looked and displayed. The passive women become the object of an active, male gaze.

3.3. Identity in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Shelley’s *Frankenstein* tackles issues of identity which can be also revisited in Atwood’s novel. Women in Gilead are totally submissive to men, and they are both physically and mentally dominated by the whole society. In this line, I would like to analyse how society is able to shape women’s identities by establishing relations of power and domination. For this purpose, I will be using Foucault’s theory on the function of power and its relation to subjectivity. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, men are holding a privileged position within the society by creating a gender division of unequal status. Sexism is embedded in the different institutions that conform Gilead and all these institutions are allowing men to exercise their power over women at different levels. An instance of this is the Red Center, an institution where the Aunts train the Handmaids so that they can conform to the ideal of womanhood that men have. The Aunts resort to different mechanisms to establish –the above mentioned- relations of power and domination. When Moira tries to escape, the Aunts use violence in an attempt to assume control (Atwood, 2017):

They took her into a room that used to be the Science Lab. It was a room where none of us ever went willingly. Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. It was the feet they’d do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. (p. 102)

In this line, relations of power and domination are key to controlling and dominating women in Gilead, which leads us to Michael Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. Like Butler, he tries to provide a different description of the body in which the body is not only biological, “but the body is also directly involved in a political field;

power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs [...] the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.” (Foucault, 1995, p. 25) Then, we need a “productive body”, that is, a fertile woman’s body whose “subjected body” or fertile body can be controlled and abused to become a commodity for Gilead. However, power relations, or power dynamics are not always that easy to perceive when it comes to social control. Foucault establishes a close link between domination and the concept called “micro-physics of power”. He claims that the power which both serves to dominate the individual and takes part in the processes of establishing one’s subjectivity, works at different levels: it is dispersed through society and it cannot be reduced to a dominant group: “this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them [...] This means that these relations go right down into the depths of society” (Foucault, 1995, p. 27). In this sense, this power is social and hence women subjectivity is a cultural construct.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the mainstream discourses of the society are having a direct effect on women’s identity. However, some of these discourses were inherited long before the creation of Gilead: “I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don’t open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police [...] Don’t stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going [...] Don’t go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night.” (Atwood, 2017, p. 34) Here we can see the mechanisms of “micro-physics of power” going “right down into the depths of society”, making women conform to these cultural norms while participating in their own oppression. This type of power is having a direct effect on the individual’s minds; however, its mechanisms might be invisible at times. There is another interesting instance in which Offred uses retrospective narrative to describe the moment when women were fired from their jobs: “It’s outrageous, one woman said, but without belief. What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?” (p. 186) Women are accepting the power of the patriarchal system and they are still contributing to transmitting and, consequently, perpetuating these values as part of the contemporary culture. In short, Foucault considers the body as the site for subjugation, and he tries to highlight how individuals are implicated in their own oppression by self-imposing conformity to cultural norms. This brings us back to Gerda Lerner and her view in *The*

Creation of Patriarchy, in which she argues that women are not the victims of their role in society. She makes a fair comparison between women's lives and a performance: "Men and women live on a stage, on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance. The play cannot go on without both kinds of performers." (1986, p. 12)

Gilead exerts its power to control women. Their bodies and their minds belong to the regime literally: "I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am national resource." (Atwood, 2017, p. 75) Here it can be seen how the Handmaids' bodies are valued by their biological nature, hence their reproductive system functions as a commodity for Gilead. This leads us to Foucault's (1995) notion of the "docile" bodies:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). (p. 138)

Thus, women's bodies and minds, through discipline- that is, the methods that according to Foucault assure the subjection of the bodies- can become easy to control as well as essential for the continuity of the patriarchal state of Gilead; women's bodies are no other than political instruments. The national obsession for women to carry children has a direct effect on women's identity; the Handmaids are indoctrinated to believe that fertility is their ultimate goal in life, to the point that they do not see themselves as humans any longer but as a mere transaction for future generations, "we are containers, it's only the inside of our bodies that are important." (Atwood, 2017, p. 107) As mentioned before, power circulates freely through society; it is embedded in a network of practices in everyday life which affects one's subjectivity: "My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. *Shameful, immodest.*" (Atwood, 2017, p. 72) Being women

victims to a religious fundamentalist regime, it is no wonder that their minds are affected by the forces of an extremist Christian theology in which women's bodies are merely reduced to fulfil their "natural" role as procreators. That is why, as Fiona Carson mentions (2006), the act of theorizing the body is especially pertinent to women insofar as their bodies are culturally defined in terms of their biological capacities: "While men lay claim to the supposedly 'superior' category of mind, the biological processes -menstruation, gestation- are writ large upon the surface of the female body, and thus become the means by which 'woman' is defined." (p. 94) The handmaids have been compelled to perceive themselves in terms of these biological capacities that define them. Thus, women's bodies are reduced to become a mere site of procreation and their identities are based on this self-conception. The handmaids cannot be an intelligent subject any longer, but they need to "learn" how to fulfil a passive role in Gilead. For that, Gilead controls the entire society at different levels: rewrites history, manipulates religious discourses, asserts governmental control of television broadcasts, forbids books and newspapers. Actually, Gilead tries to make women's life quite empty and simple, even the Wives are victims of this simplicity: "Sometimes, however, Serena Joy is out, visiting another Commander's Wife, a sick one; that's the only place she could conceivably go, by herself, in the evenings [...] They get sick a lot, these Wives of the Commanders. It adds interest to their lives." (Atwood, 2017, p. 162) In this sense, everyday life in Gilead makes women become more passive; their only role in society is to continue being subject to male's dominance. Their lives depend on men by being deprived of their individual identities and agency. They need being silenced, submissive and remain ignorant. (Atwood, 2017):

The store has a huge wooden sign outside it, in the shape of a golden lily; Lilies of the Field, it's called. You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was pointed out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us [...] Our first stop is at a store with another wooden sign: three eggs, a bee, a cow. Milk and Honey. (pp. 36-37)

Literacy is very restricted in Atwood's novel, women are forbidden to read, however, the Aunts will be able to do so as part of the propaganda and brainwashing accepted by the regime. This lack of language is just another strategy on trying to dehumanize the Handmaids insofar as they are not perceived as individual and rational subjects anymore. It should also be noted that the handmaids do not have a fixed name. Their names are imposed upon them depending on the family they belong to. Names

render identity, and the fact that the handmaids lose their real name might be making them lose their personal identity so that they can easily become a manageable subject for Gilead's unethical practices.

4. OTHERNESS AND IDENTITY IN *EX MACHINA*

4.1. Science-fiction in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*: female robots

As mentioned in the introduction, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be seen as a critique against the sexist ideologies and praxes of science. Science is male-oriented, and Shelley seems to be highly critical of the excess of masculinity in the praxes of an amoral science, lacking affective and ethical concerns. Victor's ambitious experiment leads to his Creature's misery. "Frankenstein's failure inheres in his inability to provide his Creature with a cultural environment conducive to the growth of healthy emotions and in his failure to establish it in the network of relations [...] that is the essence of the nature-culture continuum constituting human life." (Banerjee, 2014, p. 17) These lines support Mary Shelley's concern about this type of amoral science based on the traditional ideology of the dualism between "nature" and "culture", where men stand for the rational being/culture who needs being in control of the affective-ethical and yet irrational female/nature. This sexist ideology as the basis of science thinking will be also seen in Alex Garland's contemporary film *Ex Machina* (2014). However, we are now in a capitalist and postmodern society where technological advancement is unstoppable. In Garland's film, the audience can witness again the story of a God-like-man's ambition to create life, nevertheless, this time the product of this masculinist technology is a cyborg. The cyborg has become an important figure in feminist theory since it has allowed to subvert certain binarisms. Donna Haraway, an important postmodern feminist who analyses how issues of gender have been transformed by technological advancement, defines the cyborg as a "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." (1987, p.1) Then, a cyborg can be seen as the combination of robot and human, and its own hybridity lets transgress different boundaries. In feminist theory, "The metaphor of the cyborg is itself used ironically in order to challenge, and ultimately to subvert, the binarisms inherent in contemporary culture, such as those between human and machine, self and other, inside and outside, nature and culture." (Wolmark, 1999, p. 3) Keeping in line with Haraway's work, the cyborg can become a space that subverts certain dichotomies upon which the

western patriarchal system is based. Thus, going back to Foucault's theory, this might be challenging the so-called "power relations" in which masculinity has largely functioned to its full extent. However, it should be noted that Garland's film revolves around female cyborgs, and: "these female-gendered cyborgs inhabit traditional feminine roles - as object of man's desire and his helpmate in distress. In this way, female cyborgs are as much stereotypically endowed with feminine traits as male cyborgs are with masculine traits. Cyborg images reproduce cultural gender stereotypes." (Balsamo, 2000, p. 151) Living in a world shaped by masculine norms, it is no wonder that in *Ex Machina*, the male scientist decides to create female cyborgs so that they could be stereotyped according to their sex while allowing men enjoy their supremacy within an unequal relationship based on the gender dichotomy of male-woman. Hence, the bodies of the female cyborgs, which are the by-product of the patriarchal ideals of "natural" femininity and erotic beauty can be objectified, sexualized, and controlled by men. Then, I would be analysing Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* and paying special attention to the negative effects the masculine hegemony of technology might exert on the gendered cyborgs by analysing issues of otherness and identity.

4.2. Otherness in *Ex Machina*

As mentioned throughout the essay, masculine supremacy is founded on a dichotomous thinking in which sexual differences lead to create the gendered dichotomy of men "The Self" and women "The Other". Although for some feminists like Haraway, the cyborgs can be considered as a site of change; an entity in the process of dismantling certain of these dichotomies embedded in contemporary culture, *Ex Machina* presents us female cyborgs which are compelled to endure a sense of otherness because of the constructiveness of their gender. They are sexualized and stereotyped according to the misogynistic ideals of femininity ingrained in society and, consequently, reproduced by their male creator. Keeping in line with Judith Butler's notion of "sex", which is seen as "the stable point of reference on which, or in relation to which, the cultural construction of gender proceeds" (1993, p. xi), the fact that Nathan- the scientist in the film- makes females bodies, allows him to perpetuate issues of gender inequality as well as to question the idea of an inherent female gender. Actually, despite the fact that a machine being can perform gender so effectively reinforces the idea that femininity is a construct. In other words, although these cyborgs lack biological sex, Nathan undermines the possibility of their bodies having an existence prior to the mark of gender. For Butler, when gender is

theorized independently from sex “gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice” (1999, p.10). However, in Garland’s film gender mirrors sex. Caleb, a programmer who gets the opportunity to stay the weekend with the brilliant scientist Nathan Bateman, asks him: “Why did you give her sexuality? An AI does not need a gender. She could have been a gray box” (Garland, 2014, 0:46:03) and Nathan asks him back: “Hmm. Actually, I do not think that is true. Can you give an example of consciousness, at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension?” (Garland, 2014, 0:46:11) Nathan reinforces Judith Butler’s theory on how gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes (1999, p. 10) Thus, sex needs being determined so that the body it governs can be cultural intelligible by inscribing certain gender stereotypes on it to later reproduce them. So, as mentioned before, the female cyborgs fall victim to the misogynistic ideals of femininity ingrained in society, and yet with the materialization of their bodies, these robots are compelled to endure the power relations of compulsory heterosexuality: “In between her legs is an opening, with a concentration of sensors. You engage them in the right way, it creates a pleasure response. So, if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking, you could” (Garland, 2014, 0:46:49). In this light, Nathan might be driven by the so-called “masculine myth”, a concept that Antony Easthope deeply analyses in relation to popular culture. One of the interesting points that Easthope argues about the “masculine myth” is how males’ insecurities make men strive for reinforcing their masculinity and their male identity in society by promoting- as aforementioned- a compulsory heterosexuality, denying any possibility of showing their feminine side. In *Ex Machina*, this need for displaying masculinity is what might make Nathan feel the urge to materialize these cyborgs’ bodies and, therefore create female robots in an attempt to preserve heterosexual desire. (Easthope, 1990):

There can be no identity unless the object of desire is relatively defined - masculine desire for a female figure, feminine desire for a male figure. But both forms of desire are laminated together in any individual so that neither - heterosexual desire nor homosexual desire - can ever be more than a preference. The masculine myth insists that this preference should be heterosexual and only heterosexual. (p. 167)

Hence, cyborgs’ bodies are sexualized for the sake of preserving the “masculine myth”. Despite the pleasure of transgressing boundaries – as Haraway claims - the female cyborgs in Garland’s film are just reinforcing certain dichotomies. They are drawing a

clear distinction between man and woman, human and machine, self and other, and, nevertheless, in any of these categories, the gendered cyborg becomes an instrument to male control, and it is relegated to a subordinate position. Likewise, Ava, the main female cyborg in the film, is confined to a glass-walled room, which highlights her marginal position; she is everything that Nathan is not: she is the machine, the female and the other. In this room, Ava is constantly filmed and, consequently, watched through the cameras. The way in which the film decides to put Ava in a favourable position to be non-consensually watched through the cameras by the males in the movie applies to Laura Mulvey's description on the conventional cinema: she mentions how the audience unconsciously participates in the "observation of an unknowing and unwilling victim" and she denounces how the audience is also absorbed into a voyeuristic situation as the cinematic conventions "portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds, magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on the voyeuristic fantasy." (1973, p. 17) In this light, the audience observes Ava through Caleb's eyes, who is secretly watching her in his bedroom. "In these instances, Caleb indulges in his voyeuristic pleasures, which dehumanize Ava's body into a silent, unmovable object" (Musap, 2018, p. 410). Ava becomes the other, who is overly sexualized to be the object of the active male gaze.

Ava, like the other female robots, is the site for displaying masculine power. Actually, Nathan exerts a complete control over all the female cyborgs insofar as he determines how they must physically look according to his masculine canons of beauty. He even determines their temper, like Kyoko, an Asian female cyborg, who is totally sexualized, and she cannot even speak, as her unique goal is to satisfy Nathan's sexual desires. Thus, the role of Kyoko in the film conforms to the racial stereotypes of Asian women as sexual, passive, and submissive, which serves to stress Kyoko's racial otherness in relation to Nathan's misogynistic and racist ideologies. "While his pornographic imagination is stimulated by multiracial females, his physical and psychological abuse, particularly against Asian droids, indicates his antipathy towards women he views as racially inferior." (Magistrale, 2019, p. 267). That is, Kyoko's liminal position in the film shows the intersections of being woman and Asian. In this sense, Nathan's sexist praxes in modern science are what Mary Shelley rejects in *Frankenstein*: a radical science based on rationality and masculinity, lacking any sort of affective and ethical concerns. Actually, "If you've created a conscious machine, it's not the history of

man [...] that's the history of Gods." (Garland, 2014, 0:11:10) On his arrival at Nathan's house, Caleb's words are turning the latter into a God-like figure; an illusion that allows Nathan to assume absolute power while putting his creations in a vulnerable and inferior position due to his overwhelming control. It should also be noted that even though Ava is a stunningly attractive female cyborg, she still has too many artificial traits to be assigned in the biologically human category, which stresses both her otherness and her abjectness. For this concept, I would be referring to Julia Kristeva who introduces the whole concept of the "the abject". Kristeva (1982) described "the abject" as the object that "is radically excluded and [...] where meaning collapses." (p. 2) Hence, Ava's body can become the place where meaning collapses, and according to Kristeva, abjection "is what disturbs identity, system, order." (p. 4) In this light, cyborgs become a threat for cultural intelligibility and Ava's abjectness thrusts her into a marginal position in which the category of human and non-human remains clearly distinct and stresses her otherness. This enables Nathan to exert control over these robots while proving this cultural association among masculinity/rationality, technology and science.

4.3. Identity in *Ex Machina*

The identity that has been endowed to the female cyborgs in *Ex Machina* is the outcome of the sexist and racist attitudes of their male creator. In this sense, the artificiality of their bodies makes it easier to support Judith's Butler argument in which bodies are described as "a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 1999, p. 177) Hence, their gendered bodies prompt to reinforce some stereotypes and reproduce certain gender performances ascribed to female bodies, which also have a direct effect on the subjectivity of the cyborgs in the film ; a subjectivity that tries to fit into the category of being a woman. However, not only does *Ex Machina* revolves around issues of gender, but also of racism insofar as the conditions of the non-white female cyborgs in the film get even worse due to their intersections of being both Asian and women. Thus, their constructed gender and race differences force them to hold an inferior position in relation to the white female cyborg. It is no wonder that within a patriarchal and racist world, these Asian cyborgs become particularly vulnerable to the male scientist's unethical practices.

Kyoko's character is portrayed in a highly sexualized and racialized manner. Actually, her lack of agency and language stresses her objectified status in the film as she has been programmed to be a sexual companion of her male creator. In other words, Kyoko's position in the narrative is that of being a mere instrument for male control, in which he can achieve sexual gratification. Thus, unlike Ava, the only white robot in the film, Kyoko's identity falls short to pass the Turing Test, which determines whether a robot can display intelligent behaviour similar or identical to a human's level of intelligence. As Caleb explains, the Turing Test is "when a human interacts with a computer. And if the human does not know they are interacting with a computer, the test is passed." (Garland, 2014, 0:10:35). Whereas Ava is given an emotional depth that allows her to move closer to the human category, Kyoko is presented as a submissive character, lacking both personal identity and autonomy, which serves to reinforce her condition as an erotic robot while refusing to be treated as a rational subject.

Kyoko seems to conform to the stereotypical portrayals of sexualized Asian women, and, for this purpose, it would be interesting to analyse how the depiction of this exotic, and over-sexualized Asian archetype arrives at the present state in the American culture as the result of a long historical legacy. Edward Said claimed that the Orient was an entity constructed by the Western gaze; a site for collective imagination that promoted both its exploration and exploitation. "The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West." (Said, 2003, p. 5) Thus, the sexualization of Asian women is also the by-product of Western's fantasies: "The history of the United States in Asia has shaped a colonialist attitude towards Asian women that is grounded in Western superiority, racism, and sexism." (Matsumoto, 2020, p. 116) It can be seen once again how sexual differences exacerbate an already complicated situation for women insofar as white American males treated Asian females in dehumanizing ways as they were reduced to mere vehicles for pleasure. Thus, their racial and cultural identities were sexualized in order to fulfil men's sexual desires. "[The local] women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (Woan, 2008, as cited in Matsumoto, 2020, p. 116). This quote, and namely the concept of willingness, puts the category of Asian women into a particularly difficult position; lacking both personal agency and intelligence while assuming a sexualized identity imposed by a racialized sexism of Western power dynamics. Having said that,

Kyoko's behaviour might be showing, or else, reinforcing the historical association between Asian women and sexual utility. Nathan, through his female Asian cyborgs, still contributes to the objectification of Asian women, preventing them from becoming independent and rational subjects even in the context of postcolonialism.

Kyoko has been programmed without a voice in order to be submissive and satisfy males' sexual desires. This lack of language has a direct effect on her identity. Actually, the unfavourable conditions of women and their marginality and lack of power - as some of the inevitable consequences of living withing a male-oriented world - is reflected in the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which they are spoken of. In this sense, it is not a stretch to say that women could be also experiencing linguistic discrimination. Robin Lakoff, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, carried out an interesting analysis on the so-called "women's language" - the language used for women to speak in society, and the type of language used in society to describe them- and the effects it might have on women's subjectivity. As Lakoff (1973) mentions, "the overall effect of 'women's language' is this: it submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly [...] and, when a woman is being discussed, by treating her as an object - sexual or otherwise - but never a serious person with individual views." (p. 48) Kyoko might be experiencing this linguistic discrimination insofar as she is unable to articulate any word, and therefore, unable to "express herself strongly". Her silence and, hence, her inability to communicate turn her into a very passive and subservient cyborg. As Nathan mentions: "It's like a firewall against leaks. Means I can talk trade secrets over dinner with an HOD or CEO and know it will go no further. Right, Kyoko?" (Garland, 2014, 0:32:22) In this sense, language, or else, this lack of language denies Kyoko becoming an independent subject and prevents her from establishing her own identity.

In the case of Ava, while her physical appearance is based on Caleb's porn preferences, the identity that she tries to develop throughout the film draws on the ideals of traditional femininity that she has learnt from her surroundings. In this sense, Ava's awareness of the materiality of her body makes her resort to gender performativity to reaffirm her sex, and therefore her identity as a woman: "the sexed surface of the body thus emerges as the necessary sign of a natural(ized) identity" (Butler, 1999, p. 91). Judith Butler mentions how a gendered body becomes the site for the inscriptions of cultural significations and, in this line, Ava will be able to pass the Turing Test only if she

conforms to the traditional stereotypes inherent to female bodies, which have been commonly fixed and accepted by the society. Thus, gender proves to be performative as it is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” (Butler, 1999, pp. 43-44) The performativity of these repeated acts is what allows gendered bodies to become cultural intelligible, and the only way for Ava to become cultural intelligible, that is, to be perceived as a human woman, is to perform accordingly to her imposed sex and gender. Hence, Ava is trapped inside the gendered body that Nathan has built for her and, consequently, she is also trapped into the role and the identity that said body demands from her. In fact, Ava is constantly studying images of other women so that she can (re)produce female attitudes.

She also conforms to Nathan’s ideals of womanhood: “Ava was a rat in the maze, and I gave her one way out. To escape, she’d have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality”. The way in which Nathan has constructed Ava, and the way in which he perceives her show the huge influence that the figure of the femme fatale has had in popular culture, especially in cinematic representations. In this sense, Ava is described as an over-sexualized and manipulative woman who is able to do whatever it takes to get what she wants. Eventually, Ava will be able to escape from Nathan’s house by adopting some of the long-established tropes of the femme fatale as part of her identity. In order to see how Ava falls into these stereotypical portrayals of women, it would be interesting to resort to Mary Ann Doane who provides some of the main characteristics of this figure. She mentions, that one of the most striking characteristics of the femme fatale is that she never really is what she seems to be. In fact, during the first part of the film, Ava pretends to be a damsel in stress so that Caleb can trust her and help her with her escape plan. Doane makes another interesting point saying that “if the femme fatale overrepresents the body it is because she is attributed with a body which is itself given agency independently of consciousness.” (1991, intro, para. 3) Even though Ava shows to be extremely conscious of her circumstances, she is also perfectly aware of her physical attractiveness. Thus, she will use her body to seduce and manipulate Caleb. In one of their encounters, she covers her artificial body by putting on a blue dress and a brown wig to continue flirting with Caleb: “Are you attracted to me? You give me indications that you are [...] Micro-expressions [...] The way your eyes fix on my eyes and lips. The way you hold my gaze”. (Garland, 2014, 0:43:53) Ava is also aware of Caleb’s voyeuristic tendencies

to watch her through the cameras: “Do you think about me when we are not together? Sometimes at night, I’m wondering if you are watching me on the cameras. And I hope you are.” (Garland, 2014, 0:44:27) At night, she will look directly at the cameras while taking off her clothes in a very seductive way, being very aware of the effects of her appealing and most important, gendered body on heterosexual males. Hence, her identity reflects the interiorization of the most traditional ideals of women, which have a significant impact upon women’s self-conception and decisions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Mary Shelley’s fiction novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) has had a huge influence on literature and on popular culture. The novel has been traditionally read as a conventional horror story; however, new literary theories have allowed to approach the text in an entirely different way. *Frankenstein* has been incorporated into the discourses of feminist literary criticism and hence, the novel has been explored through a feminist lens. In this sense, analysing some of the main tropes in *Frankenstein* from the perspective of gender issues has given me a broader understanding of the novel, which has ended in a very interesting and refreshing analysis. Mary Shelley’s novel stresses the effects of patriarchal thinking through history and *Frankenstein* hints at the growing criticism against gender inequalities bolstered by patriarchal dynamics in the nineteenth century. However, after reading Gerda Lerner and, considering patriarchy as a historical process, I have been able to see -two centuries later- in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2014), the effects of a male-oriented world on contemporary societies, exposing the masculinist biases of mainstream historiography.

Analysing these texts from a feminist perspective has given me the chance to understand the importance of gender existence as the basis for patriarchal thinking. In this light, Judith Butler has become key to delving into the concepts of gender, sex, bodies, and subjectivity, which has been primordial for the analysis of both works insomuch as the materiality of the bodies has promoted and perpetuated the constructiveness of sexual and gender differences. We have seen in *The Handmaid’s Tale* how women’s bodies are defined by their biological capacities to carry children. Hence, the totalitarian regime of Gilead treats fertile women solely as baby makers, and yet women accept this patriarchal role, seemingly, inherent in femininity. In *Ex Machina* the possibility that the cyborgs’

bodies may have an existence prior to the mark of gender is undermined. All of them are given a fixed sex, forcing these female robots to perform accordingly to it, which I consider as the clearest example of Judith Butler's theory on gender as a performative act. At this point, I have been able to perceive in both works how women's (human or robot) own internalization of cultural gender norms and reproduction of traditional stereotypes impair their lives. Following in the line of trying to describe the body, Foucault's theories on bodies and power dynamics have allowed me to approach issues of gender in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Ex Machina* from a more sociological viewpoint. Foucault sees the body as the site of subjugation, drawing special attention to how Western society, being a dominant system of social control, uses power relations to act upon the bodies in order to control, restrain and transform them. Foucault describes two terms in his theories: "micro-physics of power" and "docile bodies", which have been particularly useful for my reading on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale*. These concepts have encouraged me to become more critical of women's complicity in their own victimhood insofar as they are self-imposing conformity to the cultural and yet misogynistic norms that freely circulate in society.

In relation to the multiple constraints of society, for the analysis of *Ex Machina*, I have been reading different postfeminist critics like Anne Haraway who sees the cyborgs as a site for trespassing fixed boundaries inscribed in society. Hence the hybridity of these machine beings is an opportunity to challenge certain conventional oppositions founded on patriarchal thinking, such as male/women, nature/culture, human/machine, self/other. Furthermore, *Ex Machina* stresses how the intersections of Asian female cyborgs make them more vulnerable to fall victim to male dominance, highlighting how racial and misogynistic attitudes are still part of a postcolonial and postmodern era. At this point, and after analysing how different masculine practices, that have been repeated and perpetuated from the 19th century to the present days, have promoted to build a male-oriented world, I clearly can see how mainstream historiography reflects masculine values.

In conclusion, approaching Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from the perspective of gender issues has given me the opportunity to both get a more refreshing and interesting reading of the novel and revisit some of the main tropes in *Frankenstein* in the other two contemporary texts that also resort to fiction to critique the ongoing discourses and praxes of patriarchal societies and their cultural implications.

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