"I COMPOSE MYSELF": IDENTITY AND OLFACTORY IMAGERY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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Abstract: This paper is based on the well-known 1985 novel, The Handmaid's Tale, written by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood and aims to analyse the role of the olfactory imagery and sensory exploration in the (re)construction of identity. The protagonist-narrator, Offred, lives in a near future American society, where she is denied all legal rights and is submitted to various forms of physical and psychological torture, in the event of becoming a breeding tool. Unlike other women, who crumble and die, she gradually reforms all her faculties due to her sense of smell. The odours around help Offred explore her body, the others and her environment, and more importantly, remember long forgotten memories of a totally different world. The protagonist succeeds to "compose" herself and rebel against her condition of a "womb" in the distorted society, whose smell is by far repulsive.

Keywords: body, identity, memory, olfactory imagery, space.

Olfaction or the sense of smell has usually been rejected because of its inferiority, high level of subjectivity, lack of rationality, animality, material inconsistency or poor terminology. It plays, however, a fundamental role in our lives as it shapes the way in which we perceive ourselves, the others and our environment, and unconsciously triggers many of our reactions as well as thoughts, feelings and experiences. Starting from "orientation and interpersonal communication", it leads eventually to "self-knowledge based on consciousness and memory" (in my trans., Diaconu 76). Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale,* which depicts a near-future dystopia, abounds in passages containing olfactory imagery and without counting its synonyms, the word "smell" occurs sixty-seven times. The protagonist-narrator, Offred, which was enslaved by her own society, describes in a rather obsessive way all the odors that she can perceive around her. Therefore, we cannot stop wondering: Is this a strategy that Offered applies in order to be make her story sound more convincing, does she suffer from a mental illness or her actions can be motivated by something much more profound?. We try in the following article to speculate upon Offred's addiction to smells and discover the what it actually hides.

The title of the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale,* suggests right from the beginning, the fact that the reader has to deal with a story which seems to reconstruct Offred's real life but also with what may very well be a product of her own imagination. The action takes place at the beginning of the new millennium, but it reflects some important problems and political fears of the 1980s: the conservative revival in the West, the religious extremism, the feminist struggle for liberation from traditional gender roles, the declining birthrates, the dangers of nuclear power and the increased pollution. Margaret Atwood uses her book to sound, just like Professor Monica Bottez observes, a warning signal regarding "certain aspects of contemporary society which, if ignored, might have tragic consequences for making and even endanger the very survival of the

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human race: harmful genetic and ecological effects of chemical and radioactive pollution, as well as the lack of tolerance and sexism, witch-hunting and political fanatism, moral and religious fundamentalism" (222).

Olfactory imagery makes the protagonist-narrator's experiences seem realistic by endowing them with a multiple dimension and persuades the reader/listener of her story to believe them. Nevertheless, the heroine is the victim of a dystopia, "a satirized or a deliberately distorted utopia" (Achim 98) which places her "directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future" (Jameson 2). She lives in the Republic of Gilead, a country formed within the borders of the former USA where people do not face only pollution, environmental degradation, sterility and war but also the oppression of a totalitarian regime, which combines a kind of Puritan theocracy with fascist and communist ideas. Offred's situation is extremely difficult as Gilead proves to be a phallocentric or patriarchal society which preaches an extreme separation of the genders. Deprived of all her rights even of her real name, she is transformed into a Handmaid, whose single purpose is that of bearing babies for the Commanders. Forced to wear a red robe, she becomes along with the Commanders Wives in blue clothes, the Aunts in brown uniforms, Marthas dressed in green, the Econowives in multicoloured outfits, the Unwomen in grey and the prostitutes trapped in carnival outfits, another coloured instrument used by men and the state to reach their own purposes. Offred is constantly controlled and submitted to different forms of physical and especially psychological forms of torture which alter her behavior, making her seem mostly passive and unable of obvious acts of rebellion. Her struggle to recover is, therefore, a psychological struggle, one powered mainly by olfactory stimuli as all her senses have been somehow censured and she is not allowed to see, hear, touch or even taste some of the things around her.

Olfaction, as Aristotle states occupies a "middle position between the contact senses (touch, taste) and those of distance (sight and hearing)" (in my trans., Diaconu 21) and allows her to analyse the world in a very discreet way. Therefore, her nose becomes in Nietzche's terms "a symbol of the intuitive knowledge" (in my trans., qted in Diaconu 36), an instrument which helps her sniff the truth or rather the abnormality of her society.

Atwood's novel, just like many others, including Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *1984* (1949) corresponds Achim's opinion that "dystopia usually focuses on sight, revealing images which are most of the time really shocking" (142). It abounds in countless terrifying images such as tortures, hanged bodies, public executions, sexual abuses, but vision is not the only sense they stimulate. There are other senses involved as well. Vision is usually considered to be the only "theoretic" and "esthetically potential" sense, especially due to Hegel's thesis (in my trans. qtd. in Diaconu 30) but olfaction can also have a great potential of subjugation on one hand, and liberation, on another. A present smell, for instance, can trigger the memory of an old similar one. But sometimes, the scents perceived by Offred might exist only in her mind and be just like Descartes states "subjective" and "unreliable" (542). At the beginning of the novel, her personality just like that of many other dystopian protagonists who wake up in a constraining incoherent space, seems to be alienated. After a brief description of the basketball court where she must sleep, she says that "I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair" (Atwood 2). Focusing on the words "I thought I could smell" one can definitely see that she was not sure of her own senses. She resembled to a certain extent, Codillac's statue from his *Traité*

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des sensations (1754) and just like it, on basis of smell Offred gradually (re)forms all her faculties. She (re)constructs her Self as she is able to remember old smells and compare them with present sensations. Olfaction helps her shift through pleasant or horrible memories, gain liberty and achieve a self-consciousness, which may also explain her addiction to odors and their detailed descriptions. The sense of smell helps her, eventually, to overcome her status of a breeding tool, "transcend her biological determinism" (Bottez 228) and recompose her personality: "I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (Atwood 66). At the stage of a (re)composed Self, Offred extends in space on the basis of smell by perceiving her own body odor, the people around and her environment, as well as in time by memory and imagination.

Humans are endowed, according to Helmuth Plessner, with twofold experience of corporeality or Verkörperung and Offred make no exception from this rule. When we see, listen, touch and especially smell our own bodies, we face a sort of a halving: "On the one hand we "have" a body; on the other we "are" a body". In other words, Plessner says that "humans seem to be provided not only with a biological body but also a phenomenal one that is the focus of their senses and that is perceived by them" (Jackson 245). This process takes place in the first place because it is accessible (we are closer to our bodies than to those of the others) and because and an odor is just a momentary state (we cannot perceive a permanent smell). When Offred becomes aware of her own body smell and analysis it, she faces a twofold experience understanding the fact that she is not only a body to be used by others but also its "owner". Although she is not allowed to posses anything she can still have something: her own body and its smell. Accordingly, she experiences a sort of a "corporal cogito", as if she would say: "I sense, therefore I am!" (qtd. Diaconu 6).

It is also important to highlight the fact that the human body smell has never been purely biological and that right from the beginning it has been socially and cultural conditioned (Diaconu 80). The Gilead society preaches the return to natural and organic products. Even though flowers are accepted, perfumes are rejected in a Socratic manner, being associated with luxury, eroticism and moral depravation. Still, men are free to use aftershaves and the Commanders wives, such as Serena Joy succeed in buying them illegally from "private sources". Meanwhile, the Handmaids, regarded as simple tools are denied the right to have a smell. Offred, however, confesses that she smells "like butter" and that she and the other handmaids secretly use it to keep their skin soft. This kind of a "private ceremony" helps them believe that: "we will someday get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire" (Atwood 97). The smell of butter or margarine could be interpreted from an Aristotelian perspective as a momentary olfactory pleasure with a vital value and not an esthetic one. As a result, Offred becomes able to predict her own bad smell: "The butter is greasy and it will go rancid and I will smell like an old cheese; but at least it's organic, as they used to say" (Atwood 97). The perspective of a disgustful odor is actually imposed to her by the oppressive society she lives in. The Wives usually complain about the Handmaids' lack of hygiene saying: "they aren't even clean […] don't wash their hair, the smell. I have to get the Marthas to do it, almost have to hold her down in the bathtub, you practically have to bribe her to get her to take a bath even, you have to threaten her" (Atwood 115). Their stench can be understood as a gesture of rebellion or a clear proof of their insanity but also as a problem of olfactory prejudices. They represent an inferior class and just as George Orwell puts it "the lower classes smell. […] For no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a physical feeling" (112).

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The more Offred explores her body smell, her only possession, she becomes a sort of a narcissist which loves herself and her transformations. She is eager to have new experiences and to perceive new smells. When she asks the Commander to bring her a hand lotion, it is not only because her "skin gets very dried" but also because she longs for diversity and implicitly for the revival of her old memories:

> *I would have liked to ask also for some bath oil, in those little colored globules you used to be able to get, that were so much like magic to me when they existed in the round glass bowl in my mother's bathroom at home. But I thought he wouldn't know what they were. Anyway, they probably weren't made anymore.* (Atwood 158)

When she receives a hand lotion, in "an un-labeled plastic bottle" which "wasn't very good quality; it smelled faintly of vegetable oil", Offred is disappointed and adds: "No Lily of the Valley for me. It may have been something they made up for use in hospitals, on bedsores" (Atwood 159). Her sadness is not triggered by the fact that she did not get a "Lily of the Valey", a perfume which she quite disliked, but because she was offered an oil used for bedsores, in other words not the smell of a person but the smell of an object. Something similar happens when the Commander wants to take her on a "date" and gives her "a lipstick, old and runny and smelling of artificial grapes" (Atwood 230). Offred's destiny is to carry "the fruit" and ends up enveloped by the smell of a fruit. In fact, she seems to be more thrilled when Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, asks her to hold the wool while she is winding: "I am leashed, it looks like, manacled; cobwebbed, that's closer. The wool is gray and has absorbed moisture from the air, it's like a wetted baby blanket and smells faintly of damp sheep. At least my hands will get lanolined" (Atwood 203).Apparently, having the smell of an animal seems far more pleasant than that of an object or of a fruit.

Offre's need for smells is so great that when she spots the Japanese tourist's pink painted toenails she experiences an imaginary body transfer:

> *I remember the smell of nail polish, the way it wrinkled if you put the second coat on too soon, the satiny brushing of sheer pantyhose against the skin, the way the toes felt, pushed towards the opening in the shoe by the whole weight of the body. The woman with painted toes shifts from one foot to the other. I can feel her shoes, on my own feet. The smell of nail polish has made me hungry.* (Atwood 29)

This experience makes her remember the smell of freedom and she starts to hunger for it. Her senses lose their basic functions and acquire more spiritual ones. The memory of dabbing behind her year with a specific perfume, Opium, while waiting in a hotel room for her married lover, Luke, presents her as a self-empowered woman in a long lost world; a world which inoculated the alienation of the body and the addiction to toiletries. However, as Diaconu says "the aura of our own smell does not protect us from the external threats but external means save us from ourselves" (90 in my trans.). The perfume corrects the biological esthetic nature and promises us happiness, gives us self confidence, a weapon of seduction, an instrument of power. Gilead's prohibition of the perfume equals the prohibition of self-improvement, individual power and contentment.

Offred's olfactory journey continues with the perception of the Others, a process which has been metaphorically expressed by Sartre:

> *L'odeur d'un corps, c'est ce corps lui-même que nous aspirons par la bouche et le nez, que nous possédons d'un seul coup, comme sa substance la plus*

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> *secrète et, pour tout dire, sa nature. L'odeur en moi, c'est la fusion du corps de l'autre à mon corps. Mais c'est ce corps désincarné, vaporisé, resté, certes, tout entier lui-même, mais devenu esprit volatil.* (Sartre 201)

Although the body odor is triggered by a physical matter, it proves to be ephemeral because of its high volatility. Sartre describes it as a unique combination of being and nothingness and states that it symbolizes the true nature of human beings. Eventually, during the smelling process, not only the body, but also the soul of an individual can be inhaled and as a result they combine themselves with those of the perceiver. Therefore, the handmaid appears as being permeated by the bodies and souls of the others. Social boundaries, nonetheless, limit her contact with those around her and their body scents are usually based on assumptions and imagination. When she eventually finds herself next to them, their odors seem to be perverted by the environment and most of the time make her sick. For instance, when kneeling near Serena Joy, she is actually submitted to a lethal combination of odors: perfume, "lemon oil", "heavy cloth", "fading daffodils", "leftover smells of cooking coming from the kitchen" and she starts to feel "slightly ill"(Atwood 80). Yet, Serena Joy's perfume, Lily of the Valley, remains for her "a luxury", a rare smell:

> *I breathe it in, thinking I should appreciate it. It's the scent of pre-pubescent girls, of the gifts young children used to give their mothers, for Mother's Day; the smell of white cotton socks and white cotton petticoats, of dusting powder, of the innocence of female flesh not yet given over to hairiness and blood*. (Atwood 80)

According to Kant, the perfume of the ladies is as dangerous as the miasma of the marshes: one of them endangers our health and the other limits our freedom (158). Serena Joy is later depicted as a kind of a Madona frozen in time wearing:

> *one of her best dresses, sky blue with embroidery in white along the edges of the veil: flowers and fretwork. Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreathe herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them anymore, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere, once.* (Atwood 81)

Le Guérer makes a very interesting statement regarding the similarity between the female physiognomy while having an orgasm and that while smelling a flower, which he calls "an ambiguous marriage between the woman and the breathed smell of the flowers" (219). Serena Joy's extreme care for flowers might reveal, without doubt, a secret sexual desire. Just like the flowers, the objects that surround Serena Joy have also a great impact on Offred, though not a sexual but a maternal one. The smoke of cigarette "that has been inside Serena's body" makes Offred remember her "little girl who is now dead" and the sensation she had when they tried to cross the border illegally: "I feel as if there's not much left of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes" (Atwood 85). The soap fragrance reminds her of the little girl: "I close my eyes, and she's there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap. I put my face against the soft hair at the back of her neck and breathe her in, baby powder and child's washed flesh and shampoo, with an undertone, the faint scent of urine" (Atwood 63). Even though she was separated from her daughter she preserves the maternal bond due to odors and sensatory memory: "She comes back to me at different ages. This is how I know she's not really a ghost. If she were a ghost she would be the same age always" (Atwood 63).

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The way in which she acknowledges men, on the basis of smell, is also interesting to analyse. Women have always used perfumes to make themselves most attractive in order to be pursued and chosen by men. As Classen says, women embody "the prey who must leave scent trails for their hunters" (164). Astoundingly, in the novel, Offred is a pursuer of men's odours. She sniffs, examines, imagines and even longs for them. The Commander's scent is compared to that of her previous one, "who smelled like a church cloakroom in the rain; like your mouth when the dentist starts picking at your teeth; like a nostril". Although the Commander's odour is also quite repulsive (he smells of mothballs, or of a "some punitive form of aftershave") it seems to be an "improvement" (Atwood 95). When she has to kiss him goodnight, Offred states that: "his breath smells of alcohol, and I breathe it in like smoke. I admit I relish it, this lick of dissipation" (Atwood 230). According to Kant, olfaction is a "preliminary taste" (Vorgeschmack) which allows us to quench our thirst through the air by "drinking the air through the nose" (158 in my translation). For Offred this gesture represents in fact a form of rebellion against the social prohibitions. On the other hand, when she spots Nick, she thinks of the smell of his "tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke". She gets excited by the idea of a perception of his odor: "I sigh, inhaling" (Atwood 18). Her sudden attraction to Nick is explained by modern biology which states that "the nose instinctively appreciates in the body smell the genetic compatibility or incompatibility" (Diaconu 71). Nick's smell gives her the power to transcend her boundaries of memory and reconstruct a mental olfactory image of her husband, Luke:

> *He is surrounded by a smell, his own, the smell of a cooped-up animal in a dirty cage. I imagine him resting, because I can't bear to imagine him at any other time, just as I can't imagine anything below his collar, above his cuffs. I don't want to think what they've done to his body.* (Atwood 105)

At the same time, Offred knows that she is being smelled by others as well, even though their opinions are not revealed. This is precisely the reason why she hides the bottle of hand lotion given by the Commander in his office: "I think I could get some of that, he said, as if indulging a child's wish for bubble gum. But she might smell it on you. […] I'd be careful, I said. Besides, she's never that close to me. Sometimes she is, he said" (Atwood 159).

It is also important to underline the fact that the handmaid's analysis of the body smells is usually perverted by those of her environment. The smellscape as Constance Classen calls it, or the olfactory landscape of the dystopia is mostly oppressing and makes the character feel sick and imprisoned. No one can escape a smell because it comes by breathing. Extrapolating from Kant's ideas regarding the "intimate incorporation" (innigste Einnehmung), one may even say that by breathing in, Offred allows smells to blend her in the environment (158). Living in a Western city, the different olfactory spaces she encounters "are largely a product of zoning laws" which "regulate the kinds of construction and sets of activity that may go on different areas" (Classen 170). In addition, Margaret Atwood reveals the importance of the three kinds of urban domain distinguished by Classen: the private or personal (the home), the public and the industrial (170). The house where Offred lives is or at least has to be, just like Gaston Bachelard says, a "body of images which gives the illusion of stability" but also one of smells that trigger memories (vii). The objects and the scents they emanate are as holds charged with mental experience and the protagonist takes advantage of their presence (Bachelard xxxvii). Yet, the space as a whole is also subject to artificiality, especially due to the decorations added by Serena Joy, which seem to draw up a play setting rather than the inside of a home. Despite its elegance, the sitting-room is oppressive through the smells of polished furniture, dried flowers, cloth dust and even food. It

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is impregnated with Serena Joy's perfume and she is part of the room as much as the room is part of her too. In contrast, "the kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell" and reminds Offred of the "other kitchens" she used to have and of "mothers", her own mother and herself in past. This new olfactory experience makes her conclude that: "This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out" (47). As she is still vulnerable the maps of smells and experiences can increase her suffering and torments but the acknowledgement of this situation puts her in control over her own feelings; restores her Self-identity. Another similar experience takes place in the room where her colleague, Janine, gives birth. This is actually an olfactory climax:

> *the air is close, they should open a window. The smell is of our own flesh, an organic smell, sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet, and another smell, more animal, that's coming, it must be, from Janine: a smell of dens, of inhabited caves, the smell of the plaid blanket on the bed when the cat gave birth on it, once, before she was spayed. Smell of matrix*. (Atwood 123)

According to Constance Classen, the smells of child-birth are "an example of olfactory phenomenon deemed to be repellent and disruptive in many societies. Accordingly, these smells must either be dispelled by the use of other scents, or controlled by secluding both the new born and its mother" (124). The handmaids must "Breathe, breathe" and "Hold, hold. Expel, expel, expel" while Janine is in labour (Atwood 123). The horrible combination of organic smells provides a great form of olfactory torture. In this situation, however, "smells of all sorts become legitimate in the private space, the space of home" (Classen 170). The overwhelming atmosphere makes Offred undergo an exhausting exertion and underlines the animalism of human nature. An important aspect of this scene is that Janine gives birth to a beautiful baby-girl who eventually proves to have a malformation and be rejected. Just like her, the Republic of Gilead seems to be perfect in the beginning, but soon, turns out to be rotten and repulsive.

The home, depicted in Atwood's novel, protects "the daydreamer" as Bachelard calls it, and helps Offred transcend the material world through imagination, surf through flash-backs and find long lost memories, but it also constrains her. Even its garden which is an outdoor space has a double function. Its beautiful flowers and perfumes can provide both a peaceful refuge, as in Serena Joy's case, as well as an agonizing experience for Offred: the "scent from the garden rises like heat from a body, there must be night-blooming flowers, it's so strong. I can almost see it, red radiation, wavering upwards like the shimmer above highway tarmac at noon" (Atwood 191). The protagonist's intense attention to the "smell of the turned earth and grass" coming from the garden (Atwood 12) may reflect a clinic disorder and in Freud's terms a "regression to a past stage" (qtd Rieff 55). This regression is, in fact, a general feature of all characters who live in an oppressive world.

The smells of the public space are barely described. The handmaid is allowed to go outside the house to buy some food and walk with Ofglen, but the reader can only imagine the olfactory sensations she might encounter. The city where Offred lives is the centre of Gilead's power. It has never been explicitly identified, but a number of clues mark it as the town of Cambridge. Its main purpose is to confine its citizens functioning as a great prison where everyone is under the permanent surveillance of an army of Eyes, Angels and Guardians. The old red brick Wall, which might somehow resembles the Berlin Wall, represents an extremely repugnant olfactory sensation. It is an execution place dominated by stench due to the hanging bodies left there for long periods of time: "as long in summer as they do in winter" (Atwood 165). This piece of information is an implied olfactory imagery. "Imagine their smell in summer" might the protagonist narrator say, and "imagine what we feel". Offred is also shocked

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comparing the city and its emanations with the old one "which was once the land of air sprays, pine and floral" (Atwood 165). The protagonist mentions some details related to the industrial parks or the garbage dumps from he colonies. Although she has never seen those places, the things that she had learned about them make her fear for her life and accept many compromises. In the Colonies, the Unwomen have to burn bodies in order to avoid any plague or to clean up "toxic dumps and the radiation spills". Their noses fall off and their "skin pulls away like rubber gloves" (Atwood 39). In other words, they even lose any chance to smell or touch and are condemned to a slow and painful death.

As noted above, Atwood's characters are prisoners of numerous circumscribed enclosures starting from their mothers' wombs, houses, gardens, city and finally the Republic of Gilead. The repugnant "smell of matrix" can be seen much as the odour of the whole society which shelters abnormalities. The handmaid succeeds to recompose her identity on the basis of olfaction, exploring her own body, the others and her environment. Odours envelope and even torture the protagonist but also help her shift through pleasant or disturbing memories; transcend space and time through imagination. Not only does the olfactory imagery provide multiple dimensions of meaning and veracity to Atwood's dystopia but it also underlines the character's psychological transformations and healing.

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