Towards a crooked voice: Language and the development of the female protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Crooked Line*

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Introduction

All that the women had to do was to tread on the path designated for them (Chughtai 264)

The sentence above is taken from the novel *The Crooked Line* by the Indian writer Ismat Chughtai. Although Shaman, the female protagonist, makes this observation in a specific context, the idea that there is a designated path for women to follow can be seen in the female centered novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Crooked Line* as a whole as well. Within language and discourses a clear role and path for women is established, which determine how they should live. The female protagonists in those novels dissent from this path and appropriate language in their endeavor to gain a voice.

The term 'voice', in this sense, has to be seen as something more than the sounds uttered by a person. Two definitions given in the Oxford English Dictionary are especially insightful for the understanding of voice in the context of this paper. 'To give voice to' is explained as “to allow (a person or group) to speak, or have a say in the control or running of something”. This definition links the term voice to gaining agency and the ability to exercise power. 'To find one's (own) voice', furthermore, is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “to find a means of expressing oneself; to arrive at an authentic mode or style of (artistic) self-expression”. Here, a connection is made between 'voice' and identity. It is about finding one's Self and a way of expressing oneself. 'Voice', in this paper, will be seen as a combination of these two definitions. The search for a voice is seen as looking for a way to express oneself with language whilst creating a space within society to let this expression be heard.

The Crooked Line, written by the Indian writer Ismat Chughtai in 1944, and *The Handmaid's Tale,* written in 1985 by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, are two novels

that are highly concerned with language and its functions. Both focus on a female character who finds herself in a subordinate position and struggles to find her own voice and place within society. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is often read as a dystopian novel, both novels are considered to be female-centered *Bildungsromane* (Hogsette 273; Gopal 87).

It has proven to be hard to establish a definition of the *Bildungsroman*, making critics ask whether it is even useful to attach the name of 'genre' to it (Bolaki 9-10). Still, however, there seems to be consensus about the general form and themes of the *Bildungsroman*. A good description is given in the *Algemeen Letterkundig Lexicon*:

> [A Bildungsroman is] a novel in which the education and character development of the protagonist is the central theme. This concerns the formation (in German *Bildung*) of the hero by his surroundings (the wide-cultural context as well as personal experiences with family, friends, etc.), which makes him 'mature' and due to which he reaches a certain equilibrium, a kind of ideal attitude towards life (Van Bork e.a., translation my own).

However, many derivations from this 'normal' *Bildungsroman* can be found. The plot need not necessarily be teleological and the protagonist does not have to develop a coherent identity (Bolaki 9). Furthermore, the protagonist does not have to be a male-subject, even though the description of the *Bildungsroman* in the *Algemeen Letterkundig Lexicon* seems to suggest this. Especially in the second half of the twentieth century it had gained new currency in the hands of women writers who focus in their story on female subjects (McWilliams 1). Stella Bolaki and Susan Fraiman are influential literary scholars who are concerned with gender, language and writing and interested in the female *Bildungsroman.* In Bolaki's *Unsettling the Bildungsroman* and Fraiman's *Unbecoming Women,* they state that the female *Bildungsroman* - novels of development that focus on the life of a female protagonist - unsettles the standard form and language of the genre.

In this thesis a comparative analysis will be conducted in which Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the English translation of Chughtai's Urdu novel *Terhi Lakir* (*The Crooked Line*) will be given a central place and examined by means of close reading. Although taking these two novels together will be challenging because of their many differences – with *The Handmaid's Tale* being a novel set in a speculative future written by a Canadian women in the 1980's and *The Crooked Line* being a realistic novel written by an Indian women in the 1940's that is dealing with the time in which it is written –, similarities between these female *Bildungsromane* can still be found. Using feminist and postcolonial theories about language, I will focus on the relationship between language and the female protagonist within these *Bildungsromane*, asking the question: In what way do Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Chughtai's *The Crooked Line* depict the role of language in the development of the female protagonist? In doing this, I will be looking at the ways in which language in the dominant discourses works as a repressive mechanism, as well as the ways in which the female protagonists deploy language in order to find their own way of expressing themselves and to gain a place within society. Furthermore, I will think about the implications of this research, asking the question in which way the insights into language and female development in those *Bildungsromane* furthers our understanding of this form.

In this research I will start with an introduction on language and its power mechanisms, drawing from postcolonial theories and insights of feminist critics. Using theories of Foucault and Butler I will discuss the way in which language produces repressive discourses and various roles within society. The same chapter continues with a discussion of the possibilities for suppressed people to use language to find their own voice and place, where Spivak and Parry will be discussed. The second and third chapter will discuss how these repressing and liberating forces of language are depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* and

The Crooked Line focussing on the relation between language and female development in those female *Bildungsromane*. In the last chapter these insights will be taken together and the implication for the female *Bildungsroman* will be discussed.

Feminist and postcolonial theories of language

The definition of voice as given in the introduction can be related to feminist and postcolonial theories about language, power and identity. Both fields of cultural criticism are concerned with the voices of the oppressed and are dealing with the ways in which language is used to oppress as well as to liberate (Barry 188). Feminist and postcolonial critics use eclectic analytic strategies and, because of the similar interests, they often draw upon each other's insights (Barry 190; Parry 2). This chapter will start by discussing the ways in which language, consciously or unconsciously, is used to maintain the status quo and in this way represses certain groups. In doing this Michel Foucault's theories about discourse and Judith Butler's theory of performativity will be discussed. Subsequently, the voice of the oppressed will be given attention, drawing on the discussion between Gayatri Spivak and Benita Parry about the question whether oppressed people can make themselves be heard.

The postcolonial and feminist theories of language are especially apt to examine the mechanisms of language within *The Crooked Line* and *The Handmaid's Tale,* because of the novels' focus on oppression and the female subject. Furthermore, *The Crooked Line* plays against a background of the struggles for independence from British colonial power in India and *The Handmaid's Tale* is a fictional text that is dealing with fundamentalism in power. Both novels, thus, depict a society in which one group has seized power and 'colonizes' the population.

The poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault, whose theories have often been used both within postcolonial and feminist criticism, is concerned with the way in which power structures are imbedded within discourses. 'Discourse' is an important term within Foucault's theories that can be described as a system of signs that is used to organize and interpret the world (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney 93). As Barry states in his scholarly work *Beginning*

Theory, discourse, for Foucault, is “not just a way of speaking or writing, but the whole 'mental set' and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society” (Barry 170). It is a self-reinforcing system that determines what can be said and thought. Discourse, however, is not singular: “there is always a multiplicity of discourses – so that the operation of power structures is as significant a factor in (say) the family as in layers of government” (Barry 170).

In his work *Discipline and Punish* Foucault shows that within the *disciplinary society*, which designates the societies of the modern period from the early eighteenth century and onward, the power of discourse takes on importance (Driver 428; 433; 437). While before, within the *societies of sovereignty*, power was exercised by a centralized and external power center, which punished citizens after they had committed a fallacy, in the modern society mechanisms were sought to *prevent* crimes. The citizens within this modern state become disciplined by means of surveillance, by moralizing judgements, examinations and training (Driver 428; 433; 437). This surveillance is no longer maintained by physical force, but by “the power of its 'discursive practices'” (Barry 169-170). With discourses as power mechanisms, power becomes internalized and diffuses itself throughout society. As Foucault states in *The History of Sexuality,* “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere” (93). Furthermore, while the sovereign punished a citizen after a fallacy, in the disciplinary state power is “constantly exercised by means of surveillance rather than in a discontinuous manner” (Driver 437).

In this modern society where discourse is used for surveillance, language takes on a different role. It comes to be used to discipline people. However, discourse, which is partly formed by language, can also be used to undermine this power. Foucault sees reality as a discursive phenomenon, which gives language and literature a political dimension. As he puts

it: “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101). While it was possible to change the power structures completely by overthrowing the sovereign, in the modern state these power structures are woven through society. This makes it impossible to completely change them in an instant, but gives the possibility to foster change gradually from within the personal sphere, using language as a means (Barry 170). Resistance can be exercised from within society and its discourse.

Not only do Foucault's theories show the ways in which language is connected to power, they also concern the relation between language and identity. Identities, according to Foucault, are shaped by discourses. As an example Foucault shows that before the introduction of the terms hetero- and homosexual in the late nineteenth century, people did not identify as either homosexual or heterosexual (Bennett and Royle 221). Cultural discourses, and especially literary texts, invent and produce identities (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney 392).

The philosopher and literary scholar Judith Butler is especially interested in this connection between language, discourse and identity. Foucault's idea that language and discourse produce identities is elaborated by Butler with regard to gender. She states that gender is not a given, but rather is constructed within discourses. Gender, Butler tells us in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, "is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 519). Butler makes a connection between gender and performance acts. She states that gender “is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (522). It is a role that people have to take on and if they “fail to do their gender” they are punished by society (522). Butler focusses on the gender

roles that exist within societies. The idea that there are roles that are performed, however, is not exclusive for gender, but exist for distinctions such as sexuality, race, class.

In the works of the feminist and postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak issues concerning gender and colonialism are taken together. Spivak is concerned with the voice of the subaltern within repressing discourses that create distinctive roles. Subaltern, here, can be defined as “the member of a subjugated group whose position has been hidden from history” (Lewis and Mills 10). Spivak asks herself whether it is possible for the subaltern to be heard, “analysing the possibility, or perhaps the impossibility, of the subordinate subaltern female being able to articulate anything other than the dominant discourses” (Lewis and Mills 10). Spivak concludes with the provocative statement that the subaltern cannot speak. There is no place outside of the dominant discourse from where the subaltern subject can be heard. Furthermore, because speaking is related to domination, as soon as the subaltern would find a way to speak, he or she cannot be considered a subaltern anymore (Chow 331).

Benita Parry takes a stance against Spivak's arguments. She states that Spivak assigns an “absolute power to the imperialist discourse” (Chow 330). According to Parry the imperialist discourse cannot only be seen as the discourse of the oppressors that determines all the subjugated people. Rather, the colonist's text “already contains a native voice” (Chow 330). It is a hybrid text and the voice of the subaltern can be heard in this hybridity (Chow 330). As Parry's ideas show, there might not be a place outside of the discourse where the subaltern can make him or herself be heard, the subjugated people can however have their own voice within this discourse.

Language and female development in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and Chughtai's *The Crooked Line* are highly concerned with these workings of language for identity construction and the conservation of power relations as discussed in the last chapter. *The Handmaid's Tale* tells about the fictional society of Gilead, set in a speculative future. It focusses on the life of a female protagonist, Offred, who finds herself, with the role of Handmaid ascribed to her, in a suppressed position within society. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is often read as a dystopia, in this research I will examine the novel through the frame of the *Bildungsroman*. However, it will not be until the concluding comparative chapter that I will discuss the implications of the current chapter for the *Bildungsroman*.

This chapter will start by discussing the way in which language within this society oppresses Offred. Using the theories of Foucault and Butler on language, I will be looking at the discourse of those in power within the Gileadean society and the influences that this discourse has on Offred's position within society and the construction of her identity. Subsequently, I will show how this female protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale* uses language against this oppressing discourse. Spivak's and Parry's discussion of the voice of the subaltern will be used in discussing Offred's struggle to gain a voice of her own and a place in society in which she will be heard.

<u>The oppressing discourses of Gilead</u>

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Margaret Atwood imagines a possible future society, set in the year 2000, that emerges as a reaction to the American society of the 1980's. Around this time the American neo-conservatives and New Puritans were criticizing the practices of abortion, sterilization and other kinds of freedoms they deemed dangerous. In *The Handmaid's Tale*,

these groups have come to power and established a totalitarian, theocratic society named after the biblical land of Gilead and based on the Old Testament (Staels 455). Environmental problems have caused fertility rates to drop and many of the children in Gilead are born with abnormalities. For this reason, the society is organized in such a way as to optimize the offspring, with clear roles assigned to everyone. Women who have proven to be fertile and able to bear healthy children have been given the role of Handmaid. These Handmaids are trained by elderly infertile women, the Aunts, to comply to their role within society and assigned to a Commander and his infertile Wife to bear them children (Staels 455).

Butler's theory on performativity is interesting when looking at these roles within Gilead. Here, those various roles go together with different rules of conduct, which need to be acted out. Atwood gives an important place to language to distinguish between these roles, with different possibilities of language use connected to each role. As Mario Klarer states in his article *Orality and Literacy* Atwood depicts a power structure "which is designed to oppress women by restricting them to an oral cultural tradition" (130). Furthermore, also within this oral tradition differences are easy to find. While the Commanders and the Wives, who are of a high rank within society, have a considerable amount of freedom in speech, the language of the Handmaids is restricted to a large extent (Hogsette 267-268). There is an official body of language assigned to the role of Handmaid. This can be seen in the recounting of Offred's meeting with Ofglen, another Handmaid: ""Blessed be the fruit," she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. "May the Lord open," I answer, the accepted response" (Atwood 29). The Handmaids are not supposed to have personal conversations and are restricted to these pre-rehearsed responses (Hogsette 267) making Offred feel that she has lost her own voice: "They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll"

(26). The identity of Offred as a Handmaid, thus, is constructed within the Gileadean discourse and becomes something that she perform. This makes her feel that she is being reduced to this role, losing her individuality.

It is through the dominant discourse of the Gileadean society that the Handmaids are made to conform to their suppressed role. Hilde Staels states in her article *Resistance through narrating* that within Gilead there is a "discursive law of theocracy [which] forces the inhabitants to submit to the power of one (moral) law, one true religion and one language code" (456-457). Within this oppressive discourse there is no place for ambivalence and polysemy of discourse and textual and visual counter-narratives are forbidden (Staels 457; Wagner-Lawlor 67-68). Rather, the ideas prevalent in Gileadean discourse are expressed in terms of universal truths that are supported by the Old Testament (Hogsette 271; Staels 457). The oppression of the Handmaids and their role to bear children for the Commanders and their Wives is legitimized by a biblical citation: "*Give me children or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her"* (Atwood 99). As is often the case in contexts of oppression, here the language of religion, which does not allow for questioning, is used to legitimize suppression. In this manner, the discourse based on religious 'truth' does not leave much space for counter-narratives.

Language not only legitimizes the oppression of the Handmaids, it is also used to make them comply with this inferior position. Fertile women have been brought to the Red Centre where the Aunts train them to take on the role of Handmaid. As Offred says of Aunt Lydia: "we are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives" (124). The Aunts indoctrinate them by means of language (Staels 457-458). Fixed expressions and biblical citations are used to present ideological ideas as universal truths to the Handmaids. While Offred knows

that she is being indoctrinated, the absence of utterances from outside this dominant discourse and the fact that she does not have access to the written word lead to a situation in which she cannot check the validity of the words of the Aunts. As Offred says: "*Blessed are the silent*. I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking" (Atwood 100). Although, according to Foucault, language can be used to thwart power, the unavailability of opposing narratives creates a situation in which Offred cannot do anything other than accepting this oppressing narrative. Language in the form of biblical citations and indoctrinating slogans is used to make the Handmaids comply with their role of 'walking wombs' and discard their individuality. This happens to such an extent that the Handmaids are no longer addressed to by their old names, but are given new names that show their oppressed position within society. In Gileadean discourse Offred is no longer addressed as an individual, but becomes seen as the property of the Commander to whom she is ascribed, she is 'of Fred'.

It is because of this oppressive discourse that Offred loses her stable identity. She is constantly negotiating between her own individuality and the role of Handmaid that is imposed upon her. The clash between those identities, creates a situation in which Offred starts feeling shattered. As Offred says her body used to be "lithe, single, solid, one with [her]" (Atwood 83), while now "the flesh arranges itself differently", feeling like she is "a cloud, congealed around a central object" (Atwood 84).

Offred's search for a voice

Offred makes use of language in order to cope with her shattered self and to find a place and voice within society. This subaltern female protagonist starts using language as a means of resistance. "Context is all", Offred says in *The Handmaid's Tale* (154; 202) and it is from

within this oppressive discursive context that her language acquires meaning. While Offred, as a Handmaid, is not supposed to have access to the written word, she starts playing Scrabble with the Commander to whom she is assigned. In these Scrabble sessions with the Commander, Offred temporarily leaves the fixed role of Handmaid and acquires a new secret and subversive layer. Playing Scrabble seemed dull at the time before the establishment of Gilead. However, in the new context it becomes a meaningful act: “Now of course it's something different. Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable” (148-149).

According to Marta Caminero-Santangelo in her article *Moving Beyond “The Blank White Spaces”*, Atwood's novel depicts the postmodern recognition that there is no pure 'outside' of an oppressive dominant order and that resisting oppressive ideologies is only possible from *within.* It is from within this dominant discourse, which is characterized by unity, truth, objectivity and unequivocality, that the narrator's creation of a “personal, multivocal tale” can be seen as an act of resistance against a discourse that tries to discard her individuality and numb her voice (Staels 462).

The absolutist regime of the Gileadean theocracy wants to abolish the past (Staels 460). The availability of earlier discourses, which present opposing ideas, would question the idea of truth and objectivity of the Gileadean discourse. In this context memories of earlier times can serve as counternarratives. By changing the names of the Handmaids the Gileadean leaders want them to forget their former identity. Telling names becomes a secret act of resistance: “We learned to whisper almost without sound […] We learned to lip-read […] In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June” (Atwood 14). As Offred tells, this name “has an aura around it, like an amulet” and by telling this real name she feels that she is known (Atwood 94; 282). In this manner remembering the

past is used to establish a place for herself within society, to keep her own identity (Staels 459). Other words from the past, such as May Day, which “used to be a distress signal” (Atwood 53), acquire new meanings in the context of Gilead as well (Atwood 212). In this way remembering becomes a dangerous act, as Ofglen's reaction to the words May Day shows: ““That isn't a term I remember. I'm surprised you do. You ought to make an effort …” She pauses. “To clear your mind of such …” She pauses again. “Echoes”” (Atwood 296). Throughout the narrative Offred is concerned with former meanings of words (Caminero-Santangelo).

Offred's discussion of the meanings of words is interesting for another reason. Within a discourse that does not allow for ambiguities, Offred is concerned with double meanings of words (Caminero-Santangelo) While there is no place for her voice within the dominant discourse, Offred creates an opposing voice that allows for these ambiguities and in this manner helps her to find her own identity: “I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution […] These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself” (Atwood 120). Offred's language provides a counternarrative to the idea of truth, objectivity and wholeness that characterizes Gileadean discourse. As Klarer states, the society of Gilead is organized in such a way as to “prevent the 'privilege' of objectivity from getting into the hands of women” (135).

However, Offred does not try to gain objectivity. Instead, she stresses subjectivity in order to offer an opposing voice to this privileged, 'male' objectivity. There is not one truth that can be told. Rather, Offred shows that all stories are constructed: “This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction […] It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances, too many gestures, which could mean

this or that" (Atwood 144). In her struggle to tell her own story, Offred shows that it is impossible to present a comprehensive narrative. She feels "like the word *shatter*" (Atwood 113) and it is only in this shattered manner that she can tell her story: "I'm sorry [this story is] in fragments […] but I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it" (Atwood 297).

The wish to tell her story and to be heard, drives Offred's narrative. While it seems that Offred finds her own voice that opposes the dominant discourse, the "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel question Offred's ability to gain a voice, making us once again ask whether the subaltern can be heard (Hogsette 271). In the "Historical Notes" Professor James Pieixoto tells in a lecture how he and Professor Wade discovered fragments of Offred's narrative on tape and took on the task of transcribing it. While Offred searched for a way of telling her personal, subjective, fragmented story, her text becomes "inscribed by the interpretive acts of a man" (Hogsette 271) who is only interested in the facts behind the story and searches for its "univocal, transparent meaning" (Staels 465).

Language and female development in *The Crooked Line*

Ismat Chughtai, in her novel *The Crooked Line,* likewise focusses on the life of a female character and is concerned with questions about gender, identity construction and the power of language. Although in this story there is no totalitarian regime that determines what can be said and by whom, it is dealing with a society with strong hierarchical power structures; the patriarchal Indian society under British colonial rule. Both colonial and patriarchal discourses create an idea of 'the Other', which is used to justify the different treatment of natives and of women. *The Crooked Line* tells the story of Shaman, an Indian Muslim woman, who finds herself under the double burden of colonialism and patriarchy and struggles to find her place and voice within society.

Chughtai is described by Tahira Naqvi, the translator of *The Crooked Line,* as “an iconoclastic example of female independence in a society where women are still struggling to find their place” (393). She is considered one of the great pillars of Urdu literature and writes in a highly realistic style about the female psyche (Naqvi 376; 382). By showing the dark realism of Shaman's psyche, however, Chughtai surpasses the idea of realism as just a neutral perspective on the world, and takes it into a register where it works as enormously alienating and defamiliarising. Chughtai is highly concerned with the construction of gender roles and is unique for her time in the way she writes about women's lives (Naqvi 382-383). Stories by and about middle-class Muslim women already existed, but those mainly supported the existing gender roles with instructions on how to be a good wife, mother, and daughter (Naqvi 381). Chughtai, however, disrupts the ideas that constitute society and “[upends] the notions that gave force to how women ought to be” (Patel 346). She dramatizes “a worldview in which ideas are not fixed and there is room for women's self-reliance and autonomy” (Naqvi 389)

In a similar fashion as in the previous chapter, here I will use Foucault's and Butler's theories to discuss the influence of discourses within this Indian, patriarchal, colonial society on the identity and social position of the female protagonist, Shaman, to move on by discussing Shaman's use of language in order to create a voice and space for herself in this society. However, before going into a discussion of the novel, it is important to stress the fact that in this paper we are dealing with an English translation of a novel originally written in a vernacular language of India, Urdu. As Simona Bertacco states in her work *Language and Translation in Postcolonial Literatures,* "the cultural and political weight of a language is shown to be socially and historically specific" which makes translations "politically *un*neutral" (2). This is especially important in this case, where the Urdu story is translated into English, the language of the former colonizers. Furthermore, as Naqvi mentions in her *Afterword* it had proven to be hard to translate the colloquial language of Chughtai into English and to recreate the nuances present in the original (375-376). Chughtai responded to Naqvi's translation by stressing that it is difficult to transfer cultural attributes from one language to another (Naqvi 376) Because language and culture are closely connected, it is insurmountable that the original text is changed by translating it into another language in which words know different implications (Bertacco 2). We have to bear these limitations in mind.

The oppressing discourses in Shaman's India

In *The Crooked Line* oppression is a central theme. As Naqvi states there is a cycle of repression; while the Indian population is suppressed by the colonizers, men oppress women and, women, "powerless and unable to govern their own destinies", oppress other women (387). In this cycle there is an oppressive discourse of the British colonizer, which has huge

power over language and truth. As Shaman says, the colonizers “are the historians. We'll continue to read what we've always been reading, their successes, our follies” (Chughtai 307). Furthermore, there is a patriarchal discourse that oppresses women. Women, in general, do not have much power within language: “any interesting items related to reading and writing were kept out of Shaman's reach” (Chughtai 10). Thus, language is dominated and for a large part controlled by the oppressors. The fact that many of the oppressed are illiterate, is used by the dominant group to stress their inferior status and maintain their oppression: “Everyone regards those who are inferior with pity. They're weak, they're illiterate, they're useless, and therefore deserving of charity […] keeping them down and continuing to push them into an abyss” (Chughtai 224). Within these dominant discourses of society, the way in which people should act is determined. Language is used to let people follow the 'right' path. As Shaman observes, “if you still persist, your character, your secret relationships, and details of your trips will be unraveled by means of the local newspaper” (Chughtai 221). The people oppressed by these discourses often do not use language to question the status quo, but meekly follow their path of life: “In this sluggish life everybody is treading *silently* along the path of life with their eyes shut. If there is a collision, you side step and continue ambling” (Chughtai 227 emphasis my own).

For Indian women this path of life is clearly defined within the dominant, patriarchal discourse. As Sarah Farooq Lone observes in her article *A Women's Plight* “a woman has to carry out several duties -daughter, wife and mother- and while performing them she loses her real self as she has to stifle her own desires and mould herself according to other's aspirations” (Lone 342). Geeta Patel in *An Uncivil Woman* likewise stressed that the terms with which women identify themselves are often “couched in marriage and childbirth” (Patel 353). No independent roles are ascribed to a woman; she is the daughter of her parents, the

wife of her husband or the mother of her children. This path in which a female has to perform respectively the roles of daughter, wife and mother, is not a natural path, but is designed by society. Shaman asks herself the question why a women cannot be a mother without being married first and stresses the importance of the discourse of society: “What is it that nature's laws appear weak and worthless when compared to social mores? If one thinks carefully it becomes clear that nature has no restrictions on a woman who wishes to be a mother, but society demands a tax” (Chughtai 190-191).

Patel discusses the connection between *The Crooked Line* and Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex*, in which De Beauvoir makes the statement that “one is not born, but rather becomes a women” (Patel 352). Here, De Beauvoir makes a distinction between sex and gender, stating that while sex is biologically determined, gender is socially and culturally constructed (Sharma 212). Like Butler's theory of performativity, De Beauvoir's statement shows that the image of 'woman' is constructed within discourse. Within the dominant discourse in Chughtai's novel women are ascribed those dependent roles of daughter, wife and mother and a clear distinction is made between what is seen as masculine and what is considered feminine. The stereotypical images of 'the woman' often support her oppression, with men regarding women as weak (Chughtai 183), unintelligent - “I can bet that no woman is capable of serious study” (Chughtai 313) - and “afraid even of mice” (Chughtai 249).

As Lone states, gender “starts playing a role from the time of birth” and Shaman's life is influenced by these ideas of gender that are prevalent within the societal discourses right from the start (340-341). As another unwanted girl in her family, her birth was not welcomed at all. Shaman, however, does not adapt to the roles assigned to her based on gender. Instead of following the straight path from daughter, to wife and motherhood, Shaman follows an independent road. Within her family, and subsequently within the educational system, the

progressive movement and her marriage, Shaman does not simply comply to any norm, but she uses her angry voice to constantly question those norms and revolt against them. Since the path that she has chosen differs from the norms, people start to talk about her, which influences Shaman's life to a large extent. Especially after her provocative marriage with the Irish army captain Ronnie Taylor, societal discourses start to have a huge influence on Shaman and on her relationship with Taylor. She is seen as "a woman of loose morals" and as "base" (Chughtai 332; 334; 337) and starts hearing these voices of society even in her own head: "'wrong … all wrong … fire and water … can never embrace each other,' someone seemed to be whispering in her ear" (Chughtai 327). Furthermore, Taylor, who tried his best to see Shaman as his equal, is influenced by the discourses that oppress the Indian and the Indian women specifically. As Shaman says "As far as [Taylor's] conscious self was concerned, he allowed it a broad view, but he had no control over his unconscious. The mildew that had accumulated over a period of centuries could not be scraped off so easily" (Chughtai 351). In this manner the oppressive colonial and patriarchal discourses at work within the Indian society, drive Shaman and Taylor apart with the "very taunts that they saw in the eyes of onlookers [now hurling] at each other in the form of words, the very qualities that had proven endearing once now [rankling] like splinters in their eyes" (Chughtai 335).

The crookedness of the road Shaman has chosen, thus, makes her life difficult, causing Shaman sometimes to lament her decision for an independent path: "She looked behind her and saw in the distance a road that wound about like an undulating cobra pursuing her. She wanted to return, to wipe out this frightful mark and in its place draw a new line, a neat and clean line. But these curves had become too firm, like a steel wire" (Chughtai 292). After she has left Taylor, Shaman describes in a highly visual manner how she feels by taking this independent road: "feeling as light as a balloon, she fell on her bed; it was as though she

had been freed of the responsibilities of life. But sleep evaded her and it seemed that the balloon, cut off from its string, was flying higher and higher. Where was it going? There was no breeze so one couldn't determine its direction" (Chughtai 325). What can be seen throughout the novel, is that there are discourses that create expectations of Shaman, while she choses to follow her own pathway. However, she is influenced by those expectations and is constantly negotiating between her own ideas and the roles imposed upon her. By not simply following the expected path, Shaman's life lacks a clear direction, making her feel shattered (Chughtai 275; 299) and making her see only a "foggy cloud" when trying to find herself (Chughtai 301).

Shaman's search for a voice

In order to cope with the difficulties that arose because of oppressing voices of society and Shaman's choice to follow an independent pathway, she uses language to create a space and voice for herself within this society. The young Shaman was often neglected and her voice unheard: She "thrashed her legs, cursed heartily, but no one paid any attention to her" (Chughtai 17). Although Shaman was unruly, she was not yet able to put her critique into well-substantiated words. It is only when Shaman comes into contact with Satil and the progressive group that she becomes aware of the "smouldering fire" in her "flat, silent, stony breast" that is "waiting to be awakened" (Chughtai 185). While her breast was silent before, now the 'new Shamshad' creates an interest in words in order to understand and construct this new identity: "With Satil's help she tried to identify and understand this new personality that had caught her unawares. She embarked on a study of literature and philosophy, developed an interest in poetry, and soon the old cracked shell broke, and from it emerged a solid kernel" (Chughtai 186). From this moment on, Shaman starts going to lectures and takes part in

discussions. After she meets Taylor, the discussions intensify and, as Taylor tells her, she develops “a sharp tongue” (Chughtai 311). Shaman has a strong opinion and knows how to use language in order to make her opinion clear. This goes so far that the Professor does not wants to enter into a discussion with her, because, as the Professor states “If I start arguing with you, I know I'll lose” (Chughtai 356).

Shaman uses her sharp tongue and bold language to question the existing discourses, in this way trying to create a space for her dissenting voice and identity. She has an awareness of the oppressing discourses within society and by unravelling these discourses and their influences by means of language she tries to bring them down. This strategy seems to be powerful, when looking at the influence of Shaman's words on Alma. Alma treats her son badly and Shaman shows her that it is because of the societal discourses that she does not love her 'illegitimate child'. By confronting Alma with the fact that she “[professes] to be very strong, but actually [is] afraid of society”, Shaman makes Alma aware of her weaknesses and makes her change her attitude towards her son (Chughtai 241).

Whether Shaman manages to create a space and voice for herself by means of language is not quite clear. At one point in the story she is confronted with the fact that her disappearance “had not made the slightest difference to the order of things” (Chughtai 274). She is disappointed that her voice had not yet made a change and her disappearance did not leave an empty place within society. In a similar manner as Spivak, Shaman comes to ask herself whether the language of the oppressed can make a difference when she asks: “Is it possible to obtain freedom by shouting and screaming and by dying in anonymity?” (Chughtai 318). Although Chughtai's novel shows that it is hard to find a stable identity with its own place and voice from within this oppressed position, the crookedness becomes something positive. As Jasmine Sharma states in her article *Queer Shaman*, at the end of the

novel “the crookedness still prevails but now it is celebrated […] it is the realization of this crookedness that enables one to lead a life of courage and diligence without any fear or lamentation” (215).

Similarities and implications *Bildungsroman*

In this chapter, the insights of the last chapters will be taken together and the implications for the genre of the *Bildungsroman* will be discussed. Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Crooked Line* can be considered to belong to this literary form, even though they present their stories of development in different moods. Wagner-Lawlor tells us about *The Handmaid's Tale*, that due to the dystopian character of the text with its focus on "more spectacular (and catastrophic) visions of future society" the novel is generally not thought of as a female *Bildungsroman* (24). Offred's story can be seen, however, as a *Bildungsroman* of sorts in which Offred "matures into political awareness" (Hogsette 275; Wagner-Lawlor 71). Priyamvada Gopal, in his book *Literary Radicalism in India,* similarly highlights the growth of the protagonist in *The Crooked Line.* This novel, according to him, is "preoccupied with the evolution of its protagonist into a gendered modern citizen and subject" (87). Although both novels derivate from the classical *Bildungsroman* as defined in the introduction, both are dealing with the emotional development of a women and can be considered to be female *Bildungsroman.* They alienate the standard *Bildungsroman* and challenge our understanding of this form.

The unsettling of the classic form of the *Bildungsroman* is often used in order to critique the status quo and to foster change within society. According to Foucault, with power everywhere the personal sphere can become a place for political discussion and the *Bildungsroman* is an excellent form to critique society by presenting those personal stories of development. Joseph Slaughter, in his work *Human Rights, Inc.*, states that the form of the *Bildungsroman* is closely connected to human right discourses and has often been adopted by minorities in their struggle to gain rights (4-5). It is therefore not surprising that with the rise of women and civil rights movements in the twentieth century, there has been a "resurgence

of interest in the form [of the *Bildungsroman*], especially by marginalised subjects" (Bolaki 10-11). *The Crooked Line* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are concerned with marginalised women and unsettle the standard form of the *Bildungsroman*.

As stated before in the introduction, this unsettling character of female *Bildungsromane* has already been discussed by scholars as Susan Fraiman and Stella Bolaki. Fraiman focusses in her work *Unbecoming Women* on four British female *Bildungsromane* from the 18th and 19th century, while Bolaki in *Unsettling the Bildungsroman* focusses on contemporary texts written by ethnic American women. Although those scholarly works on the *Bildungsroman* are dealing with novels written in different contexts, this chapter will show that some of their more general points about the female *Bildungsroman* remain true even in such disparate female *Bildungsromane* as the Indian 1940's novel *The Crooked Line* and the postmodern Canadian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* from the 1980's. Furthermore, the focus on the repressive and liberating forces of language in these two novels furthers our understanding of the female *Bildungsroman.*

The classical, male-centered *Bildungsroman* is characterized by a belief in progress. It has a teleological plot with a hero who matures and develops a coherent identity and sovereignty of character (Fraiman 10). Although the Bildungshero is struggling to find his place within society at the beginning of the novel, there is a progressive development towards "integration into the existing social order" (Bolaki 12). In order to find his place he, thus, does not change society, but rather assimilates himself to its expectations. This classical *Bildungsroman* bears resemblances with colonial discourse, with which *The Crooked Line* is concerned, and with totalitarian discourses, such as the totalitarian, theocratic discourse in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Just as the classical *Bildungsroman* colonial and totalitarian discourses present coherent, teleological stories about progressive development in which there is a

“promise of certainty” (Patel 354). Furthermore, all are characterized by an idea of coherence and truth and create binary oppositions and fixed roles within society.

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Crooked Line* oppose this classic form of the *Bildungsroman* with its linkages to repressive colonial and totalitarian discourses. Being concerned with the oppressed of society, these novels show the impact that the stories of progress and fixed ideas have on those in a minority position. The heroines in Chughtai's and Atwood's novels are in search for their own identity, while at the same time fixed roles and paths are imposed upon them by the dominant discourse. There is a constant negotiation between the expectations of society and the feelings and desires of the protagonist, making Offred and Shaman feel shattered and 'floating like a cloud'.

It is from within those oppressive discourses that the female protagonists use language in order to cope with their shattered identity and find their own voice and place within society. The impossibility of escaping the dominant discourses made Spivak conclude that the subaltern could not be heard. In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Crooked Line* however, the subaltern protagonists do not try to escape the discourse; they use language to find their own voice and to change the discourse from *within*, in this manner supporting Parry's claim that the subaltern, although he cannot have a completely independent voice, can be heard from within the discourse.

As Fraiman and Bolaki already showed, the female *Bildungsroman* does not deploy a teleological plot and the protagonists do not come to a coherent identity (Fraiman X; Bolaki 12). The title of Chughtai's novel already highlights the crooked line that Shaman follows and also Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* does not follow a straight path towards an independent voice, as the masculine representation of her voice in the “Historical Notes” at the end of the novel suggests. The constant tensions between the repressing and liberating forces of

language are connected to this shattered identity and non-linear development. The female protagonists are influenced by the repressive discourses, while at the same time contesting it, resulting in a dynamic story in which the protagonists encounter ups and downs, rather than a straight line towards progress.

Although Offred and Shaman do not follow a path towards a coherent identity and stable voice within society, it is this act of searching and negotiating that constitute their voices against the dominant discourses. In their search for a voice, Atwood's and Chughtai's protagonists question the fixed ideas of truth, stability, progress, coherence and teleological development, which are related to the oppressive colonial and theocratic discourses in the *Crooked Line* and *The Handmaid's Tale* and to the 'male' *Bildungsroman*. Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* is remembering double meanings of words and stresses that stories are constructions, in this way questioning the idea of truth, coherence and objectivity. Shaman in *The Crooked Line* stresses the crookedness of her path of life and uses her sharp tongue to unravel the essentialist ideas prevalent within the colonized Indian society in order to shatter them. In this manner Shaman and Offred both create a space for doubts, double meanings, hybridity, fragmentation, change and crookedness, while stressing the constructedness and subjectivity of all stories and discourses.

In a sense, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Crooked Line* support Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot be heard, because Offred and Shaman are not able to create a stable, coherent identity and voice. On the other hand, however, it is this crookedness and fragmentation that characterizes the 'voice of the subaltern' and opposes the dominant discourse. Indeed, the ideas of a stable identity and a coherent voice are constructed within these repressing discourses and to use them would be to support those discourses.

What this research adds to Fraiman's and Bolaki's discussions of the female

Bildungsroman is, apart from its focus on different texts, a more thoroughgoing understanding of the role of language in those *Bildungsromane*. It shows that the oppressing and liberating forces of language are in a constant tension, which is an important reason that the female Bildungsheroines develop fragmented identities, follow crooked paths and abandon essentialist ideas about the world around them. It shows, by taking together these disparate novels, that these mechanisms of language within the female *Bildungsromane* are neither dependent of the culture and time in which the work is produced, nor of the style in which it is written.

Conclusion

In this thesis we have been looking at language and female development in oppressing contexts as presented in the female *Bildungsromane* by examining two female *Bildungsromane* written at different times and places: Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Chughtai's *The Crooked Line*. Starting with a more general discussion of the oppressing and liberating workings of language, this thesis moved on by looking at the ways in which the two novels depict the role of language for the development of the female protagonists, and concluded with the implications of this research for the form of the *Bildungsroman*.

We have seen that in *The Handmaid's Tale* there is a totalitarian, theocratic government that has huge power over language. Through language and discourse the leaders create a coherent story that justifies their regime and makes claims to truth. Furthermore, in this dominant discourse various fixed roles are created and designated to different groups of people. Offred, who is not supposed to have power over language, uses language to oppose this dominant discourse and, in doing this, stresses double meanings of words, the subjectivity and constructedness of stories and the fragmentation of her Self.

In *The Crooked Line* colonial and patriarchal discourses create different ideas about the roles of the colonizer and colonized and of men and women, which oppress the native population and women. As an Indian woman, Shaman's position within society is very much influenced by these oppressing discourses. She constantly challenges the fixed ideas of society and uses her bold language and sharp tongue to unravel the mechanisms of the repressive discourses. She does not follow the path designated to Indian women**,** in which they respectively follow the roles of daughter, wife and mother, but follows her own crooked road, characterized by fragmentation and instability.

We have seen that the dominant discourses within Gilead and within colonial India

ascribe roles to Offred and Shaman to which they do not want to comply, making them feel shattered. Furthermore, both come to challenge those discourses from within, using language to thwart the essentialist ideas prevalent in the dominant discourses. The voices these subaltern women create within those oppressing contexts are crooked and question the ideas of truth, stability and progress. While Bolaki and Fraiman already noted that the female *Bildungsroman* opposes the idea of teleological progress and coherent identity, this thesis has shown that the dynamic interaction between repressing and liberating mechanisms of language can be connected to this crookedness.

The strength of this thesis at the same time can be seen as its weakness. By focussing on two *Bildungsromane* written in different times and places, it does show that certain trends within the female *Bildungsroman* can be seen independent from the context and the style in which the novel is written. However, this focus on two disparate texts runs the risk of being short-sighted and over-generalizing. In order to make the argument of this thesis stronger, an investigation into the workings of language in a larger corpus of female *Bildungsromane* need to be conducted.

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