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THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN THROUGH THE EYES OF MARGARET ATWOOD AND ELENA FERRANTE

Abstract: This paper analyzes the concept of freedom in the literary works of Elena Ferrante and Margaret Atwood through the lens of feminist theory. Although rooted in different geographical, cultural, and genre contexts, both Ferrante and Atwood consistently interrogate what it means to be a free woman, how such freedom is constructed, and under what conditions it becomes threatened or denied. The paper explores how both authors reflect on the limits of personal and collective autonomy through narrative structures that foreground female experience, the body, language, and identity as central sites of political resistance. Through a comparative analysis of the differences between American and European second wave feminism, as well as the specific features of Italian feminism, the study highlights how feminist discourse is shaped in relation to local socio-historical contexts. Ferrante, drawing on emotional introspection, addresses class tensions, institutional and domestic violence, linguistic hierarchies, and bodily ambivalence as elements in the struggle for subjectivity. Atwood, by contrast, uses dystopian narratives and speculative fiction to explore mechanisms of institutional control, repression, and resistance, opening space for interpreting the political dimensions of women's storytelling. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that freedom, in the works of both authors, is not presented as a given, but rather as a dynamic and

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often contradictory process that entails questioning, resisting, and continuously (re)defining the self.

Key words: freedom, feminism, Ferrante, Atwood, identity

1. Introduction

Elena Ferrante and Margaret Atwood are authors whose bodies of work differ in their temporal and geographical contexts, as well as in the literary genres most closely associated with them. Nevertheless, a recurring thematical concern in their writing is the concept of the free woman—the question of what freedom means for a woman, how it is attained or claimed, and how fragile it can be. Exploring the relationship between women and freedom inevitably leads to a feminist framework, which will shape the approach to this analysis. Margaret Atwood, writing from a North American context, and Elena Ferrante, shaped by European cultural and historical conditions, inevitably offer feminist perspectives that reflect the distinct socio-historical environments in which they developed. This paper aims to shed light on certain feminist aspects that Ferrante and Atwood engage with in their literary work, analyzing how specific concepts of second-wave feminism are reflected in the writings of these two authors, widely regarded as feminist writers *par excellence*. While their respective poetics reveal clearly discernible differences in feminist approaches, this analysis will highlight the thematic concerns they share and jointly explore, as well as the points at which their theoretical, stylistic, and poetic trajectories diverge.

2. Freedom and Feminism

Women's freedom, both historically and globally, has been shaped by deeply entrenched social, legal, and economic structures that have often restricted their autonomy and right to self-determination. Far from being a universally recognized right, women's freedom has frequently been contested, reflecting broader dynamics of power across different societies. In its early stages, feminism as a movement was oriented toward achieving equality between men and women. However, after

securing the right to vote, its focus gradually shifted toward identifying the factors that distinguish women from men, while simultaneously fostering solidarity among women in a shared project of transforming their socio-political status. This orientation emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and is known as the second wave of feminism. The notion of freedom in the second-wave feminism does not primarily refer to a liberal understanding of freedom as the absence of external constraints, but rather encompasses a sense of personal safety, dignity, and acceptance of one's identity. In this regard, "freedom means feeling good, safe, and beautiful as a woman in the world; having the freedom to explore one's sexual identity without the constraints of cultural norms, sexual repression, and prejudices that portray women as inferior beings" (Đorđević, 2023, p. 17). The rise and influence of second-wave feminism unfolded simultaneously in North America and Europe. Although both currents are driven by a dominant emancipatory impulse, there are notable differences and divergences in their theoretical-philosophical approaches as well as in their practical applications.

2.1. Second-wave Feminism in the U.S.A

Second-wave feminism in the United States developed during the 1960s and 1970s, with a primary focus on institutional equality and legal advocacy for women's rights within the existing system. The movement was strongly inspired by liberal values, which gained prominence on the socio-political stage of North America during that period. It sought to advance women's rights through political and legislative reforms, particularly in the areas of education, employment, reproductive rights, and the fight against gender-based violence.

The ideological and cultural shifts of the time created fertile ground for the emergence of feminist literary criticism, which—with its unconventional boldness—managed to profoundly unsettle the foundations of prevailing literary-theoretical norms. In its initial phase, American feminist criticism centered on the woman as reader—a consumer of literature predominantly produced by men. Within this framework, it aimed to expose the ideological mechanisms that sustain

patriarchal narratives: misogynistic stereotypes, the exclusion of women from the literary canon, the exploitation and manipulation of female readership—especially in popular culture and film—and the treatment of woman as a mere signifier within the semiotic system (Showalter, 1985, p. 128). In its second phase, feminist criticism shifted its focus from woman as a passive recipient of meaning to woman as its active agent, placing the question of female authorship at the heart of analysis. The aim was not only to revise the literary canon but also to articulate an authentic female literary voice. As one of the most prominent theorists of this period, Elaine Showalter, writes: "to find a new way of reading that can integrate our intelligence and our experience, our purpose and our suffering, our skepticism and our vision" (Showalter, 1985, pp. 141–142). In this sense, feminist criticism becomes not only theoretically rigorous but also practically subversive—at times approaching militancy—as it seeks to deconstruct the foundations of dominant male literary tradition and build a new epistemological framework for understanding literature.

2.2. European Feminism

Although it emerged under nearly identical socio-historical circumstances, European feminism developed along a more theoretically intricate and philosophically complex trajectory. In contrast to American feminism, which often retained a rationalist and empirical orientation, European feminist thought, particularly French feminism, evolved in interaction with psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and Marxism, seeking to deconstruct the premises of phallogocentric doctrine.

Thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous engaged in analytical critiques of language, identity, and embodiment, interrogating the very foundations of phallogocentric discourse and searching for a "women's writing" (*écriture féminine*) that could express a specifically female experience, one that arises and acts outside the framework of patriarchal symbolic order and masculine logic of representation. The concept of women's writing, which affirms alterity, is not necessarily contained in the gender of the author, argues Cixous, but in the

gender of the writing itself. It represents a discursive effect within the text, realized through a departure from the patriarchal concept of phallogocentrism (Đorđević, 2023, p. 23). French feminists asserted that the female unconscious is fundamentally different from the male, and that this psychosexual distinction is precisely the source of potential for subverting masculine ideologies and creating a new, female discourse (Jones, 1985, p. 365).

One of the key innovations compared to American feminist criticism lies in the way the relationship to the mother, the maternal body, and maternal language is conceptualized. Thus, Luce Irigaray calls for a return to one's sex, "to our mother, our mother within us and among us" (Irigaray, as cited in Lešić, 2003, p. 132). With this invocation, she lays the foundation for the concept of female sisterhood—a notion of mutual female closeness and solidarity that second-wave feminists would readily embrace both in Europe and in North America.

Despite differences in theoretical and practical approaches, both American and European feminism contributed to the development of a rich corpus of ideas and methods within feminist theory and literary criticism. American feminists often criticized the French school for excessive theoretical abstraction, accusing it of intellectual exhibitionism and a tendency to mystify the concept of the feminine to the point of semantic emptiness. Conversely, French feminists reproached the American emphasis on rationality and clarity of exposition, arguing that such an approach fails to pose a genuine threat to the patriarchal order.

Although it developed within the broader continental intellectual tradition, Italian feminism emerged through a dynamic dialogue with global progressive movements, particularly under the influence of the African American civil rights struggle and feminist concepts shaped in North America. Italian feminists, recognizing that in the local context privilege manifested primarily as a gendered rather than racial category, formulated a specific political response by withdrawing from mixed political collectives and establishing autonomous women's associations. This separatist practice, modeled after American strategies of political resistance among marginalized groups, played a significant role in shaping Italian feminism, which distanced itself from traditional

militant and class-based forms of activism. Elements of North American struggles for racial and gender justice, such as intersectionality, political subjectivity, and resistance to institutional power, did not function in the Italian context as mere imitation, but rather as a process of situated reinterpretation and ideological reconfiguration of global theoretical and aesthetic principles to local experiences. The development of this trajectory was also shaped by broader cultural factors, including American "soft power" mediated through the Marshall Plan[2], which, alongside economic aid, enabled an intensive transatlantic exchange of cultural content, educational models, and feminist discourses (Gardner, 2012). Media propaganda projects and cultural cooperation under the Marshall Plan facilitated the circulation of films, discourses, and educational materials that helped shape perceptions of modern identity (Bullaro, 2016, p. 25).

In this transatlantic dialogue, cultural imagery and affective codes were as transformative as intellectual models—the slogan *Black is beautiful* directly inspired the Italian feminist motto *Donna è bello*, symbolizing the affirmation of marginalized identity as both a political and cultural act (Anabasi, 1972). This represents a dynamic interplay of cultural and ideological forces, rather than a straightforward, linear trajectory of influence.

In this spirit, the first feminist groups in Italy emerged spontaneously and in a decentralized manner, without hierarchical structures, with the aim of empowering women through the exchange of lived experiences. A key role in this approach was played by theorists and philosophers from northern Italy, who emphasized the importance of the female voice and the genealogy of relationships among women as the foundation of political action.

[2] George Marshall was an American officer and statesman, military advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt, and during President Harry Truman's administration, the architect of the European recovery plan for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953. Through this initiative, a substantial sum of money was invested in the development of nearly all Western European countries, aiming to foster renewal and improve living standards. As a result, the project led to significant Americanization of industry and technology, as well as widespread popularization of American culture across Europe (Testa et al., 2001, p. 120).

Through this process, a distinctive theoretical and identity-based framework was shaped, grounded in the politics of difference (*la politica della differenza*), within which the female subject is not defined through equality with men, as is often the case in American feminism, but through the affirmation of difference and the construction of a symbolic order of her own.

One of the most influential figures of this wave is Adriana Cavarero, founder of the Diotima group, whose philosophy centers on the analysis of language, identity, and subjectivity. Criticizing the Western philosophical tradition for its exclusion of the female subject, she insists on the importance of the female voice and narrative, and through reinterpretations of female figures from ancient mythology, she proposes the concept of plural subjectivity. Luisa Muraro, also a member of Diotima, advocates for the establishment of a female genealogy of thought and a symbolic order of the mother, sharply opposing traditional philosophical interpretations of motherhood and insisting on the recognition of the maternal role as constitutive in shaping female language, identity, and symbolic frameworks. Carla Lonzi, founder of the group *Rivolta Femminile* (*Female Revolt*), in her work *Let's Spit on Hegel*, critiques phallocentric culture, psychoanalysis, and Marxism, calling for the affirmation of clitoral sexuality as an expression of emancipated female autonomy. Lonzi radically opposes equality-based feminism, advocating instead for a feminism of difference, in which sexual difference is interpreted as an existential rather than legal or biological category.

The shared goal of these theorists was, without question, the deconstruction of the patriarchal symbolic order and the affirmation of female experience, embodiment, and language as legitimate foundations for philosophical thought and social transformation.

The central themes of Italian feminism encompass questions of language, subjectivity, motherhood, and narration, with female identity understood not as universal, but as plural and contextually situated. This conception of identity draws on key theoretical foundations of the movement, such as the concepts of *autocoscienza* (self-awareness), *affidamento* (one woman's trust in another), and *partire da sé* (starting

from oneself), which emphasize the introspective and relational grounding of female subjectivity, as well as the importance of personal experience in the process of political emancipation.

Self-awareness, developed within the *Rivolta Femminile* group, entails a collective practice of experience-sharing in an exclusively female space built on trust (*affidamento*), where speaking about oneself becomes an act of political articulation and a form of cognitive and emotional liberation. *Starting from oneself*, according to Luisa Muraro, means breaking with the existing order of symbolic male domination and initiating political subjectivation through the affirmation of female difference and reciprocity (Muraro, 1996).

Despite internal differences and criticisms of elitism, Italian feminism succeeded in translating theoretical discourse into concrete social change. It built a strong collective identity, catalyzed a transformation of social consciousness, and laid the groundwork for the continued advancement of women's rights in Italy. This period was marked by the transformation of the private sphere into a political field, accompanied by a pronounced shift toward the cultural and symbolic redefinition of female identity and the place of women in society.

3. Elena Ferrante and Margaret Atwood: Two Brilliant Authors

Elena Ferrante is the *nom de plume* of an Italian writer, used since the publication of her first novel in 1992. However, given that debates surrounding her identity have become as prominent as discussions of her books' content, one must ask: why is it so important to assign a face to a recognizable voice that categorically refuses to be revealed? On the other hand, the controversies surrounding Ferrante's anonymity illuminate broader questions about the relationship between author, text, and reader, as well as the double standards associated with authorship in the context of gender. If we assume that her pseudonym constitutes an experimental creative space in which the absence of the author allows for complete freedom, it is nonetheless legitimate to ask: does Ferrante conceal her identity in order to prevent readers and critics from intruding upon the space of her freedom and her decision

to remain anonymous, or does she truly believe, as she writes in her essay collection *Frantumaglia* (2016), that "'the right way to read' is a fabrication of academics and critics" (Ferrante, 2021a, p. 204)?

My Brilliant Friend (*L'amica geniale*, 2011) is the first of four novels in the series that readers and critics have come to call *The Neapolitan Tetralogy*. At its core, the tetralogy is a *bildungsroman* that traces the childhood, adolescence, and adulthood of the protagonist Elena Greco and her "brilliant" friend Lila, set against the harsh backdrop of postwar Naples steeped in poverty, crime, illiteracy, and violence. Yet by following their growth, friendship, rivalry, and confrontation with numerous life challenges, the narrative also offers a strikingly clear political, cultural, and social portrait of Italy—from the era of the so-called economic miracle (*boom economico*) in the 1950s, through the period of student and labor protests and the awakening of feminist consciousness in the 1960s, to the political unrest and terrorist attacks of the *Years of Lead* (*anni di piombo*) throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

As such, *The Neapolitan Tetralogy* constitutes a multilayered narrative that dismantles prevailing stereotypes about women's writing—particularly the notion that narratives of friendship, envy, and love must necessarily be devoid of cultural-political depth and representation.

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer whose works have consistently engaged with the shifting boundaries of power, language, identity, and gender. Over the years, she has emerged as one of the most influential voices in contemporary feminist literary discourse, blending incisive social commentary with formal innovation, an achievement reflected in her receipt of numerous prestigious awards, including the Booker Prize. She is best known for her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), describing the fictional totalitarian theocratic regime of the Republic of Gilead, where women are institutionally stripped of their rights and reduced to predetermined roles in service of an extreme, radical patriarchal ideology. Although the narrative is set in a fictional future, Atwood has emphasized that none of the forms of repression depicted in the book are invented—they are all historically documented (Atwood, 2017). In this way, the novel functions as a warning about the fragility of women's freedoms and the dangers of institutionalized,

religious, and cultural misogynistic violence. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist dystopia precisely because it does not merely depict the loss of individual rights, but the systemic erosion of female subjectivity and social power, with a strong emphasis on bodily submission as the foundation of political control.

4. Ferrante's and Atwood's Concepts of Freedom

Freedom, as portrayed in the works of Elena Ferrante and Margaret Atwood, emerges through a feminist perspective that brings into focus the intricate interplay between the body, identity, and patriarchal power structures. Freedom is not a universal category, but one that is always contextual, gendered, and relational. In the *Neapolitan Tetralogy*, Ferrante explores the process of female empowerment through the lens of growing up in a traditional Neapolitan environment, where the female body functions as the primary signifier of a woman's social position, whether through experiences of violence, control, or attempts at self-actualization. The idea of freedom in this narrative is inextricably linked to the concept of class (im)mobility, which is largely determined—or denied—through access to education.

Although upward mobility through education is important for both male and female characters, Ferrante focuses primarily on female subjects, who endure not only class-based oppression but also gendered repression. This dynamic is evident from early childhood, when access to knowledge is questioned solely based on gender: "Studying? Why, did I ever study? [...] And did you go to school? Then why should your sister study, when she's a girl?" (Ferrante, 2021b, p. 66).

Lila and Elena quickly realize that education offers the only viable escape from the misogynistic and impoverished environment that shapes their bodies and destinies. Yet only one of them is truly granted that path: "I'll graduate, send out applications, land a position, escape this misery, and get as far away as I can." (Ferrante, 2021b, p. 321), while the other is denied that right solely because she is a girl.

Feminist discourse of the second wave permeates Ferrante's text through explicit references—such as Carla Lonzi's manifesto *Let's Spit*

on Hegel (Ferrante, 2021d, p. 289)—and through the protagonists' internal struggles, as they reject repressive familial and social models in pursuit of alternative ways of living and actively dismantle the transgenerational patriarchal structures. In Ferrante's work, freedom develops gradually, both as *freedom from* (patriarchy, authority, societal expectations) and as *freedom to* (choose oneself, write, influence other women).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood examines the concept of freedom within a dystopian regime that radically suspends human rights and reduces women's bodies to reproductive functions. Although repression appears to affect all citizens, it is evident that women endure a multilayered form of oppression—not only are their political and civil rights revoked, but the fundamental elements of identity are stripped away: name, speech, memory, body.

Within this context, freedom is transformed from a political category into a somatic and psychological experience. If we begin from the premise that reality is constructed through social consensus and continuously reinforced by dominant discourses, we can observe that the Gilead society generates a strict and repetitive interpretive matrix that shapes how women, especially Handmaids, perceive themselves and their surroundings: "We are for breeding purposes: we're not concubines, geisha girls, courtesans [...] We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 2006, p. 150).

The Handmaids, including the narrator, are denied personal identity, education, and freedom of movement, pointing to a process of dehumanization enacted through control of the body, speech, and thought, arguably the most insidious form of domination. This system gives rise to cognitive dissonance: an internal conflict between what women instinctively feel to be moral or true and what the regime relentlessly imposes as the only acceptable reality.

In such a context, psychological mechanisms of adaptation, suppression, and rationalization become essential for maintaining mental stability, yet simultaneously serve as tools that sustain the oppressive order. It is precisely from this internal rupture—between subjective truth and social norm—that the protagonist's experience of freedom emerges: no longer a universal right, but an intimate, fragile, and intermittent

possibility to think differently, to preserve the memory of one's identity, or even to rebel, if only in silence.

Paradoxically, freedom is often experienced through the lens of death—as the most vulnerable yet most radical act of resistance, or the only escape from total control. This is reflected in the protagonist's contemplation of suicide as an act of liberation: "But watch out, Commander, I tell him in my head. I've got my eye on you. One false move and I'm dead." (Atwood, 2006, p. 101).

Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), argues that both the body and identity are products of discursive practices that render them culturally legible and politically regulated. These practices shape not only our understanding of bodies and identities, but also determine which forms become socially recognized and accepted (Butler, 1993, p. 1). In this sense, freedom entails the possibility of disrupting and performatively reconfiguring these norms, a dynamic evident in Elena Ferrante's work, where the protagonists attempt to escape gendered identities through education and writing, and in Atwood's narrative, where the protagonist employs language, memory, and irony as subversive strategies for preserving the self.

Adriana Cavarero, in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (*You Who Look at Me, You Who Tell Me About Me*, 1997), emphasizes that identity is not constructed from within, but emerges in encounter with another woman, through a narrative act that affirms us as singular beings. In this framework, a woman begins to understand *who* she is, which constitutes an ontological category, as opposed to *what* she is (daughter, wife, mother), which reflects her empirical existence (Cavarero, 1997, p. 76).

This idea is particularly resonant in Ferrante's poetics, where the protagonists Elena and Lila continuously interrogate their identities in relation to one another, telling stories to and about each other in a form of intimate female solidarity, but also envy, fear, and mutual . Through the constant oscillation between two perspectives, we gain insight into Elena's narrative about her friend Lila, while Lila simultaneously narrates Elena, creating biographical narratives of one another and enacting what Cavarero calls relational subjectivity (Pinto, Milkova, Cavare-

ro, 2020, p. 239): "I felt the need [...] to tell her: see how close we were, one in two, two in one [...] she and I, continuously shaped, altered, and then reshaped" (Ferrante, 2021c, pp. 464–465); "I can no longer distinguish between what is hers and what is mine" (Ferrante, 2021e, p. 481).

For these protagonists, freedom does not merely signify the absence of external constraints, but the possibility of redefining the fundamental premises of identity, relationship, and meaning—the right to be different, to exist in text, body, and speech as one's own subject, despite the forces that seek to silence, instrumentalize, or erase them.

4.1. Narrative Freedom vs. Reliability

In terms of narrative structure, both Elena Ferrante and Margaret Atwood explore and challenge the boundaries between truth, memory, and the fictionalization of reality, although in markedly different ways. Ferrante's portrayal of women's hard-won struggle for freedom is conveyed through a narrative so intensely personal and emotionally saturated that its sincerity feels both unyielding and hermetically contained. Her narrative voice, shaped through the character of Elena Greco, leaves little room for doubt regarding the truthfulness of what is told. The narrator's honesty is radical, almost brutal, and thus comes across as irrefutable truth.

Yet one must ask: to what extent is this truth objective, and to what extent is it the product of a subjective narrative construction? Ferrante, consciously or not, uses narration as a means of asserting control over the truth she conveys, leaving no space for questioning the reliability of the voice that speaks. Her narrative power stems from a sense of authenticity that places the reader in a position of agreement rather than resistance.

Particularly striking is the fact that at the very end of the first volume, the author creates a moment of epistemic tension that destabilizes the reader's grasp of truth, calling into question the power dynamic between the two protagonists and the identity of the one referred to as the "brilliant friend." This play of meaning is further emphasized by

the original Italian title—*L'amica geniale*—which, unlike the English *My Brilliant Friend* and the Serbian *Moja genijalna prijateljica*, remains ambiguous and thus preserves interpretive tension.

In this sense, Ferrante's narrative style creates the illusion of complete self-exposure and credibility, yet it is precisely this radical transparency that constrains the reader's interpretive freedom when it comes to identifying who, in fact, is the brilliant one.

Margaret Atwood, on the other hand, deliberately destabilizes narrative reliability in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The protagonist openly admits that she is recounting events from memory, acknowledging that certain details may be distorted or imprecise, thus explicitly inviting the reader to adopt an interpretive stance. This narrative framework enables broader interpretive freedom, while also relativizing the notion of truth itself, shifting the emphasis from factual verification to emotional authenticity.

Yet, as Umberto Eco points out, every story, even one told fragmentarily and from a position of trauma, must ultimately acquire a narrative frame that prevents the proliferation of incoherent meanings. As he argues, "between the unreachable intention of the author and the questionable intention of the reader, there exists the transparent intention of the text, which rejects unsustainable interpretations" (Eco, 2004, p. 78). The protagonist, while opening space for ambiguity, closes the narrative with a symbolic frame that gestures toward a broader epistemic structure concerning Gilead, thereby establishing a balance between interpretive freedom and textual stability.

Moreover, her account frequently adopts a speculative tone, even in the act of remembering: "I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened […] It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction" (Atwood, 2006, pp. 283, 285). This conscious narrative unreliability is simultaneously an invitation for the reader to interpret, question, and reassess. By leaving room for multiple readings and withholding definitive answers, Atwood gestures toward the idea that freedom, including interpretive freedom, is a vital value that must be continually claimed, protected, and reflected upon in every dimension of experience.

4.2. Marriage and Love: Battlefields of Freedom

In the *Neapolitan Tetralogy*, marriage and love emerge as central arenas in the struggle for freedom and as spaces where that very freedom is inevitably challenged. Within the narrative, marriage often appears as an escape from an authoritarian parental home and domestic violence—primarily paternal—but ultimately reveals itself to be a form of illusory freedom, as female subjugation merely shifts in form, not in essence. Ferrante portrays the institution of marriage as a site for the reproduction of patriarchal patterns, where romantic relationships rarely constitute authentically free choices, but rather function as existential strategies. The changes that occur across the four volumes—such as access to education, divorce, contraception, and motherhood outside of marriage—represent concrete emancipatory advances, yet they do not erase the enforced structures in which women are primarily defined through their relationships with men.

Marriage in Ferrante's work can also be read as a metaphor for the intrusion of the male world into female experience: it is an act in which a man not only enters the physical and emotional space of a woman, but simultaneously reshapes her individuality, breaches the boundaries of her identity, and appropriates fragments of her subjectivity. In the lower-class suburbs of Naples, male domination manifests as the brutal physical erasure of female identity: "As if they had been swallowed by the bodies of their husbands, fathers, brothers, whom they resembled more and more each day—perhaps because of hard labor, aging, illness. When did this transformation begin? With housework? With pregnancies? With beatings?" (Ferrante, 2021c, p. 102). The violence in Lila's marriage is not only physical, but also verbal, psychological, and emotional, aimed at the total dismantling of her identity: "He no longer wants me to have a single thought that is mine alone, and if he discovers I've kept even the most trivial thing from him, he beats me" (Ferrante, 2021c, p. 406). Ferrante does not question the ethics of domestic violence; rather, violence is depicted as expected and normalized, revealing the extent to which it erases female subjectivity. At the same time, Ferrante draws attention to more subtle forms of control within bourgeois families. In upper-class contexts, violence does not necessarily manifest

physically, but through emotional exhaustion and the suppression of women's needs. Although Elena's husband loves her, she finds neither genuine support nor intimacy in the relationship. He refuses contraception, remains emotionally distant, and implicitly undermines her creativity, believing that if she truly has something to write, she will do so regardless of motherhood: "If someone really has something to write, they'll write it, whether they're expecting a child or not" (Ferrante, 2021d, p. 231). Love, which might otherwise represent a space of free choice and emotional autonomy, is portrayed as an affective impulse that, in the impoverished and rigidly structured world of Ferrante's protagonists, is often compromised by social, economic, and cultural pressures. In this way, Ferrante suggests that control over female subjectivity within a patriarchal system is not exercised solely through violence, but also through love, education, and marriage—institutions that, in ideal conditions, ought to enable freedom.

In Gilead's dystopian regime, the institutions of love and marriage are radically redefined to serve political control and the reproductive function of the state. Marriage is no longer an expression of free will, love, or partnership, but becomes a tool of social control and the disciplining of the female body. The systematic depersonalization of women is reflected in the way society perceives and treats them—not as individuals with personal identities, but as faceless functions in service of the regime. "He looks us over as if taking inventory. One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green, standing" (Atwood, 2006, p. 99). With this observation, the narrator illuminates the Commander's perception of women, revealing a complete emotional detachment and lack of empathy, viewing them solely through the lens of role and uniform, rather than personality. The culmination of this institutionalized dehumanization is depicted through the so-called Ceremony—a ritualized act of coerced sex between the Commander and the Handmaid, formally attended by his Wife, who holds the Handmaid in her lap, serving as a kind of living frame.

The Ceremony scene encapsulates the paradigmatic marriage of Gilead—an act devoid of empathy and consent, where reproduction is an institutional task rather than a space of personal connection, freedom, or affective exchange. In describing the Ceremony, the narrator observes

the Wife's passive participation in the act: "Before I turn away I see her straighten her blue skirt, clench her legs together; she continues lying on the bed, gazing up at the canopy above her, stiff and straight as an effigy. Which one of us is it worse for, her or me?" (Atwood, 2006, p. 108). This scene suggests that even the Wives, though formally privileged within the social hierarchy, are not spared from the emotional alienation and bodily rigidity dictated by the system. The novel thus critiques the patriarchal instrumentalization of marriage and shows how stripping it of its affective dimension becomes a means of total disciplining of the woman's past, body, and language. Within this strictly structured order, love as an affective and individual choice scarcely exists. What the protagonist tries to preserve through memories of her husband and daughter represents an intimate space of emotional freedom—precisely what the Gilead regime seeks to erase from her experience. Gilead suppresses love because, in a system where individuality and the right to subjectivity are profoundly subversive, love becomes the ultimate expression of freedom—and thus a threat to the stability of the regime.

4.3. Language: Instrument of Control / Freedom

In the works of Elena Ferrante and Margaret Atwood, language is not merely a means of communication, but a fundamental tool which shapes identity, subjectivity, and the social dynamics of power. While Ferrante employs language as an introspective mode of self-discovery and an authentic expression of inner conflict, Atwood presents it as a tool of repression and systemic control.

In Ferrante's writing, language is intimate, raw, and emotionally charged. It reflects the psychological interiority of her female protagonists—marked by contradiction and emotional fragmentation—especially when viewed through the contrasting use of dialect and standard Italian. Dialect functions as a stylistic device to signal social belonging, but also as an echo of local cultural heritage and a marker of class divide for many characters in her novels.

Particular attention is given to the protagonist's effort to distance herself from the dialect, which she perceives as the language of both literal and cultural poverty, and her aspiration to ascend the social ladder through education and mastery of standard Italian. In the ongoing opposition between dialect and standard language, the protagonist seeks to detach herself from the dialect she associates with violence, seeing in the standard language a possibility to deconstruct the inherited legacy of female subjugation: the oppressed, illiterate, and silenced women whose identities are always positioned as objects, constructed solely in relation to a man. Thus, language functions not only as a communicative tool, but also as a site of ideological struggle and symbolic emancipation.

Margaret Atwood, by contrast, approaches language in a radically different way. In Gilead, language is a foundational pillar of totalitarian power—censored, ideologically charged, and ritualized. Women are stripped of their freedom of speech and denied access to written language: reading is forbidden, and literature, newspapers, and magazines are systematically destroyed. Language is manipulated not only through explicit prohibitions, but also via its symbolic and religious registers. Biblical phrases are reinterpreted and used to justify repressive practices, allowing the regime to demonstrate total control over meaning. In such a context, the loss of language entails the loss of identity—women are reduced to the functions they perform and the names assigned to them: Handmaid, Wife, Martha. Their individuality and capacity to articulate their own subjectivity are erased.

Atwood challenges both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of language—women in Gilead cannot even think freely, as they lack the vocabulary through which to formulate their thoughts. In this contrast, both authors approach language through the lens of freedom in markedly different ways. Elena Ferrante uses it as a space of self-affirmation, intellectual autonomy, and introspective truth, while Margaret Atwood reveals how language itself can be transformed into an instrument of total subjugation.

Ferrante gives voice to suppressed emotions and intimate traumas, whereas Atwood warns of the danger posed by the loss of language as a means of resistance. Each author, in her own way, affirms Michel Fou-

cault's thesis that discourse is not merely a vehicle for meaning, but also a producer of power—especially if we consider Foucault's understanding of the correlation between power and knowledge, which asserts that knowledge and its discursive manifestations shape power and the space of pure susceptibility to its formation (Butler, 1997, p. 90).

5. Concluding Remarks

In the works of Margaret Atwood and Elena Ferrante, freedom is not presented as a static or universal ideal, but as a complex, multilayered, and deeply contextualized concept that is continuously interrogated through the lens of female experience, language, embodiment, and belonging. In Ferrante's writing, freedom is achieved through processes of self-discovery, education, and a departure from patriarchal patterns deeply rooted in familial, class-based, and cultural structures. In contrast, within Margaret Atwood's dystopian vision, freedom is something already taken—articulated through the loss of voice, identity, and bodily autonomy, which renders the space of resistance all the more vital and subversive. Despite their generic and stylistic differences, both authors construct literary spaces in which freedom is never assumed, but constantly illuminated as a fragile, uncertain, yet necessary possibility—one that is forged through language, memory, writing, and solidarity among women.

The aim of this paper was to examine, through a comparative analysis of the literary worlds of Margaret Atwood and Elena Ferrante, how the concept of freedom is shaped and refracted through female experience, taking into account the social, linguistic, and political contexts in which their protagonists live. Through an analysis of representations of the body, language, marriage, love, and narrative position, it has been shown that freedom, in both authors' work, is not a given category, but a process—one that is continually constructed, threatened, and transformed.

In Ferrante's case, freedom is won by breaking down violent legacies and class constraints. In Atwood's work, freedom emerges as resistance within a space of repression, through the preservation of memory, lan-

guage, and subjectivity. Although they belong to different poetics, both authors articulate a feminist space in which freedom is perceived and cultivated as an active force rather than a given value. The paper demonstrates that literature is a powerful tool not only for analyzing social mechanisms of control, but also for imagining resistance and envisioning emancipatory horizons.

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