TURUN YLIOPISTO

A Human – Never a Person, Always a Product

The Normalization of Atrocity in Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh*

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This thesis examines how the atrocity of cannibalism is normalized in Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh* (2020), a novel that depicts a society in which the consumption of human flesh becomes socially accepted despite its status as a cultural taboo. I argue that manipulative language and institutionalized violence together construct the conditions in which atrocity can be normalized, and that social conformity, the class system and the loss of empathy perpetuate the normalized atrocity. I additionally draw on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), as it offers thematically relevant points of comparison due to its dystopian themes of exploiting humans for one's own gain.

To better understand an individual's capability to create and partake in atrocities, I draw on Albert Bandura's works on moral disengagement, in which he primarily argues that unethical acts are not necessarily done by evil individuals. Rather, different psychological processes and social conditions enable people to disengage morally, which then allows them to cross ethical boundaries.

This thesis demonstrates that the normalization of cannibalism emerges from the connection of linguistic, institutional, and social processes that gradually reshape moral perception. The novel ultimately suggests that extreme violence does not require inherently cruel individuals, but conditions that enable moral disengagement, thereby highlighting the fragility of moral boundaries.

Key words: cannibalism, atrocity, dehumanization, moral disengagement, Agustina Bazterrica

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1 Introduction

Atrocities are rarely accepted immediately; rather, they become normalized through gradual linguistic, institutional and social shifts. One of the most widely recognized forms of atrocity is cannibalism – the consumption of human flesh – due to its status as one of the most significant cultural taboos in Western societies. Cannibalism often functions as a symbol for the collapse of morality, as is depicted in countless forms of media: movies and series of apocalypse and extreme circumstances frame it as what humanity resorts to in the face of survival. In literature, it is often used to critique society throughout history. A notable example of this is Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), in which Swift proposes a satirical solution for the economic hardships in Ireland: the children of the poor people should be sold to the rich English as food. Swift's essay demonstrates how cannibalism can be used to expose and critique the moral limits of society.

This thesis focuses on Agustina Bazterrica's more modern example of this kind of social commentary, as in her novel *Tender Is the Flesh* (2020) society does not resort to cannibalism as a last resort for survival. Although cannibalism is officially justified as a response to a food crisis, Bazterrica portrays this justification with a hint of satire. Mass media promotes the idea that plant-based diets are not enough to sustain a human, even going as far as publishing articles about "the dark side of vegetables" (Bazterrica 2020, 15). With this portrayal, the novel comments on how propaganda and misinformation can normalize extreme practices by presenting them as logical solutions.

Tender Is the Flesh, originally published in Spanish as *Cadáver exquisito* (2017) and translated into English by Sarah Moses in 2020, presents a world in which a mysterious virus turns animals lethal to humans. When produced antidotes and vaccines do not work, humanity results in eradicating all creatures that they are able to get their hands on. This creates a meat shaped hole within society, one that gets quickly filled with what is left to replace it: human meat. The people at the bottom of society's hierarchy – immigrants, the marginalized and the poor – start disappearing and incidents of cannibalism appear on the news. Eventually, to satisfy humanity's enduring craving for meat, a law passes that allows the breeding of humans as animals for consumption. Protests get drowned under the following:

> Professors and researchers at prestigious universities claimed that animal protein was necessary to live, doctors confirmed that plant protein didn't contain all the essential amino acids, experts assured that methane emissions from cattle had been reduced but

> malnutrition was on the rise, magazines published articles on the dark side of vegetables. (Bazterrica 2020, 15)

With this, society's radical shift from carnism to cannibalism – called the "Transition" – is complete. However, in order for cannibalism to become socially acceptable, humans bred for consumption must first be redefined; society begins referring to them as "head". As observed by the novel's protagonist and narrator, Marcos, society has adopted "technical words to refer to what is a human but will never be a person, to what is always a product" (Bazterrica 2020, 16). This distinction between being biologically human and being socially recognized as a person is at the core of the novel's depiction of normalized atrocity.

The novel follows Marcos Tejo, a man grieving the loss of his infant son, a broken marriage and a severely sick father. Marcos is a high-ranking employee at a processing plant that has been converted into a slaughterhouse for the head. He is responsible for overseeing routine operations as well as the supply and distribution of the meat. His narration provides insight on the functioning of his society, as well as the mindset of an individual who actively participates in atrocity. Marcos offers an especially interesting narrative, as he is unable to continue consuming human meat after the death of his son, yet remains in a central position in the system that produces it.

In this thesis, I study how the atrocity of cannibalism is normalized in Basterrica's fictional world and explore how society accepts and rationalizes its transition from animal to human meat. This study is relevant as the focus is not on the horror of cannibalism itself, but on what it reveals about societies willingness and capability to create and adapt to atrocious circumstances. The novel's depiction of society's desire for meat and the lengths people are willing to go to obtain it functions as a way to examine the broader mechanisms of how humanity bends their morals in order to justify unethical behaviour and practices.

To support my analysis, I compare *Tender Is the Flesh* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* ([1985] 1996), another dystopian novel that exaggerates current societal issues – such as women's rights and abortion laws – in such a plausible way that it horrifies. In *The Handmaid's Tale,* infertility has become an issue worldwide and The United States has been overthrown by a new government, Gilead. Fertile women are hunted down and forced to serve as Handmaids to influential families of the new society. Both novels explore societies that commit atrocities in order to attain something they desire: In *Tender Is the Flesh*, humans are consumed as meat, while in *The Handmaid's Tale*, fertile women are forced to bear

children for the elite. In both cases, individuals are treated as products rather than persons, either literally, as in Bazterrica's world, or figuratively, as in Atwood's.

To further help understand how individuals are able to accept and actively participate in atrocities, I draw on Albert Bandura's works on moral disengagement. He explains how harmful practices become acceptable through mechanisms such as moral justification, euphemistic language, diffusion of responsibility, and dehumanization. Bandura (2002, 109) emphasizes that atrocities emerge not from inherently evil individuals but from social conditions that enable ordinary people to disengage morally. The society in *Tender Is the Flesh* undergoes precisely this process, which is a key factor in the possible normalization of cannibalism.

My study is divided into two main sections: the construction and the perpetuation. In the construction section, I argue that manipulative language and institutionalized violence together build the conditions in which cannibalism can be normalized. In the perpetuation section, I argue that social conformity, the class system, and the loss of empathy are what uphold this norm. Finally, I conclude that all of these mechanisms together constitute the normalization of atrocity and offer insight into how society can come to accept circumstances and practices that can be considered ethically wrong.

2 The Construction

In this section, I examine how the conditions in which the normalization of atrocity becomes possible are constructed. Bandura (2002, 116) observes that

> societies cannot rely entirely on individuals, however righteous their moral standards, to provide safeguards against human cruelty. Civilised life requires, in addition to humane personal codes, social systems that uphold compassionate behaviour and renounce cruelty.

When these social systems fail, or as in the case of *Tender Is the Flesh*, when they deliberately promote cruelty, the conditions for the normalization of atrocity are built.

First, I will discuss how the manipulative language introduced by the government functions as a tool to desensitize the public to the idea of cannibalism. Moral perception is reshaped with euphemisms, animal terminology and prohibitions: they dehumanize the head, normalize the consumption of human meat, and blur individuals' ethical boundaries.

After this, I will discuss how the novel depicts a system of institutionalized violence: structured harm that is legitimized with law and authority. The institutions in *Tender Is the Flesh* do not simply enforce cruelty; they also rationalize it, distribute responsibility, and transform brutality into routine.

2.1 Manipulative Language

Language functions like a moral anaesthetic in *Tender Is the Flesh*: it allows a society built on human consumption to perceive its actions as ordinary. As Marcos observes early in the novel: "There are words that are convenient, hygienic. Legal" (Bazterrica 2020, 11). This remark captures the role manipulative language plays in creating the foundation for the possible normalization of cannibalism. For society, it is more convenient and "hygienic" to describe cannibalism and all that participating in it contains through sanitized terminology. The government reinforces this process by regulating language itself, legally prohibiting words that would reveal the true nature of the practice and therefore preventing society from being reminded of what their new diet actually entails.

2.1.1 Dehumanization through Language

For society to be able to accept the consumption of human flesh, it must first differentiate the consumable humans from itself. In *Tender Is the Flesh*, this separation is achieved through a process of dehumanization that reclassifies humans bred for consumption as "head". Bandura (1999, 200) notes that "social practices that divide people into ingroup and outgroup members produce human estrangement that fosters dehumanization". By classifying the head in a different category from the rest of society, individuals can distance themselves morally from those who are consumed. Dehumanization thus has a central role in the enabling of atrocities.

Haslam (2006, 256–257) proposes that there are two distinct types of humanness, and therefore two types of dehumanization depending on which type of humanness is denied from an individual. The society in *Tender Is the Flesh* employs what Haslam calls animalistic dehumanization, the result of a person being deprived of characteristics that Haslam calls "uniquely human" (ibid.). These characteristics – such as civility, moral sensibility, and higher cognition – are instead seen as being ruled by instincts and appetites rather than reason (ibid.). As Haslam explains, those denied uniquely human traits are seen as lacking refinement and moral capacity, and as being driven primarily by basic impulses (ibid.).

Haslam's concept of animalistic dehumanization illuminates the treatment of the head in *Tender Is the Flesh*, as they are not just simply reduced to consumable objects, but are presented as lacking the qualities that would make violence against them morally troubling. By denying them rationality, moral awareness, and individuality, society is able to view the head as closer to livestock, rather than people. In doing so, the novel demonstrates how animalistic dehumanization enables atrocity: once the head are perceived as being driven by their instincts and as morally inferior, society is able to accept their slaughter the same way that they accepted the slaughter of animals before.

In *Tender Is the Flesh,* this animalistic dehumanization operates primarily through euphemisms, animal terminology and the control of language by the government. Institutional euphemisms sanitize killing, and lexical transference of animal terms for humans erases the distinction between species. The government decides what is allowed and what is illegal. These linguistic practices collectively dehumanize the head and allow atrocity to appear normal.

2.1.2 Euphemisms, Animal Terminology and Control

In Bazterrica's dystopia, euphemistic language is consistently used to obscure violence. Additionally, and as noted by Bandura (1999, 195), the use of euphemisms can make harmful conduct appear respectable and reduce an individual's feeling of personal responsibility. The humans bred for slaughter are referred to as "head", a term that is usually used in the context of cattle. This creates the first gap between the consumer and the consumed. Human meat is then branded as "special meat". Black markets are filled with cheaper meat obtained illegally from individuals that are recognized as persons. This kind of meat's origin is never explicitly identified as human, but is instead marketed as "meat with a first and last name" (Bazterrrica 2020, 41), which further linguistically obscures its true source. Doctors who treat sick head are referred to as "specialists", a label that allows them to maintain a distinction between treating a person and treating a head, even though the treated bodies do not biologically differ from each other.

Even crimes committed against the head are framed to fit the new narrative. The rape of a head is officially described as the victim having been "enjoyed", and the police intervene only under "destruction of movable property" (Bazterrica 2020, 62). This can be compared to *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the rape of a handmaid is called "the Ceremony", to frame it as a holy ritual for reproduction instead of a crime. The public executions of people that have broken Gilead's law are called "the Salvagings". Gilead employs the same strategy of masking their morally reprehensible acts behind sanitising language.

The novel's dehumanizing language is reinforced by the use of animalistic terminology in regards to the head. The head are directly referred to as "animals" by multiple characters throughout the novel, an act that has become normal after the successful dehumanisation of the head. Gendered terminology also contributes to the erasure of humanity: the head are called "males" and "females", terms that are typically reserved for animals, rather than "men" or "women".

Similarly, the terminology of body parts is likened to the language of animal butchery. The society in the novel refers to cuts of human flesh as "front" or "hind" extremities, terms that are familiar to them from buying animal meat. This moment is significant, as it illustrates how society begins to further build on the linguistic framework imposed by the government, essentially doing the work of normalizing cannibalism on its behalf. Following this event,

Marcos notes: “The industry took this as permission and started to label products with these euphemisms that nullified all horror” (Bazterrica 2020, 43).

The language in *Tender Is the Flesh* is not only shaped but heavily controlled. Bandura (2002, 116) notes that “political systems that exercise tight control over communication can more easily promote moral disengagement.”. State regulations forbid calling the head humans. The word cannibalism is banned, which prevents society from being able to properly articulate the occurring atrocity. With this, official vocabulary becomes the only vocabulary.

This control extends even beyond laws: the vocal cords of the head are removed, stripping them of the possibility of speech. The restriction of voice, both literal and metaphorical, ensures that only the state’s language is used. Through such linguistic practices, the humanity of the head is further erased and violence against them becomes thinkable and permissible.

2.1.3 Internalization: Marcos and Linguistic Dissonance

While the institutional vocabulary shows how much desensitization has spread within society, Bazterrica also illustrates how this language influences individual thought. Marcos, who narrates the novel, reveals the psychological tension between the official terms he is expected to use and his own moral awareness.

A significant moment in the novel occurs when Marcos is gifted a female head by a business partner. Marcos goes on to treat the female as a nuisance, like an unwanted pet, abandoning her in a barn and providing her with the bare minimum for survival. During the novel, Marcos’ narration shifts between calling the captive head “the female” and “the woman”, marking moments where his struggle to internalize the official language shows. His shifting language reveals how deeply the official dehumanizing vocabulary has shaped his thinking: moral clarity appears at times, but he is unable – or unwilling – to maintain it.

Later in the novel, Marcos momentarily restores the female head’s humanity by giving her a name: Jasmine. By doing this Marcos gives her individuality and acknowledges her as a person. However, when Jasmine becomes pregnant, Marcos refers to the unborn child as “his child”, as if Jasmine was nothing more than a surrogate. Despite going against the system and trying to teach Jasmine to live like his equal, his use of language illustrates how the government’s dehumanizing framework still shapes his thinking.

2.2 Institutionalized Violence

In addition to the government's use of manipulative language, which linguistically obscures the horror of cannibalism, the government also normalizes violence through institutional and systemic practices. The government presents cannibalism as a social necessity, as if it were a solution to a crisis rather than an ethical failure. The slaughter of humans is made into a legal form of employment, which ensures that systemic violence becomes an indispensable, yet invisible part of everyday life.

The government implements cannibalism in the legal system itself; a person can be sentenced in the court of law to the Municipal Slaughterhouse to be slaughtered and processed as meat. Marcos notes on numerous occasions throughout the novel of different instances of people breaking the law, that all end in them being sent to the Municipal Slaughterhouse. He even fears that fate for himself, for the crimes of "enjoying" Jasmine and impregnating her.

Institutionalized violence in the novel is not limited to government policy; it also appears through other institutions that help legitimize harm. An example of this is the Church of Immolation, a religious group whose members come to processing plants to sacrifice themselves, believing that it will save the planet. Instead of forbidding this practice, the government negotiates with the church and eventually incorporates it into the system. As Marcos notes, the church succeeded in this only after an influential member that had "high-ranking contacts and a lot of means" joined the church (Bazterrica 2020, 140). This shows how institutional power instead of ethical reasoning determines what kinds of violence become acceptable.

Processing plants that agree to receive the church's members are given tax breaks from the government, which turns the practice into a regulated part of the economy. With a "certificate for consumption", which is required from those who wish to be immolated, human sacrifice is turned into a legitimate economic transaction. With this, an act that would ordinarily be seen as atrocious becomes officially organized and approved.

The importance of the arrangement between the government and the Church of Immolation is made clear: when the Church of Immolation – who is described by Marcos to be "a group of lunatics who jeopardized the whole false structure built around the legitimization of cannibalism" (Bazterrica 2020, 140) – is integrated into the system, it eliminates a potential threat to its stability. If a person with "a first and last name" can be processed legally, the line

between citizen and product is erased. By regulating rather than rejecting these practices, the government ensures that violence remains orderly and unquestioned, and in doing so reinforces the system that normalizes atrocity.

The infrastructure of Bazterrica's fictional world makes atrocities routine and simultaneously distributes the responsibility for the acts in such a way that their moral weight disappears from individuals. Bandura (2002, 107) speaks of how "responsibility can be diffused by the division of labour" and how these subdivided tasks then seem less harmful to the individual performing them. He argues that the individual's attention is directed to the details of their specific job, and away from the actual meaning of their actions (ibid.).

This is demonstrated in the novel when Marcos recalls an episode in which a member of the Church of Immolation, Claudia Ramos, came to the processing plant to be immolated. Marcos, due to being distracted by the news of Jasmine being pregnant, handles Claudia carelessly, skipping the usual procedure in which the church member wishing to be immolated is given a tranquiliser without their knowledge. Instead, Marcos takes her straight to the area of the processing plant where the head are stunned and then drained of blood. Although Claudia is legally a citizen and not a head, the employees handle her according to the plant's established routine: an employee at the processing plant grabs her "as though she were an animal", attempts to undress her for stunning, and does not care that she is frightened (Bazterrica 2020, 142). When this causes Claudia to panic and run away, shouting "I don't wanna die", the employees do not respond with concern, but instead with irritation at the disruption of routine (ibid.). The employees' reaction reveals how deeply violence has been absorbed into the institutional procedure at the plants.

While running, Claudia comes across a lot of head arriving at the plant, and begins pleading for the employees not to "kill us" (ibid.). Claudia aligning herself with the incoming head exposes how thoroughly the system erases the line between person and product. She is then stunned by an employee with the same professional manner that is used on all of the head, and her body is dumped outside of the fences of the processing plant. The episode illustrates how institutional routine overrides moral thought and action: within the plant's violent system, even an individual who is legally equal to the employees is treated and processed as meat without hesitation.

The government further legitimizes cannibalism and the violence that comes with integrating it into society by giving these practices a higher purpose. Bandura (1999, 196) speaks of "advantageous comparison", a physiological mechanism used to disengage moral control, in which an individual gives their harmful conduct a high moral purpose. By doing this, they "eliminate self-censure" and gain "self-approval in the service of destructive exploits" (ibid.). Employees at processing plants are able to rely on the belief that their work provides much-needed food for society. Parents, in turn, can convince themselves that they are providing their children with nutritious meals that a meatless diet supposedly could not sustain. Although cannibalism is officially presented as a response to the food shortage, Di Minico (2025, 167) observes that "society solved the food problem, poverty, and overpopulation with one horrific solution". In this way, even the government that legalized cannibalism can frame its actions as addressing broader societal crises rather than merely responding to a supposed food shortage.

The mechanism of advantageous comparison is also present in *The Handmaid's Tale*: powerful members of society overlook imprisonment, rape, and brutal oppression, as they view these acts as a part of a noble mission to secure children. Gilead justifies its overthrow of the United States government through the goal of "saving humanity". America is portrayed as polluted and corrupt, while Gilead promises a cleaner, more orderly society that can provide concrete results, such as an increase in births. This presumed noble purpose allows citizens and leaders to rationalize the sexual assaults of the Handmaids and the broader violence and oppression within the new society structure.

3 The Perpetuation

While *Tender Is the Flesh* constructs the conditions for normalized atrocity through manipulative language and institutionalized violence, what ultimately sustains this system is society's everyday participation in it. Contrary to what one might assume, the capability to create, partake in or accept atrocities does not require an inherently evil individual. Bandura argues that "it requires conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people to produce atrocious deeds" (2002, 109). When harmful practices become a part of daily life, ordinary individuals can become capable of extraordinary cruelty (ibid.).

In Bazterrica's dystopia, social conformity, class hierarchy, and the loss of empathy operate together to uphold the practice of human consumption. Atrocity persists not only through state power but through routine social interactions, economic inequality, and the emotional numbing required for survival. Bandura notes that "people are producers as well as products of social systems" (2002, 116), meaning that the structures that normalize violence shape individual behaviour. Individuals, however, also produce and reinforce those structures by conforming, complying, or disengaging morally.

Thus, once the framework for cannibalism is in place, its continuation depends on a set of social and psychological processes. Social rituals reinforce conformity, class divisions determine whose lives are devalued, and the loss of empathy further strengthens the system of violence. Together, these dynamics maintain a society in which atrocity is not only possible but routine.

In this chapter, I will first discuss how social conformity retains cannibalism as a normal, everyday occurrence, rather than an atrocity. Then I will discuss how the class system redefines the value of an individual's body and how cannibalism becomes tied to status. Finally, I will discuss how the loss of empathy functions as a cycle of society trying to survive by feeling less, but in doing so stabilising the on-going atrocity.

3.1 Social Conformity

Social conformity plays a crucial role in normalizing cannibalism in *Tender Is the Flesh*. The pressure to fit in encourages individuals to ignore the true nature of atrocities and to follow norms that enable them. In turn, abiding by these norms reinforces and strengthens the

system. As Bandura notes, “where everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible” (2002, 107); collective participation diminishes an individual’s moral accountability.

In Bazterrica’s society, consuming “special meat” is an established social expectation, and deviating from this expectation marks one as abnormal. Eating human meat is an inherent part of everyday social rituals, such as dinner parties or lunch breaks, where partaking in it is viewed not only as normal but also as polite. The desire to belong outweighs ethical discomfort, turning cannibalism into a way to express solidarity rather than a source of moral conflict.

Marcos repeatedly encounters situations that test his moral boundaries. When giving a tour of the processing plant to a potential business partner, he is offered a sandwich made of child meat, which is considered to be “the most tender” (Bazterrica 2020, 33). His refusal is met with surprised looks; no one would usually decline such a luxury. Though he faces no direct consequences because of his professional status, the reactions he receives signal that he has deviated from the norm. A similar dynamic occurs when Marcos tells his sister, Marisa, that he does not eat meat. Her confusion quickly turns into questioning, causing him to lie and attribute his refusal to health reasons. Marcos does not want to bring up his moral objections, as it is a topic that is collectively refused to be confronted by society.

Alongside cannibalism, other new norms take place in society as well. Marcos and Marisa often argue about his refusal to use an umbrella outdoors, something that is an essential accessory in the city due to the fear that bird excrement might be lethal. Marcos dismisses this as urban paranoia, but Marisa is visibly anxious that neighbors may see her with someone that ignores this norm. Her discomfort demonstrates how conformity functions not only as a desire for belonging but also as a defense against social judgment.

Apart from social exclusion, rejecting the norm of cannibalism also threatens something deeper: if the majority were to see special meat as what it truly is – human flesh – those who abided by the norm are forced to confront their own immoral acts. Social conformity therefore protects individuals from having to acknowledge the moral consequences of their actions by maintaining collective denial within society.

As cannibalism is a social norm, individuals can rely on this as a justification for their morally questionable actions. As Bandura (1999, 194) notes:

> People do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. In this process of moral justification, detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes. People then can act on a moral imperative and preserve their view of themselves as moral agents while inflicting harm on others.

As cannibalism has become a norm with the reason being attributed to the solving of the food crisis, people can depend on this norm. With this, an individual's moral justification becomes relied on the thought "everyone else does it" and on cannibalism being necessary, legal and normal.

Society's refusal to confront the moral implications of their everyday participation in atrocity does not necessarily come from a place of evil. Society has not concisely chosen cruelty, instead, it has ceased to think critically about their actions. In her study of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi official responsible for organizing the logistics of the Holocaust, Hannah Arendt examines how ordinary individuals can participate in immense crimes. Arendt ([1963] 1976, 287–288), while discussing how Eichmann was inclined to "become one of the greatest criminals of that period", introduces the concept of "thoughtlessness", emphasizing that "[h]e was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity". Arendt (ibid.) describes Eichmann's evil as "banal", not because his crimes were ordinary, but because he committed them without reflection. His actions were the product of this "thoughtlessness", a failure to distinguish between obedience and morality. In *Tender Is the Flesh*, the normalization of cannibalism similarly depends on this absence of thought: workers and citizens comply with the system without confronting its ethical reality.

Arendt's remarks on the dangers of thoughtlessness highlight how atrocity can persist not through chosen cruelty, but through mindless conformity. She observes that "such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man" (ibid.). Bergen (1998, 12) emphasizes that, according to Arendt, the boundary between moral and immoral action is located in "the fragile banalities of who we think we are and what we think we are doing". When individuals cease to critically think about their morally questionable acts and how these acts reflect them as a person, harmful norms can become accepted as ordinary. With this, the normalization of cannibalism in *Tender Is the Flesh* is sustained through everyday participation that goes unquestioned.

3.2 The Class System

In *Tender Is the Flesh*, cannibalism also functions as a sign of social and economic inequality. Only the wealthy can afford high-quality meat from butcher shops or keep a head of their own in their homes, while others rely on cheaper black-market meat, that's origins are unknown. Cannibalism becomes tied to social status: the more money one has, the better and "safer" meat they can consume. This economic hierarchy helps normalize the practice, as it becomes part of everyday class distinction.

Class also shapes who are seen as disposable. After the eradication of animals, the immigrants, the marginalized and the poor become the new bottom of society's hierarchy. Marcos recalls that the first news of cannibalism was a scandal in which "two unemployed Bolivians" were killed and eaten by their neighbors, reinforcing the idea that "meat is meat, it doesn't matter where it's from" (Bazterrica 2020, 14). Following this incident, some countries began persecuting and slaughtering immigrants, illustrating how those who are already devalued are the first to be consumed.

In *The Handmaid's Tale,* the same kind of biopolitical hierarchisation is employed to ensure the continuation of the ongoing atrocity. At the very top of the social hierarchy are the Commanders and their wives, while Handmaids occupy a lower but still valued position due to their fertility. At the very bottom of the hierarchy are the Unwomen; women who are unable to provide children, are disobedient or otherwise unuseful. The Unwomen are sent to the Colonies to clean up toxic waste, an unsurvivable fate due to the lack of protective attire. With the threat of the Colonies, Gilead keeps its society in a desperate need to achieve or maintain a higher position in society, which ultimately sustains its regime.

As the head have essentially become the new animals, the lowest tier of society is occupied by the Scavengers, who Di Minico (2025, 167) aptly describes as "[t]he poorest citizens, who clearly do not have the power to literally and metaphorically have a seat at the table." Living on the outskirts of processing plants, they receive meat that is unsaleable, and are seen as "outcasts" and "undesirables" by society (Bazterrica 2020, 141). Due to their status as being of no value, it is even considered beneath oneself to be consumed by a Scavenger. Marcos notes how the sacrificed members of the Church of Immolation cannot be told that their body will be consumed by Scavengers. This further highlights the role of the class system in regards to the consumption of other people: social status not only determines the quality of

meat one is able to consume but also dictates who is deemed worthy of consuming whose body.

3.3 The Loss of Empathy

Constant exposure to atrocious circumstances consumes an individual's capacity for empathy and moral reasoning. In the novel, the loss of empathy is presented as a result and as a condition for survival in a society that actively participates in atrocities. Linguistic manipulation and violent routines force individuals to detach emotionally in order to survive within the system. A vicious cycle is created, in which the decline in empathy is a consequence of the horrific circumstances, but at the same time it further stabilizes the normalization of atrocities.

The decline of empathy that occurs within society can be partly explained with Bandura's (2002, 110) description of moral disengagement as a gradual process rather than a sudden shift. He explains that individuals "initially perform mildly harmful acts they can tolerate with some discomfort", but repeated participation eventually dulls self-censure to the point that practices once regarded as abhorrent "become thoughtlessly routinised" (ibid.). Over time, this cognitive distancing results in ethical desensitization: individuals cease to feel moral outrage or empathy, ensuring the system's stability. This process is illustrated in the novel's depiction of butcher shops after human meat becomes legal. Initially, customers approach these shops with hesitation and shame, with the rich even sending a servant on their behalf. But as Marcos notes, the disgust quickly fades as time passes:

> The maids picked up the meat, disgusted and confused, and always clarified that they'd been sent by the man or woman they worked for, as if doing so were necessary […] and the maids always came back for more, with increasing confidence, until finally they stopped giving explanations. (Bazterrica 2020, 41–42)

Once society has gone through the process of disengaging morally, individuals capacity for empathy is significantly affected. One of the most striking examples of this occurs at the end of the novel, when Marcos' captive head, Jasmine, gives birth. Marcos, panicked, calls his wife Cecilia to assist with the delivery. After the baby is born, Jasmine desperately tries to hold her son, but she is coldly ignored by both Marcos and Cecilia. When Cecilia leaves the room with the child, Marcos follows the procedure that he witnesses daily at the processing plant: first calming Jasmine, then striking her with a club. Cecilia enters moments later and is horrified, not by the violence, but by the waste of potential, as "she could have given us more

children" (Bazterrica 2020, 219). There is no empathy for Jasmine, who has been rendered back to the status of an animal after fulfilling her purpose.

Di Minico (2025, 169) speaks of the usefulness of a human body, and draws a relevant parallel of *The Handmaid's Tale* to the case of Jasmine: "If it does not provide benefits or has already completed some required duties (e.g., work, pregnancies, etc.), it is useless, like the bodies of the Non-women in *The Handmaid's Tale*". Just like the Unwomen who are sent to the Colonies to die from toxic waste as a punishment for being useless in Gilead's society, Jasmine is killed after becoming useless in Marcos' eyes after giving birth to his son. Both of the novels' societies portray a lack of empathy, depicting societies that tie a human being's value on to the ability of them being able to provide something that society desires.

A similar lack of empathy appears earlier in the novel when the Scavengers overturn a cage trailer, killing dozens of head and the trailer's driver. The employees at the processing plant view the deaths of the head merely as a financial loss, while the death of the driver is described as horrific. If the driver had been naked, and if the head still had their vocal cords, an outsider could not have differentiated them from each other in the midst of the massacre. The scene was concrete evidence of the likeness between the head and humans, yet only the driver's death is considered tragic. Emotional disengagement is so complete that even direct evidence of the humanity of the head cannot elicit empathy for them.

This inability to feel the same amount of empathy for the head and the driver can be attributed to the reality that the head have been morally excluded by society. Opotow (1990, 1) describes moral exclusion to occur when

> individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving; consequently, harming them appears acceptable, appropriate, or just.

Society views the head as something that would be abnormal to feel the same empathy as for humans. Opotow (1990, 3) goes on to introduce the term "scope of justice", by which she means an individual's "boundary of fairness". Moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply only to those that the individual includes within this boundary (ibid.). For the atrocity of cannibalism to be able to happen, society must exclude the humans being eaten from their scope of justice. This is supported by Opotow's (1990, 5–6) remark about how an individual's scope of justice is defined: "one's scope of justice is largely determined by the

prevailing social order, which defines both our relationships with others and our beliefs about their entitlements". In other words, by socially excluding the heads from the scope of justice, society justifies their mistreatment and ensures that cruelty towards them can be perceived as normal. This demonstrates how social structures shape an individual's capacity to commit or condone atrocities.

The loss of empathy can be argued to be the final nail in the coffin that ensures that the on-going atrocity persists. As Di Minico (2025, 173) suggests, the dystopian conditions depicted in the novel could only be resisted through empathy and the recognition of marginalized others, whose humanity the system seeks to erase. Without this, the inability to view the head as persons is finalized, which allows their suffering to become morally insignificant to society. Without empathy, atrocity can persist even under the most blatantly cruel conditions.

4 Conclusion

This thesis has examined how the normalization of cannibalism in *Tender Is the Flesh* is constructed and sustained through a combination of linguistic, institutional, and social mechanisms. The analysis has shown that manipulative language and institutionalized violence first create the conditions in which atrocity is able to form, while social conformity, the class system, and the loss of empathy ensure its continuation. Together, these processes demonstrate that the acceptance of extreme practices requires different kinds of social systems and physiological processes, rather than inherently evil people.

By drawing on Bandura's theory of moral disengagement, this study has highlighted how individuals are able to participate in harmful practices without perceiving themselves as immoral. Euphemistic language obscures violence, institutional structures legitimize and routinize brutality, and social dynamics reinforce compliance. Additionally, Arendt's concept of thoughtlessness helps explain how this participation is sustained not through deliberate cruelty, but an individual's failure to critically think about their own actions. With this, the novel illustrates how ordinary individuals can become complicit in atrocities when the surrounding structures enable and normalize them.

The comparison with *The Handmaid's Tale* further demonstrates that such mechanisms are not unique to Bazterrica's fictional world. In both novels, human beings are reduced to their functional value, and violence is justified through appeals to necessity or a higher purpose. These parallels emphasize how easily ethical boundaries can be reshaped when social systems reward compliance and discourage moral reflection.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that what is most disturbing is not the act of cannibalism itself, but how easily it becomes integrated in the ordinary structures of society. As Di Minico (2025, 172) observes, it becomes "easier to imagine the end of cannibalism as a taboo than the end of the meat industry". *Tender Is the Flesh* does not simply depict an extreme dystopia, but prompts reflection on the mechanisms that already exist within society, which opens up possibilities for further research into how these same mechanisms may operate beyond fiction. By presenting the normalization of atrocity in such a believable way, the novel challenges readers to truly think about the fragility of their moral boundaries, or more importantly, the conditions under which they may be redefined.

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