

# The War of the Sexes:

Power Hierarchy and Gendered Oppression in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Alderman's *The Power*

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# Abstract

This thesis explores the conditions that constitute and uphold the power hierarchy between the sexes, as emphasized by the two novels *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Power* by Naomi Alderman. Both belonging to the genre of dystopian speculative fiction, the novels depict regimes that may serve as feminist criticisms of oppression and physical violation of women in our contemporary, patriarchal society. This thesis will examine the ways in which the novels conduct their social criticism through a close reading of the narrators' emphasis, character development, symbolism and allusions to significant biblical and other literary references. My thesis discusses how both novels call attention to the way Christian ideology advocates and upholds patriarchal gender norms and power hierarchies, and how rape and the threat of rape serve to uphold the power dynamic between the sexes. Furthermore, attention is given to how embedded power is in human relations and how power is ascribed in relation to the construction of our societal structures. To what extent may one argue that it is the socially constructed patriarchal gender norms that uphold the power hierarchy of the sexes, juxtaposed with how biological differences between men and women arguably uphold this power hierarchy in a different manner? Do physical biological differences constitute an unchangeable power dynamic between the sexes, or can we imagine ourselves differently by placing less value on the capacity for violence?

The motivation behind this study is an aspiration to explore ideas that uphold gender norms and sexual difference and to show how these perceptions prevent progress towards the equality of the sexes. This thesis will argue that gender norms and androcentric perceptions about power create and uphold the power hierarchy between the sexes and, thus, the continuation of the pitting of sex against sex; furthering the war between the sexes through the insistence on a dynamic of the oppressor and the oppressed.



# Acknowledgements

The process of writing this thesis, although frustrating in the beginning, has ultimately been very rewarding. The topic of my thesis is something I am very passionate about and my research and writing have both strengthened my passion and increased my understanding and awareness. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Nils Axel Nissen, for his invaluable feedback and words of encouragement throughout the process and for his participation in our light-hearted conversations. A big thank you to my partner, Vigdis, whose mutual passion, moral support and words of encouragement I am much appreciative. I also thank my mother and grandmother for their interest and support and my band for giving me the much-needed break of something different to focus on entirely. I would also like to thank The English Department for offering inspiring courses on minority literature; acknowledging Nils Axel Nissen for his historical contribution thereto. On this matter, I want to particularly thank Ass. Professor Rebecca Scherr, whose feedback and encouragement helped me grow as a writer and whose teaching inspired me to write my thesis on the topic of patriarchal oppression of women. Finally, a special thanks to my little pug, who has been an excellent headrest throughout my writing.





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# Introduction

‘The dystopian society I proposed would contain no feature that human beings had not already put into practice, somewhere, sometime. . .’ (Atwood n.pag.). So go Margaret Atwood’s own words describing the conditions she set for her construction of the Gileadean society in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. A theocratic state that exercises complete control over its citizens, it is a regime that above all oppresses women and justifies this oppression by the claim that a woman’s place is in subordination to man. Women are still oppressed and violated all over the world today simply *because* they are women. The question of which societal structures constitute and uphold this oppression is what I wished to investigate in my thesis. Thus, it was the realism of the horror portrayed in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and its continued relevance for societal criticism, that made it an obvious choice as a primary text to examine here. Atwood has assured her readers on many occasions that she did not make anything up. Not just addressing the persistence of the female oppression, the novel shows great emphasis on the ideology that lies behind it and that which sustains it. Atwood’s message concludes: ‘What’s my next hope for this book? The same hope it’s always been. I hope that *The Handmaid’s Tale* will remain between its covers; that it will not become a reality. Any more than it already is’ (Atwood n.pag.).

The edition of the novel I will use for my analysis, that includes this message, was published in 2016: the same year the production of the Hulu TV adaption of the novel began. Widely successful, the TV adaption has become an inspiration for women fighting against oppression worldwide. The Handmaids’ outfit, red cloaks accompanied by a big, white bonnet obscuring the women’s face, has emerged as a prominent feminist symbol over the last few years, as they are worn by women protesting governmental restriction of women’s autonomy and control over their own bodies in countries all over the world. 2016 was also the year of the election of Donald Trump, whose sexism is all too familiar and who has been the subject of several ‘Handmaid’s Tale’ inspired protests. In the light of Trump’s victory, Atwood asserts her views on the continued relevance of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s societal criticism by repeating the words of the cast and crew of the novel’s TV adaption the day after the election: ‘We’re no longer making a fantasy tale, we’re making a documentary’ (Kay).

When searching for a primary text to study alongside *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I found that Naomi Alderman’s *The Power* would be a suitable choice: both because of the novels’ similarities in genre and thematic emphasis, but also because of the differences in approach

and perspective they offer. While *The Handmaid's Tale* thoroughly accounts for various forms of oppression of women conducted by patriarchal societies, *The Power* gives this issue additional emphasis by imagining men as victims of the same oppression women used to be victims of before 'the power' rose in them; flipping the hierarchy of the sexes, but revealing the prevalence of similar structures of power. As well as complementing each other well in terms of the perspectives from which the societal criticism is offered, the novels' difference in familiarity also made it an interesting pairing. I found it motivational to include a more recently published and, thus, less explored novel compared to *The Handmaid's Tale*, which at present has been extensively analysed by many scholars. Moreover, it is worth a mention that *The Power* sprung out of Atwood and Alderman's mentor and protégé relationship in the Rolex Arts Initiative in 2012-2013 (Rolex Mentor and Protégé), acknowledging the connection between the two authors. As a result of this relationship, Alderman has dedicated *The Power* to Atwood, whose mentorship Alderman asserts as having been invaluable (Alderman 340) and which is reflected in the similarities between the authors' political emphasis and feminist agenda.

The novels combined offer interesting social criticisms of all the aspects of gendered oppression and power relations in contemporary patriarchal societies that I wished to investigate further for my thesis. They both place emphasis on religious influence on the justifications for normative gender ideology and power dynamics between the sexes and offer criticism of the cultural upholding of gender stereotypes and perceptions on rape and sexual violation of women. *The Power*, additionally, in Atwood's words '[M]akes us rethink a number of our assumptions about gender and human nature, and about how much more wonderful the world would be if it were ruled by women' (Rolex Mentor and Protégé). *The Power* considers questions like: Are women naturally more peaceful than men and is this a matter of biological differences or prescribed behaviour? Is the position of having power connected to having the physical capability for strength and dominance, ascribed according to societal gender norms, or a combination of both? Appropriate for the societal criticism they call attention to, both novels are written within the genre of dystopian speculative fiction. However, a significant difference between the two novels is the level of realism they contain. While Atwood's dystopia bears no element of science fiction, which distinguishes it from other novels following the dystopian tradition, Alderman's dystopia depicts a world where women's biology has evolved so that they now have an additional organ which transmits electricity. It is this biological modification that allows Alderman to conduct the thought

experiment that addresses the questions above. Liberating women from the role of victim that they have often inhabited, Alderman challenges us to critically consider the significance of the biologically determined physical difference between men and women juxtaposed with gender norms that prescribe behaviour and convey power.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the near future of the time of its writing, where the United States has been overturned and become the Republic of Gilead: a theocratic state with a totalitarian regime. Through the narrator, Offred, the reader is given insight into her experiences of being situated in a society that exercises complete control over its citizens: women being the greatest victims of its totalitarianism. As a response to the recent fertility crisis, a woman's value is reduced to her reproductive abilities, and as a Handmaid, Offred's sole purpose is to breed children for couples of the highest rank; robbed of all self-autonomy and power over her own life. Gilead is a regime where the ones on top have power over those at the bottom. The women who have control, however, only have control over other women, thus, furthering the regime's patriarchal agenda. The women with no power are either forced into their role as Handmaids if fertile, or otherwise sent to work with toxic waste in the Colonies or as prostitutes at Jezebel's. The state of powerlessness is given much emphasis in the novel through Offred's narration and her desire to regain some of what she has lost.

The main narrative in *The Power*, however, calls attention to the enticement of possessing power. The novel depicts a series of events set in our contemporary time, organized into chapters counting down from 'ten years to go' to 'here it comes' to what Alderman has called 'the Cataclysm'. As we learn from the email exchange between Neil and Naomi set 5000 years into the future, making up the framing narrative, 'the Cataclysm' was a global war resulting in massive destruction and giving rise to a new world where women have become the more powerful sex. The main narrative takes the reader on a journey from the beginning of the rise of power in women and throughout the years that depicts how the women grow stronger and more powerful and, consequently, how they challenge men's former physical dominance. It all begins with a growing number of young women realizing they had developed an electrical skein beneath their collarbone, which can transmit electricity. Difficult to control at first, they gradually improve, some by themselves, others at the NorthStar training camp for girls. As the young women have the ability to wake up the power in older women, the number of women who have 'the power' grows rapidly. Women around the world start gathering together, fighting against the patriarchal oppression of which they have been victims. This, along with the growing influence of the new female-centred religion,

bring about the gradual power reversal of the sexes: men now situated in the vulnerable position normally occupied by women. This change causes much outcry and resistance from the men, and some women, insisting on the naturalness of a patriarchal power hierarchy. Challenging the notion of women's natural tenderness and refuting the idea that a society where women are in charge would bring about equality between the sexes, we experience a complete inversion of power, where women inhabit the oppressive roles previously inhabited by men. A significant reason for this development seems to be women's desire for revenge for the oppression they have suffered, but also their growing desire for power in itself. Consequently, men are raped, tortured and verbally abused with the aim of humiliation. The narrator focalises the story through six different characters, all offering different perspectives on the societal development. The four main characters Roxy, Allie, Tunde and Margot, however, are the most focalised and significant voices in expressing the societal criticism that the novel offers, thus, they are the ones to which I will give most attention in this thesis. Although we are given insight into the events leading up to it, the actual event of the Cataclysm is never narrated, making the ending similar to that of the main narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale*. While both the 'Historical Notes' in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the email exchange in *The Power* reveal the ending of the eras that the main narratives describe, the fates of the characters remain a mystery for the reader in both novels.

This thesis will explore how both novels powerfully criticise normative perceptions of gender and the power hierarchy between the sexes. The aim is to emphasize how the novels draw attention to the various aspects of societal gender ideology that contribute to the continuing oppression of women in patriarchal societies. As Simone de Beauvoir famously argues in *The Second Sex*, men view women as 'an Other through whom he seeks himself' (93). This quote denotes her criticism of how men historically have defined women not as individuals on their own, but in relation to themselves. Patriarchal social norms have decided the purpose and the limitations of the female sex, and, consequently, how women are perceived. Thus, supporting the view of women as man's Other, patriarchal societies proclaim and uphold the structure of inequality between the sexes that keep women in subordination to men. However, as this thesis will argue, both men *and* women contribute to the persistence of this power dynamic by their upholding of societal gender norms. Through a close reading of the novels, I intend to discuss the ways in which the novels exemplify how the power hierarchy between the sexes is upheld by societal defence of male domination and female subordination; proclaiming men's continuing oppression of women and women's passive

acceptance of their subordination. To do so, I have focused my thesis around three important aspects emphasized in the novels: physical and sexual violations, religious oppression and power: its essential presence in human relations and the hierarchy of the sexes as ascribed by society. Additionally, some attention will be given to the ways in which the chosen narrative techniques and formal structures serve to emphasize these issues. Both novels may read as criticism of patriarchal suppression of subjectivity in storytelling and especially of women's narratives. The issue concerning the oppressive use of language that denotes sexism will be central to this discussion. Many scholars have discussed this aspect of *The Handmaid's Tale* and I will use the findings of some of them, Karen Stein and Hilde Steals in particular, to support my arguments. Through Offred's narration, I will argue how *The Handmaid's Tale* reclaims the suppressed voices of women and how both novels' framing narratives criticize how men largely have been and still are the judges of what stories are worth telling.

Both novels call attention to the issue of physical violations of women, with particular emphasis on the issue of rape. From sexual slavery and prostitution in *The Handmaid's Tale* to grotesque descriptions of rape in *The Power: What societal criticism may be drawn from these depictions of sexual gendered violence? To answer this question, I will largely base my discussion on theoretical work done by Rebecca Whisnant, Susan Brownmiller and Claudia Card, who all emphasize various feminist aspects in relation to the problem of rape and objectification of women. Whisnant's discussion of problematic cultural perceptions of rape and how these relate to the issue of prescriptive feminine behaviour is central to my analysis of how sexual objectification and violations are depicted in the novels. They both call attention to the danger of having a female body due to cultural norms prescribing female vulnerability and subordination. *The Power*, additionally, gives attention to the question of the significance of being naturally victimized due to physical inferiority. Card's contribution to the discussion is expressed through her question of whom rape benefits and whose interests patriarchal societies protect. Brownmiller, whose major contribution to feminist perspectives on rape I have much to thank for my analysis, brings insights on rape's function as a patriarchal weapon. She argues how the threat of rape, as much as rape itself, keeps women in subordination to men. The issue of pornography and prostitution is also raised in the novels and given attention in this thesis. A discourse between liberal and radical feminism is included, primarily based on Fiona Tolan's discussion of feminist ideology in relation to how she interprets *The Handmaid's Tale's* problematization of these issues. While Tolan interprets the novel as a warning against certain radical feminist movements, I will argue why I dispute*

her interpretation in support of Brownmiller's argumentation. This thesis argues how the problem with pornography and prostitution is largely how both advocate a male-controlled sexuality, which governs female behaviour and upholds harmful societal perceptions about the relationship between power and sexuality. These perceptions reveal a so called 'rape culture', that proclaims that sexual domination over women is a natural display of male power, thus, normalizing the power dynamics between the sexes that constitute the condition for rape. Ben Merriman's criticism of Atwood's choice of making Offred the narrator, claiming that sexism is largely a matter of race and class, only confirms to me the value of this thesis's project.

Furthermore, this thesis will examine the novels' emphasis on religious justification of female oppression and gender stereotypes. Religious criticism is a fundamental aspect both of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, and the authors' similar emphasis denotes similar societal criticism. Dorota Filipczak, Maria Christou and Janet Howe Gaines offer insight on the significance of the Biblical references Atwood uses throughout the novel, which gave me a good starting point for my further examination of the criticism conveyed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. 'Gilead', 'Jezebel's' and allusions to the biblical sacrifices are all significant for interpreting Atwood's emphatic criticism of religious justification of subjugation of women. Perhaps the most powerful, in any case the most provocative, are the references to biblical passages from the book of Genesis and Paul's First Letter to Timothy, which clearly communicate that women's rightful place is in subordination to man. Both novels give emphasis to the biblical story of the Original Sin of Eve and its use as justification for gender stereotypes and prescribed female behaviour. The novels' use of devil and witchery imagery will be explored in relation to this. I will argue how Lucy Elizabeth Ellman's criticism of Alderman's emphasis on religion, suggests that she has missed the importance of her criticism of the danger of religious influence on individuals and on society as a whole. Through the rise of the new female-centred religion, Alderman calls attention both to the influence of Christian heritage on patriarchal gender ideology and raises important questions of the dangerous relationship between religion and power.

The enticement of power and its essential presence in human relations is explored in both *The Power* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. They complement each other well in how they portray the experience of powerlessness juxtaposed with that of possessing much power. Both novels raise the question: What is power and what does it mean to possess it? In my attempt to answer this question, I will look closely at how it is commented upon by the main



characters and what criticism arises thereof. I will place myself within the discussions posed by scholars such as Pilar Somacarrera, Silvia Caporale-Bezzini and Stephanie Barbé Hammer concerning the power politics in *The Handmaid's Tale*, whose contributions have been valuable for my further inquiry. They have all compared Atwood's power politics to Michel Foucault's and with the help of Lois McNay and Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace, I will engage further with Foucault's theory of power relations. His conceptualisation of power as ascribed within our social structures is central for my interpretation of the societal criticism that the novels pose. Power conquers, touches everyone and how it is perceived constrains us to the hierarchy we have created. Thus, this thesis will argue that a society which relies on a hierarchy of power will never escape the power dynamic of the oppressor and the oppressed. Moreover, the relationship between power and societal gender norms will be explored. In my discussion of how the novels engage with the concept of gender, Judith Butler's theory of performativity will be essential in support of my arguments. While both novels place emphasis on the constructiveness of gender, *The Power*, additionally draws interesting attention to the significance of the biological differences between men and women. This raises interesting questions in relation to the debate about the sex/gender distinction, something of which Toril Moi addresses in her book *Sex, Gender, and the Body*. In praise of her theoretical work, Moi argues how Beauvoir has avoided the sex/gender distinction all together, by rather speaking in terms of bodies and subjectivity. This way, Moi argues, one may acknowledge sexual differences without using oppressive terms and avoid a discourse limited to defining the body as either nature or nurture (114). I will view the questions *The Power* raises in relation to the issue of gender determined as nature or nurture in light of Moi's suggestion. Central to what this thesis will investigate is the question of how the novels may be seen to criticise the relationship between societal perceptions on gender in relation to power. How may the novels be read as criticisms of androcentrism and the societal inclination to equate masculine gender traits with power?

The body of this thesis is structured thematically into three chapters, all discussing different aspects of how societal gender ideology upholds the oppression of women and the power hierarchy of the sexes by examining how these issues are raised in both novels. There is a strong relationship between the first two chapters, as they both discuss societal defence of female subordination from two central perspectives emphasized in the novels. Together, they constitute the foundation for what the final chapter will discuss. The first chapter asks what criticism arises from the gendered violations portrayed in the novels, with particular emphasis

on the issue of prescribed femininity and rape's function as a patriarchal weapon. In chapter two, the issue of religious oppression of women is explored. Given much emphasis in both novels, this chapter will discuss how religious justification of gender stereotypes contribute to upholding the power dynamics between the sexes. The third and final chapter asks what power is and offers a discussion of what conditions constitute and uphold a hierarchy of power, as suggested by the novels. Crucial to this discussion is the prevalence of the socially constructed gender norms. However, the question of whether the biological differences between the sexes is significant or not is also raised and given emphasis especially as it is considered in *The Power*; revisiting the issue of the threat of rape in relation to this discussion. What insights on issues preventing equality between the sexes do the novels offer? How may their portrayal of gender ideology and power dynamics read as criticism of patriarchal social structures, and what answers may be found through this portrayal? Perhaps the most significant criticism offered is the emphasis on the culturally imbedded power struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed, on which society relies. Is it possible to imagine ourselves differently? This thesis argues how the threat of rape, both due to socially prescribed gender norms and women's physical vulnerability, upholds the power dynamic between the sexes. It suggests that a society that places value on the capacity for violence and domination, insisting on a hierarchy of power, prevents societal growth towards a utopian reality of equality between the sexes, where an ideology of gender does not exist.

# 1 Gender Targeted: Rape as a Weapon of Domination

*When I hear his steps outside my door  
I lie down on my bed,  
open my legs  
and think of England*  
Lady Hillingdon

The issue of female subjugation through physical and psychological violation in patriarchy is raised in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*. Both novels are narrated in ways that emphasize the subject of female oppression in patriarchal societies. Nevertheless, Atwood and Alderman have made different choices in the form of narration they use to achieve this emphasis. *The Handmaid's Tale* has a first-person narrator and only one focaliser, Offred. I believe the significance of this choice is that of giving voice to the oppressed. The narrator gives us insights into Offred's mind, that we otherwise would not have, which strengthens the emphasis on the loss of self that the Handmaids undergo and the self-submission they are taught. In a society that treats women as objects, as the Other, Offred's subjectivity emerges through the narration of her own story. Furthermore, as Hilde Staels discusses, it significantly communicates resistance towards Gilead's communicative prohibitions and its attempt to erase the memories of the past. Glenn Deer asserts that the 'narrator is a powerful user of language, a poet and rhetorician' (94) and, as Staels accounts, '[Offred] revitalizes an otherwise extinct language and inner life, deadened by the supremacy of codes' (120). Keeping in mind that we learn that her story is a recording, which we must assume was done after she stepped into her unknown future, the style of her narration may be interpreted as her way of taking back the control of self-expression from the society that made her mute. By remembering, Offred clings to the sense of self and individuality that society has done its best to erase. Aunt Lydia asserts how the ones that come after the 'transitional generation' that the Handmaids belong to will 'accept their duties with willing hearts', a claim Offred significantly contemplates: 'Because they will have no memories, of any other way' (Atwood 181).

*The Power*, on the other hand, has a third-person narrator that frequently shifts its focalisation, predominantly between the four main characters Allie, Roxy, Tunde and Margot. I believe Alderman chose this form of narration to give voice to multiple perspectives that emphasize patriarchal subjugation of women; significantly with the implementation of one male focaliser to stress that what previously was female experiences of oppression are now, after the shift in power, male experiences. Through the shifts in focalisation, we are given insight into a broad range of gendered violations under which women struggle: sexism, sexual harassment, physical violence and, most significantly, rape.

In her book *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller attempts to write the history of rape from women's perspective, emphasizing the suppression of women's narratives in favour of society's male-controlled sexuality. The attempts at erasure of past experiences and oppression of individual voices that Offred's narrative withstands, and the inclusion of multiple voices that the narrator in *The Power* advocates, draw attention to the novels' thematization of physical and psychological oppression of women. This chapter will discuss the ways in which the novels raise the issue of sexual violation of women and the subjugation of women to men through prescribed femininity. It will draw particular attention to how rape and the threat of rape keep women in subordination to men.

### **1.1 The Question of Consent and Prescribed Femininity**

The subject of sexual slavery is raised in both novels, but is represented differently. In *The Power*, the history of sexual slavery and sex trafficking in Moldova is accounted for and its function as female subjugation is expressed through the description of the sexual violation of a woman, having been lured by the promise of secretarial work in Berlin: 'she was thrown down on a concrete floor and shown, over and over again, what her job really was' (Alderman 93). The women are held in captivity against their will and are subjects of sexual trafficking, thus, this depiction of sexual violation is one where rape is indisputable. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, the sexual violation of the Handmaids is described, through the narrative voice of Offred, in ways that makes the question of what counts as rape, in relation to various assumptions of what counts as consent, interesting to consider. Rebecca Whisnant, while recognizing that the definition of rape is in some dispute, claims that '[rape] is generally understood to involve sexual penetration of a person by force and/or without that person's consent' ('Introduction'). When describing her monthly sexual ritual with the Commander

herself, Offred says: 'Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose' (Atwood 146). As a reader, however, one is most inclined to define the Ceremonies as rape, as this is a violation so severe that no one would have chosen it, had not the alternative meant death. The 'choice' Offred is referring to is to either accept her new role as a sex slave or become an 'Unwoman': the term for sterile, old or resisting women sent to 'The Colonies' to clean up toxic waste. Offred's reluctance to defining the Ceremonies as rape, even though the sexual acts are unwanted on her part, calls attention to the issue of what counts as sexual consent. In Offred's mind, the term consent seems to mean 'surrendering without resistance' and this poses the question of what counts as rape and if a sexual act is consensual as long as it is not met with a firm 'no' or physical resistance on the woman's part.

As Whisnant recounts, 'the absence of refusal or resistance' (ch. 2.1) is how women's consent has been understood in many instances where rape is concerned. This is a problematic definition, as it assumes willingness unless otherwise expressed and there are several circumstances under which women opt for non-refusal of unwanted sexual acts, such as the one Offred finds herself in. Whisnant refers to two ways of understanding consent, as either attitudinal or performative. Attitudinal consent is defined as being in a mental state of willingness and performative consent is defined as a physical action or utterance expressing willingness (ch. 2.1). From these definitions, we may consider Offred's supposed consent to be performative, which emphasizes the limitations of this definition, namely, that it 'does not take into account the context in which the relevant behavior or utterance occurs' (ch. 2.1). A woman may be threatened or coerced into giving performative consent when sex is unwanted. Understanding consent as attitudinal, however, is even more problematic, as it allows for the assumption that willingness is a woman's default state and relies on men's interpretation of women's attitude. The challenge this poses is further problematized by patriarchal prescribed femininity. The idea that how a woman dresses, where she goes and with whom or that her history of sexual activity has relevance for whether or not she is perceived as having consented to the sexual violation she has been the victim of, is an issue problematized in both novels. As Whisnant observes, this idea is central to feminist issues and important for feminists to discredit (ch. 2.1).

The threat of rape, as much as rape itself, determines female behaviour and terrorizes women into compliance. Women are taught that their bodies are 'rapable'. In order to avoid becoming a victim of rape, they must follow 'the unwritten rules that govern female behavior'

(Whisnant ch. 3.2). These rules entail restricting their behaviour and expression, so as not to be perceived as sexually provocative to men and, thus, blamed for their own rape, because they ‘asked for it’ or ‘led him on’. The idea that avoiding rape is women’s responsibility is problematized in both novels. In *The Power*, the precautions that women must take are emphasized through the role reversal that has taken place after ‘the power’ has been awakened in the women. Now parents are ‘telling their boys not to go out alone, not to stray too far’ (Alderman 21), a well-known precautionary warning given by parents in their upbringing of girls. Women are taught that they are at risk for no other reason than the fact that they are women and, thus, normally physically weaker than men. This is underlined through the testimony of a mother: ‘I saw a girl in the park doing that to a boy for no reason’ (Alderman 21). Now, it is men, not women, who fear walking alone at night. Tunde says, ‘The dread stalks him on quiet streets. . . It has been a long time since he’s felt comfort in a night walk (Alderman 300). Furthermore, Margot recalls the well-known predicament young girls have about being careful not to give boys the wrong impression of consenting to more than they are, ‘how far was *too far*, where a boy’s hand should stop’ (Alderman 23). This is further meditated on when Allie brings two boys to the graveyard with her. Given their previous sexual interactions, the boys expect her to ‘fool around’ with them this time as well. When she rejects them, saying she is not in the mood, Hunter says: ‘That’s fine . . . but see, you brought us here and we *are* in the mood’ (Alderman 28). His wording of ‘That’s fine’ expresses irony and underlines that it is irrelevant to him if she is in the mood or not. This suggests the idea, considering she put herself in this position, that the boys are entitled to the sexual services she usually provides. This gives emphasis to the common social perception that men do not need women’s consent in certain situations if and when she already has given her consent through previous actions. Hunter tries to force her physically, and it is only due to Allie’s physical advantage that he retreats. Significantly, the abnormality of this power dynamic invites the reader to consider how this scene normally would have played out.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the subject of prescribed feminine behaviour is emphasized through the propaganda of the new regime of Gilead. Patriarchal societies, where women must take such precautions as emphasized in *The Power*, is exactly what the new regime claims it has saved its women from. Echoing Whisnant, Offred remembers the rules of female behaviour, ‘rules that were not spelled out but that every woman knew: don’t open your door to a stranger. . . . Keep the locks on. . . . Don’t go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night’ (Atwood 39). By taking away women’s right to self-determination and to govern their own

lives, the regime has eliminated the dangers such freedom entails, and the Aunts use this fact to advocate for the new regime at the Red Center, 'There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. . . . Now you are being given freedom from' (Atwood 39). In a 'freedom to' society, women are categorized into 'good girls,' who follow the rules of prescribed femininity, and 'bad girls,' who do not. As Claudia Card argues, 'Like other terrorisms, rape has two targets: the expendable 'bad girls' and the 'good girls' 'to whom a message is sent by the way of the treatment of the former' (302). This description echoes the message of the terrorism that the Handmaids undergo in their training at the Red Center to succumb to their new roles in society. The Aunts use such 'bad girls' as examples of wrong female behaviour and proclaim this kind of female expression as shameful: 'The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. . . . Such *things* do not happen to nice women' (Atwood 87). At Testifying, the Aunts make the Handmaid's blame themselves for sexual violations they may have been victims of in the past under the pretext that 'bad girls' deserve whatever happens to them. As one Handmaid testifies to her past atrocities, the other Handmaids are forced to take part in the slut shaming and brainwashed into to a degree meaning what they say. The most disturbing example in the novel is perhaps when Janine is made to blame herself for her own gang rape, and the other Handmaids join in: 'But whose fault was it? . . . *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault. . . *Who* led them on? . . . *She* did. *She* did. *She* did. . . . It was my fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain (Atwood 111-112).

The perception that certain victims of rape deserved to be violated is explored both through the gang rape of Roxy's brother Ricky and the rape of Allie by her foster father in *The Power*. When Roxy confronts the women who gang raped her brother, one of the women claims he was acting provocatively and that he clearly wanted it. She echoes the phrase used to blame women who do not follow the rules for female behaviour for their own rape when she says, 'He was *asking* for it' (Alderman 197). Similarly, Allie's foster father wishes to teach her a lesson for being alone with the two boys at the graveyard, having transgressed the proper conduct of female behaviour: 'Saw you. Saw you in the graveyard with those boys. Filthy. Little. Whore. . . . He pushes her knees apart. His hand is at his belt. He's going to show her what kind of a little whore she is. As if he hadn't shown her many times in the past' (Alderman 30). One might question why Allie does not stop him, even though the power in her, obvious from what she does next, enables her to. Alderman may have made Allie endure

the rape to be able to show the horror of rape when the victim does not possess the physical power to stop it, 'She doesn't roll into a ball. She doesn't beg him to stop. She knows it only makes it go on longer' (Alderman 30). However, it may also have been to show the hesitancy or fear of rebelling against and breaking out of the power dynamic that has always existed between her and her foster father. Whisnant writes, 'By molding women both to femininity and to self-blame, the threat of rape thus systematically undermines women's capacity to resist not only rape itself, but various other elements of their oppression as well' (ch. 3.2). Although Allie now has the physical ability to fight him off, she has been taught her role as the submissive in their relationship for a long time.

The idea that certain expressions of femininity are shameful, that being the victim of rape is the result of said expression and, therefore, experienced as shameful for the victim, emphasized by the 'slut shaming' in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is explored in *The Power* as well. It is interesting to consider, as it calls attention to the prescribed heterosexuality of the female as the submissive and the male as the dominant. The fact that rape is connected with shame and submissiveness suggests that femininity has negative connotations in society and is considered a subordinate gender trait to masculinity. As Whisnant discusses, 'when men and boys are raped . . . they are often seen as having been feminized, treated like women and thus rendered shamefully woman-like' (ch. 3.2). Tunde echoes this idea after his first encounter with 'the power' and the possibility of being dominated by a woman, 'There is a shame like rust working its way through his body. . . . his absolute vulnerability, the feeling that she could overpower him if she wanted (Alderman 15). Later in the novel we learn, through his narrative, that the men kept silent about the violation they had experienced at first 'because it was not manly' (Alderman 239). This is further emphasized by the importance of keeping Ricky's rape a secret from his father, because of the shame and disappointment this would have made him feel towards his son, 'This is not what happens to a man' (Alderman 195). Additionally, it gives emphasis to the shame that is attributed victims of rape, thus, disputing attitudes in favour of protecting the accused, claiming that it is easy to cry wolf in rape cases and stressing the probability of falsely convicting rapists. Whisnant refers to Ann Cahill, who claims that rape must be understood as 'a sexually specific act that destroys the . . . personhood of a woman' (ch. 3.1). This is an accurate account of Ricky's reaction to having been sexually violated, as he withdraws from the life he used to lead: 'Ricky's not coming back to the life, not for years, maybe not ever, and not how he was' (Alderman 200).



Both the brutality of rape and the problem of defining consent is given much emphasis in these two novels and it challenges the reader to consider social perceptions about the relationship between rape and consent and how these perceptions reveal a rape culture, where patriarchal sex stereotypes uphold the notion that the sexual conventions in place are a natural power dynamic between men and women. Societal perceptions of normative differences between men and women's proper gender enactment upholds female subjugation and promotes a power dynamic between the sexes that constitutes the conditions for rape. Furthermore, the insistence upon these sex stereotypes enlarges the threat of rape under which all women live, already in place due to the biological difference of physical strength between men and women.

## **1.2 Rape and Sexual Objectification of Women as a Patriarchal Weapon**

Susan Brownmiller argues that rape has had a critical historical function as a 'continuous process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear' (15). This threat towards the feminine body contributes to upholding the power hierarchy between the sexes in its function as group-based subordination of all women. In addition to the assertion of male domination over women, Card and Whisnant both argue that all men benefit from the threat of rape in another way; namely the female need of male protection. By taking upon themselves the role as protectors, female dependence and services are secured (Card 304). This provides man with a sense of entitlement towards woman, and the prescribed female behaviour of submissiveness leaves the role of the dominant and aggressor with men. Thus, rape is committed by '*exemplars of our social norms*' (Whisnant ch. 3.2), promoting female delicacy, hesitancy and passivity and male sexual domination over the female. Whisnant continues, 'In this system, "good" men protect virtuous and deserving women from "bad" men, and part of what defines a woman as deserving protection is her conformity to rules of patriarchal femininity' (ch. 3.2). This form of male aggression and entitlement to the 'services' of females is exemplified when Tunde observes a man giving a girl unwanted attention in *The Power*. He calls out to her, 'A pretty girl like you deserves a compliment. . . . Hey, don't turn away from me. Give me a little smile' (Alderman 16). This encounter represents prevalent sexual harassment in societies where women are viewed as the subordinate sex and it is exactly freedom from this kind of male behaviour that the government of Gilead prides itself

on having given women: 'no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles' (Atwood 39).

On the one hand, this kind of 'freedom from' society has fulfilled certain feminist demands and may be considered to represent a form of 'feminist utopia' in some respects. In Gilead, there is no more pornography or objectification of women. Women walk the streets, albeit only to run specific errands, without the danger of being physically violated or subjected to sexual harassment. Both Shirley Neuman and Fiona Tolan point to these aspects of the Gileadean society that they claim have met certain feminist demands and Tolan accounts for the interesting dialogue between radical and liberal feminism in addressing the issue of women's rights and freedom of expression that the novel engages with. Offred's flashbacks to the 'freedom to' society that we live in show support for women's sexual liberation through the character of Moira, who is giving an 'underwhore party' 'to subvert and defuse the pornographic image' (Tolan 25). This calls attention to liberal feminist argumentation for women's right to explore and express their sexuality. These flashbacks are contrasted with Offred's memories of her radical feminist mother, who participated in the burning of pornographic images and demonstrations for banning films that showed sexual abuse and exploitation of women. Tolan discusses the similarities between the societies that fundamental Christians and radical feminists envision, in contrast to liberalism: 'both necessitate a form of governance that prescribes for its subjects' (25). By exercising control over both men and women, Gilead has achieved the radical feminist aims of banning pornography and other sexually objectifying images of women, as well as ensuring female protection from sexual abuse and violence. Tolan argues, therefore, that Atwood's writing serves as a warning against totalitarian tendencies within radical feminism. She writes, 'Atwood recognizes the disadvantages facing minorities within liberalism but, in imagining a dystopia, she explores the dangers of abandoning this tradition', and she concludes her essay: 'the novel can only advise its readers to . . . defend liberty before ideology' (30-31). If by 'minorities' she means women, or women who suffer from societal liberalism, her use of the term 'minority' is problematic. All women, not just a minority, suffer from the perpetuation of the power hierarchy of the sexes. Not disagreeing that the novel moves beyond the defence of any one ideology, however, I do not necessarily believe that one rightly compares radical feminist aims of changing women's subordinate status with the measures Gilead has taken, seeing as these measures merely result in a different form of female oppression and are still within the confinement of patriarchal control. Rather, I would argue that the novel suggests

that the freedom of expression that liberal feminism advocates is impossible to achieve until certain radical feminist demands have been met. *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes that equality between the sexes in relation to freedom of movement and expression is impossible to achieve within a patriarchal society. As Brownmiller writes in disputing liberal feminist views: 'There can be no "equality" in porn. . . Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women . . . not to free sensuality from moralistic or parental inhibition' (394). Furthermore, she argues that sexual hostility towards women is ideologically encouraged through liberal views on pornography and prostitution. Such liberal views are challenged in *The Power* as well, when the girls wonder about how some boys express that they want them to use the power on them sexually. 'One had done the thing to a boy because he *asked her to*. . . Could it be that boys like it? Is it possible they want it?' (Alderman 42). This draws attention to the idea that some women find it is arousing to be sexually dominated in a violent manner and are portrayed as such in a vast majority of pornography. The significance of the quote lies in the wording which suggests a generalization: not some boys, but boys plain and simple. Exactly that is the problem with what pornography conveys: a generalized image of women as sexually submissive as a default, enjoying the physical violation imposed on them. Pornography is objectifying exploitation of the female body and sexual preferences, masked by misguided arguments in support of sexual liberation.

Although all citizens are prescribed to a function in Gilead and, thereby, subjected to totalitarian control by the government, it is to a great degree women's freedom that has been impaired in order to achieve the 'freedom from' society. All men, except the Commanders, are prohibited to engage in sexual relations with women, but that is a prohibition that affects both sexes. Gilead, however, proclaims the view that male and female sexual needs are different and this prohibition is seen as a restriction of men's freedom to protect women from what 'he can't help' (Atwood 70). This supports the naturalness of male sexual aggression, and thus, camouflaged as female protection, women's rights to free movement and expression are severely restricted: the Handmaids are not to leave the household with the exception of running errands, make-up and skin-care is forbidden and they are forced to wear clothing designed to cover their sexually provocative femininity. Gilead's prohibition of pornography and sexual images serves to promote female chastity, not to free women of oppressive sexual objectification, as pleasurable sexual encounters are prohibited for either sex. Similarly, the removal of the threat of male aggression is not for the sake of protection of women against

violence, but to protect their wombs from harm. Brownmiller discusses how, when laws against rape emerged, it was not with the intention of protecting the rights of women, but rather to accommodate man's desire to protect the chastity of his property (17-18). This echoes the male-controlled government of Gilead's desire to protect the Handmaids from harm, as it is the women's reproductive abilities that are valuable to them, not their *bodies* in themselves. This is affirmed through the beatings the Handmaids suffer when showing resistance or disobedience. 'Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes, your feet and hands are not essential' (Atwood 143).

Unfertile women who are not of the rank of Aunts or Wives, however, are not considered worthy of protection against male desire. As a stopover to the final destination of the Colonies, these women are used to fulfil the sexual needs of the Commanders, seeing as these needs are not met through the Ceremonies. The Handmaids' forced unattractiveness, juxtaposed with how the women at Jezebel's are dressed up to serve the sexual desires of the Commanders, gives emphasis to the subject of clothing and how it relates to the issue of prescribed femininity and objectification of women. Offred recounts how she is the object of the men's gaze at Jezebel's: '[T]hey review my breasts, my legs, as if there's no reason why they shouldn't' (Atwood 365). The contrast between Gileadean society's strict policy of the covering up of female sexuality and its display at Jezebel's, the women dressed up as every possible Playboy fantasy, emphasizes how the novel draws attention to 'Male attempts to possess, enjoy and control it' (Jones 32).

Moreover, Jezebel's draws attention to the idea that female attractiveness is in service of male desire and an outlet for sexual aggression. Thus, it supports the radical feminist view that prostitution upholds the objectification of women and the notion of male entitlement to women's bodies. To justify the establishment of Jezebel's, the Commanders says: 'Nature demands variety, for men' (Atwood 367). He claims that the reason women used to wear different clothes was to trick men into thinking that they were having sex with multiple women. At Jezebel's, men have the opportunity to live out the sexual desires that the new society prohibits. To this Offred responds: 'So now that we don't have different clothes . . . you merely have different women' to which the Commander replies: 'It solves a lot of problems' (Atwood 367). This implies that 'the problem' of restricting male desire and sexual aggression is something in need of solving, and prostitution, thus, upholds the notion of male entitlement to the use of women's bodies and 'the theory of aggressive male domination over woman as a natural right' (Brownmiller 389). Furthermore, the idea that men want women *to*

want to be subjected to their dominance is called attention to. The Commander wants Offred to have sex with him willingly at Jezebel. He says, 'I thought you might enjoy it for a change' (Atwood 395). Julia O'Connell Davidson accounts for findings in her study which reveal that many clients construct a fiction of mutuality in their sexual encounters with prostitutes. She writes, 'Clients often want to believe that . . . in their particular case she enjoys her work and derives sexual and/or emotional satisfaction from her encounter with them' (158). The male wish to establish a connection with the women they violate is emphasized through the meetings the Commander arranges between himself and Offred. He admits to finding the Ceremonies 'Impersonal' and desires more intimacy between them: 'I want you to kiss me' (Atwood 209, 250).

Although Jezebel's is described in a way that bears similarity to a brothel, there is one important distinction: there is no *exchange* of the services the women provide at Jezebel's. Their temporary award is a delayed deportation to the Colonies, not money. The women are not bought, they are simply taken and the only difference between the services of the women at Jezebel's and those of the Handmaids is the aim of the service: sexual pleasure for men versus reproduction. With this, I believe Atwood is suggesting a further parallel between prostitution and rape, emphasizing one of Brownmiller's arguments against the institution of prostitution: if women may be bought for a price, they may also be taken 'without the civility of monetary exchange' (391). This, she continues, fuels the mentality of the rapist and constitute the mass psychology of rape (392).

In addition to calling attention to the proper gender enactment deserving of male protection, the novels also give voice to the issue of patriarchal institutions being better at protecting men than women legally. As Whisnant writes, 'rape is unquestionably a gendered crime', as a vast majority of rape victims are female, and an even greater majority of rape perpetrators are men (ch. 3.2). Rates of reporting and convictions in rape cases are both low. As Card claims, 'governments have been better at protecting men from accusations of rape than at protecting women from rape' (300). In Gilead, ironically, the penalty for what the government recognizes as rape is death; however, it becomes clear that its motive is not to protect women from sexual abuse, but rather to protect the womb from being compromised and to fuel the Handmaids' anger towards something which threatens it: 'It was too much, this violation. The baby too, after what we go through' (Atwood 428). Thus, convictions for rape are carried out in service of the interest of the male dominated government in Gilead, something of which might suggest a parallel to the interests of governments in contemporary

patriarchal societies. Card proposes that rape is a terrorist institution from which patriarchal societies benefit, as ‘a major task of rape is the subordination and subservience of women to men’ (299). Therefore, Gilead’s severe punishment of rape and contemporary governments’ reluctance to press for rape convictions can both be argued to be carried out in service of patriarchy.

Similarly, when the tables begin to turn in *The Power*, and there are increasing instances of girls being physically violent to boys; men being the ones at risk, the government is anxious to find a solution to ensure their protection. Boys are driven in boys-only buses to boys-only schools and there are public outcries to find a permanent solution to the problem: ‘Lock them all up, maximum security’ (Alderman 22). Moreover, they run tests to make sure that none of the women employed in government buildings have the power. Daniel, the governor, defends this action by claiming that having the power is ‘like walking around with a loaded gun’ (Alderman 63). This is an interesting comparison that invites the reader to consider if the power that women now have is really any different from the physical advantage men have always had over women. Certain positions involving contact with children and the public are now being mandated as unsuitable for women who possess ‘the power’, but do those physically inferior to man stand any chance against *his* loaded gun? The irony of the measures taken to ensure men’s protection calls attention to how government falls short in protecting its female citizens. This is further emphasized in the novel by addressing the issue of how government has proved unsuccessful in protecting women from the violation of sex-trafficking, ‘[They] knew what was happening and did nothing’ (Alderman 94).

Brownmiller writes, ‘Man’s discovery that his genitalia could serve as a *weapon* to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times’ (14-15, my emphasis). Rape’s general function as a weapon is, as discussed, to preserve the power dynamics of the sexes, but it has historically been, and still is, used specifically as a weapon to conquer in war. The winning side rapes the women on the losing side, to prove their ‘superiority – to the woman, to themselves, to other men’ (Brownmiller 33). This issue is raised in both novels; symbolically in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and explicitly in *The Power*. While the rape of Allie and Ricky exemplifies the kind of rape used to assert one’s dominance over another person’s body simply because one can, the raping of the men by female warriors during their attack on the refugee camp represents rape as an act of proving one’s superiority in war. Card discusses in her article ‘Rape as a Weapon of War’, that the act of raping creates a form of bonding between soldiers; it induces ‘camaraderie’ (line 10). This idea is echoed in

the description of the raping done during the attack: ‘Her mates are egging her on. . . . When the woman comes, her mates roar their approval. . . . they all pat her on the back. . . . (Alderman 281-282). Like soldiers raping women when there is nothing left to gain except inflicting humiliation upon their victims, the female warriors rape the men ‘because they can’ (Alderman 283). Women do not pose a threat in war, and the men at the refugee camp were not retaliating against the overturn of power. Brownmiller suggests that men’s reason for raping women in war is precisely ‘because she is a woman and *therefore* an enemy’ (64), something of which resonates with how this form of rape is depicted in *The Power*.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the issue of war rape is raised symbolically by a brief allusion to the rape of the Sabine women. During one of their secret meetings, the Commander shows Offred an old book about Rome. Turning the pages, he asks her to look at a picture called *The Sabine Women*. No further comment on the history is made, but as Samanta Trivellini suggests, Atwood is presumably inviting the reader to consider the similarities between the misogynist treatment of the women in Gilead with the treatment of the Sabine women in early Rome (347). The Sabine women were abducted and raped by the Romans and forced to marry their rapists, and their sacrifice led to the founding of Rome; much like how the sacrifice of the Handmaids constitutes the new republic of Gilead. According to Brownmiller, artists have for centuries painted pictures depicting the Sabine women as making the sacrifice willingly, ‘having a good time’ (34). This glorification of female sacrifice is advocated in Gilead as well, as a necessity for creating a better world; a better world for men: their dominance over women unchallenged. In the middle of her mandatory sexual intercourse with the Commander, Offred thinks about the well-known saying ‘Close your eyes and think of England’ (Atwood 146), referring to how women have historically been used to surrendering to the dominance of males in patriarchal societies, in expectation of fulfilling their societal duties as child bearers. As a defence for what they have done, the Commander says: ‘Better never means better for everyone. . . . It always means worse, for some’ (Atwood 325). This suggests a parallel to how patriarchy as a structure violates women by imposing forced subordination and encouraging female sacrifice to uphold a male-dominated society.

The sacrifice of the Handmaids as breeders through sexual slavery suggests another historical parallel; that is, the sexual abuse of black female slaves that played an important part in upholding the system of slavery throughout the history of slaveholding in the United States. Brownmiller writes, ‘Female slaves were expected to “breed”; some were retained

expressly for that purpose' and she proclaims how the breeding of slave babies for sale to other states was the 'only *reliably* profitable slave-related enterprise' (154). Although the purpose of the 'breeding' is different, the Handmaids' societal status offers an obvious historical comparison to that of the female slaves on slave plantations. Furthermore, Brownmiller discusses how the term 'concubinage' was defined as a form of mutual liaison between the slaveholder and his female slaves by a Supreme Court in 1851, something of which contributes to this thesis's previous discussion of the definition of rape. The sexual violence committed towards the female slaves was not defined as rape at the time due to the fact that they were considered the slaveholder's property and 'One cannot rape one's own property' (162). Therefore, the concept of raping slaves did not exist and concubinage was considered even further from this definition, as it described a sexual relationship that awarded the female slaves with amnesties, such as relative status, clothing and the hope of manumission and status as the potential heir to money and property (165). As Brownmiller argues, this claimed 'mutualism' relied on the lack of a better option for slave women, as they already were bound to their slaveholders by law. She writes, 'concubinage was a male-imposed condition: a bargain struck on male values exclusively, resting on a foundation of total ownership and control' (165). This echoes the same conditions surrounding the sexual slavery of the Handmaids in their role as their assigned Household's property and, thus, supports a definition of the violation as rape. The parallel to the history of black slavery is undeniable and is made prominent by Atwood's 'Female Underground Road' which alludes to the 'Underground Railroad by means of which the runaway slaves of the American South used to enter British-controlled Canada where slavery had been abolished in 1841' (Staels 114).

Ben Merriman offers a heavy critique of Atwood's writing on the grounds of what he claims is a racial distortion by calling out the obvious parallels to black slavery and claiming that Offred is 'an unlikely victim' because she is white (1). What he fails to recognize is the fact that making Offred black would possibly have served to limit the imagination of the reader in considering how such violations have occurred and still occur to all women. When he claims that 'sexism in America has, generally, been modulated by forms of race and class oppression. . .' (1), he fails to acknowledge that although it is true that race and class have been important factors in much of the history of rape, they far from represent exclusively decisive factors. Such an assumption undermines the history of rape and its subordination of *all women* universally and regardless of any other factors such as race and class, that



Atwood's novel draws attention to. As Brownmiller argues, the master-slave relationship is one of the most popular sexual fantasies in the industry of pornography, sustaining the power dynamics between the sexes and perpetually upholding the subordination of women: 'Such is the legacy of the male-controlled sexuality, under which we struggle' (170).

## 2 Religion as Oppression: Gender Stereotypes and Female Subjugation

*To the woman he said,  
'I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children,  
yet your desire shall be for your husband,  
and he shall rule over you'*  
Genesis 3.16

The role fundamentalist Christianity historically has played in developing the gender dynamic between the sexes, and the role it still plays in upholding this power structure is explored in both novels. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we are exposed to a society founded on Christian fundamentalist ideology and, through various accounts of biblical intertext, Atwood explores how this ideology advocates female subjugation in various ways. *The Power* gives the relationship between religion and power a close examination, as we experience the rise of a new religion with women at its centre. This thought-provoking thought experiment emphasizes the influence religious justification of female subjugation have had, and still have, on patriarchal societies and the danger of a belief in prescribed behaviour by a higher power. Both novels criticize the use of religion to achieve political aims. By imagining the religious influence on the foundation of a new matriarchal society, Alderman draws attention to the still imbedded Christian gender ideology in our contemporary, Western societies.

One similarity in the novels' form is the inclusion of epigraphs with passages from the Bible: *The Handmaid's Tale* with a passage from Genesis 30.1-3 depicting the story of Jacob, Rachel and Bilhah and *The Power* with a passage from the book of 1 Samuel 8, which tells the story of how the people of Israel wanted a king despite Samuel's warnings. The passages serve to establish religion as a fundamental subject to consider throughout the novels; representing important aspects of the religious criticism that the novels offer. While the passage from the book of Genesis represents the very foundation of the religious ideology on which the Republic of Gilead is founded, the passage from the book of Samuel calls attention to the dangerous relationship between power and religion and religious justification of the female oppressive gender dynamic that historically has followed.

This chapter will explore how both novels call attention to religious justifications for the physical and psychological violation of women. It will consider the significance of the novels' thematization of religiously prescribed oppression as a reflection of contemporary power dynamics between the sexes.

## 2.1 Male-Centred Religion and its Subjugation of Women

Atwood has significantly named her new state Gilead after a territory much referenced in the Bible; a name 'firmly anchored in patriarchal history' (Filipczak 172). As Dorota Filipczak discusses, Gilead becomes a symbol for transition in the book of Genesis, as the journey of Jacob's tribe across Gilead marks the tribe's cleansing of their dubious past and their newfound reliance on Jacob's God (173- 174). This echoes the Gileadean regime's attempt to rid itself of atrocious human behaviour of the past and return to the righteous path intended for humans by God. The hymn 'There is a Balm in Gilead' (Atwood 337) is formulated as a confirmative answer to Jeremiah's question 'Is there no Balm in Gilead?', which Filipczak explains refers to his uncertainty about the corrupted Jewish state's ability to heal (173). The hymn suggests that 'the state possesses some supreme moral value that is a remedy for the corruption of the former permissive culture' (Filipczak 173). Religion is central to the societal developments depicted in both novels, however, advocating opposite ideologies. While the restructuring of society in Gilead is based on literal interpretations of patriarchal passages from both the Old and the New Testament, the revolution that takes place in *The Power* is influenced by a religious re-interpretation of the Bible in the favour of women.

'She cuppeth the lightening in her hand. She commandeth it to strike' (Alderman 9), so goes the first reference to the fictitious 'Book of Eve', the moment Ricky first discovers her power. The reference is repeated several times throughout the novel and is in fact a rephrasing of a quote from Job 36.32, describing God's almighty strength and control over nature. The significance of this rephrasing is that it offers a strong contrast between the Jewish and Christian depiction of God's strength and their male-centred interpretation of how humans must live in accordance with God's will, and that of the new female-centred religion that praises the Holy Mother and her power which flows in all women. It is not He but *She* who commands the lightning to strike. The symbolic significance of using this particular quote is perhaps to emphasize how the display of power over humans that God asserts through his control of lightening is now, with their ability to transmit electricity, the power

through which women assert their dominance over men. The novel's focus on the birth of this new religion offers both criticism of the male-centeredness of Judaism and Christianity and of the power religion exercises over its believers. The Book of Eve preaches that the restructuring of power has not issued from 'the palace' above, but from the change within the people themselves: 'When the people change, the palace cannot hold' (Alderman 4). This seems to suggest a defence of the turn of power as a natural development that will replace the societal power structure of the past. Thus, the new religion preaches that female domination is the new natural power structure of the sexes, due to women's biological development of skeins. Ironically, and significant for interpreting Alderman's aim of religious criticism, this echoes Christian advocacy of man's natural domination over woman due to their biological differences. Significantly, it is not the power in women alone that causes the overturn of societal power that Alderman imagines, but the immensity of the power of the religious cult that women are drawn to.

The rise of the new religion echoes the religious move away from Judaism and the birth of Christianity. Allie thinks, 'God is telling the world that there is to be a new order. . . . Just as Jesus told the people of Israel that God's desires had changed, the time of the Gospels is over and there must be a new doctrine' (Alderman 46). However, the new doctrine does not embody the male-centred ideology of the old, which Christianity continued to preach, but a new ideology based on the 'shaking up' (Alderman 46) of the world; with Mother Eve inhabiting a role similar to Jesus as the Messiah, preaching the will of God. Like Jesus, Allie in her role as Mother Eve, holds sermons that teach the people what God wants of them. Amal El-Mohtar writes in her *New York Times* review that *The Power* explores the 'entrenchment of power around a new religion' (my emphasis), which is a fitting description of how the new religion is preached. Mother Eve, speaking on behalf of God, tells the women to 'gather together' and 'perform great wonders' (Alderman 186). 'She came to you . . . teaching vengeance against those who have wronged us and love for those who are close to us' (Alderman 187). Her speeches are powerful and the reactions they provoke are equally so. The people are described as ecstatic, 'crying, shaking, shouting. . . . Several people faint . . . some begin speaking in tongues' (Alderman 186-187). Another aspect of her sermons, which also suggests a parallel to Jesus, is the healing services she performs on stage to further convince the people of Her power. With this, I believe Alderman is emphasizing the extremity and power of religious conviction, underlining its function of suppressing individual thinking. The danger of religious conviction is further emphasized when Roxy calls Allie crazy for

saying the only way for the women to win is to bomb everything and start over, which from what we learn from the main narrative's countdown to 'the Cataclysm', is exactly what will happen.

Another significant aspect of Mother Eve's sermons is when she preaches that 'The Holy Mother' cares for both men and women: 'She won't send her goodness just to the women, but to anyone who believes in her' (Alderman 186). Although society moves in the direction of female domination, men should still believe in and worship her. This draws attention to how, although Christianity teaches that God's intention for women was to remain in subordination to men, women should still believe to receive God's blessings. The new religion reveals itself as advocating the complete opposite gender ideology of the Christian puritanism that both Alderman and Atwood criticize. Just as Mother Eve preaches that *She* wants the women to fight back, the Republic of Gilead preaches how *He* intended quite the opposite of women. During a wedding ceremony, the Commander reads from Paul's First Letter to Timothy: 'But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve' (Atwood 341). Similar to the story of the creation, the story of Mary is that of submission, not strength. She was simply the vessel for God's emissary, Jesus. Mother Eve, however, tells the story from a different angle. She claims that since the Creator is greater than the thing that is created and as the son comes from the mother, 'It is the Mother not the Son who is the emissary of heaven. . . . God the Mother came to earth in the body of Mary, who gave up her child that we could live free from sin' (Alderman 80). Thus, it follows that the religious greeting between women in Bessapara is in praise of the Holy Mother and women in general: 'Praise be to Our Lady', answered by 'Glory in the highest' (Alderman 228), while the only accepted greeting in Gilead is reduced to a praise of women's fertility, reflecting the celebration of Mary's fertility in giving birth to Jesus: 'Blessed be the fruit' answered by 'May the Lord open' (Atwood 30). This is also a reference to Genesis 29 and 30, which tells of God's power over women's fertility through the story of Jacob and his second wife Rachel, who could not conceive.

Rachel's solution to her fertility problem, as written in Genesis 30.3, encompasses the foundation of Gilead's attempt to solve the fertility crisis, 'Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her' (Atwood epigraph). The story is, as Offred recalls, 'drummed into [them]' (Atwood 138) at the Rachel and Leah Center (nicknamed the Red Center), significantly named after Jacob's infertile and fertile wives. It explicitly describes the Handmaids' duty to their Household and offers an

exact depiction of the enforced Ceremonies between the Commanders, Wives and Handmaids, with the latter situated between the Wives' knees. Significantly, it was after Jacob's tribe multiplied and prospered by Rachel's sacrifice of her fertile maid that the tribe left for Gilead; giving merit to the necessity of the sacrifice for the growth of the prosperous new society, that Atwood's Gilead advocates. As Filipczak states, Gilead's insistence on male domination and female submission is sanctioned by the story of Jacob and Paul's First Letter to Timothy (171). The Commander continues reading from the latter: 'Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding, she shall be saved by childbearing. . .' (Atwood 341). This passage proclaims how women's purpose is childbearing, not only to secure the continuation of the human race, but also to atone for the sins of Eve. The responsibility of successful reproduction lies solely with the Handmaids, 'There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren' (Atwood 95). This echoes the story of Jacob, as he gets angry when Rachel confronts him with *their* infertility. As Kristy Tenbus notes, 'he has done his part and the fault, therefore, cannot be his' (5). This generates a situation that gives the doctors power over the Handmaids as well. They are at liberty to report them for infertility or otherwise benefit themselves from the services of the Handmaids by impregnating them themselves, to save them from being shipped off to the Colonies. Offred recalls a quote by Rachel in Genesis 30.1, '*Give me children, or else I die*' and she continues, 'There's more than one meaning to it' (Atwood 95). The quote implies that Rachel would die, figuratively, from not being able to fulfil her purpose as a woman. However, infertility equals literal death for the Handmaids as failure to perform the role society has assigned them makes them disposable.

Atwood has named the twelfth section of her novel after the establishment Jezebel's and the significance of this exceeds the purpose of drawing attention to the establishment itself. It both emphasizes the reference to the biblical figure of Jezebel herself and the patriarchal oppression the story communicates. The latter is emphasized through how Offred's sexual duties evolve to include prostitution, both at Jezebel's and through Offred's agreement to Serena Joy's suggestion that she have sex with Nick to become pregnant; a crime that, if discovered, ironically could grant her a temporary stay at Jezebel's. When Serena Joy suggests Nick for the job, Offred's thoughts imply its connection to prostitution: 'So that's who does her little black-market errands for her. Is this what he always gets, in return?' (Atwood 316). This ironic link between the fate Offred tries to avoid and the

potential punishment for the crime calls attention to how the Handmaids' existence relies on offering sexual services to men, working either within or outside the system. Maria Christou accounts for the obvious similarity between Offred's name and the adjective 'offered' and suggests that it represents a biblical reference to the sacrifice of the lamb (418). Just as Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac spared his son's life through the sacrifice of a lamb in his place (Genesis 22), the Handmaids' willingness to sacrifice their wombs for the greater good will spare theirs. Offred is forced to offer her womb to society, her body to the Commander during the Ceremonies as a slave and at Jezebel's as a legal prostitute, and finally to Nick as an illegal prostitute. Although their circumstances are different, Moira and Offred's fates are the same. This indicates that resisting or unresisting, women in Gilead cannot escape their subjugation, leaving in actuality no room for resistance.

The impossibility of female resistance within a patriarchal system is emphasized by the story of Jezebel as portrayed in the Bible. As Janet Howe Gaines writes, Jezebel has the reputation of 'the bad girl of the Bible, the wickedest of women'. She is portrayed as a wicked killer of God's prophets, an idol worshiper who rejects monotheism and God and a prostitute, although this last accusation is not substantiated (Gaines). She has become a symbol for women who deviate from what is perceived as God's intention for women. This becomes evident through Aunt Lydia's comment about women who chose to sterilize themselves, rather than risking to give birth to radioactively deformed children, 'Jezebels! Scorning God's gifts!' (Atwood 173). Although sterility was not one of Jezebel's supposed crimes, her name is nevertheless used to represent female defiance against God's will. Gaines' article poses the question of whether Jezebel deserved her reputation, or if she was simply made to be the scapegoat for the fury at the King's tolerance of polytheism. She refers to a passage in 1 Kings 21.25, "there never was anyone like Ahab, who committed himself to doing what was displeasing to the Lord, at the instigation of his wife Jezebel". Much like Eve was made to blame for Adam's transgression of eating the apple, Jezebel is blamed for her husband's actions that defied God's will. This gives voice to the idea that there must be a woman behind the mischievous acts of men. As women use their influence for malice, they must remain in subjugation. Jezebel was a strong-willed woman who 'steadfastly remain[ed] true to her own beliefs' (Gaines) and is likely portrayed in such a negative way because she defied patriarchal perceptions of what a woman is supposed to be. Her resistance towards God's will was rewarded with her reputation as the wickedest of women, much like the women at Jezebel's in *The Handmaid's Tale*, whom the Aunts consider are 'all damned' (Atwood 388). As Jezebel

was murdered for her sins against God, so will be the fate of the women at Jezebel's, once they have served their purpose as sex slaves. This offers yet an allusion to Jezebel's reputation as a prostitute, however, as Gaines points out, harlotry is a term occasionally used in connection with people who do not follow God in the Bible. Therefore, Jezebel's reputation as a prostitute may actually refer to her transgressions of appropriate female behaviour, not prostitution. The connection between transgression of appropriate female behaviour and prostitution is emphasized in the novel, as Aunt Lydia condemns the women who defied the will of God through self-sterilization: 'They were sluts' (Atwood 174). The usefulness of the scapegoat is given further emphasis through the Particicution ceremonies, instigated for the outlet of the Handmaids' anger and to create for them a sense of regaining some power which they are otherwise denied.

## **2.2 Nature's Norm as Justification for Gender Stereotypes**

There are distinct phenomena that inspire the drastic societal and governmental changes in both novels; the fertility crisis caused by radiation in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the development of the skeins in women in *The Power*. Under a different regime, the fertility crisis could have instigated a movement of female transcendence from their immanent status as child bearers and in some ways have inspired the same rise from female subjugation as the one we experience in *The Power*. Atwood's choice of making fertility the crisis from which society needs to be saved, calls attention to the issue of using the reproductive function of women's bodies and their role as mothers in society as a defence of female oppression. While the women in *The Power* rise as leaders, transcending the domestic sphere to which women largely have been confined, all women in Gilead are perpetually kept within domestic immanence. While religious ideology is at the centre of both novels, one regime advocates female resistance and strength; the other the impossibility of it. While Gilead emphasizes Christianity's misogynist nature, the women's movement in *The Power* reveals how imbedded the religiously founded gender ideology still is in Western culture.

In Gilead, the gender stereotypes that confine women to domesticity and their reproductive bodies are defended on the religious ground that God made men and women biologically different for a reason. Through the implementation of arranged marriages, the Commander claims they have given women more than they have taken away. He recalls how women used both to struggle to find a man and to keep him. Due to the lack of respect they got as mothers, it is 'No wonder they were giving up on the whole business' (Atwood 338).



This implies the view that there must be something wrong with the circumstances in a woman's life if she should choose a different path than motherhood, and this is what Gilead claims to have rectified. Within the control of the new regime '[women] can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement' (Atwood 339). This is interesting to consider in light of the previously discussed idea of the male need for sexual variation. Juxtaposed with the female destiny of childbearing, it suggests a non-existence of female sexuality or sexual needs. As the Commander claims, the male need for sexual variation is 'part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan' (Atwood 367). Significantly, this strictly reflects a *patriarchal* procreational strategy, with full biblical support through narratives describing men who take more than one wife to procreate and expand their lineage; preferably by the birth of sons who would continue their father's legacy. With support of the gender roles professed in the Bible, the Commander concludes, 'All we've done is return things to Nature's norm' (Atwood 339): a norm proclaiming that God intended women's lives to be restricted by their womb.

A return to the subject of pornography is useful for the discussion. As Tenbus accounts, the New Christian Right had gained political prominence in the United States at the time of Atwood's writing (7) and *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a critical response to its politics. Opposing the Equal Rights Amendment in support of fundamentalist Christian family values, the New Christian Right were also opposed to pornography. Brownmiller discusses how part of the problem is that the most vigorous opponents of pornography belong to the group of religious, Southern, conservative and right-wing adherents (392-393). This is a problem, because their opposition is founded on biblical beliefs, as discussed, that proclaim restrictive ideas about expectations of womanhood. Consequently, as their views oppose female liberation in other areas of life, their arguments against pornography give merit to the opposing, liberal view that pornography is about sexual liberation for women. Through its exploration of the subject of prescribed femininity and sexual stereotypes, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows us that Christian fundamentalists and liberals both argue within the confinement of patriarchal female oppressive beliefs and, thus, neither in favour of women.

It is by claiming that God made men and women different with the intention of prescribed behaviour accordingly, that Janine is made to blame for her own rape. Male sexual aggression is defended on biological grounds: 'Men are sex machines. . . . It's nature's way. It's God's device' (Atwood 222). Thus, the responsibility for physical violations done to women by men are placed with the women, leaving men blame-free. As part of their re-

education at the Red Center, the Handmaids are taught that ‘He [God] made you different. It’s up to you to set the boundaries’ (Atwood 70). By setting boundaries, Aunt Lydia means not to make sure men restrict their behaviour, but rather that women must restrict themselves so that men are not tempted. This gender ideology proclaims that men are sexual predators by nature and women must take certain precautions to make sure they do not end up as prey. Hence, it follows that when they do, it is to be interpreted as punishment for going against God’s will. Janine failed to protect her chastity and was, therefore, punished for her sin: ‘Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*’ (Atwood 112).

Similarly in *The Power*, Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor justifies the rape of Allie through her religious conviction: ‘I saw that a devil was in you. . . . You needed to be taught discipline’ (Alderman 316-317). The image of the devil is significant as it symbolically refers to Eve’s Original sin of consorting with the devil; an act that caused humankind’s expulsion from Paradise. As written in a New Internationalist issue, ‘The identification of woman with evil, temptation and sin thus became a primary ingredient in Christian tradition’ ever since and as accounted for ‘women are redeemed by willingly accepting their gender roles’ (New Internationalist). That ‘the devil’ had to be driven out of her suggests the idea that women who do not act according to said gender roles are sinful and must be shown their place. The subject of religiously justified punishment of transgressive feminine behaviour is given further emphasis in the novel through repetitive allusions to the devil. The event that sparked the female rebellion in Saudi Arabia that Tunde went to report was the murder of two young girls in line with Moslem practice of so-called honour killings of women. A religious uncle had witnessed his nieces ‘practising their devilry together . . . and somehow they had both ended up beaten to death’ (Alderman 56). The normalcy of such punishment for female gender transgressions is emphasized, as the narrator notes that ‘the same events might have gone unremarked’ (Alderman 56) before the power rose in the women. The accusation of practicing ‘devilry’ refers to the girls’ use of ‘the power’ and may both allude to the practicing of witchcraft and female gender transgression; the close relationship of which I believe Alderman makes a point of drawing attention to. This to invite the reader to consider how a rise of such power in men still would be within the norms of strength and domination appropriate for the male gender and how the religious condemnation of the practicing of witchcraft mostly befall women. It is, after all, called *witch-*, not *wizard*, craft for a reason.

Following the sexual harassment accounted for in chapter one, the girl strikes the man with her power and people call out: 'That girl was a witch! That is how a witch kills a man' (Alderman 17). This scene is particularly interesting if one interprets Alderman's use of symbolism to invite the reader to draw a parallel to the Original sin of Eve. They are in the fruit aisle and Isaac thinks the girl will hit her harasser with a mango. Instead she strikes him, he falls dead, and people exclaim that she has 'Hit him and poisoned him' (Alderman 17), while some suggests that 'there is a snake among the fruit. . .' (Alderman 17). The fruit may symbolize the forbidden fruit that Eve, like a snake, lures Adam with, thus, poisoning him, and the sentence *that is how a witch kills a man* may allude to how Eve was responsible for the fall of Adam and Mankind. This interpretation is given merit later in the novel, as a reference to original sin is made explicitly by Sister Veronica, who is convinced the girls have welcomed the Devil into their bodies: 'This is the Devil working in the world, passing from hand to hand as Eve passed the apple to Adam' (Alderman 46). The connection between witchery and the sin of Eve is made in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well, when Offred describes how former nuns in hiding are round up by the state, converted or shipped off to the Colonies. Formerly recognised as women dedicating their lives to God, they are now condemned for their chosen celibacy. Offred thinks, 'There's an odour of witch about them. . .' (Atwood 340), a comparison that suggests the religious view of women's connection with the devil which proclaims that women must redeem themselves through childbearing. The fact that Jezebel also was named a witch for her idol worship (Gaines) strengthens the use of her name in the novel as a symbol for all unredeemable women. Furthermore, Atwood's choice of dedicating the novel to her ancestor Mary Webster must not be ignored. Although she survived because the rope broke, she was hanged for being a witch in a Puritan society (Karen Stein 129). This dedicatee thus emphasizes Atwood's criticism of religiously justified subordination of women.

In her critical book review of *The Power*, Lucy Ellmann claims that 'There's far too much about religion. . .' (34). This statement suggests that she has missed the importance of what Alderman is drawing attention to through this aspect of the novel: namely the poisonous heritage of patriarchal religion and the dangerous relationship between power and religion alike. By turning the tables, implementing aspects which Ellmann considers extreme, she forces the reader to rethink everything and to consider the immensity of female subjugation in what we consider normal societies. One of the sections in the novel is dedicated to a disclosure of a chat forum originating in a misogynist backlash by angry men. It is titled as

one of Allie's sections, which makes little sense unless interpreted as emphasizing the central role that religion plays in the movement. One of the men shares how a woman tried to convert his son, which afterwards led him to ask his father if it was true that 'God wanted him to be obedient and humble' (Alderman 145). The juxtaposition of this biblical proclamation of acceptable female behaviour with the heated response that follows, emphasizes an irony that gives power to what the novel criticizes, 'Bitches need to see a change. They need to learn what justice means' (Alderman 146). Criticism of the power hierarchy of the sexes, proclaimed by the Bible is given further emphasis through the words of the most profiled blogger encouraging male resistance, UrbanDox: 'This is why God meant men to be the ones with the power. . . . [H]owever bad any man treated a woman, he needs her in a fit condition to carry a child' (Alderman 180). His argument is that God's intended power dynamic was to ensure the survival of both sexes. When women are the powerful sex, most men are rendered disposable, 'one genetically perfect man can sire a thousand – five thousand – children' (Alderman 180). However, confining women's societal value to her womb, suggests that what makes up her *individuality* is disposable.

The subject of using religion as a defence for one's dominance over others is given even more emphasis towards the end of the novel. The new religion intended to relieve women of their subordinate status is now used to justify subordination of children. We learn that Allie's abusive foster mother has continued her abuse of children, claiming to have found support in the teachings of Mother Eve: 'The mother is greater than the child. . . . [S]he is so . . . *delighted*, that Allie understood that everything she and Clyde did they did for her own good' (Alderman 316). With this I believe Alderman is leading up to her main criticism of the destructive relationship between religion and power, by drawing attention to the destructiveness of a power structure that prescribes an essence of dominance and submission. This, to a great degree, is the significance of the passage from 1 Samuel 8 as the novel's epigraph. The people wanted a king, as the women looks to Mother Eve, to lead them despite warnings of how the king would conquer and oppress. There is obviously an underlying point of how the women would suffer the most from the king's domination, however, the overall message is how all people would suffer from his power. When someone has all the power, it inevitably establishes the imbalance of the powerful and the powerless, as power cannot exist without powerlessness. When Allie asks the voice how she is supposed to know which side is good and which is bad, whether she should lead the women to finish the war or avert it, the voice tells her that it is more complicated than that: 'Who persuaded the other one to eat the

apple? Who has the power and who's powerless? All of these questions are the wrong question. . . . You can't put anyone into a box' (Alderman 319). This suggests a criticism of the existence of the power structure that religion presupposes in its very essence. The voice continues, 'the whole idea that there are two things and you have to choose is the problem' (Alderman 320). This may be interpreted as the voice telling her that nature set this in motion for a reason and it is not a matter of choice. It may also, however, be interpreted as criticism of how the power structure in place presupposes the opposing positions of dominance and submissiveness: proclaiming a choice of either or. Women are the ones most oppressed under this structure and both Atwood and Alderman convey the urgency of rethinking societal structures that prescribe specific gender norms and roles. Tenbus writes that women 'perpetuate their own subjugation by internalizing and strengthening [the] voices' (4) that prescribe their subjugation; a fact which emphasizes the need for such thematization and the importance of, especially, a female readership. Being able to recognize all levels of one's own subjugation within societies that have spent decades justifying and teaching prescribed femininity is not a given.

### 3 Power Dynamics: Hierarchy and the Significance of Sex

*I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet.*

*Just kiss. I don't even wait.*

*And when you're a star they let you do it.*

*You can do anything.*

*Grab them by the pussy.*

Donald J. Trump

The novels share similarities in their structure and form. In addition to the similar epigraphs, discussed in the previous chapter, they are both frame narratives. The frames in both novels may be interpreted as giving emphasis to the sexism and power hierarchy of the sexes, that the main narratives in the novels criticize. *The Power* is written as a novel within the novel, which embodies both fictitious narratives and supposed archaeological findings. The main narrative, entitled *The Power: A historical novel*, is written by the made-up author Neil Adam Armon (an anagram of Naomi Alderman), and its frame is composed of emails back and forth between Neil and Naomi discussing its content. Alderman's intention of creating an anagram of her name may have been to allude to the necessity for female writers to use pseudonyms in order to be taken seriously as writers in the past. This is further underlined through Naomi's last email to Neil, making up the final lines of the novel: '[H]ave you considered publishing this book under a woman's name?' (Alderman 339). From Neil's first email, we learn that he is a member of 'The Men Writers Association', an unthinkable concept in our contemporary society, which emphasizes the reader's familiarity with various women writers' associations. With this, Alderman addresses how the patriarchal gender hierarchy is still reflected in how writers are acknowledged. She underlines how society considers women writers through Naomi's comment on how men writers are perceived, '[A]nything you do is framed by your gender. . . . Every book you write is assessed as part of 'men's literature'' (Alderman 338-339). Naomi's suggestion that Neil publish his book under a woman's name as '[A] way out of that particular bind' (Alderman 339) criticizes how society perceives 'male' as the default gender of writers and how it still considers the gender of a female writer relevant for the

categorization of her work. Ironically, Alderman herself was awarded Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction for *The Power* in 2017, an award that has no equivalent for male writers. Although the award was first created as a response to other 'gender neutral' awards' tendency to favour male writers (Britannica), the effect is, simultaneously, that of upholding the notion that the female writer is somehow separate from the male writer, unable to compete for the same award as equals. Alderman asserts her criticism through the words of Naomi: '[T]he frame is as inescapable as it is nonsensical' (Alderman 338).

The tone of the communication between Neil and Naomi reveals a sexism and a matriarchal power hierarchy that offer a reflection of our patriarchal society. Neil comes across as humble and anxious about Naomi's opinion about his novel; Naomi, contrastively, as confident and, at times, patronizing. She criticises his perspective on history and suggests that it is 'a fun exercise' (Alderman 333). This draws attention to patriarchal sexism in language, such as the use of 'mansplaining' to imply incapability in women. Naomi addresses Neil in line with that concept, 'you saucy *boy*' (Alderman ix, my emphasis). The use of the word 'boy' alludes to the patronizing use of the word 'girl' when addressing adult women. Naomi also reveals the normalcy of sexualisation of men in their world, something of which parallels the previously discussed issue of male objectification of women. She describes Neil's fictitious world as 'a . . . more *sexy* world than the one we live in' (Alderman ix). Moreover, a comment on how pornography encourages objectification is made. Naomi writes, '[M]en in army fatigues or police uniforms really does make most people think of some kind of sexual fetish' (332), to which Neil responds, '[S]ome people will just treat it as cheap porn. That's always the tawdry inevitability if you write a rape scene' (334). Furthermore, the link between the hierarchy of the dominant and the submissive and sexual fantasies is addressed through Naomi's words, '[G]angs of men locking up women for sex... some of us have had fantasies like that!' (332). This draws a parallel to the previously discussed conflict between liberalist views of pornography's function as sexual liberation vs. radical views supporting its objectification and suppression and suggests, I believe, that such fantasies are in fact only liberating for the physically dominant. It becomes a liberating fantasy, because it is not true submission, but a game, with the knowledge that regaining control of the situation is physically unproblematic. This challenges the reader to consider the sexual norms from which liberalist views originate and to which they are confined.

Furthermore, the framing narrative denotes criticism of how patriarchal history presupposes one fixed, objective historical truth. Neil is trying to put forth a different

perspective than the history taught about the Cataclysm era, a perspective of which Naomi is very sceptical: ‘Are you really suggesting that everyone *lied* on a monumental scale about the past?’ (Alderman 369). Naomi’s response to Neil’s claims about the past suggests criticism of how history has been written mainly by men and about men, thus suppressing female perspectives. Neil claims, ‘[T]hey picked works to copy that supported their viewpoint and just let the rest moulder into flakes of parchment’ (336). This idea resonates well with what Alderman reveals about two archaeological findings from the ancient city of Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley in her Acknowledgements. Two of the illustrations in the novel, ‘The Priestess Queen’ and ‘The Serving Boy’, are based on these findings, and as Alderman suggests, the whole of the novel could have been communicated through these illustrations and a factual note describing how, despite findings suggesting a fairly egalitarian culture, the figures were named ‘Dancing Girl’ and ‘Priest King’ respectively (Alderman 341).

Similar criticism of the suppression of female perspectives on history is raised in *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s epilogue, named ‘Historical Notes’. We learn that Offred’s narrative has been transcribed by Professor Moon and Professor Piexioto, who have studied the insights she offers about the Gileadean period. Over the course of his lecture, Professor Piexioto swiftly undermines Offred’s narrative for failing to enlighten the researchers through hard facts, such as traceable names, that would have authenticated her story and made it a valuable contribution to history. Marta Dvorak, Dominick M. Grace and Hilde Staels all discuss how Piexioto’s dismissal of Offred’s narrative for lacking credibility supports a reading that criticises the idea of a fixed historical truth that disregards personal experience. As Staels writes, ‘They fail to consider the narrator as generator of meaning in their search for ‘objective’ truth’ (124). Offred herself insists that she is an unreliable narrator: ‘I made that up. It didn’t happen that way. . . . It didn’t happen that way either. . . . All I can hope for is a *reconstruction*. . .’ (Atwood 402-405, my emphasis). Offred’s thoughts about her own narration emphasizes the notion that absolute truth is impossible to generate, as it is always reconstructed by someone. Thus, objectivity is impossible, because subjectivity is always a part of storytelling. That the narrative is meant as criticism of a narrow perspective on historical truth is emphasized through Piexioto’s grasping for meaningless details that may support an identification of the Commander, such as ‘[H]is hair was indeed grey’ (Atwood 475). Piexioto’s lecture draws attention to patriarchal ‘refusal of male intellectuals . . . to acknowledge the value of a woman’s perspective on patriarchal history’ (Staels 126). Not acknowledging the constructiveness of history that Offred’s narration emphasizes, Piexioto



states, 'She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy' (Atwood 476).

As Karen Stein accounts, *The Handmaid's Tale* may also be read as a frame narrative, if one considers Atwood's dedication and the 'Historical Notes' section as framing the main narrative. Such a reading finds support in the significance of Atwood's choice of dedicatees and the parallel that may be drawn between the pairing of Mary Webster and Perry Miller and Offred and Piexioto. Miller was a scholar of Puritanism at Harvard, and Atwood's old Professor, and the parallel between him and Piexioto is evident in that they both ignore the misogynist aspects of the cultures they study (Stein 130), of which both Offred and Webster are victims. Stein refers to Sandra Tomc, who notes that the significant issue of both pairings 'is the failure of the female object of study to fit the patterns of inquiry set out by her male scrutinizer' (130). In other words, scrutiny that follows from a patriarchal perspective fails to recognize the value of a woman's perspective. The fate of Offred and Webster (presuming Offred did, in fact, escape) may symbolize the hope of rising from female oppression. However, their escape was, significantly, due to sheer luck or the help of others, which suggests that in actuality they did not escape their oppressed state at all.

Similar to the language exchanged between Neil and Naomi, sexism is an important aspect to take note of in Piexioto's language as well. One example, much emphasized by scholars such as Grace (161), is the opening of his lecture with a pun that compares women with meat, at the expense of Professor Moon: 'I am sure we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner, and now we are enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word 'enjoy' in two distinct senses, precluding, of course, the obsolete third. (*Laughter*)' (Atwood 459). The significance of this chosen pun is that it draws attention to how, in Madonne Miner's words, 'in a sexist society, women and flesh are interchangeable' (26). The fact that he makes the pun, emphasized by the audience's laughter at the end, informs the reader that the 'Clearer light of [their] own day' (Atwood 479) in which Piexioto studies the culture of Gilead, is an ironic description. Piexioto himself acknowledges that there was not much original about the regime of Gilead, which makes his claim '[W]e must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gil-eadeans. . . . Our job is not to censure but to understand' (Atwood 463) even more provocative. By not morally judging history, they have not learned or rectified the mistakes of the past in their present and male oppression of women persists. Staels, Stein and J. Brooks Bouson, among others, have commented upon Atwood's presumably intentional pun in the name of the lecture's location, The University of Denay,

Nunavit, (deny none of it), which, as Bouson writes, ‘carries a hidden message to readers’ (59). This resonates well with the novel’s emphasis on the value of multiple perspectives on history and the warning against passive acceptance of oppression. The shifts in both novels, between the past (our present) and the future, serve, as shown, to reinforce this message.

This final chapter will continue the discussion of the criticism raised in the novels’ framing narratives. It will offer a close examination of the concept of power as it relates to the hierarchy of the sexes and discuss the ways in which the novels offer criticism of this subject. The final section will discuss how the aspects that the novels call attention to may be placed within the sex/gender debate of nature vs. nurture.

### **3.1 Power Dynamics and the Warning Against Female Passivity**

The concept of power and the normalcy of patriarchal power hierarchy is given much emphasis in both novels through the narrators’ depiction of the characters’ preoccupation with what power is and ways to possess it. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we experience the effect of powerlessness through Offred and her desire to regain some sort of control and power over her own self and others. This need is expressed through her yearning for defiance of the restrictions forced upon her body, largely articulated through her recurrent urge to steal something throughout the novel: ‘It would make me feel that I have power’ (Atwood 124). Furthermore, she admits to taking pleasure in even the slightest power she has over others: physically over the sexually deprived Guardians and psychologically over Serena Joy, by breaking the rules of intimacy between herself and the Commander, thus trespassing her domain. Within the confinement of the regime, Offred has in actuality no power to exercise any control of her own life, but her fixation on the power she does have to indirectly affect others with her actions, emphasizes the extent to which power is embedded in human relations. Commenting on the Aunts’ willingness to control other women, Piexioto asserts that ‘When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting’ (Atwood 473). This is not to suggest that when power is plentiful, it is exercised less, rather that it is exercised to the extent a person’s situation allows for. Offred comments on this, as she considers the extent of the Commander’s powerful position, allowing him to bend the rules of the Regime he helped establish: ‘Perhaps he’s reached that state of intoxication which power is said to inspire, the state in which you believe you are indispensable and can therefore do anything, absolutely anything you feel like’ (Atwood 365).

Through Offred's flashbacks to Gilead's primary step towards eradicating women's self-autonomy, we learn that they were reverted back to being financially dependant on their husbands 'or male next of kin' (Atwood 276): prohibited to work, leave the country and robbed of the right to own property and distribute their own money. In *The Power*, similar laws emerge to restrict men's freedom and autonomy. Men must now have a female guardian and are 'no longer permitted to drive cars. . . . to own businesses. . . . to gather together . . . in groups larger than three. . . . to vote' (Alderman 243). While the style of narration in *The Handmaid's Tale* gives the reader much insight into the state of powerlessness, the shifts in focalisation in *The Power* allow for a greater emphasis on characters who experience the enticement of possessing power. How out of reach such a power normally is for women is significantly underlined by how the female characters are continually comparing their new strength with the biological advantage men used to have and the power this gave them. This emphasis, juxtaposed with the depiction of male outrage and resistance towards the overturn of power, calls attention to the normalcy of patriarchal power hierarchy and societal dependence thereof. When Tunde needs Roxy's help to escape his captivity, he thinks how he must be 'A flattering looking glass . . . reflecting her at twice her natural size' (Alderman 274). This is a reference to the looking glass imagery that Virginia Woolf uses in her essay *A Room of One's Own* to describe how women serve to uphold man's feeling of superiority through the male insistence on female inferiority; perceiving them only in relation to himself. Woolf describes how the male ego and self-confidence rely on this relationship. She writes, 'For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished' (53). Tunde goes on to think that 'Without that power . . . probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle' (Alderman 274), something which seems to support Woolf's notion that civilisation as we know it relies on this relationship, thus, upholding the patriarchal power hierarchy.

Alderman further explores normative power dynamics between the sexes through her depiction of male fear of losing their superiority and their attempts to assert it and revert things back to normal. The reactions she imagines support Woolf's notion that the male 'fitness for life' rely on the inferiority of women and that power, once possessed, is not easy to let go of. Men fight to keep their physical superiority. When the power first rose in women in Moldova, 'They used to blind the girls. . . . So they could still be the bosses' (Alderman 261). Similarly, there is a scene depicting police violence where the police beat up a woman who, greatly outnumbered, had only slightly hit two of them in self-defence as a warning.

This suggests criticism of hostile attitudes towards minorities in the police force in general, asserting their white, male dominance. The emergence of ‘men’s movie clubs’, watching movies that emphasize male strength and superiority, call attention to gender norms prescribing that display of strength and violence are gender traits reserved for the male sex. The idea that the normative power hierarchy is the way the power dynamics of the sexes should be is given much emphasis. Tunde reads chat forums suggesting that if all men had skeins ‘everything would be back to the way it ought to be’ (Alderman 171). This echoes Roxy’s dad’s justification for the grotesque surgical removal of her skein, to insert it into his son Darrell instead: ‘It’s better this way . . . This is the way round things ought to be’ (Alderman 256).

The question of what power is and what it means to possess it is considered through the thoughts and experiences of the characters. Through Margot, the subject of sexism in the work place and its particular prevalence in candidateship for higher positions, is called attention to. We are given insight into the rivalry between her and Daniel in the upcoming election for Governor and learn that her ability is being questioned due to societal expectations of her sex: ‘[W]ith those two girls to raise, can a woman like that really find *time* for political office?’ (Alderman 165). However, the change in her physical power, brought about a change in her attitude and her confidence. Margot’s thoughts about having power suggests it means having the *ability* to physically wound someone: ‘It doesn’t matter that she shouldn’t, that she never would. What matters is that she could, if she wanted to. The power to hurt is a kind of wealth’ (Alderman 71). Following these thoughts, she addresses Daniel with a sharp and slightly condescending attitude which denotes her superiority, thinking that ‘Nothing either of these men says is really of any significance’ (Alderman 71). Taken aback, Daniel has no response and the significance of this exchange is that it makes the interesting suggestion that physical superiority generates psychological confidence and dominance as well. Margot asserts, ‘That is how a man speaks. And that is why (Alderman 71). In fact, it is following her slip, where she slightly hits Daniel with her power during the campaign, that she is elected governor. She has proven to be no less capable than a man in any aspects, she has shown them ‘she’s strong’ (Alderman 169). To her daughter Jocelyn, power means physical strength and the ability to defend oneself: ‘It was for this. To save her from this bad man, trying to kill her’ (Alderman 304). To Roxy, having grown up witnessing her father run his drug business through intimidation and violence, power is having other people fear and respect you. It is the physical strength to protect oneself and others, ‘She’s always wanted to

have that. It's the only thing worth having' (Alderman 47). Essentially, the voices in the novel suggest that power means having the physical strength to avoid the position of the vulnerable victim: a position women have often inhabited.

Yet Roxy represents the voice who recognizes how the new power in women could replace the pervasive power dynamic of the sexes with equality: men and women working together, not insisting on maintaining the dynamic of the submissive and the dominant. She asserts, 'Blokes have got a thing they can do: they're strong. Women have got a thing now, too. . . . The stuff we could do together (Alderman 103). The voice of Roxy makes me think of the narrator's voice in *A Room of One's Own*, which exclaims: 'All this pitting of sex against sex, of quality against quality; all this claiming of superiority and imputing of inferiority, belong to the private-school stage of human existence where there are "sides". . . .' (Woolf 102). However, there is too much anger, too much need for revenge for the female oppression of the past for Roxy's voice to prevail. The desire to punish men for their past arrogance and dominance is great, 'Just like a man . . . thinks we always want to hear what *he* has to say' (Alderman 229). Consequently, acts of violence towards and oppression of men escalates. As we learn from the emails between Neil and Naomi, in the end the rise of power in women brought about no more equality between the sexes than our patriarchal society has. Lucy Ellmann does not review the novel favourably and questions Alderman's reason for writing it. She claims that 'By the end of it, you'd really rather men stayed in charge' (34). This statement shows that, in addition to failing to comprehend the significance of the novel's focus on religion, she overlooks the important emphasis on the prevalent power struggle of the sexes. On the one hand, the novel emphasizes the problem of the physical inequality of the sexes, but on the other it suggests that even if an opportunity for physical equality arises problems still persist due to the prevalence of a dynamic of the one dominating the other. The character development of Tatiana exemplifies how power corrupts. She grows exceedingly more malicious towards those she considers her subordinates and her desire for power has no end. Although she is not made a focaliser in the novel herself, she occurs in the narratives of the majority of the focalisers and may, thus, be interpreted as a symbol of how power touches everyone and how our conceptualisation of power sustains the dynamic of the oppressor versus the oppressed. Roxy's voice suggests a parallel to the argument made by Woolf in 1929, that 'No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own' (97), signifying that the pitting of sex against sex is still very much at the centre of the equality struggle of our time. With her statement, Woolf criticised the increasing war between the sexes: women's

growing struggle for equality and men's insistence upon their inferiority. The insistence upon a power hierarchy rather than power equality, upheld by prevalent societal gender norms, constitutes an essential aspect of criticism that the novel offers. As Tunde reflects, 'There is a part in each of us which holds fast to the old truth: either you are the hunter or you are the prey. Learn which you are. Act accordingly' (Alderman 265).

Pilar Somacarrera discusses Atwood's power politics as articulated by the author herself and as shown in *The Handmaid's Tale*. She quotes Atwood's own words: 'Politics, for me, is everything that involves who gets to do what to whom. . . . to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power' (44). In Gilead, only the people at top have power, and as Somacarrera observes, Atwood has stressed that the people on top encompass not only men but some women as well: '[They] have different kinds of power . . . but power nonetheless, and some of the power they have is power over other women' (53). The final remark is an important one, for even though the Aunts and Wives have power over the self, the power they have over others is restricted to other women. As Stephanie Barbé Hammer puts it, the narrative 'focuses specifically on men's domination of women by means of other women' (39). All power exercised in Gilead, regardless of who exercises it, is in service of its patriarchal system. Offred's power over the Angels services patriarchal sexualization of the female body, her power over Serena Joy is merely an effect of compulsory heterosexuality and its advocacy of female rivalry; even Offred's narration, her only successful defiance of a society that forbids female discourse, does not escape patriarchal censure and oppression. The power relationship between Offred and Serena Joy is, as Dorothy Jones discusses, a result of social pressures which 'divide women from one another for male gratification by assigning them to the opposing categories of wife or mistress' (39). The man, wife, mistress dynamic is emphasized through the Commander, Wife and Handmaid relationship, but also through Offred's description of her role as Luke's mistress before he divorced his wife. This emphasis calls attention to the patriarchal propaganda restricting female autonomy, which Adrienne Rich calls 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Female autonomy threatens the foundation on which the heteronormative society is built, thus, through disempowerment, women are promoted as 'the emotional and sexual property of men' (Rich 284). The power play between Offred and Serena Joy is nothing but a continuation of their own patriarchal oppression. As Offred states, referring to the Commander's role in that situation: 'There's no doubt about who holds the real power' (Atwood 212). Similar attention is given through what Monique Wittig calls 'the exchange of women', which she argues upholds patriarchal obligatory heterosexuality (309).

The arranged marriages in Gilead are an example of how such an exchange is organized, where women go from being in subordination of one man to another.

Somacarrera, Hammer and Silvia Caporale-Bezzini all discuss Atwood's power politics as expressed in the novel, in relation to Michel Foucault's theory on power relations. According to Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace, Foucault refrains from providing a theory on what power actually is; it is the effects of the exercise of power that preoccupies him and about which he has brought insight (89). His main argument is that power 'produces the cultural forms and social stratifications we have come to recognize as features of our society' (82), thus, Foucault refutes the idea of an a priori power relationship between the sexes because power 'is the *result* rather than the productive *cause* of the relationship' (88). Power is, therefore, ascribed in accordance with how society is constructed. As Somacarrera claims, Atwood's and Foucault's focus alike is on 'how our identity is always determined by a net of relations of power' (55). By imagining a society where women have lost the power that they, in Atwood's time of writing recently had fought to obtain, Atwood demonstrates the non-essentialism of power; thus, refuting views expressing that power hierarchy between the sexes is essential and not socially constructed. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* both may be interpreted as communicating a perception of power relations in line with that of Foucault, which 'challenges the essentialist notion of patriarchy' (McHoul and Grace 124). What *The Power* additionally asks, however, is if the conditions for a power hierarchy rely on physical difference, thus, challenging the reader to critically consider the ways in which society advocates for the so called masculine gender traits of strength and dominance.

Another of Foucault's arguments is that power relations rely on the possibility for resistance (McHoul and Grace 84). As Caporale-Bizzini claims, it is the limitation of resistance within a patriarchal structure that *The Handmaid's Tale* calls attention to (37). Offred describes Moira's successful resistance to the regime as her having obtained power: 'Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman' (Atwood 207). It is clear that the reader is asked to critically question the kind of 'power' resistance to the regime allows for. Moira becomes in many ways Offred's opposite when it comes to recognising the persistent power hierarchy between men and women. Offred recalls a conversation with Moira, pre-Gilead, where she maintains that Moira's insistence on the existence of an imbalance of power between men and women is outdated: 'She said I had trivialized the issue and if I thought it was outdated I was living with my head in the sand' (Atwood 264). This emphasises the novel's thematization of female passive acceptance of the

power hierarchy of the sexes and the gender norms it prescribes. Rephrasing Foucault, Hammer denotes Atwood's criticism of how society 'controls our behaviour so efficiently and discretely that we fail to notice the degree to which we are being manipulated' (46). She, significantly, points to how the Gileadean society lacks the futuristic technological trappings common in the dystopian tradition (44). In its place, the 'invisible and all pervasive . . . technology of power' (45) is at work.

As accounted for in the previous chapters, the Aunts in *The Handmaid's Tale* and Mrs Montgomery-Taylor in *The Power* represent women who contribute to upholding patriarchal norms of prescribed femininity by actively furthering the patriarchal agenda. However, the novels also emphasize how women generally contribute to and participate within the confinement of this system, by assuming the role of passively accepting female oppression. As discussed, gender norms prescribing female behaviour have forged women's compliance with and acceptance of their subordinate status. This is likely to develop a kind of passivity towards visible oppression, either inflicted upon themselves or other women. In her personal statement, Susan Brownmiller admits that she used to be among the women who retained a passive attitude towards violence and oppression inflicted upon other women and attributes this to societal norms accusing women of being partially to blame for the oppression they are victims of. She considers the danger of not feeling kinship with violation inflicted upon other women and writes, '[T]hese attitudes gave me a feeling of security I needed: It can't happen here' (8). Such attitudes prevent the realization that gendered violations done to one woman uphold and generate oppression of all women. Both novels warn us against the danger of female passivity and ask of its readers to consider the universality of patriarchal female oppression. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is expressed through the characterization of Offred, whose attitudes echo the female passivity that Brownmiller warns us against:

There were stories in the newspapers, of course . . . but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives. We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. (Atwood 89)

Taking into account what we learn about Offred's past: her disinterest in politics and obliviousness to the power dynamics between men and women, reflected in her relationship with Luke who encourages her passivity, Hammer claims that 'Offred seems to have



exercised as little control of her former life as she does over her present existence. . . . [She] has always been a handmaid – a woman who serves others, but never herself’ (43). This is a distressing claim, but as Hammer notes, one which denotes the similarities between Gilead and contemporary patriarchal societies. Greatly contrasted with her recollection of her politically active, feminist mother, Offred seemed oblivious to the fact that her ignorance contributed to her oppression: ‘I didn’t much like it, this grudge-holding against the past’ (Atwood 309). However, her experience in Gilead seems to have changed her perspective. Leading up to her recollection of ‘the women in the newspapers’, she asserts, ‘We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it’ (Atwood 89), suggesting that female passivity is an active, willed performance of prescribed femininity, because it is easier to conform to societal expectations than to challenge them. Similarly, when Moira comments on the Commanders reasons for bringing their handmaids to Jezebel’s: ‘[Y]our gang are supposed to be such chaste vessels. They like to see you all painted up. Just another crummy power trip’ (Atwood 377), Offred’s first thought is that the Commander’s motivation must have been more ‘delicate than that’ (Atwood 377). However, she acknowledges that ‘it may only be vanity that prompts me to think so’ (Atwood 377) and merely an extension of her desperate need to recover what she has lost: ‘I want to be valued (...) I want to be more than valuable’ (Atwood 152). Her perception of the Commander’s wish to ‘diminish things, myself included’ (Atwood 354) in response to his sexist remark ‘How is the fair little one this evening?’ (Atwood 354) emphasizes the need for increased awareness around commonly used language which serves to subjugate women.

The issue of ‘willed ignorance’ is emphasized in *The Power* as well, through the depiction of female reluctance to embrace ‘the power’ and fight back against their oppression. One of the girls at the convent had tried to help her mother, who ‘had been beaten so hard and so often by Victoria’s stepdad that she hasn’t a tooth left in her head’ (Alderman 42), by showing her how to use her power. The mother, however, rejected the power Victoria woke in her and threw her out on the street, ‘calling her a witch’ (Alderman 42). Her use of the word ‘witch’ emphasizes how women partake in the use of words that contribute to upholding patriarchal oppression of women. When Woolf writes that women ‘must begin to tell the truth’, it implies that women themselves must actively refuse to serve as ‘looking glasses’ in order to stop being viewed in relation to man. This argument is emphasized through the relationship between Roxy and Tunde. Still without her skein, but with Tunde’s encouragement and reassurance about her strength and power ‘She’s got something back

already. She's twice her natural size' (Alderman 298). The novel communicates its criticism through the voice in Allie's head: 'If the world didn't need shaking up, why would this power have come alive now?' (Alderman 46).

### 3.2 Power Hierarchy and the Body as Nature vs. Nurture

The aspects of the novels hitherto discussed offer criticisms of gender as constructed and upheld by societal gender norms. The way both novels draw attention to how power relates to the relationship of the sexes agrees with Lois McNay's claim that Foucault's discussions of power and the body has given feminists 'a way of placing a notion of the body at the centre of explanations of women's oppression that does not fall back into essentialism or biologism' (11). According to Foucault, the body is 'an historical and culturally specific entity. . . . [with no] fixed biological or prediscursive essence' (McNay 16-17), thus '[T]he body is arbitrarily and violently constructed in order to legitimize different regimes of domination' (16). It follows, then, that sex and sexuality is not a natural, unruly force controlled and repressed by power and knowledge, rather, power and knowledge produce sex and sexuality within a society (McNay 29). While *The Handmaid's Tale* also provides insight on this matter in ways additional to those previously discussed, *The Power* comments more explicitly on this issue.

The way the argument for the constructiveness of gender is most emphasized in *The Power* is by illustrating how women show masculine gender traits of strength and dominance when they have the power; thus, refuting the normative perception of masculinity being reserved for the male sex and the myth of natural female qualities of tenderness and vulnerability. Margot's growing confidence, as previously mentioned, may also merely be a reflection of the socially prescribed gender norms aligning strength with dominance and ascribing power to the physically strong. The idea that gender is the result of socially prescribed behaviour is voiced through the relationship between Roxy and Tunde. Their sexual encounter is described as one where a balance of power has risen out of their shared lived experience of both submission and dominance. The narrator declares: 'They cannot, in that moment, tell which of them is *supposed to be* which' (Alderman 289, my emphasis). The issue of socially prescribed gender enactment is raised throughout the novel and is given particular emphasis through the depiction of its presence in social media. There are several scenes throughout the novel where we are given insight into the discourse between the news anchor Kristen and her male colleagues. The significance of these sections, I believe, is to call

attention to how gender is performed on screen. Tom's verbal attack on Kristen marks the point where gender performance is given emphasis: '[The power has] made you hard; you're not even a real woman anymore' (Alderman 175). This suggests a change in Kristen's gender enactment, strengthened by Tom's replacement Matt. He is young and attractive, something which is made a point of, and he performs his gender in a way previously attributed to and expected of women. He laughs and smiles a lot and comes across as humble and helpless: in want of female protection. In an interview with Jocelyn, he admits: 'I couldn't even have watched. . . . I know *I* feel safer with you around' (Alderman 211- 212). Kristen, on the other hand, is made to look more dignified and composed. These passages exemplify Judith Butler's theory of 'gender performativity'. She writes, 'That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (329). This implies that there is no gender core: gender is performed through the continuous repetition of acts that sustain the socially established norms of how gender is supposed to be performed. She continues to argue that these repetitions serve to conceal gender's performative nature and, thereby, concealing possibilities for performing gender 'outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality' (332) as well. She uses the concept of drag performances to emphasize her argument: '[D]rag . . . effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity' (329). To explain this, she points to Esther Newton's claim that drag symbolizes the inversion of a feminine appearance and a masculine essence and a masculine appearance and a feminine essence, both at the same time. Alderman's play on gender performance, like drag, effectively challenges the established binary gender norms by mocking societal perceptions of feminine and masculine expression.

Similar emphasis is given through Jocelyn's description of the new form of advertisement: '[S]assy young women showing off their long, curved arcs in front of cute, delighted boys. . . . Be strong, they say' (Alderman 258). The same issue is thematised in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well, through Offred's description of how men and women are portrayed in the once common magazines. The way she describes the Commander's chin, stating that 'he looks like a vodka ad, in a glossy magazine' (134), brings to mind how men are photographed to highlight the masculine aspects of their faces. Her description of a female model in comparison, '[H]air blown, neck scarfed, mouth lipsticked. . .' (240), highlights the difference in how men and women are portrayed. With this emphasis, both novels offer significant criticisms of how the media uphold social perceptions on how gender is to be

performed in our contemporary society. The documentary *The Codes of Gender* discusses how advertisements emphasize the differences between male and female, strictly aligning sex with gender. The main aim of the documentary is to show us how advertisement uses bodily expressions of the female body to convey female subordination. Females are positioned in a way that expresses vulnerability, dependency and sexual submissiveness by lying down or expressing inattention, while males are positioned to express dominance, assertiveness and that of being in control. The sexualized images of the past are juxtaposed with Gilead's insistence on the absence and suppression of female sexuality. With this, Atwood demonstrates how, according to Foucault, '[S]exuality is not an innate or natural quality of the body, but rather the effect of historically specific power relations' (McNay 3), offering a criticism of how 'women's experience is impoverished and controlled within certain culturally determined images of feminine sexuality' (McNay 3).

In her book *Sex, Gender, and the Body*, Toril Moi engages with the sex/gender discourse and argues how Simone de Beauvoir's conceptualisation of the body 'as a situation' is a way of acknowledging biological bodily difference and at the same time avoiding oppressive terms. She recounts how Butler argues that 'sex' is, like gender, a societal construction and how our two-sex model is oppressive in that it presupposes that everyone will fit into the category of either 'man' or 'woman'. Moi argues, however, that Beauvoir has already solved 'the problem' of sex and gender, because she does not ask us to choose between a society 'with or without sexual difference but between one with or without sexual oppression' (112). Moi proposes, then, to replace the sex/gender distinction altogether and rather 'speak in terms of bodies and subjectivity' (114). She writes, 'On this account, the human body is neither sex nor gender, neither nature nor culture. To say that my subjectivity stands in a contingent relationship to my body is to acknowledge that . . . no specific form of subjectivity is ever a necessary consequence of having a particular body' (114).

Moi argues in favour of these terms, because the structural theories of sex/gender fail to provide 'analyses of power relations more complex than that of domination and subordination' (25) and how the continuation of labelling 'qualities and behaviours as masculine and feminine will foster sex-based stereotypes' (107). The sex/gender discourse, she argues, only protects us against biological determinism, not 'oppressive generalizations about sexual difference' (108). These oppressive generalizations are exemplified with Moi's account of Strindberg's 1887 play *The Father*, which shows how a two-sex model creates an impasse, only to be resolved through sexual warfare: 'Either radical patriarchy or . . . radical

matriarchy would do the trick' (13). This is exactly what *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* exemplify and both may be interpreted as emphasizing how the two-sex model which presupposes this power struggle 'cannot produce a relationship between the sexes, at least not if the word relationship implies mutual trust and understanding' (Moi 13). Interestingly, though, the relationship between Roxy and Tunde in *The Power* may represent such a relationship, that has escaped the sex/gender distinction. Their relationship comes across as one which, in Moi's words, describes a more complex dynamic than that of subordination and domination, as neither fits the categorization of the one or the other. The question that remains, then, is which conditions such a relationship presupposes.

It is possible to consider *The Power* in the light of Moi's suggestion that we view humans as bodies situated in their lived experiences, in how it communicates its deconstruction of societal ideas of gender and reveals its non-essentialism. In his final email, Neil denotes how once we recognize that gender dynamics is a result of socially constructed power structures, '[W]e can think and imagine ourselves differently' (Alderman 338). He argues for the non-essentialism of power and suggests that the idea of 'gender' in itself is constructed: 'Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn't. What is a woman? Whatever a man is not. Tap on it and it's hollow. Look under the shells: it's not there' (Alderman 338). The novel's emphasis on biology in relation to power that acknowledges sexual difference suggests a view on gender and sex more along the lines of Moi's conceptualisation than Butler's for instance. However, the novel's emphasis on physical difference reveals an ambiguity in Neil's suggestion that we can imagine ourselves differently. Prior to this proposal, he addresses the fact that male babies used to be aborted in their society and claims that 'This can't have happened to women in the time before the Cataclysm' (Alderman 337), which we as readers of course know is not true. I interpret this as the novel emphasizing the idea that a society that relies on a hierarchy between the sexes will never escape the dynamic of the suppressor and the suppressed, regardless of which sex shows itself superior. The relationship between Roxy and Tunde may be interpreted as underlining this idea when we consider the conditions from which their seemingly peaceful and equal relationship arose. They have both shared the lived experience of submission and dominance, but were only able to do so due to the rise of power in women, which evened out the biological physical difference between the sexes. Does this, pessimistically, suggest that the problem of physical difference is so great that it is almost impossible to achieve true equality between the sexes? Even though the novel clearly offers criticism of societal advocacy of the

superiority of masculinity and critically address the persistence of power hierarchy, it depicts anatomical difference as something which stands in the way of equality of power between men and women, despite moving beyond normative perceptions of gender. The problem of female physical vulnerability still remains, and the fact that the novel imagines that the biology of women would have to be altered for female domination to be possible, does not argue favourably for women's odds of escaping their physical vulnerability. Without her skein, Roxy is portrayed as incapable of defending herself: 'And here she is. Hiding. Like a man' (Alderman 284). Thus, the novel seems to suggest that who has power over whom is not merely socially prescribed, as Foucault suggests, but also a question of physical strength and capability.

The issue where physical difference perhaps is considered the most significant is that of rape. Even though rape and the threat of rape is, as discussed earlier, an attack on women as social beings and much due to perceptions of gender and influence by the continuing sexualization of the female body, women's physical vulnerability in relation to men is also a significant factor in facilitating these situations. Although she argues throughout the body of her book how the greatest issue of rape is the ideology that encourages it, Brownmiller also acknowledges the need for women to learn how to defend themselves physically in her final pages: 'Fighting back. On a multiplicity of levels, that is the activity we must engage in, together, if we – women – are to redress the imbalance and rid ourselves and men of the ideology of rape' (404). Like Card, she encourages self-defence classes for women, along with her call for a change in how women perceive themselves and how they are perceived by men. Both take on a slightly revengeful tone: Card with her satirical suggestion that compulsory male to female transsexual surgery be implemented as a punishment for rape (14) and Brownmiller with her provocative insinuation: 'Is it possible that there is some sort of metaphysical justice in the anatomical fact that the male sex organ, which has been misused from time immemorial as a weapon of terror against women, should have at its root an awkward place of painful vulnerability?' (404). Essentially, the criticism expressed in both texts and the novels alike, suggests that the prevalence of the power structure of the sexes on which society relies prevents progress towards a society where equality of the sexes is even imaginable.

# Conclusion

This thesis has examined the societal aspects that constitute and uphold the power hierarchy of the sexes and its oppression of women in patriarchal societies. Through an exploration of the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, this thesis has discussed religious advocacy of gender norms that prescribe femininity and uphold the notion that woman is man's subordinate. The justification of woman's subordinate position as naturally determined by the biological functions of her body is problematic in that it sustains the essentialist notion that the biological differences between men and women have predetermined their societal functions. Read as a critique of this justification, the novels call attention to the constructiveness of societal gender norms. *The Power* offers particular emphasis on this issue by refuting the myth of natural submissiveness and tenderness in women. Gender norms, emphasized by social media, uphold societal objectification of the female body. Thus, women are taught that their bodies are 'rapable' and that they should restrict their behaviour and bodily expressions accordingly. Both novels problematize this issue and may be interpreted as criticizing how gender norms serve male freedom of expression and female restriction of expression; thus establishing and sustaining the notion of male-controlled sexuality and objectification of women. As this thesis discusses, the novels' emphasis on issues like rape, sexual slavery, prostitution and pornography exemplifies how rape and the threat of rape functions as group-based subordination of all women and how institutions like prostitution and pornography are patriarchal at the core: upholding objectifying sexualisation of the female body and, thus, revealing a male-controlled sexuality.

As this thesis has argued, the dichotomy between biological difference and the constructiveness of gender is given interesting emphasis through the issue of rape and societal conceptualization of power. Although, as Brownmiller argues, culturally pervasive perceptions on rape are upheld by normative prescription of femininity and objectification of the female body, they alone do not constitute the problem of rape. Female vulnerability to sexual violations due to their biologically determined physical vulnerability leaves women at a disadvantage when confronted with male physical strength. This issue advanced this thesis's discussion of societal perceptions of power. If society ascribes power to those who are able to dominate, and if, as suggested by *The Power*, this means having the physical strength to oppress, this weakens the prospects for equality between the sexes. However, if society were to place less value on strength and dominance and advocate a view of women not as objects in

relation to man but as individuals on their own, it is possible to imagine the development of a different power dynamic between the sexes than hierarchy.

Although *The Power*'s emphasis on the physical difference between the sexes suggests the problem of female inescapability of their naturally vulnerable position, the novel also stresses how this dynamic is much due to society's emphasis on the value of the masculine gender traits of strength and dominance. Neil's ambiguous suggestion that we can imagine ourselves differently carries more weight, perhaps, when considered in relation to his argument that patriarchies 'place less value on the capacity for violence' (Alderman 334). Alderman's matriarchy reveals the same power dynamics between the sexes as our patriarchy, because women adopt the androcentric perception of what it means to have power, now that they have the physical capacity to possess it. If society's conceptualisation of power was something different than strength and dominance, however, it would allow for a different power dynamic between the sexes to arise. Whether this means that Alderman suggests that women are naturally more apt to place value on a dynamic that is not based on hierarchy *because* of their natural physical inferiority, I do not know. Regardless, the novel's emphasis on the need for a restructuring of the socially upheld power dynamic in human relations seems to me the only possible path to true equality between the sexes, as equal physical strength is biologically implausible.

Although this thesis has had room to explore many aspects of gendered oppression as they relate to the power dynamics between the sexes, its limitations have set some restrictions in terms of the aspects I have had the opportunity to explore in depth. Women's reproductive rights are a central aspect of criticism in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and although it would have been appropriate to engage further with this issue as it relates to my topic of female oppression, the length limitations of this thesis led my attention elsewhere. Besides, much work has already been devoted to this issue, as it is emphasized in discussions of Atwood's novel by many scholars. A more extensive analysis of the significance of the drawings of archaeological findings in *The Power*, however, would allow for a further exploration of the novel's criticism of revisionist history. Although the subject of male-centred history and its oppression of female narratives is explored to some extent in this thesis, it would have been interesting to have researched this further. Drawing parallels between the emphasis made in *The Power* with Woolf's problematization of this subject in *A Room of One's Own* could lead to interesting discussions. Woolf's imagery of the looking glass also relates to how men have suppressed women's perspectives throughout history and how women have functioned to



strengthen men's views of their own societal significance. Moreover, engaging further with Woolf's essay would have allowed for a discussion of her conceptualisation of 'the androgynous mind'. This could prove useful in the discussion of societal perceptions on power, if one considers her argumentation to suggest an emphasis on the natural balance between masculine and feminine qualities in both sexes and as challenging the notion of placing more value on one or the other. It is possible, thus, to argue that Woolf's conceptualization of androgyny refutes gender norms prescribed according to biological sex. Her discussion of the war between the sexes shows criticism of the socially constructed power hierarchy that relies on the tension between oppression and dominance.

Finally, I would propose that bringing the issue of oppression of women into dialogue with the human rights rhetoric, taking into account how women historically were long left out of the Human Rights Declaration altogether, would be a beneficial continuation of the discussed societal criticism in this thesis. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) writes in its publication 'Women's Rights are Human Rights', that 'The work of activists, human rights mechanisms and States has been critical in ensuring that the human rights framework has grown and adjusted to encapsulate the gender-specific dimensions of human rights violations in order to better protect women' (25). Although gender-specific violations of women are included in the human rights framework and are being addressed by The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and various human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch, these issues are not specified in the Declaration of Human Rights itself. OHCHR claims in the publication that a change in attitude towards gender roles and stereotyping is necessary to achieve equal rights for women and acknowledges that gender-neutral laws may have discriminatory effects: '[A] gender-neutral law may leave the existing inequality in place, or exacerbate it' (32). They may have been written with the intention of being inclusive, but gender-neutral laws are in effect exclusive by not acknowledging the inequality that still exists between men and women in a patriarchal society.

Article 2 in the Declaration of Human Rights states that 'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status'. This proclaims that the Declaration sets out to include everyone, but it makes no distinction as to who is suffering from human rights violations the most today. Article 5, which states: 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading

treatment or punishment', addresses torture, but not gender specific violations of women such as rape or other sexual abuses, as discussed in this thesis. The problem of not acknowledging patriarchy as a human rights issue is that it leaves room for interpretation and for a defence of the violations of women's human rights that takes place under the pretext of it being part of a given culture.

Both *The Power* and *The Handmaid's Tale* invite the reader to consider how women's human rights are addressed in society and how patriarchal societies violate women's human rights through female oppression. By not acknowledging the inequality between the sexes and its subjugation of women in society, it is possible to argue that the rhetoric of the Declaration of Human Rights serves to uphold these gender discriminating conventions through its gender-neutral language. Women are subjected to gendered violations every day, and in our age of social media, more stories are being disclosed than ever. Countless of stories of sexual discrimination and abuse have emerged as a response to the Me-Too movement, raising awareness of the frequency with which women are being violated by men. Importantly, rape as a weapon in war and the industry of sexual slavery is still a vast problem. The urgency of the issues of gendered violations the novels portray is what inspired this thesis and its discussions of the aspects of society that uphold a gender ideology and power hierarchy that advocate female objectification and subordination. If there is to be any hope for women to escape their oppression, one must recognize violations done to some as violations that victimize all women, universally.

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