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# Reconstructing Feminine Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

R. Dhanappriya<sup>a</sup>, Dr. J. Uma Samundeeswari<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Research scholar, A. V. V. M Sri Pushpam College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Poondi, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>b</sup>Research Advisor & Assistant Professor in English, A. V. V. M Sri Pushpam College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli) Poondi, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India.

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### Abstract

Society becomes the ultimate source of the individual's anxiety. Many feminist organizations have flourished to demand the essential rights of female. The representation of woman in literature has been considered as one of the most important forms of socialization. Atwood's characterisation interestingly reflects theoretic perspective in many ways. The connection between the internal being of her characters and social reality is so close and obvious their reaction and responses to social interactions are mostly psychological. As social beings they are inevitably subjected to social reification, whereas as isolated individuals, they frequently retreat to their inner realm and are extremely vulnerable to psychological laws. This serves at least as a partial answer to the question of why life is so bleak for Atwood's middle – class educated women. The characters in the novel '*The Handmaid's Tale*' and their language purely reflect the inmost thought of feminine crisis in social myth.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, socialism, economic, political revolution, gender inequalities.*

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## 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and versatile writer. Her literary career began in 1961 with the publication of her first poetry collection, *Double Persephone*, and has grown to include sixteen poetry collections, twelve novels, eight short fiction collections, six children's books, and five major non-fiction works. Atwood's representations of gender explore the social myths defining femininity, representations of women's bodies in art, the social and economic exploitation of women, as well as women's relations with each other and with men. Her first five novels, in particular, demonstrate the range and complexity of her representations of sexual power politics, and provide a solid foundation for understanding the evolution of her feminist sympathies and how they inform *The Handmaid's Tale*.

To understand how *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a response to Second Wave Feminism, it is important to discuss that movement's evolution from its early nineteenth-century roots through the 1970s. The political and ideological foundations of Second-Wave Feminism reach back to the 1800s, a period noted, as Judith Hole and Ellen Levine observe in their study *The Rebirth of Feminism*, for its "geographic expansion, industrial development, growth of social reform movements, and a general

intellectual ferment with a philosophical emphasis on individual freedom, the ‘rights of man’ and universal education” (2). In the course of this political struggle, feminist pioneers challenged prevalent social assumptions. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft attempted to dispel the social myth regarding women’s inherent sentimentality in her 1792 tract, “A Vindication of the Rights of Women.” In “The Subjection of Women” (1869) John Stuart Mill argued against the Victorian theories of biological determinism. However, the re-emergence of the women’s movement fostered an understanding that their distinct lack of opportunities—economic, legal, and social—were in fact, according to Pollock, functions of a “psychologically enforced cultural myth, a set of assumptions and values concerning women that has been transmitted consciously and unconsciously for millennia” (16). Therefore, it became clear to Second-Wave Feminists that the deep-seated psychological roots of inequality had to be addressed to affect change, and, in order to do so, a new strategy had to be adopted.

The strategies to be adopted are Cultural Feminism, Separatism, Materialist Feminism, and Radical Feminism. Each of these sub-groups adopted and advanced a different perspective in the larger cultural debate on women’s issues. Therefore, instead of participating collaboratively as part of the same overall movement, Second-Wave Feminists often took separate, sometimes parallel, often conflicting, tracks. The result was that each sub-group was competing for authority and recognition, undermining women’s solidarity. Because of this, Atwood, it would appear, was drawn to none of these Feminisms. For Atwood, who has been a politically active advocate of human rights since the early 1960s, Cultural Feminism lacked an overt political focus or agenda. This sub-group was concerned instead with recovering cultural and artistic expressions and traditions that were uniquely female. Cultural Feminists sought to move away from representing male-dominated institutions and values in favor of elevating women’s experiences and values. Separatism also fell short in Atwood’s view, for it argued that the way women can best care for and/or support one another and combat patriarchy is through the creation of female-only spaces and relationships. These spaces manifested themselves in the form of all-female banks, businesses, and social agencies, and the like. However, the creation of these female-only spaces could be problematic in that women were choosing merely to separate themselves from society instead of attempting to educate men and bring about some social reform. By removing themselves from the sphere of male influence, expectation, and judgment, women could freely express their true femininity and female identity.

Another potential downfall of Separatism was its tendency to encourage resentment between the sexes. *The Handmaid’s Tale* contains hints of Atwood’s criticism of Separatism. Offred’s mother, a dedicated Second-Wave Feminist comments: “I don’t want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds’ worth of half babies. A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (Atwood 121). This marked disdain for the male sex merely reversed the extant social attitudes, without offering solutions to the issue of gender inequalities. Materialist Feminism had a strong foundation in class-consciousness. This branch may have been initially appealing to Atwood because of her own liberal political leanings. However, she is ultimately rejected the Materialist Feminist approach. Members of this branch of feminism were deeply involved with and committed to left-wing politics, and opposed capitalism in favor of socialism. They believed that the path to freedom and equality lay in the abolition of the faulty economic system whose division of labor necessarily privileged men over women, thereby relegating women to positions of inferiority. Often this meant that women’s issues were submerged within the drive for social, economic, and political revolution.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood depicts this disunity primarily through Gilead’s caste system in which women are assigned a particular role and concomitant dress and duties, with no hope of ever breaking free of these roles except through prostitution, exile, or death. The Gilead takeover can be read as stemming, in part, from women’s lack of solidarity in pre-Gilead culture and society. The social structure of Gilead reinforces and heightens these feelings, most disturbingly, as we shall examine in the fourth chapter, through the matriarchal regulation and enforcement of Gilead’s patriarchy.

Critics of Radical Feminism from the political left, including Materialist Feminists, strongly disagree with the Radical Feminist position that the oppression of women is fundamental to all other forms of oppression. These critics maintain that issues of race and of class are at least as important as issues about

gender. *The Handmaid's Tale* is Atwood's exploration of these central dilemmas of Radical Feminism, which provides the catalyst for the backlash scenario envisioned by Atwood in her creation of the dystopian society of Gilead. While there are certainly other Utopian and dystopian novels that influenced Atwood to varying degrees, the five novels discussed here contain elements that are particularly important to an analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a critique of Second-Wave Feminism because each is concerned with sexual power politics and relations between the sexes, and shares many other similarities, both with each other, and with Atwood's text. For each text a specific thread has been isolated which Atwood took up and extrapolated in the creation of her work: the dangers of political excess, the Utopian ideal of female solidarity, the politics of freedom, the politics of caste, and, finally, failed political resistance. *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood also fashions a destructive force, in the form of a military coup, as a means to free society from the excesses of the socio-political movement of Second-Wave Feminism.

Atwood also presents Gilead as an ironically egalitarian society. As the Aunts remark at the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center, each woman should be happy in the knowledge that she is performing her own socially assigned task; women are ostensibly united and relieved of the burden of multiple social roles: wives, mothers, workers, cooks, and maids, to name but a few. Instead of juggling all of these social functions, the women of Gilead are assigned only one of these roles, a system designed to foster camaraderie: "Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task" (Atwood 162). Thus, each woman works for the greater good of the community and the glory of Gilead. However, this Utopian society is designed to oppress and control people rather than to improve their lives. Atwood's world, the Utopia of Gilead is undermined by Offred's remembrance of the time. And so, an innocuous domestic item takes on tremendous importance. The entire social structure of Gilead is, at least momentarily, undermined by a white dishtowel with blue stripes.

Social harmony could not be effected by reforming the severely flawed extant social structures, nor, indeed, through any political avenue. Instead, these structures had to be destroyed. Equality is achieved by force, not by choice. Atwood also presents Gilead as an ironically egalitarian society. As the Aunts remark at the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center, each woman should be happy in the knowledge that she is performing her own socially assigned task; women are ostensibly united and relieved of the burden of multiple social roles: wives, mothers, workers, cooks, and maids, to name but a few. Instead of juggling all of these social functions, the women of Gilead are assigned only one of these roles, a system designed to foster camaraderie: "Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task" (Atwood 162). Thus, each woman works for the greater good of the community and the glory of Gilead. However, this Utopian society is designed to oppress and control people rather than to improve their lives.

Offred's complicity could be characterized as passive. However, some women in *The Handmaid's Tale* were actual agents of Gilead. Serena Joy, for instance, was a well-known television personality whose speeches, as Offred remembers, "were about the sanctity of the house, about how women should stay home" (45). Offred found these speeches and Serena's earnestness frightening (46). Throughout the novel Offred observes Serena, the Wife of her posting. One of her most telling reflections about Serena's promotion of these traditional values is how Serena reacts to the reality of being a Wife in Gilead: "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (46). Although Serena was clearly an agent of Gilead, she, too, has been trapped by its oppression.

The leaders of Gilead envisioned a return to these values: a re-awakening of morality and a promotion of faith-based guidelines to combat social chaos. The freedom to choose to marry or not, to choose to work or not, to choose to bear children or not, has been replaced with the freedom from divorce, bankruptcy, and abortion. Thus, by eliminating a need for choice, the state controls individual desires and directs them into socially acceptable channels. As in the United State of Us, choice is the enemy of social harmony in Gilead. By controlling choice, citizens' freedoms are controlled as well. The Handmaids have also lost control of their bodies, and, therefore, of their identities.

Emotions and relationships typical of human societies have been replaced with the desire for food, sex, drugs, and consumer goods. Citizens are conditioned to desire only these World State-provided basics. Since happiness is dictated by the immediate gratification of these desires, stability and social harmony abound. The technological interventions beginning at birth and lasting until death ensure that the World State retains control by changing what people want and then keeping them superficially fulfilled. All citizens of Gilead are also controlled through the establishment of the caste system. The final piece of the civil war, a regressive caste system, creates social classes by clearly delineating differing standards for behavior, dress, and social duties. This strict power structure seeks to eliminate undesirable cultural trends and beliefs while simultaneously controlling a fearful and potentially reactive populace. This stratification legitimizes what Christopher Jones identifies in his article “Women of the Future: Alternative Scenarios” as a “hyper-patriarchy” in which “men reclaim harsh dominance over women” (3-4). Jones accurately captures the psychological impetus for the Gileadean takeover.

In Gilead, women occupy the bottom rung of the social ladder, relegated to the domestic periphery. As Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives or Widows, women are confined to the household, with only two alternatives: banishment or prostitution. And though all men retain more social clout than women, not all men are equally powerful. Men too are constrained and victimized by this social system and its puritanical expectations. This victimization is more tangible, displayed in public executions for expressions of subversive behavior—religious, treasonous, or sexual. Despite this, males ultimately occupy positions of greater power, retain more social freedom, and are provided more opportunities for social mobility. As in *Brave New World*, the caste system in *The Handmaid's Tale* is ostensibly utilized to simplify the lives of citizens and allow them to more fully enjoy their lives. The Aunts have their own cache of propagandistic sayings, such as: “Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable or humane” (Atwood 163). Therefore, according to the Aunts, the new social stratum is liberating. But this attitude, couched in pseudo-feminist sentiment, is the most insidious tool of the patriarchy, a tool designed to convince women that their subservience provides personal fulfillment and serves the common good.

Similarly, Offred subverts Gilead through heterosexual relationships with men of her household. The first, her illicit relationship with the Commander, removes the barriers of objectivity that should separate them. As Offred reflects after a series of late-night rendezvous, “He was no longer a thing to me. That was the problem, and the realization has stayed with me. It complicates [...] I don't love the Commander or anything like it, but he's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow. Though his intentions are purely selfish, Offred does benefit from his interest. In his private space she is afforded more freedom as she reads magazines from the past, plays Scrabble, and uses hand lotion. Since reading and writing are strictly forbidden activities for women this experience is exhilarating. The lotion is significant for Offred because it offers hope of escape. The small act of pampering her skin leads Offred to imagine a future in which someone would again appreciate more than her potentially fecund ovaries. Her activities are socially deviant, but they are still controlled by the Commander—subject to his whims and desires.

The Commander's Wife orchestrates Offred's relationship with Nick, with the hope of Offred conceiving and therefore sparing the entire household from social stigma. Their relationship becomes more than merely another attempt at possible impregnation. Offred falls in love with Nick. This relationship provides deep fulfillment for Offred who believes “It's lack of love we die from” (103). She suffers in Gilead, in part, because she has no one to love. But this illicit love can only take place outside Gilead's domestic boundaries. There are signs within the household of stale “old love; there's no other kind of love [...] now” (103). Because of their bond and the child they both hope she carries, Nick arranges for Offred's escape from Gilead. This becomes her final and most powerful act of resistance. It is, however, problematic. Though Nick helps her escape, love is not necessarily triumphant. We know nothing of Offred's fate or the fate of her unborn child. It is unlikely that Offred and Nick ever saw one another again. Offred's resistance and escape are also problematic at the political level. She forgoes opportunities to spy on the Commander for the May Day resistance because she fears jeopardizing her relationship with Nick. Finally, her escape is motivated by self-preservation rather than

a desire to affect social change or solicit public outcry against Gilead. Like Serena Joy and the Aunts, Offred is truly complicit in her own oppression.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* employs major tropes and themes of Utopian and dystopian literature. In her article "How Can a Feminist Read *The Handmaid's Tale*. Instead of creating merely a warning, or merely a satire, Atwood expertly blends both into a satirical warning. She criticizes the autocracy of Gilead and the secular consumerist culture that preceded it. As an examination of the autocratic tendencies of such a culture Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* warns against self propagated oppression. The previous chapters explored how *The Handmaid's Tale* was inspired by Second-Wave Feminism and the genre of speculative fiction. Indeed, blending these elements was the genesis for Atwood's portrayal in *The Handmaid's Tale* of the disunity of women, and the consequent destruction of female solidarity.

Preying on the social confusion and unrest stemming from the Women's Liberation movement, the patriarchy of Gilead isolates women and then relegates them to the domestic periphery. Reacting to the increasingly strained gender relations of the liberal American culture that preceded it, the Republic of Gilead emerges as the new nation state. In Gilead, all men are not created equal: some men are second-class citizens and all women are third-class citizens. To be successful, the patriarchy of Gilead must reassert male dominance. Women are seen as potentially threatening and subversive, and, therefore, require strict control. They are banned from employment and then forbidden to own property or access assets, rendering them virtual prisoners within their homes. Women's imprisonment paves the way for Gilead's institution of a caste system, which, as previously discussed, is superficially designed to simplify the lives of citizens by dividing them into classes with clearly delineated standards for behavior, dress, and responsibilities. However, as in all dystopian societies, this caste system is actually a tool of oppression, particularly for women.

The result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as women's hatred of women. Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts one viable backlash from our current feminist momentum: gynocentric misogyny and "traditional" misogyny combined in one militaristic socio-religious order. The patriarchy of Gilead establishes a matriarchal network responsible for regulating women through enforcing the division of domestic labor. The matriarchal network ensures that, as Patricia Goldblatt points out in her article "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists," "the work women do conspires to maintain the subjection of their own kind" (4). The epilogue of the novel re-affirms the purpose of the matriarchy: "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (Atwood 308). This comment emphasizes the importance of the matriarchy both for establishing and maintaining the new social order. By relying on women to self-regulate, the founders of Gilead successfully destroy female solidarity. There are two modal systems in which this dysfunctional matriarchy is enforced: the Handmaid training system and the household. These two systems illustrate the public and private enforcement of the matriarchy.

Handmaids are the crux of Gilead's survival, paradoxically the most valued, yet most despised caste. They are charged with reversing the plummeting birthrate, a vital mission following an age of readily available birth control, irresponsible management of nuclear waste and chemical weaponry, and indiscriminate use of agricultural chemicals. After being arrested for participating in non-traditional relationships (second or common-law marriages, or other extra-marital liaisons), the Handmaids are then turned over to the Aunts for training. At the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centers (also known as the Red Centers), the Aunts indoctrinate the Handmaids in the matriarchy of Gilead. The Aunts are entrusted with the crucial duty of training the Handmaids because they rank among the most powerful female agents of the patriarchal order. In full collusion with the male leaders of Gilead, the Aunts stop at nothing to subdue and domesticate the Handmaids during their initiation.

However, by calling the Handmaids "sacred vessels" and "ambulatory chalices" the Aunts attempt to imbue their mission and status with honor (136). Indeed, the Aunts try to convince the Handmaids that Gilead has actually restored respect for women, who are now valued and appreciated because they

are “holding the future in their hands” (55). The Aunts represent themselves as motherly mentors to the Handmaids, guides on the path to successful assimilation into Gilead. Aunt Lydia’s pep talk on solidarity is disturbingly ironic in the context of the society it claims to represent. The caste system is not liberating. It is an insidious mechanism of the patriarchy, designed to convince women that their subservience provides personal fulfillment and serves the common good. Aunt Lydia justifies her mission to Offred’s group, “I’m doing my best [...] I’m trying to give you the best chance you can have” (55). The “best chance” the Aunts can provide the Handmaids is intimidation through brainwashing, humiliation, and torture. As part of a brainwashing campaign, the Handmaids are drugged into complacency and forced to watch pornographic movies. These films, among the Aunts favored tools, depict many sexually degrading and violent acts against women. In a particularly disturbing film, as Offred recounts, “we had to watch a woman being slowly cut to pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach split open and her intestines pulled out” (118). Aunt Lydia uses this film to illustrate the disdain men previously held for women. According to Aunt Lydia, women were merely bodies for men to use and abuse as they pleased. This is ironic on two levels. First, this attitude echoes the sentiments of many Second-Wave Feminists who saw men’s objectification of women as the primary source of the social oppression of women. Second, the Aunts are charged with controlling the Handmaids for the patriarchy. The leaders of Gilead view the Handmaids merely as bodies to be used for the good of the nation. The patriarchy has twisted a prominent feminist premise into a tool that enables women to oppress each other.

Within the confines of the Red Center, abuse is predominately psychological. Humiliation is a favorite technique of the Aunts. Janine, another Handmaid-in-training, repeatedly suffers public humiliation. For instance, an Aunt refuses to allow her a restroom break so she soils herself in front of the group. On another occasion, Janine is bullied into admitting she enticed the men who gang raped her, resulting in the abortion that marred her teenage years. Aunt Lydia condemns Janine, and all women who made spectacles of themselves by “oiling themselves like roasted meat on a spit, [revealing their] bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public,” and showing their legs without stockings (53). For Aunt Lydia, the sexual freedom women struggled to attain during preGilead times was the source of their victimization. Women foolishly flaunted their bodies, tempting men to sexual violence. An immodest woman is punished by God, according to Aunt Lydia, to “teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson” (72, emphasis authors). According to the Aunts, as spokeswomen for the patriarchy of Gilead, rape and other forms of sexual and domestic violence are consequences of women possessing sexual freedom and leading men on.

If psychological avenues are unsuccessful, the Aunts use physical violence to control the women in their charge. Offred recounts a few instances of violence. Her friend Moira, a militant lesbian she knew before the days of Gilead, suffers the Aunts’ wrath. Since hands and feet are unimportant to the Handmaids’ reproductive mission, the Aunts target these areas for torture; one beating left Moira unable to walk for a week. Nevertheless, Moira continues to resist the Aunts’ authority, the only woman in the Red Center who does so. Moira finally escapes from the Red Center. The manner of her escape—taking off her state-issued Handmaid robes and putting on the uniform of an Aunt—symbolizes her rejection of Gilead’s attempts to define her identity. Except for Moira, the Aunts achieve complete control over the Handmaids. The women make a few attempts to comfort one another and establish friendships in the Red Center, but acts of friendship are punishable offenses. Upon discharge from the Red Center, Offred is at the mercy of the matriarchy of Gilead. Within the domestic hierarchy, every woman is a spy and an enemy, even other Handmaids. Once the Handmaids have been initiated into the patriarchy of Gilead, they are posted to households. The domestic hierarchy, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Wives, operates on mutual dislike. The Wives consider the Handmaids distasteful. During a Birth Day visit, the Commander’s Wife makes the following comment to her friends, “Little whores, all of them, but still you can’t be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?” (115). The Handmaids are personal affronts to the Wives; they are continual reminders of the Wives’ failures to conceive. As Aunt Lydia tells her wards, “It’s not the husbands you have to watch out for, [...] it’s the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them. [...] Try to pity them. [...] You must realize that they are defeated women. The supposed empathy the Handmaids are asked to feel for the Wives as “defeated women” merely underscores the

antagonism created by the matriarchy. While Offred is cognizant of how Serena Joy, the Wife in her household, suffers under the patriarchy, she feels little, if any, compassion towards her. Offred dislikes Serena intensely for “her part in what was being done to her” (161). Serena was an instrumental figure in the Gileadean takeover, a supporter of a culture based in traditional values that would return women to the home. On a more personal level, Offred dislikes Serena “because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all” (161). This is perhaps the toughest obstacle for Handmaids. They are primed to devote their lives to conceiving children, yet are denied the pleasurable duties of motherhood.

Conception is the focus of family life in Gilead. The Ceremony is a socially condoned ménage à trois. Offred reflects that “it has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena” (Atwood 94). As Offred lies on Serena’s canopied bed, her arms restrained, and her skirt hiked up to her waist she reflects, “This is not recreation, even for the Commander” (95). Hence, sex has become a rote duty for all parties involved. To endure the Ceremony, Offred must detach from her body. Detaching from her body enables her to detach from her emotions. Offred learns to view the Ceremony as merely a part of her social duty. Serena, on the other hand, does not have the luxury of detachment. Her participation in the Ceremony requires her to watch her husband having sexual intercourse with another woman, an experience that is upsetting and insulting, to say the least. This disparity leaves Offred wondering, “Which of us is it worse for, her or me?” (95). Serena always cries the night of the Ceremony, but silently. Offred believes Serena does so because, “she’s trying to preserve her dignity, in front of us” (95). The Ceremony illustrates Serena’s failed intentions to establish domestic harmony by collaborating with the patriarchy. She fought for women to be restored to their traditional roles of wives and mothers, but the reality of being a Wife in Gilead is much different than she envisioned. Controlling Offred is the only outlet through which Serena can express her frustration with a system she once supported.

Except for the nights of the Ceremony, Offred is isolated from the rest of the household. Under Serena’s critical and ever watchful eyes, Offred must also do without the meager companionship provided at the Red Center. Offred has a deep wish to establish female solidarity; she desires a bond of friendship and a sense of community with the other women who work and live in the household. However, Offred is continually reminded of her status as a pariah, even in her “home.” As Offred remarks, Rita and Cora (the two Marthas), “talk about me as though I can’t hear. To them I am another household chore, one among many” (35). For the Marthas, Offred has the same status as any other necessary chore. Interestingly, the two Marthas have slightly different reactions to Offred’s presence. Rita, the older Martha, objects to Offred’s household duties: “she thinks I am common. She is over sixty, her mind’s made up” (48). Though Offred’s only viable alternative to becoming a Handmaid was exile or execution, Rita believes that Offred should not have “chosen” to be a Handmaid. Because of Rita’s traditional mindset, she continually criticizes Offred, both directly and indirectly. In contrast, Cora, the younger Martha, delights in the possibility of having a baby to care for. She views Offred’s presence as one of hope and happiness for the household. Offred recognizes Cora’s scant, yet willing, protection: “It pleased me that she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small 58 thing, even for her own advantage. It was a link between us” (152). Cora treats Offred with respect and makes some attempts to reach out to her. Cora tolerates, clothes, and feeds Offred because of the child she might ultimately bear. Though Offred appreciates these token actions of respect and kindness, they merely reinforce her identity as a two-legged womb of Gilead.

The only quasi-friendship Offred is allowed is the companionship of the Handmaid who accompanies her on their daily walks to market. Yet even here, free from the physical constraints of their respective households, verbal exchanges are limited to socially acceptable catch phrases: expressions of piety and dedication to Gilead. Exchanges that are not scripted are forbidden and risky. Offred and her companion are painfully aware that they meet as neither friends nor equals, but as potential informants. They travel in pairs under the guise of safety but, “the truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers” (19). The culture of Gilead is based on fear and suspicion; women are rewarded for spying on and betraying other women. Gilead, then, is indeed a culture of female treachery. *The Handmaid’s Tale* comprises Offred’s record

of life within the matriarchy of Gilead. As she performs her rote duties, under the strict system of female control, she struggles to come to terms with her multiple losses: culture, family, identity, agency, and, most importantly, companionship. Though the Aunts insist that the household is a place of camaraderie, the domestic hierarchy thrives on mutual dislike and disapproval. There is no reprieve from the purposeful and lonely life of a Handmaid; nothing must deter her from her mission. Offred is allowed to attend a few 60 social functions, such as Birth Day celebrations and women's Salvagings; these activities reinforce her role in Gilead. The Birth Day celebrations remind Offred of her duty to her household, her Commander, and her country. The Salvagings remind Offred of the consequences of any failure to follow the rules and regulations of Gilead. All of her other activities are designed to keep her body in prime reproductive health: daily exercises on the floor of her bedroom, daily walks to market, and her scheduled baths.

## 2. Conclusion

As Margaret Daniels and Heather Bowen assert in their study of female leisure spaces in dystopian novels, this "strictly controlled access to leisure reinforces the Handmaid's enslavement" (426). The Handmaids are doubly enslaved; first, by the patriarchy that developed and then implemented the caste system of Gilead, and second, by the matriarchal system instrumental to this new social order. Within this system of dual oppression the Handmaids are severely constrained. Daniels and Bowen describe their daily life thus, "they have no choice regarding the treatment of their bodies; no permission to select the individuals with whom they pass time; [they have] no control over their lives" (428). Though Offred desperately wants to rebel and reassert her agency, the matriarchy ensures that she and the other Handmaids remain isolated and powerless within the domestic hierarchy that exhibits the most serious consequence of women placing their allegiance to men before their allegiance to women: the destruction of female solidarity resulting in the disunity of women.

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