

# Constructions and Reconstructions: Feminism, Postmodernism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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In 1985, Alice Jardine defined the conceptual dilemma of postmodern feminism in the opening chapter of *Gynesis*, her influential study of feminist theory:

Not believing in “Truth,” we continue to be fascinated by (elaborate) fictions. This is the profound paradox of the feminist speaking in our contemporary culture: she proceeds from a *belief* in a world which—even the philosophers admit—*Truth* has disappeared. This paradox, it seems to me, can lead to (at least) three possible scenarios: a renewed silence, a form of religion (from mysticism to political orthodoxy), or a continued attention—historical, ideological, and affective—to the place from which we speak. (31-32)

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*—published the same year as Jardine’s book—is situated within this paradox. An elaborate postmodern fiction that questions the possibility of Truth, *The Handmaid’s Tale* concentrates on, and affectively forces its readers to recognize, the importance of “continued attention” to the cultural and linguistic situatedness of its narrator, a woman who ultimately refuses to remain silent.

The place from which the novel’s narrator, Offred, speaks is one where her sense of self is defined by her culture as residing solely in her female body and its capacity for reproduction, and where her body is located within a system of technological surveillance. Yet while her body is defined by those in power via technology, its meaning and worth are also paradoxically constructed through a correlation to “Nature.” Thus Offred’s identity is defined by the Gileadean regime as existing in her body, which is simultaneously constructed by technology and by nature—placing her between the two poles of the contested “constructivist vs. essentialist” (“culture vs. nature”) dichotomy frequently analyzed in feminist theory. Additionally, Offred’s awareness of how her identity is constructed by others and by herself in the acts of language and naming is one of the most powerful aspects of the text. For these reasons, it is not surprising that Atwood’s novel is often read by contemporary critics wishing to analyze the limitations and

possibilities of constructing a female identity in a postmodern conversation framed by assumptions about the instability of the autonomous subject. My aim is to enter this dialogue by analyzing how the identities of the handmaids in Atwood's novel are constructed by both technological and natural discourses, and also exploring how Offred responds to these discourses, comparing them to her own thoughts, feelings, and memories—that is, how she is “constructed” and how she then creates “reconstructions” of her experiences. After investigating the novel's treatment of these technological and natural constructions, I will argue that ultimately *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates through Offred's reconstructions a commitment to the possibility that there is something salvageable about the autonomy and dignity of the self, even when it is largely constructed by definitions and discourses external to it.

## **I. Technological Surveillance and the Female Body**

One of the benefits of writing “science fiction”—or “speculative fiction” as Atwood calls *The Handmaid's Tale*—is that it allows the author to write about subjects outside the range of the traditional novel. Atwood has said that one of the possibilities offered by this genre is the chance to “[e]xplore the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways, by showing them fully up and running” (“In Context” 515). She does this with gusto in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where technology is ever-present, primarily in the collection of “Compu” items that litter the text. There is a “Compucheck” that tracks the handmaids' progress via the number on their passes (21), a “Compubite” at the grocery where they buy their food (26), a “Compudoc” at the doctor's office (59), a “Computalk” (137) that sits on her Commander's desk, and even a “pocket computer” he uses to add up a Scrabble score (184). While these examples are sparse in comparison to technology-saturated dystopian novels like *1984* and *Brave New World*, they demonstrate an awareness of the role computers were beginning to play in the everyday lives of average people—a trend becoming increasingly evident as Atwood was writing the novel in the early 1980s. One event in particular illustrates the novel's paranoia about computers: the centralized power present in a single “Compubank” (173), which allows the newly formed government of Gilead to completely shut off all women from the economy in one single computerized blow. The power of this technology is explained by Offred's close friend Moira in one of Offred's memories of the time before Gilead: “[t]hey've frozen them ... Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do is push a few buttons. We're cut off” (178). After this event, women must transfer their money into the “Compucount” of a “Husband or male next of kin” (179). This event is similar in import to the coup d'état mentioned elsewhere in the novel's cursory

account of the political upheaval leading to the establishment of the Gileadean regime, for it enabled the male members of the society to swiftly and completely subjugate all its women by barring them from an economy consolidated into a single computer system.

In addition to this fear of technology coming from the top-down, the inhabitants of Gilead must live in fear of what Stephanie Barbé Hammer recognizes as “a very different kind of technology ... the technology of power which Michel Foucault has called discipline” (45). Everyone in Gilead, and the handmaids in particular, are “caught up in a network of surveillance and counter-surveillance” (45). We see the menacing force of this network in the novel’s opening chapters, where Offred describes her fear of being watched. Offred is watched not only by the powerful men in her life—namely the Commander to whom she is assigned for the purpose of bearing his children—but by everyone else too. Spies called “Eyes” watch her, other handmaids watch her, and even, in an example of how the Gileadean regime has blended modern elements of surveillance with older ones, the eyes of God watch her: the closing words of a quasi-religious Ceremony read by the Commander before their monthly attempt to conceive state that “the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to know himself strong on behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him” (92).<sup>1</sup> Offred’s body—its health, its movements—are always subject to an oppressive gaze,<sup>2</sup> to the point that she learns to ruthlessly police herself.

These technologies inform and construct Offred’s sense of her body, demonstrating the extent to which the idea and the lived experience of having a gendered body arises from dominant cultural discourses. The technologies used by the regime forcefully differentiate the male body from the female body, associating the female body solely with its reproductive capacity to the point that the handmaids are thought of as “two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (136). This essentializing definition is executed by the regime through a range of tactics, including declaring the majority of infertile women “Unwomen,” color-coding the female population according to their reproductive capabilities, ruthlessly re-educating the handmaids, and prohibiting most women from reading or writing. In essence, the handmaids are reduced to the role of pure body, and discouraged from using their minds. Whatever mind they do have is in the process of being reprogrammed, so that it runs only on the circuits

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<sup>1</sup> The biblical language of the ceremony is from *2 Chronicles* 16:9.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Stein has suggested that Atwood’s emphasis on this oppressive gaze “borrows from feminist film theory that elucidates a male gaze objectifying women” (81) — a possibility I find intriguing. Yet it is important to note, as both Stein and Hammer do, that the gaze in Gilead is not entirely male, and that one of the reasons it is so effective is that it also comes from other women.

favorable to the regime. Offred is part of a “transitional generation” of handmaids, still able to remember “the time before” Gilead, but a future handmaid would be considerably easier to survey and control, for, as Offred recognizes, “they will have no memories, of any other way” (117). The future handmaid would have a sense of self wholly constructed by the discourse imposed upon her body by the regime—one entirely based on the message she receives about her body and its sole purpose: reproduction.

The novel’s treatment of reproduction reflects the fact that the 1980s were a time of increasing feminist anxiety about the role of reproductive technology. Atwood has claimed that she purposefully restricted her imaginative treatment of technology in the text, so that there is nothing in the novel ““that we as a species have not done, aren’t doing now, or don’t have the technological capability to do,””; and the clippings she kept while conceiving of the book—“items of information on new reproductive technologies, surrogate motherhood, and forms of institutionalized birth control”—show how important these issues were to its conception (Howells 129). The novel’s treatment of technology is so time-specific that Anne Balsamo, in her book *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, has justifiably claimed that *The Handmaid’s Tale* “helps narrate and make manifest the often obscured situation of reproductive-age women in contemporary U.S. culture” (86). As Balsamo’s cultural history illustrates, in an increasingly postmodern age, feminists found it difficult to respond to encroaching technology without resorting to a seemingly antiquated conception of women as being “natural,” for by doing so they fell victim to medical discourses that viewed the female body as just another part of nature that needed to be conquered and managed by male-centric technology<sup>3</sup>.

The handmaids in Gilead are subject to medical domination and surveillance to the point that they are hardly seen as human. This becomes distressingly evident in the episode where Offred makes her monthly visit to the doctor. After her name is entered into “Compudoc” by an assistant, she is led into an examination room where she lies down and draws a sheet between her body and her head, “so that the doctor will never see my face. He deals with the torso only” (60). Because her sole worth lies in her reproductive capability, the doctor is the only male other than her Commander allowed to view her. He breaks the rules by calling her “honey,” even by speaking to her at all. Proposing that he could help Offred get pregnant, the doctor removes his examination glove, begins to stroke her leg, and even lifts the

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<sup>3</sup> I find Balsamo’s reading of the text to be in the end unsatisfactory, primarily because she reads it purely as a cultural artifact. Balsamo is a cultural critic, and her analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale* purposefully considers it “as a speculative ethnographic account of our collective life in a technological era” (114) rather than as richly metafictional literary art.

sheet separating her torso from her face—thereby crossing a series of physical boundaries. A further break from official communication occurs when he offers to “help” Offred, which leads her to respond to his offer by thinking “Does he know something, has he seen Luke, has he found, can he bring back?” (60). This simple moment of misunderstanding manifests Offred’s humanity, and shows how her remembrance of the life before, including her lover Luke, is the reason she is not wholly dominated by the constructions of the regime. But to the doctor, her body remains only a womb he wishes to impregnate while she is “soft” and ready to be fertilized. His attempts to convince her (asking “You want a baby, don’t you?”) cause Offred to snap back into the present, and feel the pressure of her constructed role: “‘Yes,’ I say. It’s true, and I don’t ask why, because I know. *Give me children, or else I die*. There’s more than one meaning to it” (61). The words in italics are a reference to Rachel in the book of Genesis (30:1), one of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s three epigraphs. It has a particularly sinister meaning for Offred, far more powerful even than when Rachel speaks them to Jacob. If she does not produce a child, she will indeed be sent to die, for her capacity to do so is her only value.

As this episode illustrates, attending merely to the external factors and discourses that construct Offred’s existence misses the essential fact about her narrative: she is self-aware, recognizing how the regime’s discourses of power influence her conception of her body. Immediately after visiting the doctor, Offred prepares for a bath and reflects on how radically her relationship to her body has changed since becoming a handmaid:

My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. *Shameful, immodest*. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely. (63)

Offred segments her body into parts, even when remembering how she used to (not) think of her body. Her time as a handmaid has colored even memories of her past life. Gilead-speak—*shameful, immodest*—intrudes, even as she rejects these terms. And even the rare moments where Offred is able to relate to her body without fear of external surveillance, when it is not covered by thick red robes, she does not want to look at it. She has, in fact, come to fear it.

Offred’s fear is justified, for her body does not belong to her; it belongs to Gilead. Reminders of both forms of technological authority—a computer system

and constant surveillance—are imprinted directly on Offred’s skin. In the bath, she “cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource” (65). Offred is property of the state, and must take care of herself for the good of the regime. Expanding on this theme in an exemplary interdisciplinary article, Linda Mysiades reads *The Handmaid’s Tale* “through the prism of property law,” noting that “the handmaid has some responsibility for maintaining her reproductive body prior to actual use or exercise, for the economic and social life of Gilead depends upon her ability to control (or perform) her reproductive function” (231). In this sense, Offred is not only responsible for taking care of her own body, but since her body belongs to Gilead, she is also forced to act as “landlord” over property belonging to the regime. This leaves her unable to think of her body even as an instrument, for “she is now completely identified with and through it” (234). Her entire life and self-identity revolve around the few nights of the month where she is fertile ground for the Commander’s seed.

## **II. Disembodied Sex and the Body as “Natural Resource”**

Sexual reproduction itself is, under the laws of Gilead, as disembodied as possible. During the sexual act, which occurs only between Offred and the Commander and only on Ceremony nights, her body is split in two:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (94)

Offred describes a sexual act in which neither party is truly involved, and where her body is merely empty earth to be filled. The Commander too is absent, as Offred notices: “[i]t’s as if he’s somewhere else, waiting for himself to come, drumming his fingers on the table while he waits” (94). Even for the dominant party, the sexual act is a performance committed out of duty to the state. Void of any of its conventional signifiers—“nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with” (94)—sex in Gilead is inhuman in its remoteness from emotion and significance. Remembering

the time when “women once spent so much time and energy reading about such things, thinking about them, worrying about them, writing about them,” Offred realizes, in one of the most demoralizing passages of the text, that these things “are so obviously recreational” (94). It is possible, Offred warns, to live in a body from which you are almost completely separated, where the body has little connection to the sense of the self.

Even though defining women as “two-legged wombs” is clearly in the best interests of the men who run Gilead, males are also subject to the regime’s limiting definitions. The Commander too is haunted by the echoes of the past, and longs for the sexual act to have more significance. This is just one example of how Atwood’s text resists overly simple women-versus-men readings. Offred observes how the Commander is also made to play a role that is oppressive and constructed by the regime, one that is explicitly tied to a single part of his body: “his extra, sensitive thumb, his tentacle, his delicate, stalked slug’s eye, which extrudes, expands, winces, and shrivels back into himself when touched wrongly, grows big again, bulging a little at the tip, traveling forward as if along a leaf ... avid for vision” (88).<sup>4</sup> While I do not wish to claim any equality of oppression in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this passage is remarkable in its acknowledgement that the male reproductive organ is often experienced as separate from the rest of the body, and that by associating the Commander largely with this part of himself the regime’s reproductive code disembodies him as well. The Commander’s sexual organ is depicted in this sequence as having to “journey into the darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see in darkness while he himself strains blindly forward” (88). This travelling-through-darkness image returns later, when Offred speculates that if she were to open her eyes, she would see the Commander’s face “intent on his inner journey, the place he is hurrying towards, which recedes as in a dream at the same speed with which he approaches it” (95). Offred’s body is constructed as land and the Commander’s sexual organ as a traveler journeying in it, so neither person performing the sexual act is truly present in it.

While the Commander may be dissatisfied with this state of affairs, as his explanations for wanting to see Offred on non-Ceremony nights reveal, he is at least in a position to remedy it. He has other outlets, and even though his sexual performance defines him during the Ceremony, he can identify himself in other ways on other nights of the month. But what is Offred to do? How can she resist being constructed? She can, perhaps, construct a different meaning for her own body, one that associates her self with the positive aspects of the landscape and the

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<sup>4</sup> Ginette Katz-Roy makes a similar point, noting that the Commander “is in the same awkward position as Offred, the bottom part of his body naked, pathetically comic, while everybody watches him do his duty. He too is reduced to a reproductive function” (123).

earth. Drawing attention to Atwood's wilderness metaphors, Coral Ann Howells reads the body-as-landscape imagery used to describe the Ceremony more favorably, arguing that "[i]n her mind her body remains unconquered territory which will be forever beyond the Commander's reach" (139). It is true that when Offred does have a moment to connect with her body, she often goes exploring:

I sink down into my body as into a treacherous swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishing of tissue, the drooling of the flesh, these are signs, these are things I need to know about. (73)

Yet what she finds is disappointing, for when she menstruates "it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own" (73). She is still defined by her reproductive capability. Unlike in the past, when she was able "to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will," she is now only a womb. Her "flesh arranges itself differently ... around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am" (73-74). After this, realizing she is empty—still only a vessel that is not filled with another body worth far more than hers — Offred begins to remember her daughter, since taken from her, and dreams of her, thinking "[o]f all the dreams this is the worst" (75). Tracing this line of associations, we can easily see why Offred prefers not to even look at her own body, much less sink into it.

The fear of her body is only one of the reasons Offred is unwilling and unable to truly define herself through it. While it is possible, as Howells shows, to ultimately read Offred's relationship to "nature" (opposed to "culture") as a positive one, I find this reading to be risky. When Offred walks through a garden in spring, she notes that there "is something subversive about this garden ... a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, though silently" (153). The garden "speaks" to Offred, and she even feels that "Goddesses are possible now and the air suffuses with desire" (153). Howells reads this sequence optimistically, as "a pagan fantasy landscape metamorphosed into Offred's rhapsody of the flesh" (141), emphasizing Offred's linguistic connection with nature. But as we have seen, to be associated with nature is not necessarily a positive thing for Offred, for she can just as easily be conceived as a fertile landscape maintained at her own risk and plowed by the Commander. Even linguistically, "Nature" can be turned on her; when she and the Commander discuss the past, he explains that in his view the rise



of modern sexuality and its notions of falling in love was “just an anomaly, historically speaking ... Just a fluke. All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm” (220). The Commander also justifies the necessity of Jezebel’s, the house of prostitution that is an open secret in the world of Gilead, by telling Offred that “everyone’s human, after all” (by which, of course, he means all of the men; Gilead has done its utmost to strip its women of the trappings of humanity). This telling misunderstanding is enforced further down the page, when the Commander responds to Offred’s question “Who are these people?” by telling her about how good Jezebel’s is for business meetings with other powerful men. She then clarifies: “I mean the women” (237). What Jezebel’s “means” for the Commander is “you can’t cheat Nature ... Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it’s part of the procreational strategy. It’s Nature’s plan” (237). This statement runs the gauntlet of ways men have constructed “Nature” to justify their behavior: it is inevitable, we evolved this way, it is reasonable, it is necessary for the existence of the human race, it has teleological importance. Just as “nature” can be a source of delight for Offred in the garden, it can also be used as just another method of oppression.

### III. Narrative Gaps and the Construction of a Reader

Offred is wedged between nature and culture, unable to turn to either for sustenance and meaning. The only things she owns are her memories and her language. Her memories of the time before the regime, while not unaltered by present circumstance, give her sufficient context to realize that her identity is being constructed, and her ability to narrate her experiences allows her to construct stories and meanings of her own. Just as she is constructed, Offred can also construct. Offred’s awareness of the subjectivity, the constructedness, of the “truths” handed to her by the Gileadean regime is what makes *The Handmaid’s Tale* a postmodern novel — and a frustrating one for readers looking to extract an actionable feminist message. Early in the novel Atwood establishes the metafictional aspect of the text, and it becomes more evident as the book progresses. In chapter 7, Offred explains:

I would like to believe this is a story I am telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn’t a story I’m telling.

It's also a story I'm telling in my head, as I go along. (39)

The first time reader encountering this passage cannot help but become confused, especially when Offred, just after this, addresses her story as a "letter" to a reader: "Dear You," even though she is aware that there is no one reading, and, as we discover later and have already begun to suspect, she is not even writing.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, the text draws attention to itself through passages like the one cited above, passages that disorient the reader and destabilize the fictional construct of simple first-person narration. By the time we read the epilogue's "Historical Notes" and discover that the narrative we just read had originally existed as a recording recently unearthed by scholars in the year 2195, passages like this one are complicated further. For even if we re-read the novel and think of it as an oral narrative it does not necessarily become more stable, and questions remain: why is Offred speaking into a cassette recorder in this way? How is it possible that she is telling a story about the past, about something that happened to her, but is also within that story telling other stories about things that happened even before the recent past she is narrating? Try as we may, it is not truly possible to consistently think of the narrative as being spoken by Offred, and the fact that the text we are reading is nothing more than a "construction" remains the dominating experience of reading the book.

Because of its indeterminacy, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a series of gaps that must be bridged. Some of these gaps are recognized by Offred, and others only by the reader. The first gap, and the most obvious, is structural: Offred's narrative unfolds in a series of fragments, with a number of interruptions, so that it is up to the reader to make sense of Offred's story. Another is located in Offred's memories of her past life, from "the time before," in which she compares her experiences from before the rise of Gilead to her current existence. An additional source of fragmentation, which becomes increasingly apparent due to plot revelations towards the end of the story, and is fully revealed by the epilogue, is the distance between the Offred who is telling the story and the Offred who experiences the events being narrated. The last gap is the space between "The Handmaid's Tale" itself and the "Historical Notes" that conclude the novel. It falls upon the reader to fill in these empty spaces. These gaps make the novel a postmodern text, and enforce the fact that, as Offred admits outright, "[t]his is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction" (134). Offred learns that since everything is a reconstruction, she can attempt to construct herself in a certain way, and even construct her reader. Atwood "extends the theory of constructionism beyond the writer-speaker, applying it directly to readers as well" as David Hogsette has observed: "readers must also learn how to construct themselves in a particular way so as to understand the writer-speaker's self-construction. Because

all identities as constructions, readers, when attempting to join Offred's audience, must engage in the very same act of self-construction as she does" (11). With multiple acts of construction piling on top of one another, readers looking for an ethical message, namely one that can be determined as "feminist," may be hard-pressed to find a stable place from which to launch a critique of the subjugating acts of construction that make Offred's tale so affecting.

Feminist critics reading *The Handmaid's Tale* have typically concentrated on two of its particular gaps: first, by scrutinizing Offred's memories of her past for external historical clues; and second, by reading the "Historical Notes" at the end as satirically misogynistic. Atwood herself has famously refused to label herself as a "feminist," or even to call *The Handmaid's Tale* a "'feminist dystopia'" — although she qualifies this statement by explaining that it can be considered feminist "insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered 'feminist' by those who think women ought not to have such things" ("In Context" 516). Yet it is obvious to inclined readers that she is dealing with topics of specific interests to feminists, and many critics have placed Offred at specific points in the history of feminism, revealed by her memories of her mother and of conversations she had in college with Moira. Shirley Neuman has recently attempted to position Offred on a specific historical timeline, claiming that Offred "is a fictional product of 1970s feminism, and she finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women's rights that gathered force during the early 1980s" (858). Neuman's overtly feminist reading of the book emphasizes how Offred's memories of the "time before" often contain criticism of her actions, particularly her tendency to ignore the news and how much she took for granted. For Neuman, whatever "implicit women's utopia" there is to be found in *The Handmaid's Tale* must exist "outside the novel" (866) — namely, in the consciousness-raising and attention-paying message we as readers take from it. Neuman does an admirable job of situating the novel within the feminist conversation of its time period, but in her efforts to extract a specific feminist message from it she largely ignores the extent to which it also engages in ideas of postmodernism. In order for a feminist reading of the text to be viable, it must address its postmodern qualities as well.

The gap between Offred's narrative and the "Historical Notes" that conclude the text is the place from which critics have most often launched a feminist reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The "Historical Notes," indicated by their introductory material to be "*a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies*," are delivered by keynote speaker Professor James Darcy Piexoto, whose talk in the year 2195 deals primarily with "Problems of Authenticity in Reference" to the narrative (299, 300). In his talk, Piexoto makes a number of dim sexist remarks, and generally disregards the grave injustices of

Offred's story. Interested only in the historical facts Offred's narrative can provide about the regime of Gilead, Piexoto's talk shocks and disorients the reader who encounters it after having spent nearly 300 affecting pages with Offred and her narrative. Notably, Piexoto repeats the regime's fascination with the power of technology, and, as Dominick Grace notes, "[h]is desire for twenty pages of printout from Waterford's computer is unsettlingly reminiscent of the Commander's blithe assertion of the power of statistics over human experience" (489). Grace's close reading of the "Notes" demonstrates their unreliability, and shows that readers of the novel need to take them as yet another call for closer analysis; we cannot take Piexoto's contextualizations and explanations at face value, for he too is in possession of biases and he too misreads the narrative. Specifically, readers should be suspicious of Piexoto's "editorial aside," where he says:

allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (302)

In addition to acting as Atwood's none-too-subtle roast of certain corners of North-American academia, Piexoto's desire to avoid judgment forces us to face again the dilemma of how and in what way we can in fact "censure" and "pass moral judgment" on the Gileadean regime. Do not the horrors perpetrated by Gilead call for a moral response?

#### **IV. Postmodernism, Feminism, and Senses of the Self**

As I have shown, feminist critics overlooking the postmodern aspects of the text and its refusal to revert to a moral often fail to sufficiently account for its metafictional literary richness. However, two critics who navigate the novel's relationship to postmodern and feminism admirably are Magali Cornier Michael, in her chapter on Atwood from *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse*, and Fiona Tolan in *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Both of these readings of *The Handmaid's Tale* dive directly into the theoretical thicket of postmodern feminism, and I want to take time to consider their readings before attempting my own. Michael's chapter zeroes in on the "gap between official history and women's histories" in the novel, arguing that it "manages to offer traces of Offred's story-history and her material existence, even though all the texts that make up the physical novel are ultimately male-centered" (137). The gaps in the novel thus

become “possibilities for change that always exist” even in the most rigid systems (146). Offred herself exists on the margins of the regime, and her oral narrative of her everyday life challenges the “official story” disseminated through the discourses of power. In Michael’s reading, the book’s postmodern aspects are also the source of its feminist critique, in the ways it destabilizes the line between reality and fiction. Therefore, it is important that Offred’s story is an oral narrative, for it does not therefore participate in the official discourse of the Gileadean regime, and even though it is recognized by its own narrator as a “reconstruction” and therefore at least possibly fictional, it “follows a given set of lived events” (158) — hence Offred’s ability to wish that the story she is telling be different. Michael’s analysis of the relationship between the novel’s “postmodern impulse” and its “feminist implications” is impressive in its clarity and succinctness:

The novel’s recognition that versions of events are necessarily mediated, and that fiction will contaminate any version of reality, demonstrates a postmodern impulse. But disrupting the conventional binary opposition between reality and fiction also has feminist implications, in that it allows women’s oral stories to function as histories. Although these stories necessarily involve fictionalization, they also maintain close ties to the material situation, as in the case of Offred’s tale. (159)

This leads Michael to her primary claim, “that Atwood’s novel accentuates its feminist agenda by emphasizing the gap that exists between women’s lived material existence or histories and the official history” (167). Michael’s reading allows us to maintain that there is still something worth preserving about first-hand storytelling, even though it too may be reconstructed. Ultimately, I believe, Michael’s reading rests upon a shaky foundation, in that it requires that the reader take a particular interest in reading Offred’s story as an “oral story under erasure” that is “both present and absent and as a result disrupts” any distinction between these terms (167). Thus the “feminist implications” in the book are not actually located anywhere, so there is truly no place besides the reader’s own construction of this absence from which to situate a critique of the specific discourses of power used by the Gileadean regime.

Fiona Tolan attempts to find such a place by specifically reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* within the conversations about feminism and postmodernity that were taking place as Atwood was writing, arguing that “Atwood moves against the growing postmodern trend within 1980s feminism” (144). Specifically, Tolan analyzes how the novel engages “the changing concerns and evolving vocabulary of an increasingly theorized feminism” (145). For Tolan, Offred’s mother

represents second-wave feminism and its concern with activism, while Moira is aligned with third-wave feminism through her interest in writing papers on date rape and holding underwear parties. Atwood's novel, according to Tolan, "exposes something of the limiting and prescriptive nature of the utopianism that that had underpinned much of the feminism of the early second wave" (145). Comparing it to the postmodern distrust of utopia evident in postmodernism (specifically citing Lyotard), Tolan posits that *The Handmaid's Tale* "can be more accurately categorized as a critical dystopia" (156). But for it to be critical, it must have a place from which to critique; if it is true that "context is all," as Offred states (144), then everything is a construction, even her very self. As Tolan recognizes, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a book in which the "liberal idea of the autonomous self is seriously undermined" (164), but also one that "[e]xposes the dangerously illiberal aspect of this postmodern construct" (166). Following Seyla Benhabib's critique of postmodernism from *Situating the Self*, Tolan argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* shows us the troubling fact that "if there is no way to know your society, except through your society, the individual is left defenceless against any concerted effort to manipulate their reality" (166). Indeed, for Offred, "her survival depends on her belief in a reality external to her culture; not an alternative culture ... a permanent embodiment of immutable values that cannot be eradicated by a cultural consensus—blind justice" (168). This is certainly a belief worth hanging onto for Offred, which is why she continuously engages in acts of reconstruction as she attempts to test her belief in an external reality against the dominating constructs that cause her to suffer under the Gileadean regime.

Fiona Tolan's use of Seyla Benhabib's examination of postmodernism is helpful for understanding Atwood's critique of the shortcomings of utopia, but I believe other aspects of Benhabib's approach are even more useful for analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's application of postmodern ideas about the instability of the subject are similar to what Benhabib, in *Situating the Self*, calls the "weak version" of the postmodern notion of the "death of Man" (213). *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the strong version of this thesis to be unviable not only for a feminist reading of the book, but for any attempt to propose a reading of Offred's tale any different from the infuriatingly indeterminate refusal to judge represented by Piexoto in the "Historical Notes." Benhabib rightly notes that the "strong version of the Death of the Subject thesis," which discards any "concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity and autonomy" is ultimately "not compatible with the goals of feminism" (214). Recognizing that a feminist ethics needs to generate a modified version of the postmodern self, Benhabib instead argues for a understanding of the self that takes "account of the radical situatedness of the subject," but still allows us to "argue that we are not merely extensions of our histories, that vis-à-vis our own stories we are in the position of author and

character at once” (214). This idea, in which the subject is constructed, like a character, by forces external to her, but is also able to reconstruct her own story, as an author, is remarkably similar to Offred’s position in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where the dilemma of postmodern feminism is exaggerated on account of the novel’s setting in a dystopian society. Benhabib refined this specific aspect of her argument in a 1999 article in *Signs*, emphasizing the role narrative plays in self-construction. Even if a self is not necessarily always stable across time, she argues, the self still attempts to make sense of its surroundings by telling stories about them. At stake in Benhabib’s new problem for the self is “whether it is possible to be a self at all without some ability to continue to generate meaningful and viable narratives over time” (347). This is the very same problem faced by Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as she continually returns to her memories of the “time before” in an attempt not only to make sense of what is happening around her, but as a way to resist the discourses of power that continually attempt to define her according to what she offers Gilead: a fertile womb.

Even within the contexts and constructs that envelope her life in Gilead, Offred is able to make sense of her self. Her realization that this is possible comes at an unlikely moment: when she is looking at a dishtowel. After returning from shopping, Offred watches the household’s cook dry her hands and makes a startling observation:

The dishtowel is white with blue stripes. Dishtowels are the same as they always were. Sometimes these flashes of normality come at me from the side, like ambushes. The ordinary, the usual, a reminder, like a kick. I see a dishtowel, out of context, and I catch my breath. For some, in some ways, things haven’t changed that much. (48).

In this passage, Offred is able to make sense of how her self is situated by realizing that, even though she now lives in a completely different world, she still, in Gilead, relates to aspects of it identically to the way she did in the past. Something here is stable, in this case not only a dishtowel, but also Offred’s ability to recognize what hasn’t changed and reflect on this fact. Her identity may not be always the *same* across time, and her sense of self is certainly constructed by the discourses that dominate her everyday life, yet she maintains a sense of self based primarily upon her desire to make sense of what she sees in the midst of that everyday life. As Benhabib argues, “hard as we try, we cannot ‘stop making sense,’ ... We *will* try to make sense” (*Signs* 347), primarily by forming narratives about our experiences and constructing meanings even where none are readily apparent—even when we are surrounded by messages that encourages us not to make sense and to instead accept the definitions imposed upon us. Atwood’s novel exaggerates the ability of

external forces to construct one particular female's sense of self, but also celebrates her acts of meaning-making: to consider how her self is situated, and then reconstruct her sense of self based on the situation. What self Offred has is based upon her ability to make sense, and even her "reconstructions," though distant from the events themselves and radically situated, still arise from her desire and ability to make meaning. She desires to make sense so much so that she continues to tell herself stories, and constructs a reader to which to tell those stories even when they are not stories that she necessarily wants to tell. The result is a narrative that illustrates the importance of the possibility that—even in a society that attempts to define women entirely in line with its ideas of their usefulness and reduce them to nothing more than a natural resources—there is something sufficiently stable about the human self, for it will continue to make meanings even when it seems impossible.



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