

Building Dystopia:  
A Modern Comparison between the Dystopian Narrative and its  
Victims in Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and Margaret Atwood's *The  
Handmaid's Tale*

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We should have a certain humility in the face of the righteous anger of younger women who look at the world they grew up in and say, “No, we’re not going to accept that”.

– Naomi Alderman in an interview with *The New York Times*

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## Introduction

Science fiction, a previously male-dominated genre of literature, has seen an increase in imaginative fiction focusing on the relation between genders and the relation between sexuality and power. This literature has become well-known as feminist dystopian fiction, a genre in which the complex relationship between the individual and societal power is discussed through a reevaluation of gender relations and institutionalized racism and sexism. Feminist dystopian novels often radicalize the inferior position of women in contemporary society and present a social reality in which captivity and severe oppression of women is the norm (Booker 340). The dystopian genre has long been popular among readers and critics of literature, with publications such as Orwell's *1984*, Zamyatin's *We*, and Huxley's *Brave New World* dominating the genre. The feminist dystopian works, however, represent a development of more recent decades, and gained more attention when Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985. Atwood's novel tells the story of handmaids working for the totalitarian government of Gilead that upholds a discriminative system regarding female reproduction. In this social reality, the reproduction of women of color was exploited and inferior to the reproduction of white women, who had a more privileged status (Roberts 783). Women are furthermore restricted in their speech, forbidden to learn and write, and being stripped from their natural rights. What characterizes *The Handmaid's Tale* is its address to issues of race via emphasizing differences as aforementioned and the novel's confrontation with the institutionalization of sexual abuse through the relationship between Offred and the Commander. These aspects, among others, define the novel as a work of critical feminist dystopia. Furthermore, the novel criticizes reproductive technology by showing how it can radicalize and objectify women, turning reproduction into a job rather than a natural process.

*The Power*, published in 2016, addresses women's oppression in a similar fashion as *The Handmaid's Tale*, but shows physical female domination rather than physical and mental female oppression under a totalitarian government. Naomi Alderman's *The Power* shows a radical change in its society's power balance by sketching a social reality in which women become the dominating gender. Alderman, known for her earlier publications *Disobedience* (2006), *The Lessons* (2010), and *The Liar's Gospel* (2012), also entered in a mentor and protégé collaboration with Margaret Atwood in 2012. This collaboration eventually led to Alderman writing *The Power* and focusing on the gender narrative (Shilling). The novel addresses the play between superiority and inferiority and the influence of gender relations on other power relations. Through this focus on power relations, Alderman slightly moves away from the trend in reproduction narratives, which has become a popular topic for feminist dystopias. The 2017 publication of *Future Home of the Living God* by Louise Erdrich and early 2018 publication of *Red Clocks* by Leni Zumas, for example, address the regulation of pregnancies by governments, and present social realities in which abortion, free choice, and women's natural rights are no longer a private matter. Both types of narrative, however, present a more critical point of view towards recent developments in social movements related to gender equality as well as reproductive rights.

According to Dopp and Booker, the critical attitude in feminist fiction is a development of the last few decades, as feminist dystopian fiction before the second half of the twentieth century failed in envisioning social realities that presented true equality and successfully addressed gender-based inferiority (Booker 338). With the publication and instant popularity of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* after 1985, this critical attitude was renewed. The novel's continuing popularity in contemporary society and the many new publications that either draw on the topics that Atwood successfully addressed or invent a new angle of social criticism, shows a renewed optimism in feminism as well as progressive

stances on gender equality. Alderman's *The Power* continues this trend with narratives that confront the continuation of sexual abuse, the susceptibility of women, and discrimination based on race and gender. Additionally, both novels engage in the feminist discourse through appropriating female victimhood, its meaning in an oppressive state, and the problematization of the nature of victimhood. Analyzing how these novels in their contemporary contexts deal with victimhood and gender relations is useful as it allows for a social critical reading that reflects upon both the past as well as the present social reality. In comparing an older feminist dystopian novel with a recent publication in the same genre, the cultural impact such novels have as well as the development or regression of equal gender relations can be analyzed. In this thesis I therefore analyze the narrative structures of the two dystopian novels and compare their use of dystopian thematic aspects. Furthermore, I identify where the more contemporary sense of criticism starts. I continue by looking at the characterization of victimhood in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, and how both novels in their dystopian social realities discuss the institutionalization of sexual abuse. In the third chapter, I connect the narratives of the two novels and their relevance in modern-day studies of the feminist dystopian genre. Through this process I argue that by analyzing the narrative structures, thematic aspects, and social relevance of two popular feminist dystopias, the role of critical literature in engaging with contemporary social issues can be further identified.





## Chapter 1: Building the Female Sphere

Topics concerning gender-inequality, sexism, and discrimination are all active relations of power that have been institutionalized in many societies and are often the focus of feminist dystopian narratives. How these narratives are structured regarding world-building and challenging conventional discourses differs per novel. Furthermore, feminist dystopias are often classified under the umbrella term of science fiction (Mohr 6), due to the interchangeability of the thematic aspects feminist dystopias can use, such as artificial intelligence, post-apocalyptic versus apocalyptic, language, and religious ideas. As science fiction covers a whole range of these thematic aspects, it becomes difficult to classify when exactly a narrative is science fiction or when it is dystopian, utopian, fantastical, or adventurous. All these genres converge and interact with one another, which eventually folds those generic distinctions together, much like how science fiction itself emerged because of a cross-fertilization of other genres, such as fantastic literature, scientific romances, and travelogues (6). A novel that is a good example of this cross-fertilization of genres and themes is Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. When analyzing the novel closely, it is a feminist dystopian novel, but with scientific aspects, such as breeding technology. The novel's references to a general concern for the future is sustained by narrative strategies that focus on defamiliarization and alternative societies, and additionally a persistent feeling of discontent with the current social reality (Mohr 7). *The Handmaid's Tale*'s alternative reality is a nightmare-like dystopian environment in which women's societal roles have essentially been limited to breeding, all at the hands of an extreme-right political environment – the Gilead government. This is what essentially classifies it as dystopian fiction. Additionally, the novel is classified as a feminist dystopia due to the novel's representation of enforced gender-based societal roles and the novel's critical attitude to issues of reproduction rights.

The interchangeability of the dystopian genre and its interaction with characteristics from other thematic aspects and genres allows for a broader spectrum of social criticism. Authors know that their writing can easily be written off as fantastical and therefore have a greater sense of freedom regarding the dystopian worlds they create. Considering the continuing social movements against sexual abuse and growing awareness of the feminist agenda, it is interesting to analyze how these discourses influence the structuring of contemporary dystopian fiction, such as Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, and how they reflect upon or react to older feminist dystopian works like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Regarding thematic aspects, readers of feminist dystopian fiction have seen a continuing focus on the discourse of reproduction, the inferiority of women (Daniels and Bowen 425), and the role of the female body in the public and private spheres. This chapter will therefore focus on a cross-analyzation of Alderman's *The Power* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and how the two works of feminist speculative fiction build their dystopian realities and interact with its thematic aspects.

## 1.1 Building Dystopias

*The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* were published thirty years apart, meaning that they reacted to different political and social environments, which reflects in its narrative structures. *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, was written during an important period of human rights and women's freedom and equality in the public and private spheres. In the years following the success of the Second Feminist Wave that started in the 1960s and lasted for approximately two decades, women had put sexual and domestic abuse, equality for both sexes in the workplace, and reproductive rights on the public agenda. The 1980s in the United States, however, became a decade of backlash on these progressions, as women were the victims of an increasing trend in murders related to sexual assault and domestic violence, and

the workers in the lowest-paid occupations were predominantly women. This societal backlash is in *The Handmaid's Tale* represented through the relationship between Offred and her mother, who was a feminist activist of those decades, and tells Offred that “you’re just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve me [...] Young people don’t appreciate things, she’d say. You don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are” (Atwood 131). The emphasis on Offred’s ignorance towards the struggle women had to go through to obtain basic human rights directly links it to the time period in which Atwood worked on *The Handmaid's Tale*. This scene between mother and daughter furthermore functions as a premonition for the establishment of the Gilead government, as this conversation is part of one of Offred’s flashbacks and therefore happened before Offred became a handmaid. It emphasizes the sensitivity of the topic of Atwood’s work and the institutionalized internal oppression that reemerged in the years during which Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*.

*The Power* was published in 2017, in the midst of the Fourth Feminist Wave. The Fourth Wave is often associated with online presence, the development of technology, and the ability to remain anonymous online, which resulted in more sexual harassment via social media. Technology becomes part of *The Power*’s narrative, as stories of the women’s electric powers is quickly spread via mobile phones and the internet. This aspect returns in all four narratives that together structure the novel: Tunde is a reporter that films everything he sees, Allie and Roxy eventually resort to the internet to spread their message of revolution, and Margot enforces her political position as a Mayor by seeking support from strangers online. This development in quick access to the latest news is therefore what partially helped radicalize the women’s surge in power, as well as popularize their cause. Alderman explores modern-day conflict, including the influence of fast online sharing, and links this to the visibility and freedom of women in the public sphere. Additionally, Alderman invokes the

idea of the dystopia, a “bad place” (Daniels and Bowen 423), that is in the visible future, waiting to happen. She builds this sense of anticipation by connecting the development of the bad place with the coming-of-age of her characters. When comparing the main influence of the author’s social realities onto their novels – *The Handmaid’s Tale* reacting to society’s reconsideration of freedom of choice regarding abortion and a regression in female rights, and *The Power* addressing the safety of online presence and technological developments – it is clear that they both react to a time period in which discussions of female rights and equality are very much so alive. This enriches the context of both novels, and they contribute to feminism by using radical alternatives through language and narration that upsets the societal balance of modern-day reality.

As previously discussed, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Power* both engage in reflecting upon gender roles, and challenge how gender-based relations are institutionalized within patriarchal power structures. Furthermore, Atwood’s representation of reproduction brings to the table the concept of sexual politics, by Millett defined as “the relationship between the sexes is one of dominance and subordination – the birthright control of one group by another – the male to rule and the female to be ruled” (1). As both novels are based on this play between superiority and inferiority, and of which gender dominates the other gender, gender relations seem to form the blueprint for many of the popular feminist dystopian novels. Upsetting the gender balance as seen in *The Power* directly affects its power structure, as governments fall, women take over higher-paid jobs, and the regulation of the electric power is in the hands of superior women. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, gender relations as the blueprint in society is radicalized and the dystopian world is already realized, with most women being placed in a domesticized environment where their sole role is to reproduce. The narrators of *The Power* still live in a somewhat free and modern world, yet their narratives shed light on the institutionalization of sexual abuse, followed by suggestions of modern-day society

moving into dystopia. Consequently, the two novels succeed in showing how gender relations can function as the backbone of all other power relations, and how a turn-around in the support for female rights can lead to radical changes on the political level, as represented by the existence of Gilead.

## 1.2 The Power of Language

Concepts of speaking versus silencing are present in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as *The Power*, and the idea of who is and who is not allowed to speak forms how both stories are constructed and told. *The Power* presents a social reality that is progressing into a dystopian social reality, and the reader experiences it alongside the characters' narratives. The novel tells the story of four protagonists – Roxy, Allie, Tunde, and Margot – and their role in the unfolding of female empowerment. In their combined narratives, women all around the world are discovering that they have electric powers. Because Alderman focuses on a shift in the amount of power that women hold, the novel consequently changes who dominates the narrative. Out of the four protagonists, three are female, and only one is male, and he is a journalist and photographer, not even someone who has any type of political or social influence. This exemplifies how the social role of women turned around drastically: from women being objects in a male-dominated social reality, women now become the leaders of the narrative and can reshape how history is experienced and therefore told. Whereas in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred loses her ability to express herself wholeheartedly due to enforced limitations in speech by the Gilead government, *The Power* takes back this “female loss of language” (270) and dramatizes what could happen if women were to rebel.

The power of language furthermore returns in the novels' choices of narration. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a text based on Offred's recordings of her experiences as a handmaid, which allows for a more extensive narrative as it includes flashbacks and reflections. Offred's

story is transcribed by Professor Pieixoto, who is fictional but in the contemporary world of *The Handmaid's Tale* has become well-known for his study: "Iran and Gilead: Two Late-Twentieth-Century Monotheocracies". This talk is included in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the epilogue, taking place at the fictional University of Denay, during which he sheds light on the life of Offred as she recorded her tapes. Because this talk is the epilogue of the novel, it enforces a reconsideration of Offred's narrative, and creates the sense of an open interpretation towards the trustworthiness of her story. Alternatively, *The Power* does not present a recording of an individual's story but rather functions as a combined narrative following the lives of four narrators as events are unfolding. This concept of having multiple protagonists and therefore multiple witnesses to the story, the novel creates a bigger sense of narrational ownership and reliability.

The reliability of language plays an important role in both novels, which emphasizes the function of language in dystopian social realities, as it is often considered to be a power tool. Offred's narrative already carries a sense of restriction, as the reader learns that Gilead has enforced a limitation in speech. This means that women specifically are allowed to only use a limited vocabulary to express themselves (Reddy 5). Offred's choice to record her experiences, thoughts, and acts of rebellion are therefore defying the government's control but simultaneously enforce their will: Offred still does not speak out loud. This addresses the duality of the power language in storytelling: much can remain unsaid when a narrative is based on thoughts, yet these thoughts can be the source of resistance (Kouhestani 612). Feminist dystopian fiction is therefore constructed by this play between voicing and silencing, and authors strengthen their narrative of oppression through emphasizing what their characters say and what they are not allowed to say.

## Chapter 2: Victimization in *The Power* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

### 2.1 *The Power* and Its Victims

Victimization as a thematic characteristic in feminist dystopias is not uncommon, as most feminist dystopian storylines discuss how the societal roles and public positions of women have been affected by power structures that consider men as the dominating gender.

Arguably, the public sphere of the modern world has aided in institutionalizing the idea of women as the weaker sex, and any female individuality is absorbed in the generalization of this weaker gender (Feuer 86). In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, victimization is linked to the concept of survival. Reddy argues that in analyzing the meaning of survival, Atwood did not necessarily mean the continuity of physical existence, but rather a sense of striving for dignity in a society that is attempting to restrict or eliminate individuality (1). This also applies to the representation of survival in *The Power*, as the idea of striving for dignity in a battle with the novel's social reality is in this case represented by women gaining electric powers; that becomes their way to survive. Furthermore, both novels react to the concept of subordination of women in Western societies and additionally the role the women themselves play in accepting subordination, even enforcing it (Foley 51). This duality between enforcing and resisting subordination and the representation of survival in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* will be the focus of this chapter.

*The Power* acknowledges oppression of women in third-world countries, told through Tunde's narrative as a journalist. He travels to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, where women are denied rights considered to be primary to Western civilization. One of these rights is driving a car, a common right given only to men, which consequently adds to the inherent power structure. Alderman radicalizes this form of oppression through giving these women power to essentially blow up the car they are not allowed to drive, thereby suggesting that

radical physical domination can change institutionalized discrimination. Tunde's narrative sketches an image of how powerful the gathering of the women is and how severely it upsets the power balance, as he describes how violence sharpens the women's motivation to resist police and government, and how it eventually leads to the destruction of governments all over the world (Alderman 61). *The Power* furthermore elaborates on the topics of sex- and human-trafficking. This latter part is an important aspect of how Alderman has structured her narrative: she points out controversial and difficult topics such as sex-trafficking as an institutionalized and ignored aspect of modern-day society. She emphasizes this through Tunde's narration and his contact with a twenty-year-old girl who clarifies that "it wasn't just them (traffickers). The police knew what was happening and did nothing. The men in the town beat their wives if they tried to bring us more food. The Mayor knew what was happening, the landlords knew what was happening, *postmen* knew what was happening" (Alderman 94). *The Power* offers criticism on this extreme form of disregard embedded into such power structures and uses language to expose this misogynistic dimension of society. Tunde's narrative functions as a strategy in giving a voice to a young girl that is a victim of sex trafficking. This scene therefore breaks down the role language plays in the women's liberation; where they were not allowed to speak under male domination, in the midst of their revolution, their resistance comes alive through speaking. Cavalcanti argues that this role of language in feminist dystopias is what helps it "contribute to a critique of 'what we have now'" (153), implying that for these narratives to be effective in current-day criticism, they have to subvert from the accepted order. In this case, the accepted order is represented by the silencing of for example the young girls Tunde speaks with. These girls are not participants in their own victimization, but do fall under the category of women whose speech was figuratively taken away by their oppressors.



The concept of victimhood changes from domestic issues to a dominating societal issue. The opening scenes of *The Power* sketch a clear image of Allie and Roxy being abused as young girls, which hints at the regularity of domestic abuse. As the novel progresses, victimhood moves from the private into the public eye, and narratives of survival are shared through the women's uprising. Margot as Mayor Cleary becomes misogynistic, selfish, and intrusive. She no longer embodies the mom who wishes for gender equality but becomes a political vessel that acknowledges and accepts violence and murder as a tactic to gain power. Allie's motivation to start a revolution for women was fueled by the physical and mental abuse she had to endure from her stepfather. This abuse, however, turned out to have been planned by her stepmother, who "saw the devil" (Alderman 318) in Allie. Even Tunde eventually becomes a victim to his own curiosity: he is tortured and threatened by women who misuse their powers. Ultimately, *The Power's* narrative is about empowering women, but also shows that abuse of power is not limited to the male gender. Alderman argues that fighting for equality is useless when society holds on to gender-specified discrimination.

## 2.2 Creating a Victim in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Victimization in *The Handmaid's Tale* takes on a different slightly form, as the protagonist and the women she encounters have already been subjected to the force of a totalitarian government and adjoining physical oppression. Offred first observes her new room as a handmaid, describing how bare it is, remembering how Aunt Lydia told her to think of her circumstance as "being in the army" (17). This sense of captivity is the center of the role women play in the social body: their function has been reduced to handmaids and they are indoctrinated with this idea that their only role is to serve the Republic of Gilead. Secondly, the form of first-person narration helps create a stronger sense of empathy within the reader, and therefore also a more intimate look at Offred's relationship with her own victimization.

The concept of ‘choice’ in Offred’s gradual decline into becoming a victim of Gilead is also embedded within the novel’s representation of victimization. The fact that Offred supposedly had a choice is discussed when Offred has just entered the handmaids’ center and encounters Rita, one of the Marthas, frowning at her. Offred considers this by saying that “she thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck”, then overhearing Rita saying that “she wouldn’t debase herself like that” (20) and that those who are now handmaids have the choice to go to the Colonies. Cora then confirms that the handmaids are doing it “for us all” (20). The reality as Atwood presents it, however, is that Offred did not have a choice, as becoming an Aunt like Cora or a Martha like Rita embodies being a captive to the government just as much as being a handmaid does. The fourth option would be becoming an Unwoman, whose job it is to clean up toxic waste and therefore essentially signing a death contract. Offred reflects on the idea of choice when she is in the middle of one of her encounters with the Commander:

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’s 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 that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose (105).

Arguably, Offred’s change in character from being upset by what she had overheard to admitting that she signed up for being a handmaid shows the influence of the Gilead government on her way of thinking. This contradiction, in many ways, “conveys an evenhandedness, a degree of hard-headed acceptance regarding the contextual, framed, and hence limited human condition, a horizon of acceptance, that counteracts justified anger” (Ketterer 213). Offred is also one of many, simply the next one in line, who receives no

sympathy from officials' Wives nor the Aunts, and is invisible to history. She recounts that "we lived in the blank spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (Atwood 66-67). The fault here is that she makes it sound as if she still has that choice and that freedom to decide where she lived, whereas she recognizes that she has become a blank space, her past being erased from memory, and her story being swallowed up in that gap ignored by the rest of society. The idea of giving women such as Offred a choice is a strategy for the Gilead government to implement a sense of freedom, whereas in fact, she never had one. Her becoming a victim of the system therefore happens not at free will, but through indoctrination and intelligent deceiving.

Offred has become more of an unreliable narrator now that her reflections upon having a choice have proven to be a product of Gilead's doctrine. Her development from desiring to rebel into complying with Gilead's wishes proves interesting in her position as a victim. At first, Offred is not a sympathizer with the Gilead government. Her will to resist shows itself through little things, such as Offred stating that "the door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say my – is not locked" (18). She seems to reward herself with these small moments of abandoning the rules, of being a defiant character, of being able to sway her hips and hoping that the men looking at her "get hard at the sight of us have to rub themselves against the painted barriers. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves" (32). It becomes clear that for her, these moments of resistance and the memories of her past form an attempt to hold on to her identity. Nevertheless, as the novel progresses, she loses her momentum and seems to adapt to the regiment of Gilead. By many critics of Atwood, this idea of losing yourself to the dystopian power is what makes it work: Gilead's power "reaches into every nook and cranny, every thought and act, of Offred's existence, taking apparent resistance or transgression and neutralizing it or turning it into a support for the system" (Stillman and Johnson 75). In many

ways, Offred is not that much of a rebel, as her compliance with the Commander in playing games and continuing having sexual encounters with him is what eventually breaks down her individual and psychological resistance.

It becomes easy for the reader of *The Handmaid's Tale* to sympathize with her as a victim of oppression, as her confessions, her memories of the past, and her emotions present her as a subject, rather than an object of Gilead. As a victim of oppression, discrimination, and verbal and physical abuse, she crafts a new self within the Gilead government with the intention of acquiring stability (Hansot 61). As a character, she is often dreaming, tuning out, or having attacks that come over her “like faintness” (Atwood 68). She describes that same type of weariness and lack of focus as being drugged (119), simultaneously saying that she is sane, and that “sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money” (119). These transgressions between clarity and dreaming and between illusions and reality create a sense of untrustworthiness towards Offred as a narrator. Offred’s grip to her past is “both a bulwark and a danger to her stability in the present [...] It arms her with different selves for different possible futures” (Hansot 61). Nevertheless, the narrator also clarifies that she at least still has those memories, however fabricated they may be. The next generation of handmaids will fall victim to their pasts being deleted and rewritten, without the awareness of having an alternative (Feuer 85). Offred’s victimization is determined and even regulated by Gilead, and to some extent, the totalitarian government feeds into this identity of a victim to accomplish a greater sense of control. The girls who will come after Offred, however, will have nothing to fall back on and therefore also no reason to resist. The dystopian world that Atwood created will thereby form into a world in which liberation and individuality cease to exist.

Offred’s greatest act of resistance as a victim but predominantly as a woman is the fact that she has recorded her story on tapes while surviving in a society that has enforced limited

speech and controlled interaction. Her individualism is simultaneously kept safe through her recordings. This is what characterizes Offred as a victim: she is physically kept in captivity, yet her struggle for survival is led by psychological intelligence. Her firm belief in resistance is based on fictional criminals, stating that “there must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from, on the television” (Atwood 115). As a woman, she believes that resistance must always exist, which is not coherent with the direction Gilead is heading in. Slightly naïve, Offred places her trust in what has probably been set up by the Gilead government as a form of doctrine and propaganda, further emphasizing that despite her attempt to hold on to her past-self and to protect herself from being a helpless victim of oppression, she has already succumbed to the power of the totalitarian government in many ways. Her victimization becomes inevitable.

When studying the two novels in their feminist dystopian genre, their differences can easily be noticed. Whereas *The Handmaid's Tale* is renowned for its clever use of language and what is told versus what is not told, *The Power* seems more of show and tell, presenting radical images of violence and abuse and narrative that come together in a continuing feeling of sensation and terror. *The Power's* representation of victimization is very hands-on: Alderman asserts subjectivity based on her characters' experiences with sexual abuse, she radicalizes the women that achieve power, and the representation of victimization is much more in the public than in the private. Offred's story revolves much more around the human reaction to imprisonment and losing one's identity, whereas *The Power*, despite its four protagonists, reads like a story of a society rather than an individual. Its invocation of war, its detailed descriptions of murder, and the unsettling conceitedness of some of its characters creates a dystopia that could easily end up becoming what Gilead is in *The Handmaid's Tale*.



## Chapter 3: A Modern Call for the Exploration of Dystopian Novels

The continuing popularity of a novel like *The Handmaid's Tale* and the critical writings of Margaret Atwood emphasize that discourses on reproductive rights, gender equality, and the victimization of women remain relevant. The strength of Offred's narrative lies partially with the duality she presents between being a victim and allowing herself to become a victim. This topic of to what extent a person can enforce his or her own victimization is controversial yet important when studying cultural forms and literary appropriation, as it often stereotypes the female gender. It furthermore shows that the binary between being a victim and allowing to become a victim is not stable, and is determined by various factors, including circumstance, level of freedom, and the role of an individual's past. By dissecting narratives that present a dystopian worldview in which current existing forms of discrimination take extreme forms, we can study the consequences of the norms modern-day society adheres to. *The Power* for example rejects the idea that inferiority is inherent to the female gender, as the revolution backfires and the women embody the sadistic result of being in power. By redefining the gender-balance and shifting it to create a social reality that is dystopian for the male gender, Alderman successfully shows how society can create these structures that are not natural to human kind.

The topics feminist dystopias bring to light and the place it obtains within critical studies allow for a continuing reach for improvement, but also a critical assessment of the effects contemporary society has on the survival of equality. It is important to continue linking thematic aspects between novels, either based on genre, time of publication, or their relationship to current-day issues. This will help in studying contemporary social realities, but also reflect upon realities of the past and learn from it. What Western society experienced with the backlash on feminism and gender-equality in the 1980s could very well be in the near-future for modern-day society. The last decade has become known for its many

progressive movements, while simultaneously witnessing a growth in conservatism embodied by political leaders and social movements. The publication of contemporary feminist fiction such as *The Power* reflects upon this conservatism that is very much so part of modern-day's social reality by emphasizing movements such as Male Power. Even though they are not the dominating group, it would be foolish to assume that all of society is accepting of changes being made, and that development should not be taken for granted. The novel therefore serves as a warning for gender-specified discrimination, but also reintroduces a sense of awareness.

Additionally, the novels' relevance in modern-day society can be seen in their presence in popular media. Alderman's novel is a relatively new publication but has already the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction in 2017 and a place in *The New York Times* Top Ten Books of 2017. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been in *The New York Times* Bestsellers List for sixty-nine weeks and counting (*The New York Times*), which for both novels indicates that people are willing to engage in the topics the novels address. The fact that audiences are receptive to both novels furthermore shows in the popularity of the TV-show *The Handmaid's Tale*, whose second season is now running. Despite *The Handmaid's Tale* having been published thirty years ago, the fact that it has been serialized and won eight Emmy Awards and two Golden Globes in the same year the series aired on television shows that its address of sexual abuse and violence, gender equality, and the freedom of women is very much so alive in contemporary society. Simultaneously, the appearance of other works of feminist dystopian fiction such as Alderman's *The Power* emphasize that especially now, a critical look at modern-day's social order and division of gender-based rules and rights is needed. *The Power* shows how a relentless enforcement of discriminative social structures can lead to a revolution, which will result in the creation of a dystopian social reality that might as well be Gilead.



## Conclusion

Critical literature in which topics such as gender relations, sexuality, and mental and physical abuse are discussed, initiate a dialogue. As these topics seem to be timeless, they enable forming quick and close ties to our own contemporary social realities. *The Power* succeeds in linking the novel's reality with the reader's reality by addressing the current state of gender-based inferiority and showing how its dystopian world can become our social reality. It enforces the idea that superiority is gender-unspecified, and that conceptions of power have become an innate part of institutionalized discrimination. *The Handmaid's Tale* breaks women's silence by emphasizing the presence of Offred's story in the far future, suggesting that as an oppressed woman, she carries unspoken power in her recordings. Furthermore, the novel shows that the duality between superiority and inferiority runs deeper than superficial gender-based assumptions in any society, as it addresses inequality before Gilead via Offred's mother and during Gilead's rule via Offred. Lastly, *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests female susceptibility can depend on how history is told, and that unreliability towards a narrative can be a product of influence by a more powerful source, such as Gilead.

My comparative analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* has mainly focused on the general structuring of dystopian social realities, how the two previously mentioned novels are built so to best carry across their messages of social critique and general concern, and the representation of and duality between victimization and repression in the two storylines. There are various topics that have been left out of my analysis. For further research, I would recommend focusing on the aspect of religion as it is widely referenced to and discussed as a power structure as well as a source of conflict and abuse in both novels. Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyze and study the presence of hope in both feminist dystopian novels, as this exact topic has been a key-point in the discussion of the function dystopian and utopian literature carry. Hope, arguably, has represented the difference

between engaging and bleak dystopian works of fiction, and its observed absence in Atwood's writings has redefined the meaning of critical dystopian fiction. I have also chosen to leave out an analysis of the presence of the state and government in *The Power* due to a limited space for writing, but this topic could enhance my argument on what influence women in high-paid positions have on the balance in gender-relations and how this affects political societies. In *The Power*, the reader meets the Moldovan dictator Tatiana Moskalev, who arguably was involved with the death of her husband in order to obtain Moldova's most powerful position. As her position and her decline into sadism and cruelty partially relies on army tactics, it would be interesting to compare her role with The Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and study how the difference in gender affects the readership. Lastly, I would suggest looking at the representation of what it means to be female in Alderman's *The Power*, and perhaps compare this to *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ. This is a 1975 science fiction novel, but it engages in the notion of womanhood, and how femininity is defined in a battle between the sexes, as also happens in the latter part of *The Power*.

It remains important to read these novels as they stand in dialogue with each other, and continue to influence contemporary social and cultural forms. It is interesting to analyze how trends in feminist writing develop and adapt to contemporary social movements, and the role they play in creating awareness among new and older readers concerning gender-specified issues. This will help in further establishing a literary tradition of the dystopian genre that is educational as well as reflective upon past and present social realities.

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