

Degree Project

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The Power of Solidarity

An Analysis of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

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Introduction

Dystopian fiction is a genre that portrays a nightmarish version of the world we live in. The word dystopia is “derived from two Greek words, *dus* and *topos*, meaning diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavorable place” (Claeys, 4). Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian novel, written in 1985, that stands out in the genre through the feminist narrative it represents. It tells the story of Offred, a woman who suffers from the change in regime where the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian theocratic regime, replaces a democratic USA. Gilead is constructed on the ideology of the Christian church but fails to adopt its spirituality. Women are treated as breeders, prostitutes, and are used in any role that is beneficial for (and assigned to them by) the men. Gilead is built as a solution to the problem of fertility. Most men are sterile, the AIDS epidemic “eliminat[ed] many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool” (Atwood THT, 316), following which many other reproductive issues developed, such as stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities. Gilead is divided into two spheres, the male sphere which consists of Commanders, doctors, engineers, etc. and the female sphere which is divided into groups, the Wives of the commanders who are the highest in rank and are mostly unable to bear children; the Marthas who, due to their age and infertility, work as house keepers in Gilead; the Aunts, who are as high in rank as the Wives, are responsible for the training, indoctrination and disciplining of the handmaids; and the Handmaids who are the most important group in Gilead. The handmaids are the ones who are deemed fertile and used to bear the Commanders’ children. They are used as sex slaves by the Commanders, sexual intercourse is conducted in the presence of their wives, which is one of the reasons why the wives despise them. Gilead’s upholding of power over its citizens can be observed through the regime’s

surveillance, disciplining, classification of women and the fact that they use women to control other women so that there would not exist a sense of female solidarity amongst them. Offred is a Handmaid and through her the story unfolds. Her true name is never told, her Gileadean name (of Fred) means that she is property of Commander Fred, which indicates the male dominance in the novel. There also exists in Gilead a clandestine resistance called Mayday, which aims to destroy Gilead from within.

The Handmaid's Tale's sequel, *The Testaments*, was published in 2019 after *The Handmaid's Tale* had been serialized for television and gained enormous attention from the younger generation as well as the older generation who witnessed the publication back in 1985. By virtue of being a sequel, it “resumes, continues, and completes that work” (Richards, 57). In that sense, *The Testaments* offers a different perspective and message from its predecessor. While it still orbits in the same universe, it differs from *The Handmaid's Tale* in its hopeful, thrilling, and adventurous tone. The novel does not continue Offred's story, instead, it moves 15 years into Gilead's future and tells the story from three female perspectives, Aunt Lydia's, Agnes Jemima's (Offred's daughter), who is raised in Gilead and embodies its ideologies; and Daisy's (Offred's second daughter and Agnes's half-sister), who is smuggled out of Gilead as a baby and is raised in Canada by a couple who work for Mayday, the resistance. It tells the story of how the three characters succeed in giving the first blow that leads to the fall of Gilead.

The Handmaid's Tale and *The Testaments* have been approached from many theoretical perspectives, including feminism, an approach that this thesis will also employ. Hogsette's article, which is published in 1997, focuses on female empowerment through language in *The Handmaid's tale*. He argues in his article

that through the exploration of language and its relation to female agency, Atwood implies that “effective -and affective- reading [of the novel] plays a significant role in the communicative process through which women regain their voice and become social agents” (265). He notes that she realizes “that language can be used as a force of resistance” (269) and concludes that by telling her story she forces her agency into the history and “makes possible social and political change” (270).

An exploration of the standard dystopian protagonist published in 2009, which is also an area of interest to this thesis, is offered by Allan Weiss. In his article he situates Atwood’s Offred within the traditional dystopian character criteria. Weiss traces the traditional dystopian protagonist’s traits back to previous successful dystopian novels like Zamyatin’s *We*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and argues that Offred, akin to the protagonists in these novels, is a complicit in keeping the totalitarian regime in place. He notes that similar to Orwell’s Winston, Offred is “guilty of complacency, complicity, and selfish concern for her own private needs and desires. She prefers freedom from pain and acceptance of comfortable paternalistic domination over dangerous political commitment” (138). Similarly, Ingersoll’s article, published in 1993, focuses on the dystopian characteristics and draws parallels between Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Orwell’s *1984*. He argues that Atwood’s writing of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is heavily influenced by, and clearly parallels, the themes of Orwell’s *1984*. Both Atwood’s Offred and Orwell’s Winston are storytellers in their own way, “while Winston’s job is to fictionalize history Offred’s job is to make babies. Her ability to record experience is limited to speaking, or storytelling” (66). In both novels, he notes, love is forbidden, and sex is limited; both characters commit an act of rebellion through forbidden relationships: “Offred’s affair with Nick, the chauffeur,

parallels Winston's relationship with Julia" (66). Ingersoll also observes that both novels have in their "narrative the element of confession" (70), and he concludes that Atwood, thus, follows the Orwellian tradition in her writing of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Due to being recently published, there are few articles which discuss Atwood's *The Testaments*. An article which was published in 2020 by Gheroghiu and Praisler's explores both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* and how Atwood deals with the feminist movements in both novels. The article argues that *The Testaments* is Atwood's way of "destabilize[ing] the contemporary hierarchies through these disruptive effects of women's writing, and even to actively participate in the rebirth of second-wave feminism, rebranded as the fourth wave." (91). They note that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a critique of the second-wave feminism and that Offred's generation has given up the fight their mothers have started against women's oppression mainly because they enjoy the freedom gained from their mother's agency. *The Testaments*, however, the young protagonists serve as an example of present day "fourth-wavers' who deliver Gilead (and the USA) from male abuse, thus completing the circle of the narratives of loss, progress and return." (95).

Machado-Jiménez's article, published in 2018, deals with the same topic this thesis is interested in, which is female solidarity. It argues that *The Handmaid's tale* is an example of sorority without solidarity in the patriarchal utopian novel. The article discusses the loss of solidarity among females in the novel, and that in Gilead, men form sororities and show solidarity among themselves in order to have a collective power against women. Women on the other hand may form sororities but they are not permitted solidarity. The article explores *The*

Handmaid's Tale and deconstructs Atwood's patriarchal utopian world "revealing its true nature as a feminist dystopia. Consequently, the latest movements in feminism may consider resorting to new forms of utopianism and, accordingly, of solidarity, in order to restore sorority as the (e)merging power for women to fight, rather than serve, patriarchy" (45). This thesis, while similar to Machado-Jiménez's topic, intends to approach *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* at the same time. Due to the recent publication of *The Testaments*, there seems to be no research done that deals with the topic of female solidarity, so to fill this gap this thesis will do a comparative reading which focuses on the role of female solidarity in the empowerment of the female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* and its sequel *The Testaments*.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* are considered political dystopias, for their depiction of a totalitarian regime that takes over and imposes its religious or political ideologies on others. In a totalitarian dystopia the narrative leads the reader to engage with, support, and empathize with the resistance against the injustice of the elite. Typical of the genre, according to Malak, "dystopias essentially deal with power: power as the prohibition or perversion of human potential; power in its absolute form that, to quote from *1984*, tolerates no flaws in the pattern it imposes on society" (Malak,10). Other features of this genre include the portrayal of a nightmarish version of reality, showing how the dream turns into a nightmare. Even though it describes a fantasy, "it's one step [or more] beyond our reality...to allow certain tendencies in modern society to spin forward without the brake of sentiment and humaneness" (Malak, 10). It also presents and dramatizes the conflict between "individual choice and social necessity"; how the totalitarian regimes force the individuals to uniformity and to give up their individuality.

The focus of the present thesis is on a related trait of political dystopia, which lies at the core of Atwood's novels, namely the regime's attempt to control its subjects. Specifically, the thesis attends to the workings of solidarity in overthrowing the regime in relation to surveillance as a means of controlling the citizenry. One of the ways a totalitarian regime uses to accomplish full control over its subjects is through visibility. For Akman, "In dystopian novels individuals are trapped in "visibility" by the state" (77), this visibility is accomplished by the constant surveillance which the dystopian regime practices over its citizens. *The Handmaid's Tale* is strongly influenced by, and written in, the Orwellian tradition; one of the themes of this tradition is surveillance, which is Gilead's main tool to ensure the obedience of its subjects and guarantee the regime's domination. The theory on discipline and power using surveillance, introduced by the French philosopher Michael Foucault, will be useful to this thesis, thus, the next section of the thesis will be dedicated to explaining this theoretical perspective and its relation to novel.

Solidarity, or the lack thereof, is also considered a key feature of dystopian fiction. It is strongly present in Atwood's Gilead since its very existence relies on male dominance. Solidarity, in general, is, according to Sally J. Scholz,

the unity of all humanity or the universal connection among human beings may be understood as both an assertion and as an aspiration. As an assertion, it describes the cohesive force among and between humans; as an aspiration, it delineates a goal of universal connection that requires moral response to the needs of others (Scholz, 728)

She notes that solidarity "entails positive duties or commitments to action. One participates in solidarity with others in order to do something – one must act (not

just refrain from acting)” (Scholz, 725). There are three different types of solidarity according to Scholz, social solidarity, civic solidarity, and political solidarity. “Social solidarity is the broadest category and involves “the interdependence among individuals within a group; primarily descriptive and secondarily normative, social solidarity pertains to group cohesiveness.”” (Maziarczyk, 214); The balance between community and the individual is what characterizes civic solidarity, that “The community has an obligation to protect each citizen from certain vulnerabilities and to ensure the capacity of each to act in freedom” (Scholz, 731); while political solidarity “is a moral relation formed when individuals or groups unite around some mutually recognized political need or goal in order to bring about social change. Political solidarity is grounded in a commitment to a common cause to end injustice or oppression” (Scholz, 732). What is relevant to this thesis is the political form of solidarity, it signifies the struggle that aims to “change the social structures that are unjust or oppressive” (Scholz 2007, 39).

In feminist theory, the concept of female solidarity is a complex one and “there is no unitary consensus about the term” (Litter and Rottenberg, 868). According to Ann Whitehead, there are many issues that form the basis for female solidarity, some of which are male violence towards women, issues regarding reproduction and mothering, emancipation, legal rights...etc. and even though “women, as a category, may well have strong interests in common against men and the state, this does not imply that all women will share these interests equally, nor that in all circumstances they will prioritize them” (Whitehead, 6). In the early feminist movement “women were bonded together like sisters, [but] their relationships were often fraught with conflict and disagreement” (Fetters, 78). Fetters notes that “much was wrong with the idea of sisterhood that insisted upon

the gender imperative while erasing difference between women and refusing to address the compounded oppressions of race, sex, class, and gender” (Fetters, 81). In that sense, solidarity does not mean sameness and sisterhood does not mean blindness to difference (Fetters, 81).

This feminist reading does not focus on a feminist theorist as such, but rather focuses on the presence or lack of solidarity, for the possibility of the female characters to overthrow the regime and (re)gain their rights, freedom, and agency. Therefore, this thesis will argue that *The Testaments* represents a shift in the narrative from its predecessor *The Handmaid's Tale*, from women's disempowerment via unsuccessful solidarity to their empowerment via accomplishing successful solidarity. The thesis will consist of three sections, the first section is dedicated to the explaining of the theoretical framework. The second section examines the thematization of unsuccessful solidarity in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It employs Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and shows that as a result of Gilead's disciplinary methods, female solidarity is obstructed. The third section focuses on the shift in Atwood's representation of solidarity and how it is successful in *The Testaments*. It employs the reversal of the use of disciplinary power, which allows Aunt Lydia to wield enough power to ultimately enable solidarity amongst the younger generation in the novel which is essential to overthrow the regime.

The Orwellian Tradition and the Panopticon

The Orwellian tradition is known for “its ability to entice the reader into a world of paranoia, oppression, fear, and pain” (Claeys, 391), it is also characterized by portraying a “protagonist [that] is so weak, in the face of so much strength” (Claeys, 409). It consists of several themes such as depersonalizing love and sex in order for the totalitarian regime to control its subjects; rewriting history

so that the rewritten history becomes the truth for the next generation; Creating a new language to force the citizens to communicate in a certain way which highlights the regime's control over the people. In the Orwellian tradition, "The domination of [the imposed] language reduces the possibility of even thinking oppositionally. The word 'free', for instance, is used only in the sense of 'this dog is free from lice'... [the new language's] overall aim... was to '*diminish* the range of thought'" (Claeys, 409). Surveillance is also a strong Orwellian theme, the regime is all seeing, the citizens are constantly watched without having the ability to see who is watching them. Fang notes that "'Orwellian,' [is] a universally recognized term for describing surveillance dystopia" (Fang, 738). Drawing on Foucault's theorization of means of control, Syeda et al. note that "Orwell's novel foregrounds the feelings of fear associated with such political structures" (134).

Michael Foucault is famous for his ideas on discipline and power. Discipline is a tool that will be useful in the analysis of how Gilead maintains its power. Foucault uses the metaphor of the panopticon as a mode for discipline to describe how modern societies control their citizens through surveillance.

The panopticon as a means of control and punishment was first introduced by Jeremy Bentham, who devised a prison that consists of a central tower surrounded by cells. The supervisors are inside the central tower and are able to see the prisoners without being seen. The prisoners, thus, assume they are being watched and internalize the "discipline". Therefore, to Foucault, visibility becomes a trap, surveillance and watching one's every move takes away the individual's freedom and puts everyone under the microscope. Foucault explains that the panopticon "reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide - it preserves only the first and eliminates the other

two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected” (Foucault, 200). In addition to the internalization of the discipline, Foucault also notes that the regimes maintain their power by instilling fear of punishment in their subjects. He explains that the primary objectives to exercise the power to punish is “to make of the punishment and repression of illegalities a regular function, coextensive with society; not to punish less, but to punish better...to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body” (Foucault, 82).

In light of Foucault’s ideas on discipline and the maintaining of power via constant surveillance, this thesis will focus on how the feeling of being fully exposed and the brutal punishment produce fear of punishment and a lack of solidarity in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. As this thesis will show, Atwood’s Gilead uses similar discipline to that of Foucault’s panopticon. Due to the constant surveillance, either by spying on one another or by the secret police which are called the Eyes, the individuals inside of Gilead internalize the discipline and the regime of Gilead succeeds in severing the solidary bond between women and so manages to stay in power.

The unsuccessful solidarity in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

The following section begins with an analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it aims to show that in this book there is a lack solidarity between the women of Gilead because of the discipline the totalitarian regime imposes via surveillance and brutal violence. A reminder of Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power is helpful to follow the analysis. Foucault tries to describe how Western societies make its citizens comply with the rules and behave as they should according to said regime, to do this he uses the analogy of the panopticon to show how people internalize the discipline

by knowing they are constantly being watched by the regime. Arragwal notes in his explanation of Foucault's ideas on mental discipline that "This discipline produces "subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies", through the enclosure of individuals at sites that classify and separate offenders. Discipline occurs in designated sites through monitoring and rehabilitating daily life with measurable results for classification" (269). And so, being exposed to the surveillance of the regime at all times enforces self-discipline, it also ensures that everyone acts as they should.

Gilead, as a theocratic, patriarchal, totalitarian regime, is based on the submission of women to men; its tactic is mainly to shock women into submission giving them no time to formulate a plan. The novel is narrated by Offred, she narrates through flashbacks how the regime has established itself and how it left them helpless and unable to escape. The pre-Gilead era is described as a time when women had freedom to dress, act, and work in whatever ways they desired. The narrator describes how her life was before Gilead took over; she has had an affair with a married man, Luke, and she used to meet him at the hotel frequently until he got a divorce and afterwards, they got married. At that time, the narrator had a job, a steady income, in other words she was independent. One morning as she is at work, the director comes in, with soldiers behind him to emphasize the seriousness of the situation and tells her that she and her female coworkers are "let go" making a distinction from the term fired, he says: "you can't work here anymore, it's the law" (Atwood THT, 185-6). This is the first step in shocking women into submission. When the narrator goes home and talks to her friend, Moira, she is told that they are financially "cut off", all bank accounts that belong to women are frozen and they cannot hold property either, that everything they used to own is automatically

transferred to their “husband[s] or next male of kin” (Atwood THT, 188). The narrator describes her feeling at the moment as feeling “somebody [has] cut off [her] feet” (Atwood THT, 188).

This tactic to shock women into submission is most clearly evident in Offred being hunted down, imprisoned, deprived of her role as a mother and being reduced to her function, which is breeding. As Gilead started to hunt down women and categorizing them according to their function in the new established regime, Offred and Luke decide to take their daughter and escape by forging fake passports. The fear of being trapped is articulated by Offred in her reflections on her past, she remembers thinking: “I don’t want [my daughter] to feel frightened, to feel the fear that is now tightening my muscles, tensing my spine, pulling me so taut that I’m certain I would break if touched” (Atwood THT, 95). After reaching a checkpoint that is suspicious of them, they bolt into the woods. Offred’s memory is hazy, she recalls screaming, she says: “There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn’t have lost that much time without help. You have had a shock, they said” (Atwood THT, 49). Stripping Offred of her maternal role adds to the feeling of being paralyzed and crushed, she is told that her daughter “is in good hands. With people who are fit. [She is] unfit” (Atwood THT, 49).

In order for Gilead to ensure its existence, it is essential to isolate women by severing any bond between them, and so to prevent them from rising against the regime. The female sphere of Gilead is structured in a way that makes it very difficult to form any kind of unity between women. “The success of patriarchal sororities consists also in the elimination of solidarity among women. The creation of antagonistic feminine archetypes and the lack of communication between them prevent empathetic feelings and solidary reciprocity, leaving sororities at the mercy

of patriarchy's desires" (Machado-Jiménez, 46). So, the groups of women in Gilead are pitted against each other; they are put into categories which forces them to hate and resist helping each other. This strategy is described in *The Handmaid's Tale's* epilog as well as in *The Testaments*, where it is explicitly stated that the regime requires women to "organize the separate sphere—the sphere of women" (Atwood TT, 175). In the epilog the keynote speaker, Professor Pieixoto, notes that "[Commander] Judd – according to the Limpkin material – was of the opinion from the outset that the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (Atwood THT, 320). As a result, the Wives feel animosity towards the Handmaids, because of their ability to bear children, and for having sex with their husbands as well as being forced to watch the procedure. Offred senses "loathing in [the Commander's wife's] voice" after Offred's rape by the commander, "as if the touch of [Offred's] flesh sickens and contaminates her" (Atwood THT, 106). The Handmaids, in return, hate the Wives for taking away their babies, they are allowed to nurse them for a few months and are then transferred to another Commander. The Marthas on the other hand are not inclined to help the Handmaids for fear of being sent to the colonies, a place with radioactive waste where women are sent as a punishment. In that sense Machado-Jiménez notes that "the prevention of female solidarity is not only achieved by the separation of women into traditional patriarchal sororities, but also by the rules applied to their inner organization" (58).

The brutality and the violence of the Aunts in disciplining the Handmaids play a crucial role in keeping the women apart. Because of their violent disciplinary methods and lack of empathy, the Handmaids feel fear from and

animosity towards the Aunts; Offred tells the reader how her friend, Moira, is violently tortured for attempting to escape, she says:

They took her into a room that used to be the Science Lab... Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. It was the feet they'd do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and hands are not essential (Atwood THT, 102)

Testifying, a ritual similar to a confession, is another method the Aunts use to abuse the Handmaids. In this ritual a Handmaid admits to doing something wrong in the past in front of everyone else. Offred describes an incident in her training days where Janine, who later becomes Ofwarren, confesses to being raped at the age of fourteen and of having an abortion. with that confession in mind, Aunt Helena asks them “[b]ut whose fault is that?” and the Handmaids reply in a chant “*Her fault, her fault, her fault*” (Atwood THT, 81-2). The Handmaids bully Janine for her breakdown by calling her “Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby”, and Offred recalls: “We meant it, which is the bad part” (Atwood THT, 82). This scene shows, according to Machado-Jiménez, that the “Handmaids must assimilate distrust and accusations, erasing any trace of solidarity with their friends in order to survive and avoid punishment” (Machado-Jiménez, 60). The Aunts show how brutal and unempathetic they are by punishing even unintended offenses. Offred recalls an incident where Dolores, a woman in the training center, wet herself because the Aunts refused her request to go to the bathroom; Two Aunts hauled her away and she was not seen during the day, but at night, she was brought back to her usual bed, and “all night [they] could

hear her moaning, off and on” (Atwood THT, 82). Offred notes that not knowing what kind of punishment has been done to Dolores “makes it worse” (Atwood THT, 82). As a result of this fear and violence, it becomes impossible to form a bond inside of the female sphere.

Being always watched, the lack of communication between women, and the possibility of being betrayed by anyone is what insures the lack of solidarity between women in the Gileadean era. Life in Gilead, as described by Offred, is characterized by the constant surveillance and the strict discipline the women are subjected to. The handmaids never walk alone, they always walk in twos, because “a single Handmaid is prone to self-awareness and dissenting thoughts, while the connections made in a large group of Handmaids may lead to cooperation and empowerment, possibly leading to their rebellion against the state” (Machado-Jiménez, 59). In that regard, Offred notes: “she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on our daily walks, the other will be held countable” (Atwood THT, 29). That way the women in Gilead internalize the discipline, Aunt Lydia tells them back in the training days that “Gilead is within you” (Atwood, 33), meaning inside of their very psyche. They are taught that instead of carrying the burden of the “freedom to” do things, they are now enjoying “freedom from” being abused by random men (Atwood THT, 34).

The novel highlights the idea that Gilead succeeds in forcing the handmaids into internalizing the discipline. In the scene where Offred and Ofglen, a handmaid who is assigned to accompany Offred in her outings, are in one of their walks and they encounter some Japanese tourists with their interpreter, it is evident how they have internalized the Gileadean discipline, believing that anyone might be an Eye, trying to see how they respond, they behave the way they should, averting

their eyes and answering the way they are supposed to. An Eye is a spy whose job is to identify and turn in dissenters, traitors, and nonbelievers to the system. It becomes then exceedingly difficult to achieve successful solidarity because each individual fears the betrayal of others, the citizens internalize the discipline by keeping tabs on each other and reporting on the dissidents. According to Sargiacomo “the main function of the disciplinary power is “to train” and links its success to the use of the following techniques: hierarchical observation; normalizing judgement; the examination” (274). Hierarchical observation, Sargiacomo notes, allows constant monitoring and as a result full control over the observed. Foucault notes that “the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 201). So, when the interpreter asks them if they are happy, Offred replies: “yes, we are very happy,” (Atwood THT, 39), she then reflects, dismissing the possibility of answering the question differently, that “[she has] to say something. What else can [she] say?” (Atwood THT, 39). The women, by this stage, know what not to do in order to stay alive, in other words, they self-regulate.

Another example of how the characters internalize the discipline is when Offred is on her medical check and the doctor offers her his help to conceive. He informs her that most commanders are sterile and that he has helped many others this way. She refuses the offer even though the possibility to get pregnant is higher this way, she disciplines herself, no need for anyone to tell her what not to do. The thoughts that run in her mind as she refuses are: “the penalty is death. But they have to catch you in the act, with two witnesses. What are the odds, is the room bugged, who’s waiting outside the door?” (Atwood THT, 71). This highlights Foucault’s ideas about discipline and punishment, he explains that

Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process. This has several consequences: it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime (9)

So, Offred's feeling of being watched all the time and the fear of punishment makes her act in a way that Gilead approves of. This internalization of the discipline is crucial in the way we can understand the impossibility of solidarity in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The wall, on which dead bodies are displayed, serves as a reminder for them of what their fate would be if they do not comply to the rules, which imposes the external threat of punishment.

The loss of hope in finding a way out results in Offred's unwillingness to assist in the fight against the regime. Ofglen is part of the Mayday secret resistance group, which operates inside and out of Gilead. After knowing Offred for a while, she tells her about the group and that they are able to get people out if they are in danger. She tells her the password is Mayday to know "who is and who isn't" (Atwood THT, 212) with them, just in case she needs it. This kindles a spark of hope in her, only to be extinguished by her finding out that Moira has lost her hope as well. Moira's escape has given Offred a hope that she made it and is now somewhere free of Gilead, it made her believe in the possibility of succeeding, but when she saw Moira at the hotel working as a Jezebel, which is a prostitute, she is shocked by Moira's indifference. Moira seems to accept her current situation, which is incomprehensible to Offred because she still holds on to the image of rebellious and

free Moira. When Moira tells her to figure out a way to end up working as a Jezebel because “the food’s not bad and there’s drink and drugs, if [she] want[s] it, and [they] only work nights” (Atwood THT, 261), Offred is shocked, she is frightened by the indifference in Moira’s voice and “the lack of volition” (Atwood THT, 261). Offred asks herself what they have taken from Moira’s essence, that something which “used to be central to her?” (Atwood THT, 261). What they have taken from Moira and now Offred is hope, the hope of being able to escape. Offred thinks that Moira is everything that she lacks, and if even Moira has lost hope, then Offred is doomed. After this night, Ofglen asks Offred to spy on the Commander, which she refuses. The incident with Moira left Offred hopeless and unable to risk her position to help the resistance. At this point, she “scarcely take the trouble to sound regretful, so lazy [she] has become” (Atwood THT, 283); she is so hopeless that she “no longer want to leave, escape, across the border to freedom” (Atwood THT, 283).

Offred’s despair and fear which results in the unsuccessful solidarity on her part, is evident when she believes she has been compromised by the new Ofglen. The fear instilled in her is the ultimate sign of the regime’s success in the prevention of the formation of solidarity in its subjects. The thoughts that run through her head are: “I will not be able to stand it, I know that; Moira was right about me. I’ll say anything they like, I’ll incriminate anyone. It’s true, the first scream, whimper even, and I’ll turn into Jelly, I’ll confess to any crime” (Atwood THT, 297). The internalization of the discipline is evident in her prayer for survival, she promises God to “obliterate [herself]” she thinks

I’ll empty myself, truly become a chalice. I’ll give up Nick, I’ll forget about the others, I’ll stop complaining. I’ll accept my lot. I’ll sacrifice. I’ll repent...Everything they taught at the Red Centre, everything I

resisted, comes flooding in... I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. they can do what they like with me. I am abject (Atwood, 298)

This shows how Atwood portrays the unsuccessful solidarity in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the internalization of the Gileadean discipline.

Noticeably, the rupture in the bond between women in the novel can be traced back to the early Gileadean time. Even with the grave situation the women found themselves in, being financially cut off, Offred says that the reaction to these laws was insignificant which indicates the lack of solidarity even then. She says “there were marches... But they were smaller than you might have thought” (Atwood THT, 189), and that she herself did not participate because “Luke said it would be futile and [she] had to think about them, [her] family” (Atwood THT, 189). This indicates the loss of hope which results in female disunity, because there is no point in fighting back, and after that, Gilead took over.

So far, this section has dealt with how solidarity was not made possible because of the barriers put between women. There are also the violent disciplinary methods which aim to prevent the solidarity that is necessary to fight against the regime.

The Shift in presenting solidarity in *The Testaments*

Turning to the sequel, *The Testaments* is a “reformative” sequel, which Richards explains as one of transformation. (Richards, 58), “it seeks literally to alter or transform the format of the first part’s narrative” (Richards, 301). He notes that “an important facet of the sequel's nature [is]: its capacity to re-think, re-appraise, and revise preceding fictional material to which it is linked by a continuity of character, plot, theme, and setting”. (Richards, 303). In that sense, and as this section

will show, instead of continuing to follow the Orwellian tradition, in *The Testaments* Atwood leans more into the recent Young Adult dystopian novel which allows for empowerment in the face of oppression. According to Basu et al., Young Adult dystopian genre “belongs to the wider traditions of utopian/dystopian literature... It also draws on a number of familiar, enduring, and popular plots and narrative forms, including the *Bildungsroman*, the adventure story, and the romance” (6). *The Testaments*’ narrative tone is similar to that of Young Adult dystopia in its hopefulness and that the “dystopian warnings are distilled into exciting adventures with gripping plots. Their narrative techniques often place us close to the action, with first person narration... imparting accessible messages that may have the potential to motivate a generation on the cusp of adulthood” (Basu et al, 1).

This section shows how Atwood shifts from the disempowerment of women in *The Handmaids Tale*, to their empowerment in *The Testaments*. In *The Testaments* Atwood opens up to the possibility of solidarity and for presenting successful solidarity as the key to Gilead’s fall. The following focuses on Aunt Lydia, because, as the novel suggests, to overthrow a powerful regime such as Gilead, change must come from higher ranks of the regime such as the Aunts because they have access to information that is denied to others; Lower ranks, such as the Handmaids are kept in the dark, they have no means of collecting information and consequently no way of attaining power.

Unlike *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Testaments* is narrated by three characters, Aunt Lydia, the most powerful woman in Gilead; and Offred’s daughters, Agnes, an upper-class young woman who was raised in Gilead and embodies all of its ideologies; and Daisy (known in Gilead as Baby Nicole), a young woman who was smuggled out of Gilead as a baby and was raised in Canada. Aunt

Lydia, portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the monster who is assigned to the training and punishment of the Handmaids, is given a three-dimensional presence in the sequel. From the first sentence, the reader is shown how powerful Aunt Lydia is by the fact that Gilead carved a statue of her, while still alive, in appreciation for her services, she notes that “the statue is larger than life, as statues tend to be” (Atwood TT, 3). The statue is of her looking up at a point in the sky, clutching to her feet is a little girl, her right-hand rests on the head of a handmaid, and behind her stands a pearl girl, who does missionary work to proselytize the Gileadean faith, and her belt has a taser attached. The statue shows her firm hand on the disciplining of these women. The first chapter indicates that contrary to what the reader believes in the previous novel, Aunt Lydia is not what she seems to be. To achieve empowerment, Atwood positions Aunt Lydia in a place where she can use the regime’s main tool for control against them, which is surveillance. Having herself installed the cameras, she knows where the blind spots are and uses them to her advantage.

Aunt Lydia is a cunning woman, through calculated moves by which a numerous number of women have been sacrificed over the years, she succeeds in gaining the regime’s trust and acquiring a strong position within the highest ranks of Gilead. This, in turn, allows her to take down Gilead from within. Before Gilead took over, Aunt Lydia has worked as a family court judge. Her resilience is evident in her overcoming her father’s abuse for being outspoken and in carving a successful career for herself. She reflects that her father was not proud of her for being “a girl and, worse, a smarty-pants girl. Nothing for it but to wallop those pretensions out of me, with fists or boots or whatever else was to hand” (Atwood TT, 112). The turning moment in Aunt Lydia’s life is when she decides to enact vengeance against

Commander Judd, one of the founder figures of Gilead. It is when he tortures her into submission and she accepts her position as an Aunt that she says:

“Did I weep? Yes: tears came out of my two visible eyes, my moist weeping eyes. But I had a third eye, in the middle of my forehead. I could feel it, like a stone. It did not weep: it saw. And behind it someone was thinking: *I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it*” (Atwood TT, 149)

So, Aunt Lydia accepts the position, vows to become “the alpha hen” (Atwood TT, 177), and starts to gain her power by using surveillance to her advantage. She collects evidence against the Aunts who plan to overthrow her, the Commanders, the wives etc. she “become[s] swollen with power... [she is] everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders [she] cast an unsettling shadow” (Atwood TT, 32). The Commanders know that their secrets are safe as long as she is safe as well. This secured her position, knowing and hearing everything, planting cameras and microphones that she adjusts to hear whispers helps her achieve her goals. Her plan to destroy Gilead is set into motion after fifteen years. She takes advantage of a situation that “passed almost unnoticed” (Atwood TT, 211); one of the Aunts comes to inform her that a girl, Becka, has attempted suicide and refuses to marry anyone and wishes to become an Aunt. Becka is Agnes’s friend and her inclusion to Aunt Lydia’s plan is a bonus. Studying bloodlines, which is forbidden and authorized only to those high in rank among the Aunts, gives Aunt Lydia the material needed to form a team, she knows that Baby Nicole, also known as Daisy, is Agnes’s half-sister and plans to bring her back to Gilead; thus, Agnes must join

the Aunts to meet her sister when she is returned and together, they will bring down Gilead.

Despite the apparent power the men in Gilead have, Aunt Lydia is the one who has the upper hand over them. In using male arrogance against them, that is, the assumption that she is harmless because she is a woman, she succeeds in securing her position in Gilead. The first meeting between Aunt Lydia and Commander Judd the reader encounters shows that the true power is in fact Aunt Lydia's. In a crucial time in Commander's Judd's career, where his position was jeopardized due to the large numbers of women escaping to Canada, Aunt Lydia came up with the idea of the Pearl Girls; she notes that: "The Pearl Girls were originally my idea—other religions had missionaries, so why not ours...but, being no fool or at least not that kind of fool, I'd let Commander Judd take credit for the plan" (Atwood TT, 64). She also gains enormous power by using surveillance to collect incriminating evidence against the commanders, she notes that "[she] know[s] too much about the leaders—too much dirt—and they are uncertain as to what [she] may have done with it in the way of documentation... They might well suspect [she has] taken backup precautions, and they would be right" (Atwood TT, 62). Foucault notes that "power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (Foucault, 27). The second meeting between them shows that since she recognizes that "knowledge is power" (Atwood TT, 35), Aunt Lydia then possesses more power than Commander Judd. Commander Judd summons Aunt Lydia to discuss the death of Aunt Adrianna, who is a Pearl Girl, in Canada; what he does not know is that Aunt Lydia already has received a full briefing from Aunt Sally, who is the one that killed Aunt Adrianna in self-defence, since the Pearl Girls answer directly to her. She even

has more information about the incident from Aunt Sally regarding the possible identity of Baby Nicole, a piece of information she chooses to withhold to use at the right time. This shows that contrary to Gilead's arrogant male assumptions, being a woman in such a position of power combined with smart thinking proves to be extremely dangerous for them.

While solidarity is impossible within the older generation, i.e., that of the Aunts, the Wives, the Marthas, and the Handmaids, Atwood presents a hope of the concept impacting upon the younger generation of the novel. Agnes Jemima, a girl who was raised in Gilead and has no recollection of her pre-Gileadean life, is adopted by a powerful Commander, Commander Kyle. Eventually, Agnes discovers that she is an adopted child. Machado-Jiménez notes that “dystopian governments encourage people to ignore and mistrust each other, suppressing any affective bond that may enact solidarity” (Atwood TT, 53). So, at school the girls are advised against forming friendships, in other words, they are denied the possibility of solidarity. The Aunts reason that “best friends led to whispering and plotting and keeping secrets, and plotting and secret led to disobedience to God, and disobedience led to rebellion” (Atwood TT, 24). Nevertheless, a bond forms between Agnes and Becka. Like Becka, Agnes is set for a marriage that she resents and tries to find a way out of it. As part of Aunt Lydia's plan to create a team that would destroy Gilead, she helps Agnes to escape the marriage. She shows up unexpectedly in Agnes's house, while Paula, her stepmother, was away and tells Agnes indirectly how to escape her marriage and join the Aunts. Driven by the glimpse of hope, Agnes orchestrates the meeting with her teacher, Aunt Estee, and succeeds in convincing her to join the Aunts. The bond between Agnes and Becka strengthens while they live in Ardua Hall and train to be Aunts, the trust between

them is evident when Becka tells Agnes: “I’d trust you with my life” (Atwood TT, 259). This sisterhood is what Aunt Lydia plans to form between them, the solidarity, the ability to trust one another.

Aunt Lydia succeeds in forming a sense of solidarity between the younger generation, specifically between Becka, Agnes, and Daisy. Through years of sending Agnes and Becka material incriminating the Commanders and the Wives of various kinds of crimes, Aunt Lydia succeeds in shaking the girls’ blind belief in the Gileadean regime and initiating internal change. Being exposed to the corruption of the Gileadean society gives the girls the proper motivation to fight back, Agnes as a result observes that “beneath its outer show of virtue and purity, Gilead was rotting” (Atwood TT, 308). The arrival of Daisy to Ardua Hall, arranged by Aunt Lydia and Mayday has the biggest impact on Agnes and Becka. Daisy, having been raised in Canada, rejects Gilead’s ideologies and is ready to take the regime down. Albeit knowing the risk of her entering Gilead and the fact that “Gilead [has] all the power” (Atwood TT, 197), she agrees to the plan. The spark of hope is what ensures achieving successful solidarity, she thinks: “I would be in a dark place, carrying a tiny spark of light” (Atwood, 271). While in Gilead, Aunt Lydia makes sure that Agnes, Becka, and Daisy are together, for it is imperative for Becka and Agnes to get an idea of how life outside of Gilead is like, and what girls can do. Aunt Lydia tells the girls the truth about who Daisy is and that she is Agnes’s sister, which reveals the girls’ strong sisterly connection, Agnes tells Becka: “you’re like my sister...so [Daisy] is like your sister too” (Atwood TT, 337). She also reveals her plan to bring Gilead down to the girls. The sense of solidarity is evident in Becka’s decision to help them and her way of convincing Agnes to be part of the plan by

reasoning “[Aunt Lydia is] asking for obedience and loyalty... remember how she rescued us—both of us? We have to say yes” (Atwood TT, 338).

Aunt Lydia and the girls are bound together in social solidarity. In social solidarity “Individuals are united on the basis of specialized roles or functions creating a highly interdependent community... Individuals must rely on one another, forming ever more complex connections of solidarity” (Scholz, 728). Commander Judd’s knowledge of Baby Nicole’s identity and his decision to marry her as soon as possible forces Aunt Lydia to speed up the execution of the plan. Aunt Lydia asks Becca to hide in Ardua Hall to buy the girls the time to escape the borders. The ultimate sign of solidarity between the young girls is Becca sacrificing herself so that Agnes and Daisy succeed in their mission. Becca knows that if she is caught, she will be interrogated and no doubt forced to confess everything she knows about the plan, risking her friends and letting their hard work go in vain. Due to being exposed to the corruption of the regime, Becca now comprehends the fact that killing is “what [the regime] do[es]” (Atwood TT, 357). As a result, Becca decides to kill herself in order to ensure that the plan succeeds, “[she] had removed her outer clothing so as to save it for someone else’s future use” (Atwood TT, 389), and drowned herself in the water cistern; the neatly folded clothes is an indication of her willing sacrifice.

The adventurous, hopeful narrative of *The Testaments* which makes the novel reveal traces of the Young Adult dystopian novel is evident in the scene of the girls’ escape. On their way to leave Ardua Hall and escape Gilead, the girls encounter Aunt Vidala, one of the founder Aunts and a rival to Aunt Lydia. Daisy punches her in the chest in the way she was taught by Mayday, to stop her from exposing them and as a result Aunt Vidala loses consciousness. Eventually, the girls

reach the ship that will take them to Canada. On the ship, Daisy feels sick due to an infection of her arm. Despite the girls' difference in ideologies and beliefs, they keep holding on to each other and stay determined to succeed in their mission. In that they also fulfill the social solidarity criteria as Sidiq et al. note that "social solidarity is a state of mutual trust between members of a group or community. If people trust each other they will become one or become friends... become mutually responsible to help each other in meeting the needs of each other" (Sidiq et al., 195). Before reaching the shore safely, the captain tells them that the ship will not be able to reach the harbor as planned which means the girls have to continue their journey in a float boat. Because of the infection in her arm, Daisy feels unsteady, affected with fever, and unable to use her infected arm. They struggle to row because Agnes has never done it before, they are going against the tide, and Daisy is feeling worse by the minute. Daisy tries to stay optimistic and encourage Agnes to keep going until they succeed in their mission to deliver Aunt Lydia's incriminating evidence against Gilead. Basu et al., note that a "popular form on which the YA dystopia draws is the adventure genre...Contemporary [Young Adult] dystopias could in fact be seen as a reinvention of the adventure tradition, tapping into the appeal that popular adventure stories had and continue to have for their readers" (7).

A significant scene is portrayed which highlights the strong female bond between Daisy and Becka. When Daisy was rowing, she was convinced she heard Becka on the boat, she recalls "Becka said *it's not much farther*. I couldn't remember her being in the inflatable, but she was beside us on the beach, I couldn't see her because it was too dark. Then she said, *Look up there. Follow the lights*" (Atwood TT, 397). This is significant because Daisy believes the love and bonding between people has nothing to do with blood ties, she forms this bond with Becka

and considers her a sister nonetheless. Female bonding is also evident in Aunt Lydia's efforts to buy the sisters the time they need to reach their destination safely, despite knowing that her decision seals her fate. Aunt Vidala wakes up and tells Aunt Lydia: "you did this, Lydia. You'll hang for it" (Atwood TT, 391), which forces her to eliminate the threat Aunt Vidala poses to her plan. She makes sure that Aunt Vidala is murdered by Aunt Elizabeth, another founder Aunt, by telling her that Aunt Vidala accuses her of the attack and of being an infiltrator. This way she gets rid of Aunt Vidala and has recorded evidence of the murder against Aunt Elizabeth saved for later, "two birds with one stone" (Atwood TT, 392) she thinks. Her last wish is for the girls to succeed, her parting thoughts to them: "Fly well, my messengers, my silver doves, my destroying angels. Land safely" (Atwood TT, 392).

This section has shown that overthrowing the totalitarian regime is only made possible through the successful solidarity which the female characters in *The Testaments* succeed in achieving.

Conclusion

The previous pages show that Atwood presents a loss of hope, a severance of the female bond between the characters and thus disempowerment in *The Handmaid's tale* while *The Testaments* presents a possibility of change through hope and solidarity and as a result female empowerment is achieved. These final pages highlight the importance of this shift from helplessness via failed solidarity to hope via successful solidarity. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is written following the Orwellian tradition which is characterized by the lack of solidarity and the helplessness of its protagonists in standing up against the regime. According to Ingersoll, "Orwell's nightmarish future is written all over Atwood's similarly near-future vision of the misogynist theocracy of Gilead. Atwood shares Orwell's liberal-

humanist anxieties about a future in which totalitarian states offer individuals the grim option of either freedom and anarchy or repression and security” (Ingersoll, 64). The surveillance, in *The Handmaid’s tale* as in Orwell’s *1984*, “is dispersed throughout society rather than being contained purely in the upper echelons” (Rook, 23), and it results in the internalizing of the discipline and that the subject begins to engage in “self-surveillance or “self-discipline”” (Finigan, 437). Just like the protagonist in the Orwellian tradition. Offred is powerless and hopeless, therefore, unable to form the solidarity necessary for his/her liberation and leads the individual to be a complicit in the system. To maintain its patriarchal power, Gilead aims to sever the female bond between the different groups of women in the female sphere by setting them against each other which results in the feeling of animosity amongst them. With the aid of Foucault’s ideas on disciplinary power, it becomes clear that Gilead uses surveillance to force its citizens to internalize the discipline. The feeling of being constantly watched enforces self-discipline and ensures that everyone acts as they should, it also generates fear of punishment which eventually results in the diminishing of the sense of solidarity within the female sphere of Gilead.

In *The Testaments*, Atwood seems to symbolize a shift from the Orwellian tradition, and while the novel is still part of the dystopian genre, the narrative indicates hope which is a key element in forming successful solidarity that leads to the possibility of change. Atwood chooses to use three voices to tell the story, two of which are young female characters, which recalls the genre of modern Young Adults dystopian fiction. In Young Adult dystopian fiction “the dystopian citizen moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance. Uncovering the failures of the dystopia often means leaving aside childhood and confronting the harsh truths of the adult world” (Basu et al., 7). This

is evident in Agnes's transformation from being a girl who believes blindly in the Gileadean ideology into a girl who questions the regime's validity and acquiring the motivation to fight against corruption. Atwood uses the coming of age (Bildungs) narrative which is another trait of the Young Adult dystopian fiction. Agnes's and Daisy's exploration of who they are and their realization of their ability to change a system that is corrupt is an indication of their growth and their sense of identity, which affirms that Atwood's depiction of the younger generation in her novel leans more into the coming of age of the dystopian character. Through this shift in the narrative from hopelessness in *The Handmaid's Tale* to hopefulness in *The Testaments*, Atwood succeeds in presenting the shift from female disempowerment to their empowerment which she does via the concept of solidarity.

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