

Extended Essay

English B HL

Two Portrayals of Women Solidarity

“How is women’s solidarity portrayed and handled in the novels “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood and “The Power” by Naomi Alderman in terms of religion, power, and gender norms?”

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1. INTRODUCTION

This essay is going to explore how women's solidarity is portrayed in the futuristic dystopian novel “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood and the dystopian novel “The Power” by Naomi Alderman in terms of religion, power, and gender norms.

Women have an explicit foundation for gender solidarity due to power dynamics, religion and gender norms that results in violence, rape, and wife-battery, and concerns related to reproduction and mothering. Women may also share interests in patriarchal familial groupings and the repressive aspects of the institution of marriage and oppressive regime. Another foundation for women's unity might be laying in aspects of their relationships with the state and the power dynamics. However, in respect to such concerning issues, women as a group may have powerful shared interests against this patriarchy that causes inequality which leads to women’s solidarity. Gender justice and equality cannot be achieved without the strength of women’s solidarity around the world.

Furthermore, women’s solidarity is portrayed in both of these novels. In the novel, “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood the main focus “women’s solidarity” is negatively affected and represented. Through an investigation of genuine and forced solidarity, and the ways in which these two forms of solidarity overlap in the novel's interactions between Offred and other women, it is obvious that women have the greatest influence on each other's success or failure in this reactionary society. Women's unity, whether real or imposed, turns into either a beneficial power or a catastrophic power.

On the other side of the coin the novel "The Power" by Naomi Alderman depicts the concept "women's solidarity" in a more beneficial and successful manner, in order to achieve equality in women's rights against patriarchal regimes with the help of women's electrical power. Alderman depicts the unity of the female gender within the metaphysics of power, possibility, and future revolution. Power relations as a whole are influenced by each individual's use of power and by power unity, therefore change is inevitable. Oppressed women assume that this divine power has saved them from the misery of their former existence on earth. Women's solidarity leads to power and revolution. Alderman demonstrates how power imposed as violence on others generates authority in a group, which may then be transformed into political and religious control.

In conclusion, Naomi Alderman represents how women as a whole, as one can generate power and authority but on other hand Margaret Atwood paints a distorted picture of what might happen when women are turn against each other, it allows men to oppress women. This brings us to the core issue of women's solidarity, which is depicted in the two contrasting ways through the themes of power dynamics, religion, and gender norms.

2. RELIGION

To be able to handle the theme religion we have to look for its definition which can defined as belief in or devotion to religious faith or observance. Gender equality is overwhelmingly demonstrated in many religions. Many religions have a long history of elevating men above women. In general women played a minor role in the formation religions, and this can be seen in the practices and customs of the religions today. Women struggle to find a place in a religion that prioritize men. Creating a one-of-a-kind blend of tradition and contemporary ideas and customs. The ideal woman in religion is often depicted as quiet and submissive. Furthermore, these two

novels also contain the negative and oppressive effects of religion on women's rights and psychology which then leads to the women alliance and solidarity.

2.1. THE RELIGION INSTITUTION IN THE POWER

First, Naomi Alderman examines how power manifests itself in a powerful institution like religion in her book *The Power*. One of *The Power's* central characters, Allie, flees abuse in Alabama and seeks safety in a convent. However, she thinks that until she has control over the convent—and eventually, the entire world—she will never truly be safe. She uses her influence to destroy the religion that treats women like mere housewives and dehumanizes them, but she doesn't really believe in her new faith; it's just a way for her to achieve her goals. Alderman adopts a skeptic's perspective on religion as a result. She acknowledges that faith can be incredibly powerful, but she also demonstrates how easily it can be manipulated and employed as a tool of control and conquest.

Alderman demonstrates further that there is no inherent relationship between gender and power, specifically within religion, through the character Allie or, as she is later known, Mother Eve. Allie's ritual acts are designed in order to help her obtain power within a religious community mainly of women. Allie acts as a new prophet figure by performing miracles with her power. As a direct consequence, Allie's femininity has a significant impact on the symbolic foundation of the new religion. Allie's clear impersonations assist the reader in identifying the impact of ritual performance on religious authority and the consequences for gendered power structures within the church. Allie rises through the ranks of religious and political leadership due to an illusion underlines the concept that gender's relationship to power appears to lack a "core."

Throughout the novel, Allie will grow into a religious prophet who helps society transition into a new religious and political era. Allie is very aware and deliberate about the role she plays in society. She does not appear to be aware of the significance of her femininity, she does focus solely on the superiority of women and feminine qualities from a religious standpoint, most likely inspired by her deep hatred of her foster father. Allie's emphasis on the divine qualities of women is influenced by her negative patriarchal experiences. Similarly, Allie does not take on the role of religious leader out of any obvious religious devotion, she sees the role as a way to gain safety, acceptance, and a place to call home for women. Allie's desire for independence and safety is understandable after living in multiple abusive homes.

As women gain prominence in community, the language used to describe godly figures begins to reflect femininity. The impact of God's image as a gendered human being has enormous societal implications, both secular and religious. Allie also contributes as a new symbol. While much of *The Power* has focused on embodied power, Alderman's attention shifts to the significance of language in power structures. The words she speaks and the language she employs to describe God solidify and justify women's superiority. Moreover, Allie emphasizes throughout her minister of state that "They have said to you that man rules over woman as Jesus rules over the Church. But I say unto you that woman rules over man as Mary guided her infant son..." (Alderman, 39) This is primarily about reclaiming femininity's holiness and women's noticeable inevitable superiority to men based on power structures.

In this society, the emergence of a female God has empowered women to assert their God-given position as the superior gender which leads them to maintain an unbreakable force of women solidarity. Even as Allie begins to refer to God as 'She' and 'Her' she also states that God is beyond human comprehension and thus cannot be completely defined by human expression or language.

To conclude the main focus of Allie, “God loves all of us [...] She wants us to know that She has changed Her garment merely. She is beyond female and male. She is beyond human understanding” (Alderman, 127).

2.2. THE CONTROL OVER PEOPLE IN THE HANDMAID’S TALE

First of all, Margaret Atwood uses Prophetic language in *The Handmaid's Tale* to demonstrate how religion has the power to control people's thoughts and actions. They ruled over the people of the Republic of Gilead through the religion of Christianity and its virtues. The Republic of Gilead implemented numerous changes that aided the government in maintaining complete control over their people specifically on women. Precisely, the oppression and the control that the Republic of Gilead’s and religion have on women is unavoidable. This level of control makes it beyond the bounds of possibility to form some kind of ally to fight for their rights.

The return to traditionalism values that underlies Gilead's society is strongly endorsed by the religious perspective. The focus of the narrative is Offred, a Handmaid, and her existence in Gilead. She frequently experiences flashbacks to her life before Gilead's revival, in particular to her daughter and husband. She repeatedly lacks the courage to take rebellious action. "What you are used to is ordinary," Aunt Lydia remarked. “You might not think this is commonplace right now, but eventually you will. It'll become commonplace.” (Atwood, 4) This demonstrates the effectiveness of a totalitarian regime; people will eventually put up with things—not because they agree with them, but rather because they are accustomed to them and unable to consider an alternative.

The Gilead government uses language to stay in control over the Handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale* by denying them and their own names, making it impossible for women to

interact with one another. Offred is the protagonist; her real name is never indicated, and the name Offred is an honorific of the Commander to whom she is given. When you add the term property to the beginning of the name, it appears to be the property of Fred. Gilead attempts to deny the Handmaids' individual freedom by refusing to accept them one 's own names. Women are defined by their sex roles, such as Wives, Marthas, and Handmaids, which denote what they do as well as their worth. This naming system also leads to hatred and miscommunication between women because of the difference in their roles which makes it impossible for any women to interact with each other to maintain a solidarity.

Sex is explicitly forbidden for anything other than reproduction, but the Handmaids are there to serve as the child's vessel, and the man is regarded as the producer. The wives and Marthas can also be effectively controlled when women are used as Handmaids, in addition to the Handmaids themselves. The Handmaids' wives are naturally envious of them, so they have no reason to join forces with them to overthrow the government. The wives are in charge of the home as well; they are permitted to hit the Handmaids, and it's likely that many take advantage of this right to express their rage at the idea that these lesser-status women are engaging in sexual activity with their husbands.

Children are the top priority for women because of the religious regime in Gilead, and since the Marthas are unable to have kids, they, too, rely on the Handmaids to stay in their place and fulfill their purpose. When religion and language are combined as a means of control and adapted to the ruling system, they are extremely effective for control. The ultimate aim remains the same: to control the women for any kind of strike and disobedience. As it is used in an oppressive manner, the goal to stop any form of alliance and women solidarity works profoundly very well.

3. POWER

In order to handle the theme of power, we must look for its definition, which can be described as having power or influence over others. Power, but much more like patriarchy, is one of the main roles that prevents women's solidarity or, in certain cases, equality. In both novels, we see a governmental patriarchal system that opposes equality. One of the many subtle yet explicit manifestations of its presence is one in which it thrives by being a destructive power under the guise of competing, or by creating a comparative - which outcomes in being radical in the sense that it creates a false impression of how there can only be 'one ideal woman' because of whatever class or area it aims to compare women in. As a result, a significant manifestation of this is how patriarchy internalizes and pits women against each other that prevents the progress of women solidarity.

3.1. NEWFOUND POWER IN THE POWER

In "The Power," a hypothetical scenario is presented where women across the globe are suddenly endowed with the ability to generate and transmit electricity through their hands. Although the power itself is neutral, women soon discover how to use it to harm others through violent electric shocks. The novel features several central characters, including Allie, a teenage girl from Alabama who creates her own religion; Roxy, the daughter of a British crime boss; Tunde, a Nigerian journalist; and Margot, the mayor of an unnamed New England town. Through each of these characters' unique perspectives, the novel explores how this newfound power, colloquially referred to as "the power," disrupts power dynamics across all areas of life.

Alderman first establishes the standard power dynamic between men and women that mirrors modern society before introducing the electrostatic power that women gain. Men, who possess a greater capacity for harm, have historically upheld a patriarchal system. The novel's two

main characters are introduced through graphic illustrations of the harm men can inflict on women. When two men armed with knives arrive at Roxy's home, the 14-year-old girl is locked in a closet. The men are easily able to beat Roxy into unconsciousness and kill her mother, demonstrating the relative weakness of women in comparison to men. This story exemplifies how men acquire power through their ability to harm others, particularly when they are able to do so without consequences.

Alderman shifts the focus to Tunde, a 21-year-old Nigerian character who is less inclined towards violence. While Alderman emphasizes how Tunde and Enuma's flirting is a performance of traditional gender roles, Tunde pursues his first relationship with Enuma. After she declines to fetch him a Coke, Tunde playfully wrestles Enuma to the ground and calls her a "servant girl" before kissing her. Although no physical harm is inflicted, Alderman illustrates how being able to dominate another person can be just as effective as physical violence, as the victim is left powerless. After witnessing another woman use her newfound strength to defend herself and kill a man, Tunde feels fear course through him and realizes that Enuma could have killed him if she had wanted to. Through Tunde's experience, Alderman highlights how a new social order has emerged, with women now holding more power than men.

In the end, the title of the book alludes to a variety of powers, including the women's increased capacity to cause harm to others as well as the secondary powers that flow from this primary power. As it becomes known, "the change" involves a change not only in abilities but also in who is capable of dominating and being subjugated, who feels confident and who feels ashamed, and who can advance in status and who cannot. In her book, Alderman shows how power can branch out from violence to take many different forms. She claims that power has the shape of a tree.

3.2. POWER ABUSE IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

One of *The Handmaid's Tale's* most important themes is the existence and abuse of power. Gilead is a theocratic dictatorship, so on the one hand, power is imposed solely from the top. There is no way to legally defend oneself against the government, no appeals process, and no hope that a third party will intervene. Extreme visibility is one of this power's characteristics. There must always be a show of dominance coming from one side. In Gilead, the government is required to provide guards and guns to cover the streets and even specific homes, in contrast to a democratic society where people freely choose their government and have an interest in preserving social structures. People are only truly free in their own minds, which significantly increases interpersonal isolation.

Atwood's characters show that even if any significant power is taken from people, they will still find a way to maintain control over themselves and other people, despite the Gilead regime's success in establishing order. Offred plays with her sexuality subtly, realizing for the first time how much power she has just by being a woman. She is aware that she is stirring up ideas in men's minds and that she is speaking with the Guardians right under the Angels' noses even though she has no ability to carry out her suggestions.

After a while Atwood displays the fact that Offred discovers that Handmaids commit suicide in order to retain a final sense of control over their bodies and choices, and in fact, the idea of suicide is never far from her mind. Offred has real power because of her connection to the Commander, but she is hesitant to exercise it. In the end, she realizes that her influence over him was futile because he won't intervene to protect her from his wife's wrath. This act to commit suicide displays the reality that because of this power oppression women now choose to die rather than live.

4. GENDER NORMS

Gender norms are standards that specifically address gender differences. They are unofficial, deeply ingrained, and widely accepted perceptions of gender roles, power relations, moral principles, or standards that control people's behaviors and practices in a particular social context and at a particular time. They serve as guidelines for what women, men, girls, and boys should be like and act like. People internalize and learn these "rules" early in life. Gender norms uphold a hierarchy of privileges and powers.

4.1. REVERSED GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE POWER

Gender norms are critically examined in *The Power*. Gender relations at the start of the book are representative of modern society: they are patriarchal, with men generally in charge. According to Alderman, this is because men are better at inflicting violence and are thus better able to rise to positions of power. However, as women begin to gain control, they start to reverse these gender dynamics. In passages that feel uncannily similar to current discourse on sexism, but with the gender roles reversed. Alderman uses the shock of descriptions of men being subjugated in comparison to how commonplace discrimination against women has become in reality to help readers see modern society with fresh eyes.

The book's opening scene shows Neil Adam Armon, a fictional character who is an anagram of Naomi Alderman, asking an imagined Naomi for feedback on his writing. This letter-writing exchange creates a world where women are the predominate gender and makes a few passing references to the discrimination that men may experience. Following her reading of the

book, Naomi replies to Neil by pointing out the impossibility of male criminal gangs and police officers and asserting that it is more likely that women were the ones who initially incited the violence. These abrupt and unjustified terminations serve as a mirror of how many professional women are treated in today's workplaces. In a final nod to how historically women's writing has been treated with less respect, Naomi suggests that Neil publish the book under a female pen name in order to increase its readership. All of these instances demonstrate how the novel's framing forces readers to reconsider gender inequality.

Explanations of women brutally dominating men in sexual encounters make the comparison between *The Power* and modern society particularly horrifying. It offers a comparison to show how sexism encourages violence against women in today's society. However, some use these findings to defend and even raping men while using the power, rather than using it responsibly. The novel specifically asks men to consider how they might feel in a world where they are brutalized in the same way that today's society is brutalizing women because readers are forced to consider how sexual violence against women has become normalized.

Men and women can imagine living in the other's shoes by reading Alderman's book, which acts as an unsettling mirror. It is extremely upsetting to read many of the passages that describe acts of violence and rape, especially since it is unusual for men to be the victims of these crimes. Alderman calls attention to the parallels in order to remind readers that contemporary society ought to shock them because of its brutal inequality and sexism. While the inequality in the book is made up, Alderman wants readers to understand that the inequality in contemporary society is very real.

4.2. MISOGYNISTIC ATTITUDES IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Gilead is a highly stratified society with strict segregation between its various groups. After the collapse of the US government due to terrorist attacks, revolutionaries in Gilead take over and remove all women from their jobs while seizing their bank accounts, leaving Offred without any means to defend herself. Luke's lack of outrage at these events hints at the pervasive nature of misogynistic attitudes, even among seemingly good men, and how Gilead is an extension of these beliefs. Women in Gilead quickly realize that they have lost all of their rights, including the freedom to read and choose their own clothing.

Despite her strength, even women like Aunt Lydia are limited to owning cattle prods as guns are prohibited in Gilead. The Commander's Wife, who previously advocated for right-wing religious beliefs that confined women to domestic roles, is now discontent and confined within the society she helped to create. Gilead's regime also normalizes sexual assault against women, as seen in The Ceremony where the Commander attempts to impregnate Offred, which is a sanctioned form of rape and institutionalized adultery.

The narrative of the book critiques both the religious right and radical feminist left. It portrays Offred's mother as an example of the latter, who also advocates for violent measures, censorship, and book burning. Rather than relying on simplistic distinctions, the book challenges readers to confront their own gender stereotypes. While some may criticize Offred for her passivity, it's important to recognize that she is a product of her culture. Similarly, it's easy to fault the Commander's Wife for not standing in solidarity with her gender and resisting Gilead's regime. However, this expectation assumes that gender is the most important defining characteristic, which is a form of tyranny in itself.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this research was based on how the theme of women's solidarity was handled differently in the futuristic dystopian novel "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood and the dystopian novel "The Power" by Naomi Alderman in terms of religion, power, and gender norms.

In the novel "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood instead of combating the actual harm occurring in the chambers of congress or in the influential lobbies where women were being subjected to literal rape and slavery, the feminists portrayed in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* criticize a symbol of patriarchal oppression of women's bodies. The novel depicts women as a class as being almost incapable of forming solidarity. By the restrictions and obstacles that were made based on religion, power and gender norms were able to barricade women's solidarity and the freedom of right.

In addition, in the novel "The Power" by Naomi Alderman the theme of women's solidarity was the complete opposite of "The Handmaid's Tale". In "The Power" women's solidarity was a big factor that the novel relied on, throughout the novel with the help of religion, power, and gender norms; women's solidarity was supported. Even the role of male was reversed in which led to a women dominant system. The role of women portrayed in "The Power" was a symbol of women domination that could break the patriarchal oppression. To conclude in "The Power" the theme of women's solidarity was positively portrayed.

In this essay as examined Naomi Alderman's representation of women's solidarity was strong in contrast to Margaret Atwood. Since "The Handmaid's Tale" presents a distorted picture of what might occur when women turn against one another and allow men to oppress women, "The Power" illustrates how women can generate power and authority as a group. This draws us to the

fundamental concern of women's solidarity, which is a means of advancing human rights through the themes of power relations, religion, and gender norms.

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