

Jezebel's: A Place for Conformity and Subversion

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Dystopian novels such as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* have the potential to cause panic and also provoke thought; moreover, dystopian novels pinpoint aspects of society that are unsuccessful and often beckon for change. One of the main components of dystopian novels is that they have a direct correlation to the events happening in society during the time of publication. Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, explores women's position in the dystopian Gileadean society and how power is stratified and managed. Much of what she delved into in her novel is a reflection of what was happening in the Women's Rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States (Bouson 132). Atwood used *The Handmaid's Tale* as a vehicle to provide commentary on how women were controlled in society through social customs, gender identity and binary sexuality groups.

One forceful section of Atwood's novel, the nine chapters that encompass and frame Offred's secretive visit to Jezebel's, includes many examples of gender hierarchy, gender/sexuality crisis, and the conformity-subversion relationship. Jezebel's is a microcosm of the power and gender structure; it is a place that both reinforces and also encourages dissent from the kinship system and binary gender/sexuality roles. Through the characters of Offred, Moira, the Aunts, and the Commander, a precarious dynamic is demonstrated to depict an abysmal gender hierarchy and evolution of the gender/sexuality relationship among women. Atwood created a novel that embodied

trepidation because of the real potential for these actions to occur in contemporary society; it also served as social commentary on how she experienced and interpreted the emerging sexuality/gender shift during the Women's Movement of the 1970s and 1980s.

The stratification of the women in the dystopian Gileadean society is what evokes the necessity for change in society. When interpreted through the lens of Gayle Rubin's female kinship studies in "The Traffic of Women," the reality of this threat seems even more poignant. "The exchange of goods and services, production and distribution, hostility and solidarity, ritual and ceremony, all take place within the organizational structure of kinship...Kinship is organization, and organization gives power" (Rubin 31). A kinship system, in Rubin's traditional sense implies the creation of a family and the exchange of women and women's goods among relatives. However, Gilead uses the kinship system by creating a "family" system within a household. The kinship system in Gilead is the Commander and his wife, a Handmaid, and Marthas to cook and clean. The wife of the Commander takes part in the kinship system through ritualistic ceremony, while the Handmaid and Marthas take part in the kinship system through goods, services, production, and ceremony. Furthermore, the Handmaids are literally exchanged and "trafficked" between households across the society; they represent the barter of human commodity. This is the smallest level of organization of the kinship system in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the large-scale organization and observance of this system is enforced through ritual practice. Thus, a reader's reaction stems from the pre-existing kinship structures already observed in contemporary society; for example, in

contemporary society the Commander equates to the father/man of the household, the Wife equates to the mother, and so on. What makes this novel so compelling is that Atwood's exposition of the hegemonic kinship systems already customary in society gives the dystopic future which she posits has a sense of immediacy and potentiality.

In this section of the novel, the community "Prayvaganza" takes place to reaffirm the stratification in the Gilead society. Because the kinship system is endorsed through rituals and gains momentum and strength through public rituals, the "Prayvaganza" is an exemplary mode of obedience to the system.

Ranks of folding wooden chairs have been placed along the right side, for the Wives and daughters of high-ranking officials or officers, there's not that much difference. The galleries above, with their concrete railings, are for the lower-ranking women, the Marthas, the Econowives in their multicolored stripes...Our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope. (Atwood 213-214)

What Offred describes is the visual separation of the women at the Prayvaganza by the level to which they belong. Atwood pays special attention to the detail of the language in this passage to emphasize the boundaries between the different women that intensify the levels of oppression.

Her use of the words "ranks of folding chairs" to describe the higher-ranking women, who are recipients of the exchanges of Handmaids along with the Commanders, places

distinct emphasis on the social status of the Wives and their proximity to the militaristic state that enforces the laws of Gilead. When describing the Marthas and Econowives she uses “concrete railings” to describe the barrier and relate it directly to the strong undesired mixing with the other members at the Prayvaganza. The description of the Econowives wearing “multicolored stripes” elicits two associations for the reader, one of convicts and the other as a potential reference to ethnicity that really depicts their status as inescapable. Finally, the Handmaids are separated with a “silky twisted scarlet rope” that is reminiscent of fertility, blood, and even female anatomy; this description and the softness of the language reflects the kind of physical care that is extended to the Handmaids. After all, the women in good “working” condition, ready to produce babies. This kind of kinship stratification in society produces the utmost level of control as portrayed in the novel. While all the women are assigned specific roles within the “family” of the household, the emotional bonds and true camaraderie are eliminated by additional restrictions such as prohibiting conversation on the street and the Handmaid’s responsibility to have a child on behalf of the Wives. The women are oppressed as an entire group as a gender by the kinship system in Gilead, and also oppressed within their social divisions within the gender.

The social status of the Handmaids wholly exemplifies the concept of Rubin’s trafficking women as a control mechanism. “As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges” (Rubin 30). Although, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Wives and Commanders both benefit from the trafficking of Handmaids, the Commanders are in the position to have complete

control over the Handmaids. This controlled relationship is explicated by Offred's name being a combination of "Of" and "Fred" indicating ownership, and it also is explicated by the liberties that the Commander takes with Offred, such as playing Scrabble and taking her to Jezebel's for his entertainment. "The treatment of the individual Handmaid by both husband and wife reinforces the concept of person as property: the Commander uses Offred for his private as well as public service" (Friebert 283). The trafficking of women through the movement of Handmaids from house to house and their treatment by the Commanders fortifies the power structure of the kinship system.

Women are also trafficked in more conventional and recognizable ways as is present in the wedding ceremony at the Prayvaganza. "The mothers have stood the white-veiled girls in place and have returned to their chairs...The Commander continues with the service" (Atwood 221). Both the Wives and the Commanders have a role in the ceremony of giving their daughters as gifts in marriage, and this participation in the trafficking on women is partly what gives the Wives some of their power in society. The Commanders' power over time is increased by the assignment of a Handmaid by society. For example, the men move from the rank of "Angel" to "Commander" through the receipt of a handmaid: "The Angels will qualify for Handmaids, later, especially if their new Wives can't produce." (Atwood 221). The language in this quotation emphasizes the concept of women as property and commodity beyond their duties; this example solidifies the double trafficking of women among Wives and Handmaids that oppress them similarly and differently simultaneously.

This Gileadean society, where men have more opportunities to exercise freedom, also enforces a strict gender/sexuality prescription through its kinship organization that requires the men to conform to the system as well. “For although he wants to make Offred’s life more bearable and although he can be ‘positively daddyish’ in his behaviour, he also affirms the male supremacist ideology which subordinate and sexually enslave women” (Bouson 145-146). Offred, as a Handmaid, is seen only has a vehicle of reproduction, but the Commander struggles with this separation of emotion from the physical coital connection. He desires a deeper connection with her emotionally and intellectually through the Scrabble game and he desires a freer sexual connection with her that he attempts to fulfill at Jezebel’s. “He’s stroking my body now, from stem as they say to stern, cat stroke along the left flank, down the left leg. He stops at the foot, his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership” (Atwood 254). This passage clearly reveals the Commander’s desire for physical contact that has feelings behind it, but it is clear, from the Braille tattoo, that he is not capable of attaining that in this society. While behind closed doors he feels comfortable extending more conventionally romantic emotions, but in the public eye of Jezebel’s he must treat her as property: “He retains hold of my arm, and as he talks his spine straightens imperceptibly, his chest expands, his voice assumes more and more sprightliness and jocularly of youth. It occurs to me he is showing me off” (Atwood 236). Therefore, attending a place like Jezebel’s allows the Commander to both subvert the lack of lust and feeling in society and also further exercise his place in the kinship system. He affirms his place in society as an owner of women and also shares an intimate moment of forbidden physical contact with Offred.

“The power of males in these groups is not founded on their roles as fathers or patriarchs, but on their collective adult maleness, embodied in secret cults, men’s houses, warfare, exchange networks, ritual knowledge, and various initiation procedures” (Rubin 34). Jezebel’s becomes the place where sexuality is enforced and sexuality is also explored. These elements of enforcement and creation are further explicated in Davina Cooper’s *Power in Struggle*: “As a form of disciplinary power, sexuality organizes identity...and social interactions around particular desires, libidinal practices and social relations. At the same time, it constructs and articulates desires, libidinal practices and social relations” (Cooper 67). Jezebel’s is the intersection, in the novel, where control, power, and gender/sexuality meet. It is the one place where women have some power over their own sexual expression and also they have power over the sexual needs of the men of Gilead.

Gayle Rubin asserts that “sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product[...]Sex/gender system is a neutral term and indicates the oppression is not inevitable in that domain, but is the product of the specific social relations which organize it” (Rubin 37-38). Rubin’s outline of the sex/gender system being enforced by the “social relations which organize it” relates directly to how the kinship system in Gilead serves to only allow for the expression of compulsory heterosexuality and blocks/controls everything else that is ambiguous or subversive. The characters of the Aunts and Moira represent these elements of the ambiguous and the subversive.

Though no women in the novel are described as feminine or wearing cosmetics, Atwood portrayed the Aunts in a meticulous way to stress their masculinity. When Moira mimics an Aunt to escape the Red Center she acts in a fashion more masculine than feminine and very different from when Offred describes walking through the checkpoints earlier in the novel when she purposely sways her hips to tease the guards.

In that brown outfit I just walked right through. I kept on going as if I knew where I was heading, till I was out of sight...I kept my shoulders back and chin up and marched along...putting on that frown and keeping myself stiff and pursing my lips and looking right through them, as if they were festering sores. You know the way the Aunts look when they say the word *man*. (Atwood 244)

Atwood chose to have the Aunts wear brown, as opposed to the Handmaids' red outfits, perhaps to indicate they are barren, dry and not fertile any longer. Moira's recollection of knowing "where I was heading" indicates that the Aunts had more mobility on the streets of Gilead. When Moira says, "I kept my shoulders back and chin up and marched along," there is a depiction of natural confidence and recognized authority that the Aunts were able to exercise. Though the physical description of the Aunts' body language is more indicative of a masculine gait and posture, the detail about how the Aunts purse their lips when uttering the word "man" also contributes to their separation into an ambiguous gender group. This description not only highlights the Aunts as exhibiting more masculine qualities, but it also hints at a disdain for men in general.

The Aunts are also the only women, besides the Wives in *control* of women working in the household, that have power and freedom in the novel and are in charge of molding the new Handmaids for their duties as well as patrolling the women working at Jezebel's. When Offred encounters the bathroom attendant at Jezebel's, she notices that "she's an older woman, wearing a purple caftan and gold eye-shadow, but I can tell she is nevertheless an Aunt. The cattle prod's on the table, its thong around her wrist. No nonsense here." (Atwood 241). Even the Aunts' accessories of "cattle prods" and their resemblance to phallic objects suggest a more masculine identity within the society. The identities of the Aunts as more masculine seem to directly correlate to the amount of power they are allowed to exercise in the novel. The Aunts are also one of the few groups of women, the Wives being the other, who participate in gift giving and the trafficking of other women. The Aunts are responsible for training and bestowing the Handmaids into society for their service; this leading role in the trafficking of women gives them power. Additionally, the role that the Aunts have as regulating the trafficking of the women at Jezebel's also concretizes their involvement of prostitution and sexual oppression. The portrayal of the Aunts in this way suggests potential commentary from Atwood.

An initial interpretation of the Aunts could be that Atwood is furthering her satire of contemporary society during the Women's Revolution in the 1970s. By purposely portraying the Aunts as overly masculine and also as one of the groups of women with extensive control in the novel, Atwood is attempting to draw out and expose the parallel of masculinity and power. The Aunts suggest that in order to have power and exercise

power, individuals must be more masculine. Atwood also portrays the Wives and Aunts participating in the trafficking of other women to call attention to these similar modes of trafficking in contemporary society and highlight that women and men are guilty of perpetuating this derogatory system. This brings up questions about whether women can hold more power without being labeled as masculine and it also brings up controversy about the spectrum of femininity and whether or not women must act like men to advance their power in society. Also, the Aunts conjure questions and speculation about sexuality in the novel because of their lack of sexual expression.

Because the Aunts' sexuality is kept very ambiguous, Atwood is attempting to also correlate masculinity to ambiguity and possibly lesbianism. By depicting characters in certain ways Atwood opens up a dialogue for why masculinity and femininity are tied to sexuality, when in reality they should be completely separate arguments. Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler were contemporaries and very much exploring the same women's and gender issues. However, Butler's analysis focuses more on gender/sexuality and power than solely the kinship system. Her essay on gender as a performative act solidifies the concept and argument that societies create acceptance and rejection for femininity and masculinity standards and associate them with sexuality. Her main assertion, "that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler 165), is applicable to the kind of conformity seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* and also serves to supplement the stratification of the women functioning within the kinship system. Each group of women have accepted ways their gender-class should perform its femininity and sexuality: the Wives are more

conventionally feminine in appearance, the Handmaids are not permitted to be sexual but must act as vessels of reproduction, and the Aunts are asexual trainers/regulators for the Handmaids. Atwood recognized the engrained gender roles in society, recreated them in the novel, and then inserted dissenting characters to question and oppose the system. Moira, in particular, is the one character that overtly challenges the gender/sexuality system.

Moira, through her expression of lesbianism and her desire for power and freedom, attempts to combat the “sedimentation” that Butler explicates in her essay. “[Sedimentation produces] a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes which exist in a binary relation to one another” (Butler 166). Moira is the character who fights directly against the binary sexuality system and also the stratification of the control of women. While the Aunts were void of sexual expression, Moira fully embraces the expression and articulation of her sexuality in the novel. She is open about sexuality to the level of crudeness, and, like the Aunts she is depicted in masculine ways through descriptions and dialogue. Therefore, again, there is the likening of masculinity to the desire for freedom and power.

There are various instances in the novel when Moira uses vulgar and coarse language and acts in masculine ways. “Camaraderie, shit, says Moira through the hole in the toilet cubicle. Right fucking on, Aunt Lydia, as they used to say. How much you want to bet she’s got Janine down on her knees? I bet she’s got her working away on that dried up old withered—”(Atwood 222). Moira’s use of profanity and also her reference to women

giving women oral pleasure in this excerpt exemplifies her irreverence for socially constructed femininity standards of speech and conversation. Even in Jezebel's, where she has the ability to exercise a ration of freedom, Moira still speaks in her masculine and impudent manner; "You'd have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard. The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights" (Atwood 249). This statement by Moira shows that she has been able to separate emotion from her position at Jezebel's, and her use of "snatch wears out" exemplifies the crude speech she still exercises while speaking about sex. While Moira and Offred are friends, Offred is still jarred and surprised by the way that Moira speaks and reacts to situations. Offred represents the traditional femininity lens of sexual experience that the reader can see through her fantasies about Luke and her trysts with Nick. However, Moira's attitude about sex and sexuality is liberated and deregulated of over-emotionalized language. Atwood juxtaposes these two characters' views on sexuality to mimic the two sides of the sexual liberation movement in society; Offred is the representative for the conservative group, while Moira is the representative for the radical lesbian group.

The relationship between these two characters is truncated in the novel but it offers adequate interaction to explicate the old and new views on sex that Atwood satirizes. Offred sees Moira as someone with courage but also is intimidated by her assertiveness and contentment with her existence in Jezebel's. J. Brooks Bouson has asserted that "the Handmaids also find something frightening in Moira's freedom...Ultimately cross-questioning the possibility of female heroism in such a regime, the narrative, while

typecasting Moira as a feminist rebel, also dramatizes her defeat. Caught, tortured, and then forced into prostitution, Moira ultimately loses her volition and becomes indifferent” (Bouson 151). Bouson’s reading of Moira neglects to take into account any lesbian/queer theory; the interpretation reflects the same ignorance that is intended to be exposed through Moira’s situation. A more accurate interpretation is that Moira’s existence among other women allows her to express her true sexuality and experience female nurturing, while subverting the hierarchy. Adrienne Rich points out that “women’s choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe, has been crushed, [and] invalidated” (Rich 632). Bouson’s interpretation perpetuates this crushing of women’s relationships in society. While Moira, lives only in Jezebel’s, it is the only place where she can attempt to exercise the female bonds and sexual expression that is prohibited in society proper. Moira is not “indifferent” as Bouson asserts, but she is working to subvert the system in ways that will benefit her sexual expression. Therefore, Bouson’s interpretation perpetuates the misunderstanding of “lesbian sexual difference...that cannot be comprehended from within the most common definitions of heterosexual difference” (Adams 476). Atwood’s inclusion of Moira’s inability to fit into the sexuality in the society has a direct correlation to the instances of gay prejudice in contemporary American society.

The perceived dramatic nature of Moira’s situation is also alluded to in the novel because it is meant as a commentary on the concept of gender and sexuality as a performative act. Moira’s role as a heterosexual prostitute at Jezebel’s illustrates the

falsity that socially constructed gender and sexuality pervades. In an interview between Butler and Rubin the following comment arose:

As soon as you get away from the presumptions of heterosexuality, differences in sexual conduct are not very intelligible in terms of binary models...There needs to be some kind of model that is not binary, because sexual variation is a system of many differences, not just a couple of salient ones" (Rubin and Butler 81).

This assumption of a binary sexuality system is precisely the mindset that led to the misreading of Moira's situation at Jezebel's and the subsequent assumption of her unhappiness. Moira concedes to Offred that "it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (Atwood 249). Her happiness is in the freedom to express her sexuality and at Jezebel's she is able to do so; with her freedom of sexual expression Moira may have her true identity within this niche in Gilead.

Additionally, the correlation to Moira's sexuality and her assertive desire for freedom and power also aim to subvert both the Gilead society and contemporary society. "Sexual assertiveness and women's full, empowered participation in sexual decision making are clearly restricted [in society]. Each of the factors... gender expectations, social controls, childhood victimization and the various source of dependence on men – can be conceptualized individually, but operate in an interactive manner to limit women's sexual autonomy" (Travis and White 312). Women's power is controlled socially by both gender stratification such as the kinship system and sexuality through

performance acts. A commonly held standard in contemporary society and in Gilead is that it is unacceptable for women to be sexually forward and seek sexual power, as Moira does in this novel. Atwood purposely foils Moira with Offred as to compare two spheres: assertive and submissive, and homosexual and heterosexual. By paralleling homosexuality with assertiveness and subversion in Gilead, Atwood reveals the stereotypes and struggle that these women experienced during the Women's Liberation and still experience in today's society. However, Moira's personality and perseverance puts forth a hope for the future of the sex/gender system. Moira makes multiple attempts at escapes to attain some kind of ability to exercise freedom, while Offred is content with merely fantasizing about subverting the system.

Although the reader experiences the story through Offred's eyes, there is no compelling reason to applaud her because she fails to make any bona fide efforts at freedom; mostly Offred fantasizes about freedom. "Offred is not a revolutionary...Her own position is much closer to the traditionally feminine role of woman as social mediator" (Howells 102). Atwood shapes Offred in this way to first and foremost reinforce the kinship system and her value as a Handmaid as nothing but an exchange of property between men. Offred's immobilization illustrates the effectiveness of the kinship system. Also, Offred completes the representation of Atwood's society and experience during the Women's Liberation Movement. "It is significant that Gilead is a society 'in transition' where all the women are survivors of the time before, and their voices represent a range of feminine and feminist positions dating back to the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s" (Howells 98). One significant point of Offred and Moira's friendship is

that Offred does truly admire Moira's ability to be fearless and masculine in the face of the Gilead society. Offred often mentions in the novel how she wishes she knew how to do things that Moira could do, like fix things or have the courage to stand up to people. Moira represents the potential actions that the Handmaids, paralyzed by fear, only fantasize about executing. This desire and curiosity about subversion brings Offred to Jezebel's in the first place.

While Moira takes large leaps towards subverting the system and exercising freedom by escaping from the Red Center and speaking openly about lesbianism, Offred moves towards subversion in small calculated steps. As a resulting action of Offred's habitual Scrabble games with the Commander, the secretive trip to Jezebel's was arranged and executed. The act of going to Jezebel's, as well as many of the occurrences that take place within the secret space, create simultaneous subversions of the Gileadean society. While the kinship system is reinforced through this secret male club, Offred's mere attendance at Jezebel's is an act of subversion. However, in this subversion she does find freedom;

There's an enticement in this thing, it carries with it the childish allure of dressing up. And it would be so flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free. Freedom, like everything else, is relative...I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things. (230-231)

It is as if, by the latter half of the novel, Offred has actually learned a new Butlerian performative act of sexuality, gender, and power. Moira has achieved some kind of transfer to Offred, and Offred finally accomplishes an authentic act of subversion to the rules of the Handmaids, to the kinship system, and to asexuality in the novel. Without this imprint of a new performative act, Offred would not have been able to fulfill her affair with Nick later in the novel. Moira is the catalyst for change in the novel and the reader witnesses how Offred is encouraged and affected by her revolutionary mindset.

In this section of the novel Atwood combines despair and hope. While Jezebel's is a secret club that serves to support the power in the kinship system, it is also a place where two of the oppressed women of Gilead are able to find some kind of freedom, if only temporarily. Atwood uses Jezebel's to explore the reader's prejudices against homosexuality and also to make strong assertions about sexuality stereotypes in society. "Masculine women tend to be read, at least initially, as lesbians, while feminine lesbians tend to be read as heterosexuals" (Queen 293). The way that sexuality and gender are fused together in Gilead is a direct parallel to the way they are linked in contemporary American society. The prevailing hypocrisy in the novel is also something worth noting: "In order to survive they and the narrator among them are constantly obliged to pretend to espouse a system of values which denigrates and threatens to annihilate them" (Hammer 40). The prevalent correlation to contemporary social issues makes this novel a poignant piece of satire.

While some critics view *The Handmaid's Tale* as a large satire of society and the controls of society, it also delineates how social control can weave its way into the most private and intimate aspects of life. The way that Gilead devises a system to control the construction of the family unit, the reproduction of people, and the conformity to strict sexuality codes is not far off from social constructions of contemporary society. Though the kinship system described by Rubin has evolved in the United States and women are not only seen as a commodity in the home, women are still struggling to achieve equality in the workplace. "Although most women in the United States are employed in the paid workforce, they have lower wages than men, are concentrated in different occupations, and are thinly represented at the highest levels of organizational hierarchies" (Eagly and Wood 274). There are also certain professions in which women are still not equally represented, and ironically many lesbians are acting as the trailblazers in those fields because they do not mind to be considered more masculine in doing so. Through the various characters of *The Handmaid's Tale* analyzed above, Atwood promoted the possibility of social change. Moira's character champions the Women's Liberation movement in areas of gender and sexual equality. Atwood's depictions are particularly interesting considering that current research shows "the dominant ethos among lesbian, gay men, and bisexuals is of egalitarian relationships" (Sinfield 59). Perhaps with the deregulation of sexual hegemony there can be a complete eradication of the oppressive kinship system and also elimination of compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, the disappearance of oppressive gender and sexual systems has the potential to conjure heightened equality in society.

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