



HWA CHONG INSTITUTION (HIGH SCHOOL SECTION)

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Topic: Analysis of The Portrayal of Women in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* and Their Effects on Feminism

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Declaration

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1.1: General Background

Chapter 1.1.1: The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel published by Margret Atwood in 1985. The novel received generally positive reception, sparking debates in support and against themes presented in the book.

The Handmaid's Tale is a feminist novel, focusing on themes such as authoritarianism as well as the oppression of women. The book exhibits ideas of Radical Feminism, positing that society is inherently patriarchal and exaggerates the plight of women in order to highlight the extent to which women have been oppressed.

Chapter 1.1.2: The Power

The Power is a dystopian science fiction novel published by Naomi Alderman in 2016. The novel received positive reception, winning the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction in 2017. It has been praised as an "essential feminist [work] that terrifies and illuminates, enrages and encourages" (Washington Post, 2017).

The Power explores the idea of Radical Feminism as a phenomenon that plagues both genders alike. *The Power* manifests its ideas in the form of the characters' struggle to create a matriarchal society and portrays how, even with a change in the power balance between genders, the weaker sex continues to be exploited and oppressed. *The Power* looks at the conventional exercise of power between the sexes and questions if it would be any different should the roles of each gender be switched.

Chapter 1.2: Rationale

The portrayal of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* provides a plethora of views on the factors leading to the oppression of women, both historical and modern. This, therefore, gives clarity to the issues faced by women over a span of different eras. Both novels also provide contrasting yet balanced views on the balance of power between the sexes, thus allowing insight into the balance of power between both genders.

Chapter 1.3: Research Questions

1. Using Radical Feminism, what does the conflicting portrayal of women as the oppressed and the oppressor in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as *The Power* show about the power disparity between the stronger and weaker sex and is it maintained?
2. Viewing the novels through a perspective of New Historicism, how has the historical context and the author's own influences, internal or external, affected *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*?

Chapter 1.4: Thesis Statement

The conflicting portrayal of women as the oppressed and the oppressor in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as *The Power*, shows that the power disparity between the stronger and weaker sex is accomplished through emotional, physical and sexual abuse, bringing about a submissive mindset. The rise of Second-Wave Feminism from the early 1960s to the late 1980s and its focus on political, sexual, economic and personal freedom has led to the over-exaggeration of such issues faced by women in *The Handmaid's Tale* while the rise of Third-Wave and Fourth-Wave Feminism in the late 1980s focused on the reshaping of society and has lent itself to the

overarching plot and role of women in *The Power*. However, the author's personal life barely affects, if at all, the content of the novel.

Chapter 1.5: Scope

The analysis will focus on the entire books for both *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as *The Power*. This paper will deal with the feminist aspect as it is considered to be the underlying theme of the books. Historical context and linguistic expressions will also be analysed to understand the circumstances in which the book was created.

This paper is not a complete analysis of the two books, which deals with ideas such as authoritarianism, a theme worthy of discussion. Therefore, the research does not cover other potentially significant ideas in the novels.

Chapter 1.6: Significance of Research

The research is significant as it highlights the key issues that feminism is facing as well as its ideologies, a topic that has repeatedly risen to prevalence over the past decades. Feminism is a movement that has suffered from various misunderstandings and misconceptions. Many have failed to see the diversity of feminism and the myriad of different beliefs that fall under this movement. This has resulted in the alarming oversimplification of a topic that is both complex and contentious. This research attempts to deepen people's understanding of feminism and to reduce stigmatisation surrounding such a controversial topic.

Chapter 1.7: Limitations

This research does not cover all aspects of feminism, focusing on a particular ideology of feminism called Radical Feminism. Additionally, this research is meant to provide an insight

into feminism during periods in which both books were written. Therefore, this paper is not a full and complete representation of the different feminist schools of thought.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2.1: Feminism

Feminism is broadly defined to be “an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms”. Feminism is able to provide a wide “range of perspectives on social, cultural, economic and political phenomena”. Despite feminism’s united goal of ending gender inequality, there are a plethora of ideological differences between feminists of different sects regarding “philosophical orientation (whether, for example, Continental or analytic), ontological commitments (such as the category of woman), and what kind of political and moral remedies should be sought” (Stamford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2018).

It is important to understand that feminism is not one ideology, but rather a multitude of beliefs all working towards the same goal of ending gender inequality.

“Feminism is actually a broader theoretical framework that encompasses multiple perspectives. In general, feminism is considered to encompass five main schools of thought: liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, Radical Feminism, and post-modern feminism (Policastro, 2015).”

It, therefore, must be noted that feminism, as a “theoretical framework”, provides a variety of different feminist schools of thought “to accommodate a more complex, nuanced understanding” of literary texts. Hence, usage of feminist theories must be applied suitably to different works of literature in order to achieve a better understanding of the text.

Chapter 2.1.1: Second-Wave Feminism

Second-Wave Feminism was a wave of feminism activity that occurred in the early 1960s to late 1980s and was seen as to have resulted from the end of World War II as well as the creation of the contraceptive pill (Phillips & Cree, 2014). Second-Wave Feminism focused strongly on the liberation of women's rights, ranging from political freedom to sexual freedom (Burkett, 2019). According to Phillips & Cree (2014), Second-Wave Feminism believed "individual, social and political inequity as inevitably interlinked".

At the peak of Second-Wave Feminism, *The Handmaid's Tale* was authored. It is, therefore, necessary for this paper to understand Second-Wave Feminism in order to fully enable an analysis of the novel.

Chapter 2.1.2: Third-Wave and Fourth-Wave Feminism

Third-Wave and Fourth-Wave Feminism is defined as the period of feminist activity from the late 1980s to the present day and age. Both Waves of feminism focused heavily on individualism as well as postmodern ideas. Along with Third-Wave Feminism came the acceptance of different sects of feminism, leading to the rise of different kinds of feminist ideologies (Phillips & Cree, 2014). This rise of feminism was the result of the rise of women's economic and political power, enabled by Second-Wave Feminism (Brunell & Burkett, 2019) and allowed feminists to become more self-critical and diverse.

When exactly Fourth-Wave Feminism began is an area of debate, with general consensus pointing to around the late 2000s or early 2010s and there is scant literature surrounding the Fourth-Wave (Phillips & Cree, 2014). However, Fourth-Wave Feminism is posited to have begun alongside the rise of the Internet as well as social media platforms (Munro, 2013),

enabled by the near-instantaneous spread of information. The Internet and social media has granted Fourth-Wave feminists the ability to have a far larger influence and impact on the surrounding committee, as can be seen from Caroline Criado-Perez and her use of online petitions such as Change.org and social media platform Twitter in her successful campaign to convince the Bank of England to place a woman on the £10 note (The Guardian, 2015).

Both Third-Wave and Fourth-Wave Feminism were at their peak during the creation of *The Power* and it is important for this paper to take note of such feminist activity in order to understand the feminist elements present in the novel.

Chapter 2.1.3: Radical Feminism

Radical Feminism is defined as a feminist ideology that argues for the deconstruction of patriarchal social relations. It has been posited to have “emerged in response to Marxist feminism and [is] often viewed as the [product] of the second wave of feminism” (Policastro, 2015). Mackay (2015) further defines Radical Feminism through the use of four criteria.

[F]irst, the acceptance of the existence of patriarchy alongside a commitment to end it; second, the use and promotion of women-only space as an organizing method; third, a focus on all forms of male violence against women and their role as a keystone of women’s oppression broadly; fourth and finally, an extension of the analysis of male violence against women to include the institutions of pornography and prostitution.

Mackay (2015), in the above quote, highlights the main aspects of Radical Feminism:

1. The aim of ending the patriarchy,
2. The need for a women-only space or organisation,

3. The emphasis of male violence, both physically and mentally, against women as a form of oppression,
4. The emphasis of male oppression of women into sexual captivity and subjugation;

Radical Feminism, based on the criteria listed (Mackay, 2015), can, therefore, be seen to be extremely applicable with regards to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, with both books focusing on oppressive patriarchies alongside with aims to overthrow it. Both novels also highlight, albeit through different forms of portrayal, the sexual, economic and political oppression of women and the weaker sex in general. As such, Radical Feminism is noted to be a relevant literary lens to examine both novels with.

Chapter 2.2: New Historicism

New Historicism is seen to be a literary theory that challenges the views of both Traditional Historicism and New Criticism, with proponents of the theory believing that individual identity and culture are mutually constitutive and dynamically unstable (Tyson, 2014), choosing to focus on the interaction between literature and culture (Scheiding, 2012), rather than the underlying meaning of the text. New Historicism, therefore, seeks to facilitate reconstruction of cultural and linguistic influence on society and its impact on the literature of its time period. Tyson (2014) proposed a list of key concepts and beliefs New Historicism can be broken down into:

1. History is a matter of interpretations and not facts. Therefore, historical accounts cannot be considered to be entirely objective and can be seen as narratives. As such, they can be analysed through existing literary lenses.
2. History is considered to be neither linear (from point A to point B) nor progressive (since humanity is not continually progressing).

3. Literature functions as a discourse, interacting with other historical discourses, continually shaping history and culture whilst being shaped at the same time.
4. Personal identity (defined by Tyson to be historical events, texts and artefacts, etc) is shaped by and shapes the culture in which it belongs. Therefore, cultural categories (such as normal and abnormal) are matters of definition
5. Historical analysis is inevitably subjective. Historians must, therefore, reveal the ways in which they know they have been influenced (such as their own cultural experience) to interpret.

New Historicism, at its very core, believes that literature affects society and vice versa. It is, therefore, extremely applicable to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, novels authored and published at the height of the feminist different waves, seeing how the discourse of beliefs and ideologies are transposed to and from the novels and society.

Chapter 2.3: Conclusion

In conclusion, New Historicism and Radical Feminism are applicable to the themes and plot elements portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* and are thus excellent lenses to study the portrayal of women in the two novels, therefore answering the research questions posited in this paper.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3.1: Radical Feminism

Radical Feminism will be used as a lens to examine the effects of feminist elements, methods of oppression and the plot have on the portrayal of women. By analysing how the needs of Radical Feminism (Mackay, 2015) are met by their environment, characters and organisations in both novels, an insight into how the power balance between genders is established and maintained can be formed.

Specifically, the use of Radical Feminism as a literary theory allows the paper to focus on how the portrayal of women in both novels contributes to the oppression of the weaker sex. The power disparity between the stronger and weaker sexes can be attributed to the portrayal of women as the oppressed and the oppressor and, hence, Radical Feminism provides a platform to analyse the impact of the portrayal of women in the power balance between both sexes.

However, it must also be noted that Radical Feminism will be applied with a focus on men in *The Power*, given that the gender roles of society have been reversed.

Chapter 3.2: New Historicism

This research paper aims to examine to reconstruct the influence of society on both novels and vice versa. Therefore, New Historicism provides a framework for the analysis of society and linguistic elements to investigate their impact on each other as interactive discourse. New Historicism's focus on how literature and culture are mutually constitutive (Tyson, 2014) offers itself as a potential platform to analyse the ideas presented as well as language in both books, comparing it to societal circumstances of the novel's time, allowing a correlation between

society and literature to be identified and explained. This, therefore, will allow the paper to draw a conclusion on how the representation and portrayal of women have been affected by society and how the novels themselves have contributed to the ideologies of their time.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis

Chapter 4.1: Establishment and Perpetuation of Power Imbalances

Abuse is a direct and often used as a method to achieve power over another. While varied, differing forms of abuse can be categorised into 3 classes:

1. Emotional and mental abuse;
2. Physical and material abuse;
3. Sexual abuse;

While such categories of abuse seem separate and distinct, they are indeed interlinked and overlap on many occasions. As such, one cannot discuss one without discussing the other. Yet, the mindsets allowing for the perpetuation of such power imbalances is another area that must be taken into consideration. Without a submissive-oppressive power relation established between the two parties, society's power imbalance will be unsustainable.

Chapter 4.1.1: Shock Value and Abuse

In both novels, the extent of and circumstances in which abuse occurs provide shock value (Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson, 2013), achieved through a multitude of means ranging from the graphic portrayal of abuse to, in the case of *The Power*, the jarring reversal of gender roles in society. Regardless of how shock value is achieved, its effects stem from the violation of norms for societal or personal ideals. Drawing from *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, shock value seeks to exaggerate and highlight the means of oppression and abuse, almost disproportionately so. It, therefore, creates a sense of bewilderment in the reader. The alien and disconcerting environment in which the reader finds themselves in allows their attention to be drawn towards issues highlighted by the author.

Chapter 4.1.2: Emotional and Mental Abuse

Emotional and mental abuse is defined as the manipulation of emotions in order to exert control over others. Emotions are invariably linked to one's mental state and are key in nurturing mindsets and the manipulation of one's emotions continually undermines their beliefs and allows for the instituting of dogma. Therefore, emotional abuse presents itself as an effective tool for the re-education and controlling of the weaker party, allowing the power disparity to be maintained over an extended period of time. The oppression is exacerbated due to the deep-rootedness and near-permanence of controlling one's beliefs and way of thinking, prolonging the effects of emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is arguably the most effective form of abuse, leaving long-lasting impacts in even one's own personality and character.

The treatment of Handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale* provides an insight into how emotional abuse can be employed to great effectiveness, pitting Handmaids against one another while at the same time re-educating them.

But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.

Her fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison.

Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.

She did. *She* did. *She* did.

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. (Atwood, 1985)

The Rachel and Leah Centre (colloquially known as the Red Centre) served as a propaganda and re-education centre, where Aunts (women placed in charge of Handmaid re-education) indoctrinated Handmaids into the oppressive Gileadean society. The quote takes place within

the Red Centre, during a Testifying. A Handmaid confesses that she was gang-raped at the age of fourteen and forced to undergo an abortion. Interestingly, rather than console the Handmaid, Aunt Helena urges the group of Handmaids attending the Testifying to shame the confessor, placing the blame on her. Through this, Aunt Helena successfully manages to divide the Handmaids, forcing them to humiliate the testifier as a group and pitting them against each other. By dividing the Handmaids, they are taught that they are unable to trust other Handmaids, robbing Handmaids of a potential support group and are therefore weakened and isolated. This makes it easier for the Aunts to impose their own doctrine onto the Handmaids. The attacking of a Handmaid over a traumatic experience also serves as a form of emotional abuse. By shifting the blame from the perpetrator to the victim, the Handmaid becomes emotionally undermined, faulting herself for being raped. The Aunts are then able to take advantage of the Handmaid's emotional instability, enforcing Gileadean beliefs onto her.

Perhaps predictably, emotional abuse is a recurring theme in *The Power*, clearly demonstrated by Tunde, the sole male protagonist in the novel. Tunde writes in his journal:

At first we did not speak our hurt because it was not manly. Now we do not speak it because we are afraid and ashamed and alone without hope, each of us alone. It is hard to know when the first became the second. (Alderman, 2016)

Tunde undeniably displays the marks of emotional abuse – yet, it is also arguably more complex than the abuse of *The Handmaid's Tale*, portraying the oppression of men while in power and when in subjugation. Alderman, in the above quote, successfully portrays the unrealistic expectations of men as the stronger sex and how they are forced to act as paragons of masculinity. Yet, Tunde also shows the transition of men from the stronger to the weaker

sex, saying that he is “afraid and ashamed and alone without hope”. This is a key concept of emotional abuse – to humiliate and isolate the victim, making them easier to control and oppress. To undermine and debase the victim is to force them into submission. Tunde’s writing also gives rise to another component of emotional abuse – that it is slow and subtle. Tunde finds it “hard to know when the first became the second”. Emotional abuse works its way through one’s sense of self-worth, slowly causing it to fracture and crumble. By diminishing one’s sense of self, it is possible to establish the discourse of power between the aggressor and the victim.

In yet another part of the novel, the President of Bessapara (a newly-formed, radically feminist country formed after a revolution in Moldova) implement laws forcing men to give up a multitude of rights and placing them under the ownership of women. This leads to men turning against one another, vying for women’s attention, fearing that they will fall out of their owner’s favour and be sentenced to death.

As in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Power* forcibly removes a men-only space (note that the gender roles in *The Power* have been reversed) and mentally and emotionally violates them, crushing their sense of self and isolating men and turning them against one another.

The analysis of emotional abuse in both novels shows that it serves to remove what is known as a “safe space” for the oppressed gender, isolating them and destroying the gender’s sense of worth. It also portrays violence against the weaker sex, utilising mental undermining to violate them. Therefore, this fulfils at least 2 of the criteria present in Radical Feminism.

Chapter 4.1.3: Physical and Material Abuse

Physical and material abuse can be considered a wholly separate sphere of abuse from emotional abuse. While the latter focused on a more indirect and subtle method, continually eroding away at the victim's self-worth, the former deals with the corporeal, leaving immediate consequences. Yet, while the means differ, the end remains the same, with both forms of abuse attempting to hold power over others, subjugating and humiliating their victims. It must be noted that physical abuse does not comprise solely of physical harm, but also of the restriction of material and physical rights.

The Gileadean government in *The Handmaid's Tale* heavily emphasises on the importance of physical abuse, with multiple instances occurring throughout the novel.

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it is forbidden.

As a Handmaid, Offred is stripped of her original name (which remains unknown throughout the book) and is given the prefix "of" as well as the name of the Commander she belongs to, presumably named "Fred". Hence, she is given the name "Of-Fred". Offred's name defines her and her role in society, a sex slave belonging to her Commander. Offred further elaborates, believing that she has been reduced to nothing more than her womb.

We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. [...] We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (Atwood, 1985)

By replacing Offred's name, she is stripped of her own personal identity, forcing her to objectify herself and see herself as nothing more than a sex tool, to be wielded by others. A

name is something intensely personal to oneself and an integral part of people's identity, without which people lose their ability to be unique. This is an important part of oppression, allowing the Handmaids to become nothing more than a faceless group, stripped of their rights and importance. As Offred has pointed out, Handmaids are "sacred", worshipped for what they do, not what they are. Offred is also a homonym of "of red", which in of itself is a metaphor for menstruation and fertility, once again reducing Offred to a sex object.

We are not each others any more. Instead, I (Offred) am his (Luke). (Atwood, 1985)

What is observed by Offred (the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*) is a stark reminder of the objectification of women, exaggerated to a great extent in the novel. In the scene, Offred is recalling the day the Gileadean government declared women as officially belonging to men. Clearly, Offred (and by extension, other women) have been reduced to nothing more than a property of men, humiliating her and allowing the Gileadean government to force her into subjugation.

While *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts the material side to physical abuse, *The Power* focuses acutely on the corporeal.

But looking at the man coughing up red mucus and crying, he (Tunde) feels the fear travel down his spine like a hot wire. He knows then what he felt by the pool: that Enuma could have killed him if she'd wanted. (Alderman, 2016)

It is through this display of physical power and causing such grievous harm that fear entrenches itself in others. Fear is an effective weapon in establishing power over others – the knowledge

that harm can be brought to oneself and that death is based on the whims of the aggressor scares the victims into submission. Inevitably, physical abuse shapes the mindsets of the abused, allowing fear to become ingrained into their mind and behaviour.

Analysing *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, it can be concluded that there are different methods even within physical abuse itself, ranging from the somatic to the material.

Chapter 4.1.4: Sexual Abuse

While sexual abuse is a subset of physical abuse, it is impactful enough for it to be discussed at length, for it can be construed as the greatest form of humiliation. Sexual abuse gives rise to the idea that one can be used to satisfy other's desire without consent, forcing the victim to cede control and power to the aggressor.

I (Offred) used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my own will. I could use it to run, push buttons, of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, solid one with me. Now, the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is more hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.
(Atwood, 1985)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred changes substantially after being subjected to being a Handmaid, believing that she, as a person, is irrelevant and that her womb is the only part of her that gives her value. As Handmaids are subjected to rape by their Commanders, they are debased and objectified, worshipping them as paragons of fertility and nothing more. Gilead

forces Handmaids to view oneself as an object whose only worth is ascribed to her is her virility. This, like other forms of abuse, strips one's personal identity away, leaving the victim with no value other than the one forced upon them.

This is furthered by the impersonality and almost ritualistic way the raping of the Handmaids has been carried out.

Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my (Offred) body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't already signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (Atwood, 1985)

The detachment from which Offred narrates this scene is stark, giving an insight into her mind. It is clear that Offred believes that she is not being raped, yet the scene she describes by it makes evident that Offred's sexual freedom has been torn from her. The fact that Offred believes that she has consented to the violation of her own body shows how effective sexual abuse is at forcing the victim into submission.

Sexual abuse can also manifest itself in the power dynamics during intercourse, as shown in *The Power*. By establishing the power imbalance within the bedroom, sexual abuse can, by extension, influence and affect relationships without.

[...] his (Tunde) absolute vulnerability, the feeling that she could overpower him if she wanted. The thought of it excites him [...] (Alderman, 2016)

Tunde's realisation and admission of his vulnerability is yet another form of sexual abuse, albeit more subtle. By willingly submitting to an abuser, Tunde unwittingly perpetuated the abuse and power disparity between both genders. His submission, no matter how willing, is an admission of the power that his abusers hold over him, allowing a power imbalance to be established and maintained.

Sexual abuse is the most effective form of physical abuse, allowing for the control over another at the most base, biological level. Forcing oneself upon another takes away control from the victim, humiliating and degrading them, forcing them into (sexual) subjugation.

Chapter 4.1.5: Mindsets

Although there are different types of abuse, they are all interlinked, seeking the same purpose – to change the victim's mindset and force them into (willing) submission. Mindsets are invariably linked to one's mental state and emotion, making emotional abuse a key factor in the creation of power imbalances. It must be noted that all forms of abuse and maltreatment have a psychological aspect to them, infallibly forming a connection between emotional abuse and other methods. All types of abuse seek to establish power over the victim, humiliating them and restricting their rights, allowing one to effectively create a disparity of power between the victim and oneself, no matter what the method used to achieve the goal.

As shown from the previous chapters (refer to Chapters 4.1.2, 4.1.3 & 4.1.4), abuse can be summed up through the removal of a potential support group and the stripping of personal identity. The latter can be shown through the loss of individualism, most prominently featured in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Handmaids are dispossessed of their own name, much less their

sexual, economic and literary freedom and are forced to wear red, forcing a common identity upon them. Yet, seeds of discord are sown amongst the Handmaid's and many who are discontent are unsure of who to trust, fearing for their own lives, preventing a proper rebellion from forming.

Humiliation and fear are themes that continually appear in abuse – humiliation to undermine the victim and fear to oppress and silence them. The combination of emotions results in a drastic change of one's behaviour, with self-preservation becoming one's main prerogative.

Chapter 4.2: Relationship Between Literature and Society

Chapter 4.2.1: Historical Context

Betty Freidan is credited with the beginning of Second-Wave Feminism in the United States publishing *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 (Friedan, Fermaglich & Fine, 1963). This, in addition to the Food and Drug Administration's approval of the combined oral contraceptive pill as a legitimate drug in 1960, sparked a feminist movement seeking the liberation of women's rights. Second-Wave feminists urged for women to be given sexual, political and legal freedom from the patriarchal system, as well as bringing to attention domestic and marital rape. It was also during the Second-Wave that Radical Feminism started to take root in the United States. Second-Wave Feminism begun in the early 1960s, lasting all the way till the late 1980s, the point of time in which Margret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale*, a book that sparked intense debate on the treatment of women. As can be seen from Chapter 4.1, *The Handmaid's Tale* intensely focused on Radical Feminism, seeking to achieve Mackay's (2015) four criteria (refer to Chapter 2.1.3). *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on prior analysis in Chapter 4, has shown clearly that it has embraced the beliefs of Second-Wave Feminism, borrowing heavily ideologies from Radical Feminism. It is through this that society has shown a clear

relationship between itself and the literature that is *The Handmaid's Tale*. Yet, the very foundation of New Historicism believes that the societal-literary relationship is not a one-sided discourse. How then, has *The Handmaid's Tale* affected society?

The American Library Association (2017) has listed the novel as the 37th most challenged book from 1990 to 1999 and it is without a doubt that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a book fraught with controversy during its time, riding the high of Second-Wave Feminism to bring the world's attention to the suffering of women. Armbruster (1990) states,

Dear Readers, please return now to the premise that Gilead is an allegorical description of the cultural system that exists in the United States right now. Extend the premise and consider that our daily exposure to it obscures the extent of its violence and cripples our political responses. As a cultural system, it generates plausible explanations for its violence and distractions that obscure its operation.

The Handmaid's Tale drew the world's attention, especially in the United States, for calling out the (casual) discrimination against women of the time, exaggerating the abuse almost to the point of ridicule, showing how absurd the oppression of women was and driving the Second-Wave to the international stage.

The term Third-Wave Feminism was first coined by Rebecca Walker as a direct response to the United State's Senate Judiciary Committee's appointment of Clarence Thomas, who had sexually harassed her, to the Supreme Court. In Walker's article "Becoming the Third Wave" (1992), she declared,

So I write this as a plea to all women, especially women of my generation: Let Thomas' confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave.

Walker believed that, despite the beginning of the Third-Wave having its roots in the appointment of Thomas as Supreme Court Justice, it was not merely a response but instead, a movement in of itself, as gender equality had not been achieved. Third-Wave Feminism built upon the foundations laid down by Second-Wave feminists, leveraging on existing political power to enact change (Brunell & Burkett, 2019). Third-Wave Feminism can, therefore, be construed as bringing forward the agenda of Second-Wave Feminism, improving and building on their beliefs, while proposing more radical and postmodern ideas.

This can be linked directly to Alderman's *The Power*, wherein Alderman deconstructs social norms and reverses the gender relationship. Similar to the result of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it provides a shocking and jarring perspective on abuse and gender equality, directly derived from qualities of Third-Wave Feminism such as its adherence to postmodernism as well as the beliefs of Radical Feminism, carried forward from the Second-Wave.

Chapter 4.2.2: Personal Life

An author's experiences and personal life has a great impact on the topics that they discuss and choose to highlight. However, it must be noted that despite Atwood's apparent strong feminist

stance in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in an interview with *The New Yorker* (2017), Atwood refutes the belief that her literary works provide hints of her life, giving rise to the theory of the death of an author (Barthes, 1967).

Contrastingly, the influence of Alderman's life on *The Power* is clear and direct. As a teenager, Alderman was a firm advocate of women's rights and feminism. Therefore, it is of no surprise that *The Power's* premise is of feminism and gender equality. However, *The Power's* feminist nature can also be drawn from external influences from Alderman's life, such as the relationship between Atwood and Alderman, with Atwood serving as her mentor through the Rolex mentorship programme. With Atwood as the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it must be noted that there are striking similarities between *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*, many of which pertain to the ideology and style of which the books are written.

The one thing Margaret directly suggested was the idea of a convent (Guardian, 2016)

According to Alderman, Atwood did indeed play an influential role in her writing – yet, she also notes that Atwood did not directly interfere with the writing process, allowing her to leave her own unique mark through *The Power*.

In the end, it must be concluded that whether an author's personal life affects the literature created is entirely dependent on the author's intentions – to state otherwise would be to contradict the findings of the discussion.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

To conclude, this paper believes that both books fulfil the four criteria that Mackay (2015) has proposed. The need to end the societal structure wherein one gender is seen to be superior is clear in both books through the use of shock value to exaggerate the abuse occurring within the novels and abuse is repeatedly used to isolate victims, while violence is repeatedly used to oppress and force victims into sexual subjugation. Through analysis, it can be concluded that there are three main spheres of abuse, all inevitably interlinked: emotional, physical and sexual abuse. All forms of abuse invariably link to the concept of humiliation, isolation and establishing power over another as a way of psychologically attacking the victim, aiming to undermine and instil dogma into them, making the establishment and maintenance of a power disparity far easier. By moulding the mindsets of the oppressed, the willing subjugation of the victims is able to be achieved, something far more effective and reliable than oppression through force alone. It must also be noted that when one gender is given (absolute) power, it inevitably corrupts, as can be seen in the case of the Commanders in *The Handmaid's Tale* and women in *The Power* and it, therefore, can be concluded that power inevitably corrupts, causing one to perpetuate the power disparity in a bid to gain more power, regardless of whichever gender is bestowed the power.

The relationship between literature and society has also been made clear, as authors inevitably seek inspiration from their circumstances and are, therefore, influenced by the circumstances of their time, borrowing heavily from ideas present in society in order to relate to people and to draw their attention to such issues and ideologies. However, whether a novel is an interface between the author and the reader remains unresolved, as multiple authors work in accordance

to Bathes' theory of the death of an author while others choose to let their experiences and thoughts guide their writing, allowing their influence to be seen throughout the literary text.

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