

# A Gender's Apocalypse: a Comparison of Power Relations in Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and Naomi Alderman's "The Power"

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pedagogije

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**Rodna apokalipsa: usporedba odnosa moći u "Služkinjinoj priči"  
Margaret Atwood i "Moći" Naomi Alderman**

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Mentorica: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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## **Abstract**

Combining dystopian with feminist fiction tends to lead to literature that feels current, yet evergreen because it deals with enduring human problems. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power* are complementary examples of feminist dystopian fiction that reveal contemporary concerns related to the issues of gender roles, abuse of power, and equality. This paper will use constructivist feminist notions to examine gender roles and relationships in these two texts.

**Keywords:** dystopia, feminism, gender roles, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Power*, Margaret Atwood, Naomi Alderman.

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## Introduction

Fiction reflects the sensibilities and anxieties of its period, and dystopian fiction more so than usual. While dystopian literature falls under the umbrella term of speculative fiction, it is differentiated from its sister genres, like science fiction, by the fact that it seeks not to predict the future, but to “voice concerns about events, technological and otherwise, existing in the authors' own lifetimes” (Gulick 11). In the article “Dystopian Dreams: How Feminist Science Fiction Predicted the Future”, Naomi Alderman argues that feminist science fiction in particular tends to feel fresh because “its authors have a habit of looking beyond their particular historical moment, analysing the root causes, suggesting how they might be, if not solved, then at least changed.” Her analysis is applicable to dystopian literature as well because she goes on to say that “[w]riters of feminist dystopian fiction are alert to the realities that grind down women’s lives, that make the unthinkable suddenly thinkable” (Alderman). Alderman is the author of *The Power*, a novel which seems like a contemporary response to Margaret Atwood’s 1985 dystopian classic *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Both novels construct societies different from our own to question “how much of what we think now, today, in generic western culture about men and women is innate in the human species and how much is just invented” (Alderman).

The novels are concerned with gender inequality and are feminist in nature, feminism being “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” (“Feminism”). Throughout history, feminism has primarily been concerned with what it means to be or is associated with being a woman in society, and how that differs from what is perceived as being male. For example, John Stuart Mill considered the position of women to be unique amongst all subjugated classes, seeing as how their masters require more than mere subservience: “Men want not only the obedience of women but also their sentiments” (9).

Utilizing the notion of constructivist feminists that gender as well as associated characteristics are created by specific cultures in history (Guerin et al. 226), this paper aims to examine how gender roles are created in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Power*, what they entail, and how they influence the power dynamics between people of different and of the same genders.

The first chapter will examine *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in which Atwood envisions a fundamentalist theocratic state flourishing on the grounds of the United States of America as modernity is blamed for declining birth rates. The Republic of Gilead seeks a return to traditional values, which means that people of color and queer people are deported *en masse* or



killed (Armbruster 147), while women's rights are severely reduced. In fact, most women assume slave-like positions, as influential men acquire fertile young women, called Handmaids, to bear children for them and their wives.

The paper continues by focusing on the class system, with each subsequent section being dedicated to one strata of women. The novel is full of constant power struggles between female characters with little power of their own, having only that power which they infer from their relationship to one another and the head of the house (Williamson 265). It is a politically charged novel, which in Atwood's own words means that it has "to do with power: who's got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how" (Rubenstein qtd. in Gulick 42), so this chapter will conclude using the novel's epilogue to look back on what could be learned from its narrative.

The second chapter will consider *The Power*, in which Alderman imagines a world where women are suddenly no longer the weaker sex. Overnight, they develop the power to electrocute with their hands, completely overturning the power balance. The following sections will track how this shift at first allows women to fight back against their assailants and grand injustice before the situation escalates as they seek repayment for millennia of sexism. Old religions are recontextualized to center around their female figures, and a new one springs around Mother Eve. Similarly, a new, female kingdom rises up in the Middle East where the women are anything but gentle rulers. Men all over the world are suddenly second-class citizens. The chapter will conclude with a rumination on the implications of the metanarrative.

## **1. *The Handmaid's Tale***

In creating The Republic of Gilead, Atwood looked at the foundations of the United States, thinking that even radical forms of government must be built on some existing basis. Her rationale was that the cornerstone of the land of the free were not the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but “the heavy-handed theocracy of 17th-century Puritan New England, with its marked bias against women, which would need only the opportunity of a period of social chaos to reassert itself” (Atwood). This opportunity was found in the crisis of declining birth rates, which the paternal authorities named the Sons of Jacob seized in order to put women in their rightful place as “two-legged wombs . . . sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood 146). Montelaro claims that ample reproductive technologies are available to the society in the novel, but its decision to enforce biological maternity without technological intervention indicates that the purpose of Gilead is not repopulating the Earth, but the social control of women (233). The goal of Gilead’s male leaders is ensuring a male line of successors who will continue to deny potentially rebellious women autonomy in childbearing (Montelaro 233).

In order to strip women of their individuality and identity, leaving them no choice but to accept their singular roles within the newly founded society, Gilead administers the following measures:

women were fired from their jobs, lost the rights of abortion and birth control, were subjected to arranged marriages, found that their testimony in a court of law was not accepted without corroboration, and discovered their charge cards closed and their bank accounts placed in the hands of their fathers, husbands, or other male custodians. (Stillman and Johnson 73)

What is important to note is that this legislation is passed in a society where women previously had those rights, proving Atwood’s point that “any hard-won rights are vulnerable to change and that we shouldn’t take them for granted” (Williamson 267). Stillman and Johnson proclaim that that, while Gilead’s power grows out of repressive laws and politics, it is “the isolation of each woman, the fragmentation of her social world, and the reconstruction of each woman’s world into Gilead’s mold” (75) that solidifies the dystopian establishment.

### **1.1. Class system**

In this patriarchal religion passing for a societal structure, women’s roles are upheld through the extreme division of labor, the narrowness and low skill requirements of their tasks,

indoctrination, and distinctive uniforms which indicate class differences (Stillman and Johnson 73). The color coded social order is based on a woman's reproductive maternal function, as well as affiliation to the corresponding male hierarchy of power. Handmaids wear floor-length, long-sleeved red dresses with headdresses that restrict (non)verbal communication and make it impossible to see left or right, and veils that make it difficult to see ahead (Armbruster 148). Atwood was guided by the traditional Renaissance color scheme wherein the red hue of the garments would signify Mary Magdalene, and by implication, prostitution ("The Symbolism of the Color Red"). It can also be interpreted as a symbol of menstrual blood, that dreaded or sacred sign of a failure to impregnate (Montelaro 244). The barren Wives are dressed in blue in contrast to their fertile counterparts, which was traditionally seen as the color of the Virgin Mary ("The Symbolism of the Color Red"). The dress code is broken only when a Wife is widowed and wears black. The Wives' daughters share the theme of virginity and are draped in white clothing. The domestic servants, named Marthas after the biblical figure who embodies hospitality, wear dull green dresses. The wives of poorer men, designated as Econowives, fulfil the triple function of Wife, Handmaid, and Martha at once, and thus wear striped dresses bearing all those colors. The Aunts who train Handmaids, arrange their placements, and follow up on their compliance with prescribed roles (Armbruster 147) wear utilitarian brown uniforms, reminiscent of Nazi officers ("The Symbolism of the Color Red").

In opposition to the visually segregated women, the men mostly wear black, regardless of their class-determining function. From the Commanders in charge of households to the paramilitary Angels of the Apocalypse quelling rebellions, the men wear indistinguishable black uniforms. The Guardians of the Faith, however, wear green uniforms because they "aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden, for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young, apart from the ones that are Eyes incognito" (Atwood 30); the Eyes being the spies and informants of the system, keeping everyone in check. Men's activity, or function, determines their position in society, whereas women's passivity, that is their reproductive ability, determines theirs: "[W]omen's identities and desires are suppressed by a discourse and social system that forces them to wear femininity as a mask" (Montelaro 244).

## **1.2. The Handmaids**

The role of the Handmaid is a God-given gift, a second chance to procreate for the regime (Williamson 263). They are a pariah caste within the hierarchy – treasured for the fertility they may be able to provide, but otherwise untouchable (Atwood). Their role is not to

be confused with the Western perception of a harem, where one man has his pick of a household of concubines who provide pleasure as well as children. Loyal to its Puritan roots, Gilead sees Handmaids as functional, rather than decorative, their only function being breeding. Possessing one who has the ability to conceive is a mark of high status, similar to the way owning slaves in the Antebellum South was (Atwood).

The Aunts brainwash the Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Training Centers with refrains such as “Where I am is not a prison but a privilege” (Atwood 18) and dispatch them one apiece to the homes of high-ranking officials, whose name the Handmaids assume. The patronymic of the titular Handmaid is Offred, the possessive preposition clearly marking her as the property of Fred, the Commander. Only upon their arrival to a new position are the Handmaids allowed to use the front door; otherwise, it is the back door for their day-to-day activities, despite Aunt Lydia’s lobbying for the front, for “[y]ours is a position of honour” (Atwood 26).

Gulick observes that just as Handmaids are often put on pedestals as saviors of humanity, they also scorned by the women around them (48). They are disliked by the Wife, and judged by the Marthas: “Once, though, I hard Rita say to Cora that she wouldn’t debase herself like that” (Atwood 20). The other house servant, Cora, replies that she appreciates the Handmaids’ work, as they are doing it for all of them, but at the same time permitting that “[i]t’s not bad. It’s not what you’d call hard work” (Atwood 20). Some resentment may come from the fact that Marthas, as official housekeepers, have to serve the Handmaids, preparing their baths and making them special, healthy food to stimulate the pregnancy. They must cut the food as well, seeing as Handmaids are not trusted with knives. This is why some Marthas see Handmaids as just another household chore.

On a normal day, a Handmaid’s only obligation is to shop among scarce supplies of food, buying only what the Marthas approved, with tokens instead of money (Stillman and Johnson 74). Even so, a Martha may disapprove of the shopping, thinking she could have done better herself: “She would rather do the shopping, get exactly what she wants; she envies me the walk” (Atwood 56). The relationship of these different classes of women is further complicated by the import a baby would bring to the household. It would be a Handmaid’s way of repaying the team, justifying her food and keep (Atwood 145). A Martha would get to arrange a grandiose Birth Day, where she would cook and serve for esteemed guests amidst a shower of presents. The joy and significance a baby brings to a household makes the Marthas depend on the Handmaids, even as they despise them for their function.

A Handmaid is not allowed to go to the central part of town alone. Instead, they are required to go in twos on their shopping trips, ostensibly for their own safety. This state-sanctioned friendship is in fact regulatory as the Handmaids are intended to spy on each other: “If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be held accountable” (Atwood 29). This system sows distrust even between equals, making enemies of the only people whom a Handmaid should be able to trust because they are in the same totalitarian boat. Additionally, building any sort of rapport is made all the more difficult by the regulated communication. The Handmaids’ conversations can be boiled down to a set of prescribed phrases, such as the greeting “Blessed be the fruit” (Atwood 29) and its response “May the Lord open” (29), the farewell “Under his Eye” (54), and the noncommittal response to any pronouncement “Praise be” (29).

As the Handmaids are desperate for any kind of news, they make use of the public occasions where their presence is mandatory to engage in more significant communication. These include Prayvaganzas, Birth Days, Salvagings, and Particutions. Prayvaganzas, as may be gleaned from the portmanteau, is a prayer extravaganza where Handmaids demonstrate how obedient and pious they are. The reasons for organizing one differ for each gender and signal “the things we are supposed to rejoice in, respectively” (Atwood 232). Men’s Prayvaganzas are intended to commemorate military victories. Women’s are organized in celebration of group weddings or, rarely, for a captured runaway nun who recants and renounces her celibacy as she joins the ranks of the Handmaids. In case of the weddings, the Wives give away their daughters veiled in white to the decorated Angels who have returned from the front. As a Commander preaches about the natural subordination and wickedness of women, the Handmaids use this opportunity to gossip – about which of the young Wives in these arranged marriages will be in need of a Handmaid, whether a Handmaid who recently gave birth was really impregnated by the Commander or a doctor, and so on. They trust each other just enough to slander the common enemy and discuss inconsequential rumors.

Birth Days are the culmination of the entire regime. They start with the sound of a siren loudly proclaiming its purpose: a pregnancy is coming to a close. A Birthmobile carpeted and curtained in red, with a red light fixed atop it, picks up the local Handmaids and transports them to the happy household. Another vehicle adorned in blue is carrying the Wives. Handmaids are excused from their daily duties, with the shopping being left to the Marthas. The special occasion warrants a bounteous buffet of rare fruits and wine for the Wives who wait downstairs while the Handmaid is in labor. The Wives hang around for hours “helping to open the presents,

gossiping, getting drunk” (Atwood 146) to dispel their envy. The Handmaids join hands around their successful sister and chant instructions “Breathe, breathe . . . Hold, hold. Expel, expel, expel” (Atwood 133) under the watchful eyes of the Aunts. They are offered refreshments in the form of milk and sandwiches as the preferred method of natural childbirth, without drugs or professional medical intervention, can take a while. Montelaro (241) sees the women’s cathartic participation in the birth as nothing more than a short-lived illusion of unity.

The doctors wait outside the house, and “are only allowed if it can’t be helped” (Atwood 124). Gulick classifies this as one of the only instances where the men have seemingly lost the power they once held, finding it to be an ironic fulfilment of the pre-Gileadean demand that women have total control of their reproductive abilities (57). It is another way this society expresses its fears of “the ‘progress’ that turned the natural processes of pregnancy and birth into medical events that could be speeded up, slowed down, or the ultimate fear, terminated completely” (Gulick 57). Machines which could once help detect whether a woman will give birth to an Unbaby “with a pinhead or a snout like a dog’s, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet” (Atwood 122) are outlawed so whatever is growing inside is carried to term. This uncertainty about how the momentous day will go makes it just as likely for a Birth Day to end not in tears of joy, but despair.

Salvagings are televised public executions, announced by a tolling bell and a gathering of Angels in riot gear, in case of hysteria. Salvagings are likewise segregated by gender so only the aftermath of the Men’s Salvagings are seen in the novel. On their daily walks, the pairs of Handmaids may walk past the Wall where the bodies of salvaged men are displayed on hooks. White bags cover the heads, but they have placards hung around their necks to profess their crimes. For example, a drawing of a human fetus singles one out as a doctor, purple placards identify others as Gender Traitors, that is queer men, and a priest is dressed in his obsolete cassock. Women’s Salvagings are less frequent these days because they have become compliant with the system. During the event, Wives, daughters, Econowives and Marthas all sit on wooden chairs, but their placement, in the back or to the sides, indicates their position in society. Handmaids kneel on red velvet cushions in front of the stage, where everyone can keep an eye on them. Women who are to be salvaged are previously medicated so as not to make a fuss. They are joined upon the stage by black-robed Salvagers and Aunts who address the crowd. It used to be standard procedure to precede the executions with a detailed account of the crimes committed, but that practice is eventually discontinued. This decision is found unpopular amongst the women as it cuts the prime source of topics for discussion, gossip being one of

their remaining indulgences. The crimes which lead a Handmaid to be salvaged need to be more serious than reading, for which the punishment is merely having a hand cut off. They need to have made an attempt on the life of the Commander or his Wife, been unchaste, or attempted an escape. Only adultery or killing a Handmaid will land a Wife on that stage. There is a Scriptural precedent for hitting Handmaids so domestic abuse without implements is allowed, but they must stop at death, especially if the Handmaid is pregnant.

Particutions are seen as almost a treat for the Handmaids, an opportunity for them to give in to all the rage they normally have to internalize. As the name might suggest, these are executions in which the Handmaids participate. They are gathered in a circle, with any other members of the public present standing to the side to watch. Guardians bring an already visibly tortured man into the circle as an Aunt reads out his alleged crimes. One such Particution took place after two Guardians supposedly raped two Handmaids at gunpoint, leading to the death of the pregnant one's baby. The state has already dealt with one Guardian, but the other is left to the Handmaids, who may use any means at their disposal to kill him at the sound of the Aunt's whistle. Another whistle marks the end of the exercise, when the Handmaids are expected to pair up once again and go calmly back to their residence. It is later actually revealed that the victim of this particular event was a Mayday agent, a man working for the resistance. It is likely that the Aunts concoct the story which will most infuriate the Handmaids, clouding their judgement and channeling their natural rebellion against repression into killing political prisoners (Armbruster 147). Offred concludes of the event: "I feel angry. I'm not proud of myself for this, or for any of it. But then, that's the point" (Atwood 293). It seems that a Particution is a multi-purpose custom: executing a traitor, giving the Handmaids an outlet for or their built-up frustration, and implicating them in the system, that is making them part of the cruel regime and thus branding them as hypocrites if they criticize it.

Finally, there is the private Ceremony, conducted inside a Commander's residence, which is the entire reason for a Handmaid's existence. A bell summons the entire household, even the Marthas who resent wasting their time when they could be tending to some chores. The Handmaid, the Wife, the Marthas and the Guardian gather in the sitting room, waiting for the ritually prescribed knock on the door by which the Commander asks permission to enter. Because the sitting room is supposed to be the Wife's territory, it is her prerogative to flaunt the little power she has by making him wait before opening the door, but the fact that the Commander can ignore this without punishment and enter when he chooses exposes this arrangement for the hollow appearance of equality it is. When inside, the Commander takes out

the Bible from a locked ornate box and reads the stories of Adam and Eve, Rachel and Leah, concluding with a silent group prayer that their venture be successful. The Marthas and the Guardian are dismissed, as the married couple and their surrogate mother proceed with the main event of the evening.

The Handmaid lies fully clothed, sans underwear, between the legs of the equally fully dressed Wife as the Commander does his duty. Offred phrases it as him fucking her lower half. Not making love, copulating or even raping because she is there willingly, inasmuch, or little, choice she had. No one seems to be enjoying this occasion: not the Wife who would rather not have her husband having sex with a stranger because she is barren. Not the Handmaid who would rather not be a barely willing sex worker. Not even the Commander, despite the once popular attitude: “But isn’t this everyone’s wet dream, two women at once?” (Atwood 105). When the deed is done, the Handmaid is supposed to rest on the bed for the next ten minutes to improve the chances of her becoming pregnant, but it is not unheard of the cases in which the distressed Wife dismisses her at once.

The Handmaids also have a ceremony of their own to perform in the privacy of their rooms. They rub their faces and their hands with butter they steal during dinner. The Wives decreed that the Handmaids should not have access to face cream and hand lotion. These women are only containers after all: “[I]t’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (Atwood 107). The Wives do not want them too look attractive, so the Handmaids employ this trick they learned during training, in the hopes that they will some day get out and be desired, be touched. This crop of Handmaids is in a unique position. As the transitional generation, they have it the hardest. Even Aunt Lydia admits so: “We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard for you when men revile you” (Atwood 127). It will be easier for the ones who come after, for they will lack the experience of a past lived differently from the present (Hansot 68). The next generation will be more docile because they will not know to ask for certain rights, never having had them in the first place. Without a history of alternatives, they will be enchained in the present (Feuer 85).

### **1.3. Unwomen**

Unwomen cannot be categorized within Gileadean society as they have no purpose. They are unable to breed and unwilling to conform so they are shipped off to the Colonies, large regions where toxic wastes are dumped for treatment and disposal (Armrueter 147). Nuns, politically active feminists, queer and old women are joined in the Colonies by Handmaids who



have failed their three chances to conceive; the Handmaids' creed "*Give me children, or else I die*" (Atwood 71) has more than one meaning. Only Handmaids who have successfully given birth to healthy infants have immunity and are safe from ever being declared Unwomen which highlights the system's essential idea, namely, that a woman's sole purpose in life is to give birth to children. Certain Gender Traitors, who have not ended up on the Wall, are also sent to the Colonies, and they are not excluded from having to wear long gray dresses (Atwood 260).

Slave laborers in the Colonies spend their time cleaning up, sometimes bodies after a battle out of the army's fear of a plague, and sometimes the toxic dumps and radiation spills. They are not given protective clothing because not only are the people expendable, but these are undesirables the Government is actively wanting to get rid of. They are a stark reminder of what fate awaits politically dissident persons.

#### **1.4. Jezebels**

Jezebel's is a boys' club, where high-ranking officials get to experience all the debauchery of times past. Furthermore, the clientele includes trade delegations because the officers know that a man will tell a woman, or let slip, something he usually would not, especially after satisfying his carnal cravings. Being run by men, the Government is naturally more understanding of men's human nature so it is small wonder that a house of prostitution exists, despite being officially forbidden: "Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason. It's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan" (Atwood 249). The Commander underpins this hypothesis with the claim that that was the reason why women used to buy so many different clothes. Now that the women no longer have different clothes, the men simply have different women (Atwood 249).

The women working at Jezebel's range from incorrigible sex workers from the time before to the women who have failed to assimilate. Some apparently prefer it here to the alternative of being a part of the Gileadean hierarchy, even if, or perhaps because, it means being "completely isolated, marginalized from the rest of society" (Stillman and Johnson 80). Still, even here, they must wear Government issue clothing, except that these outfits are far more revealing, being most similar to those of Playboy Bunnies. The brothel offers freedoms which are prohibited elsewhere, like alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Additionally, Jezebels are left to their own devices when not working, even being free to have sex with each other, a welcome blessing since homosexuality is outlawed in the mainland, prompting a lesbian worker to deem it "[b]utch paradise" (Atwood 261).

## 1.5. The Wives

Commander's Wives are women of higher social standing who are unable to bear children, either because they are barren or because they are too old. The garden is their domain, where they employ a Guardian to do the heavy digging, while they busy themselves with pruning: "[I]t's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (Atwood 22). They can often be found sitting in their gardens and engaging in other busywork, like knitting scarves for the Angels at the front lines, although Offred doubts whether the scarves are actually sent to the front, wondering if they are instead unraveled back into balls of yarn only to be knitted again: "Maybe it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose" (Atwood 23). Offred envies the Commander's Wife her knitting because it would be good to have small and attainable goals, but then again, envy seems to be the basis of all interpersonal relationships between the women in Gilead.

Seeing as anatomy is destiny for a woman in this society, Wives are naturally envious of their fertile Handmaids despite their lower social status. The fact that they take possession of the offspring as well as the social esteem that a healthy infant brings to the household does seem to go some ways towards appeasing them (Montelaro 234). Even though some may pretend to have taken a liking to a Handmaid, like the Wife of Commander Warren who calls her handmaid Janine something close to a daughter in front of an audience, this relationship is always full of latent aggression, as is shown in that same example when the Wife later nonchalantly proclaims "Little whores, all of them, but still, you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?" (Atwood 125). This antipathy is understandable as Handmaids are a constant reminder to the Wives that they are not enough on their own, that they are not a complete woman according to societal needs, but their desire for a baby does occasionally outweigh their disdain and they start to treat the whole relationship as a business transaction.

Such is the case with Serena Joy, who goes so far as to break the law in order to ensure herself a progeny. A once-singing evangelist, by the time the US started to transition into Gilead she became more prominent for her speeches about the sanctity of home and the necessity of women staying at home. Ironically, that was not what she did, as she lobbied for the Sons of Jacob. However, now that she has had a taste of her own medicine, it doesn't seem to agree with her: "How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (Atwood 56). It is secretly considered by doctors and an inside joke among successive Handmaids passing through a Commander's household without conceiving a child that it is, in fact, the Commander who is sterile (Montelaro 234). This goes against the misogynistic foundation of the Republic so it is

not discussed publicly. Serena's situation of having an obviously impotent husband when her entire life's purpose has been boiled down to the need to become a mother leads her to make a desperate move. She makes a deal with Offred to have the Handmaid try to conceive with another man. Offred is in a similarly dire situation as this is her third and final posting, her last chance to avoid being sent to the Colonies. Williamson points out that, while such a pact puts both women in a vulnerable position, the Wives always hold sway in the hierarchy (266).

## **1.6. The Aunts**

The Aunts are a female control agency comprised of menopausal woman. A scholar in the epilogue notes that "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (Atwood 320). Guided by the aphorism that when power is scarce, a little of it is tempting, many women are willing to serve as Aunts. Not to mention the fact that the position could save them from being shipped to the Colonies, as they were usually unmarried, childless, infertile or elderly. There are other benefits besides, like the right to read and write, exclusive among all women in Gilead. Such advantages are enough to turn women against their own kind.

Foley applies Atwood's own schematic of the Basic Victim Positions to define the Aunts as Basic Position One, meaning ones who deny they are a victim in the first place (52). The position is occupied by those who are marginally better off than the others in a Victim group: "They are afraid to recognize they are victims for fear of losing the privileges they possess, and they are forced to account somehow for the disadvantages suffered by the rest of the people in the group by disparaging them" (Atwood qtd. in Foley 52). Anger, if felt, is always directed at their fellow victims, which would in this case refer to other women, namely Handmaids, whom they are employed to keep in line, using verbal and physical tactics. The Aunts are armed with electric cattle prods, but not even they are permitted guns. Moreover, they utilize various forms of corporal punishment to make their lessons sink in, for example mutilating or, in extreme cases, amputating limbs: "Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential" (Atwood 102). Gulick sees the imbalance of power demonstrated in the way that Gilead manipulates relationships between women such as the Handmaids and the Aunts (31), the reason for manipulation being the division among women and the prevention of any possible rebellion against Gilead's regime. This is further helped by constant brainwashing.

For example, an important lesson taught in Gilead's reeducation centers is that women's liberation is to blame for the social chaos from whence the new Republic sprang: "women's struggles for equality and autonomy caused all the rape and violence committed against women before Gilead" (Armbruster 147). Aunt Lydia, a female instructor at the Red Center, is a prophet whose sacred text is the age-old adage of victim-blaming: "The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen" (Atwood 65). Her teachings reaffirm men's license to freely harass women (Montelaro 235), as well as insidiously conditioning women to calmly accept any and all malevolent assault on their bodies instead of reprimanding the attacker. This is most clearly depicted during a session of Testifying where the Handmaids-in-training hear about the gang-rape and subsequent abortion Janine endured. The Aunt in charge asks who is to blame for the assault, and the trainees chant in unison: "*Her fault, her fault, her fault*" (Atwood 82) because she led them on. They even have an answer to the philosophical question humanity has been asking itself for millennia: why does God allow such terrible things to happen? To "[t]each her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*" (Atwood 82).

The Aunts insist that the girls ought to be thankful, as they are living a pampered life, getting the best food when everyone else's is rationed due to the war: "You are spoiled girls . . . Naughty puss" (Atwood 99). Aunts are the propagandists for the tyrannical patriarchy of Gilead so they are mostly encountered at the Rachel and Leah Training Centers, but they can also be found patrolling the hallways in Jezebel's. They blame the progression of technology, and the moral decadence that followed, for the declining natality and thus seek refuge in a past golden age of tradition. The Republic's conservative logic is based on the Judeo-Christian Bible so the Aunts' sermons teach the value of women's chastity and modesty, which is just another way of suggesting the repression of female sexuality (Montelaro 234). Aunt Lydia preaches that the fact that men cannot help their sex drive makes it all the more important that women set up the boundaries; God made men that way, as slaves to their sexuality, but not women. This makes women responsible for any potential negative event, while at the same time it is men who have the ultimate social power. Montelaro infers that this logic, by which "women are 'different' in that they can and are expected to 'control' sexual desire", is used to enforce a culture of male dominance (235). The fact that it is irrational to claim that men – who arguably have no control over their impulses – should be the dominant gender in any society does not deter the Aunts from preaching this faulty view.

In the time before, society was dying of too much choice. According to Aunt Lydia, people used to have freedom to choose everything, which lead to mischief and immorality. Now, Gilead is offering them freedom from having to do "everything": "Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable or humane" (Atwood 171). Arguably, Gilead's practices are aimed at enabling women one day to be able to live in harmony together, as one big family. In Gilead's ideal version of the future, Handmaids will not have to be passed around anymore since there will be enough to go around, allowing for real bonds of affection to be formed: "Women united for a common end!" (Atwood 171). Aunt Lydia's proclamation that the aim of this order is a spirit of camaraderie among women rings hollow considering how they consistently pit them against each other.

Aunt Lydia's rationale is echoed, or better yet echoes, because Aunts are "only mouthpieces for the ideas of the patriarchal leaders of this society" (Gulick 31), in how the Commander justifies the freedoms done away with. Women's problems, of having to modify themselves to catch a man's eye because they are a limited resource, have been solved: "This way they all get a man, nobody's left out" (Atwood 231). Gilead allows women to fulfil their biological destinies in piece, without having to worry about money, jobs or getting a man.

### **1.7. A retrospective review**

The epilogue recontextualizes *The Handmaid's Tale* as a manuscript pieced together from audio tapes. Offred's life story is an important primary source and is discussed as such in the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies on June 25, 2195. The existence of the conference reveals that the Republic of Gilead will in time become a curious relic from the past, the regime not being sustainable. The keynote speaker is a man discussing the problem of authenticating the tale whom gender and spatial distance allow to approach the subject lightheartedly: "Piexioto's prissy academic jokes and the laughter they elicit from his audience provide evidence that sexist attitudes still persist" (Ketterer 214). Sexism seems to permeate even the intellectual society of the future so it seems they have not taken to heart Offred's clairvoyant message:

But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far, please remember: you will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a

power, perhaps the greatest. Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing. (Atwood 144)

With the epilogue, Atwood actually suggests that sexism is so deeply ingrained in the Western way of thinking that it seems to be utopian to think it can be overcome. At the same time, by providing the context of an academic conference, she suggests that academia has a lot to be responsible for, as academics do not seem to act enough to influence a society's negative practices.

## **2. *The Power***

Foley takes it as a given that Western cultures subordinate women, a state of affairs that they themselves accept and enforce (51). Men are by and large physically stronger. This is such a generally accepted state of affairs that the term “weaker sex” is used synonymously with women. It is often declared the natural state of the world. However, living in cities, covering up our shameful naked bodies, and bestowing unprecedented importance on pieces of paper, humanity is usually not so concerned with being natural. What defenders of unjust treatment actually mean is that equality between unequal genders would be uncustomary, not unnatural: “The subjection of women to men is a universal custom, so any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural!” (Mill 8). A slight evolutionary development is all that is needed to shake up the status quo. Alderman's novel, *The Power*, deals with the precise issue of evolutionary development which enables women to gain the physical upper hand and thus also exert their social power over men. In the novel, she speculates about the changes that would ensue if women would no longer be “the weaker” sex.

### **2.1. The prefatory phase**

A young Nigerian man is on holiday, and he has managed to orchestrate the situation with his friends so he would remain alone with a girl he likes. First, he impresses her by doing laps in the pool, while she plays coy. He jokingly calls her a servant-girl, asking her to bring him her Coke. When she does not, they play-wrestle for it, as he uses his strength to try and take it from her. They playact the roles of servant and lord all the while. Then, a stinging sensation blossoms from her touch on his arm which grows until he cannot move it or himself. She is in control now so she kisses him.

A teenage girl is shopping alone when an older man approaches her. He is sweet-talking her, but she does not seem interested in his advances. Her telling him to get away only makes him enjoy the hunt more; after all, a pretty girl deserves a compliment, even when she does not seem to want one: “Hey, don’t turn away from me. Give me a little smile” (Alderman 16). He grins when she brings her hand to his arm, thinking she is performing mock-fury for his amusement. An electric charge races up his arm and he is soon on the floor, pink foam at his lips.

A mixed-race girl is hanging out with two boys. One starts taking off her top, but she stops him with a gesture. The other sits on her other side, sandwiching her between them. He gropes her even after she says she is not in the mood. He does not stop, but goes in for a kiss.

A number of pinpricks into the armpits and the jaw are enough to get her message across and send the boys running. But her troubles do not end there because her foster father has seen her going off with them. A strong believer in women's chastity, he imparts this lesson on her with kicks, slaps, and punches, before graduating to worse offenses: "He's going to show her what kind of little whore she is" (Alderman 30). A current races through him, pops him out of her, and he falls to the floor, dead, in all his undressed glory.

In the novel, the newfound feminine power originates in skeins, organs of electricity found above the collarbone. It affects the pain centers in the brain so, while it looks flashy, it hurts even worse, targeting the body's pain receptors. The skein first awakened in teenage girls, but their ability to activate the dormant ones in older women means that soon all women will have the power which will deeply affect social roles and norms.

## **2.2. Cultural conversion**

There are reports of playground fights which leave boys, and occasionally girls, breathless and twitching. To soothe the parents' worries, the Government segregates schools instead of closing them down, separating the boys from the girls: "Boys-only buses took them safely to boys-only schools" (Alderman 21). Parents advise their boys not to go out alone, not to stray too far. That still leaves the problem of the girls. What was once a funny trick they learned from secret videos online is now used to show off, to prove themselves stronger. Playground bullying evolves to include derogatory names for girls who cannot defend themselves:

*Blanket*, they call them, and *flat battery*. Those are the least offensive ones. *Gimp*. *Flick*. *Nesh*. *Pzit*. The last, apparently, for the sound of a woman trying to make a spark and failing. For maximum effect, you need a group of girls all innocuously whispering '*pzit*' as you walk past. Young people are still deadly. (Alderman 64)

All across the world, new movements are taking hold. Boys start dressing more effeminately, as "girl" now seems to equal "strong". Girls also cross-dress, but only to hide like a wolf in sheep's clothing (Alderman 70). The official line among politicians wholly unprepared to deal with a complete overhaul of gender power dynamics is abstinence. Girls just ought not to do it, and it will pass. When training camps are eventually set up, they teach girls breathing exercises to keep the power under control. The thinking is: a cure will be developed and everything will go back to normal, as if that is what everyone wants.



A test is developed to detect the presence of the electrostatic power. Initially, it is used to determine if newly born girls have developed skeins, but it becomes apparent that there is no need for such diagnostics – all the female infants have them. Once it becomes clear that grown women can have the power as well, the test becomes mandatory: “Certain positions involving contact with children and the public have been mandated as unsuitable by the Governor’s office” (Alderman 66).

Margot Cleary, a mayor who has had the power awakened in her by her daughter, nonetheless passes the test and concludes that the testing is necessary, seeing as any woman who cannot stop herself from discharging under such mild pressure is a threat to herself and society. This knowledge gives Margot a different kind of power, an assurance that she is always the most important person in the room. She does not even attempt to follow what her colleagues are saying in a meeting, having been consumed by the notion that “[n]othing either of these men says is really of any great significance, because she could kill them in three moves” (Alderman 71). It does not matter that she never would, but that she could, if she wanted to. This obsession comes to a head when “[u]nder verbal attack from her unctuous old boss in a gubernatorial race, she reaches out and stuns him in the chest” (Read). In the old world, she would have been castigated for it, her political career ruined, and her private life scrutinized. Now however, she wins. Conditioned by a world in which the voters would have turned on her the second she abandoned reasoned discourse, she asks for forgiveness and expresses gratitude for the second chance she was given. She does not understand that she need not apologize for her outburst. That is what has won her the position.

### **2.3. Men’s rights**

The changing tides lead to a proliferation of men’s self-defense products. A wrist-mounted taser is advertised as a way of leveling the playing field, but is subsequently pulled back after its use leads to the death of seventeen men. Defensive slip-on rubber undersocks are another way men try to keep up with the times, but there seems to be no market for men’s self-defense classes or armor as the funding is instead channeled into girls’ training camps. This leads to a growing movement seeking justice for men. Activists gather anonymously on Internet forums to discuss their conspiracy theories about the origins of skeins and to incite each other to make a difference, to start and fight a war so “when our grandsons ask what we did, we’ll have something to tell them” (Alderman 144). They also share stories of mistreatment. One such story of a boy being bullied seemingly provokes a group calling itself Male Power to attack a women’s clinic. They claim this to be a part of a strategy to force the Government to act

against the enemies of man, but the world has been irreversibly transformed and their voices are not the loudest anymore. They are not the primary target audience of public discourse, but submissive spectators. Advertisements feature young women showing off their long, curved arcs in front of stunned silent boys: “Be strong, they say [to women], that’s how you get everything you want” (Alderman 258). Now women are the ones telling men to keep themselves safe, and to fall behind them, where they will be protected from danger.

A similar change is happening in the media. While still on air, a pair of TV anchors squabble about the possible existence of the power throughout history. Tom is insistent that if it had once existed, it had to have been systematically bred out because we did not want it around – who would? “You’d tell me if you could do something like that, wouldn’t you, Kristen?” (Alderman 63). Things go from bad to worse during Margot’s guest appearance. As she proposes training camps for girls, Tom is visibly afraid. He tries to advocate for the Government-approved strategy, but is overruled by his female co-host as she expresses her full support for the idea. The co-workers’ already frail relationship falls to pieces when the news of the Male Power’s terrorist attack breaks. Kristen’s insistence that she cannot even fathom what they are protesting about prompts Tom to go on a tirade about inequality that ends with him being dragged out of the studio.

Tom is replaced by a newscaster who has a distinctly different attitude than his predecessor: “Matt is laughing attractively and saying, Now, I don’t understand that kind of thing at all, but I’ll tell you what I do know about: apple-bobbing” (Alderman 246). The condescending way his ten years senior partner treats him hits an all-time high when the think pieces questioning how many men are really needed gain traction. The thinking is that men are dangerous, committing the great majority of crimes. They are less intelligent and less diligent. They are more likely to suffer from diseases, thus draining the country’s resources. Not as many are needed for reproducing as women so only one in ten are indispensable. Matt’s worries are swept under the rug with Kristen’s gentle hand on his knee: “And of course they’re not talking about great guys like you” (Alderman 278). Comforted, Matt proclaims that he blames the extremist men’s rights activists, before transitioning into a segment about fun self-defense moves you can practice at home. As Kristen takes over the position the reader is expected to see occupied by a male person, it becomes clear that Alderman reverses the stereotypical gender roles, and the socially accepted inequality, in order to illustrate their unfairness more clearly.

The ubiquitous power has repercussions in people’s sex lives as well. A girl in an alleyway coaxes a boy with a crackling hand at the small of his back. A journalist who sees it

all in passing finds it sexy, which is why he soon engages in some electric lovemaking of his own. Internet pornography is “reconceived when pleasure and pain are spliced in new ways” (Charles). Fear becomes as significant as lust, physical pain a part of the act as much as desire. The electricity can make a man erect, which allows for prolonged intercourse and some women “just have a jolly good time in bed with willing participants” (Alderman), but these things inevitably get out of hand. It hurts a bit if you want it, a lot if you do not. A bit of spark can also be used to hurt the vocal cords, which perfectly complements the powers to induce paralysis and erection, making anyone a quiet and easy target for rape. The new reality takes a while to set in, with victims thinking that this is not what happens to a man. Except it is now. Rapists’ justifications remain the same: “He was *asking* for it. He begged us for it” (Alderman 197). This kind of sexual domination is taken to the extreme with male genital mutilation, by which key nerve endings in the penis are burned out as a boy approaches puberty. The curbing procedure makes it impossible for a man to achieve an erection without skin stimulation by a woman.

#### **2.4. Political changes**

In addition to revealing how male dominated societies influence interpersonal relationships between women and men, Alderman also shows how the dominance of one gender influences politics and state affairs. In Saudi Arabia, a religious uncle finds two of his nieces practicing their devilry together. He summons his friends to help punish the girls, but, somehow, the girls end up dead. The neighbors who saw the unfortunate incident rally. A dozen women turn into a hundred, then into a thousand. The protesters seeking justice for the dead girls expand their cause to include problematic laws that forbid men and women from holding hands and the ones that forbid women to drive. Similar demonstrations break out in India, the women pointedly gathering at markets where they previously would not have been allowed to walk alone, not if they were under seventy. They proclaim that men are now “the ones who should not walk out of their houses alone at night. They are the ones who should be afraid” (Alderman 134).

A revolution starts in Moldova when an adolescent servant-girl passes the power to sex trafficking victims. These wait in the dark, until their captors come to take one away for the night, when they pounce. They kill every man in the house but are still not satisfied: “[I]t wasn’t just them. The police knew what was happening and did nothing. The men in the town beat their wives if they tried to bring us more food. The Mayor knew what was happening” (Alderman 94). Before long, the world capital of human sex-trafficking is overrun by

paramilitary gangs of women who freed themselves from sexual slavery, which is how the wife of a now-dead president comes to declare a new country, Bessapara. The republic of women instates the wife as the new President.

## **2.5. Religious revisions**

Consequently to the changes in secular policies, the results of female dominance are visible in the field of religion, too. As Bolivia proclaims their own female Pope, a new religion appears in the US. It starts with the mixed-race girl who fled foster care after killing a sexual predator in self-defense. Having found shelter in a convent with other girls who have been kicked out of their homes after using their powers, she performs a miracle. With her practiced pinpoint precision, she is able to clear the blockage that causes seizures in another girl. As she heals more and more, however temporarily, she becomes the de facto leader of the group. Now having a following, she reintroduces herself to the world as Mother Eve and the world takes notice.

Her teaching starts by tentatively switching the pronouns of the deity: “God is neither woman nor man but both these things. But now She has come to show us a new side to Her face, one we have ignored for too long” (Alderman 80). When Mother Eve’s followers fear that she is forgetting about Jesus, she expounds that the creator is greater than the thing created – so it is with God and the world, and so it is with Jesus and the Mother. Her sermon calls attention to forsaken female figures in all religions: “Jews: look to Miriam, not Moses, for what you can learn from her. Muslims: look to Fatimah, not Muhammad. Buddhists: remember Tara, the mother of liberation. Christians: pray to Mary for your salvation” (Alderman 115). She finds the Scripture that works for her, rewrites the bits that do not. No longer is it taught that man and woman ought to live together as husband and wife. It is more blessed that women live together, helping and comforting one another.

In time, Mother Eve makes use of televangelism to solidify her myth. In front of a gargantuan gathering, with the cameras carefully capturing the miracle, she heals a boy’s broken back, and, miraculously, his legs kick up in the air. What the crowd does not know is that this charming child was chosen over his hospital friend, an even bigger believer, whom Eve was not sure she could heal, and who also had acne, which did not make him proper TV material.

## 2.6. The perversion of power

Empowerment can very easily slip into supremacy: “[W]omen, instead of fighting back, are perpetrating old crimes” (Read). The numbers keep going up on domestic abuse against men, as do the murders of men by women. In Bessapara, things escalate. Police no longer investigate the murders of men: “[I]f a man is found dead it is presumed that a vengeance gang had given him his proper reward for his deeds in the time before” (Alderman 242). This comes on the back of a lost territorial battle for which the President blames the men of Bessapara, whom she suspects of selling information to the enemy. This was the pretext necessary for passing a law that means each man must have his passport with him at all times. Additionally, all his official documentation must contain the name of his female guardian, whose express written permission he needs to travel. If one does not have a close family relative who can fulfil this function, he will be assigned a work detail and shackled to other men, for everyone’s protection. Others rights are stripped as well:

No man may take money or other possessions out of the country. . . . Men are no longer permitted to drive cars. Men are no longer permitted to own businesses. Foreign journalists and photographers must be employed by a woman. Men are no longer permitted to gather together, even in the home, in groups larger than three, without a woman present. Men are no longer permitted to vote. (Alderman 243)

Their years of violence and depravity have shown that they are not fit to rule or govern. Any woman who witnesses a man breaking the law must discipline him immediately lest she be considered an accessory to the crime. Naturally, there will still be room for men to serve, in the appropriately subordinate roles fitting for their lesser agency (Charles). Bessapara’s President espouses this goal, staffing her entire estate, all the menial positions at least, with well-built men in fitted clothing.

## 2.7. A reflective report

The frame story presents *The Power* as a novelization of the archaeologically most plausible narrative for the evolution of the female-lead human society, written by Neil Adam Armon. A member of the Men Writers Association, he is “cautiously writing against a tradition that excludes his sex” (Read). His idiosyncratic position as a male author in an overwhelmingly female field means that he must send the manuscript to a more senior and influential author, in this case, Naomi Alderman. The already metafictional framing goes another layer deeper as “life” imitates the events of the historical novel. Just as an ultimately unreliable female ally

publishes a man's stolen research in the novel as her own, Alderman's name on the front cover means we are to understand the whole ordeal as "an act of fictional intellectual property theft" (Read) by a person who can more easily get away with it; in this case, it is the woman.

As a character in the book drunk on her newfound power to hurt proclaims it to be a kind of wealth, it becomes clear that the story is not an indictment of any one gender, but of a system which greatly favors one over the other. The question being asked is "if only the balance of power shifts, but the overall system stays the same, won't we reach the same ends?", seeing as those in power are just as likely to abuse it (Steffens). The message comes as almost a warning for the misdirected kind of women's rights advocacy that promotes a female supremacy myth. Vender does not believe special virtue should be ascribed to women, saying that if feminism is to succeed, it must de-idealize women (qtd. in Guerin et al. 269). Alderman seems to concur.

## Conclusion

The topic of this paper were two feminist dystopian novels, which chose to approach gender inequality from different, but complementary angles. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a world where conservative tendencies of returning to the traditions of yesteryear are taken to the extreme. All modern movement in sciences and civil rights is regressed in favor of the principles of the Old Testament, which leads to a society of subjugated womanhood. For all intents and purposes, it is an apocalypse for all those bearing feminine traits. A woman is no longer complete on her own; rather, she needs an entire entourage to be of use to the authorities: an idle barren wife needs one fertile and one working counterpart to create a single proactive entity. Not allowed to be an entire person alone, a woman in this system does not have a meaningful existence outside keeping the system alive.

*The Power* features a world where the power balance between genders is turned on its head, with men suddenly finding themselves on the receiving end of systematic inequity. What starts as fighting back and seeking justice quickly turns into taking revenge and general malicious mistreatment. With innumerable rights removed, society is rebuilt from the ground up with women at the top. For all intents and purposes, it is an apocalypse for all those bearing masculine traits. Women now hold all positions of power and are central figures in major religions. Men's worth plummets as they are relegated to inconsequential roles in society. Sexual harassment and abuse naturally follow from objectification, just as they did in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but with the obvious fact that in Alderman's novel gender roles have been utterly reversed.

What makes both these dystopias seem even grimmer is their respective author's refusal to twist the premises into unreality. Atwood famously only included human behavior with historical precedent. From group hangings to forced childbearing and the appropriation of the results, it can all be found in cultures and religions throughout history, with many from "within western society, and within the "Christian" tradition, itself" (Atwood). Alderman carefully explains that nothing happens to men in her novel that is not happening to women in today's world: "So is it dystopian? Well. Only if you're a man" (Alderman). Her point being that if her novel is a dystopia, then we are living in one today, as actual women all over the world receive the same treatment that men do in her novel.

Every dystopia is someone else's utopia. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the white heterosexual men prosper, while everyone considered other, including women, suffers. In *The*

*Power*, all manner of women prospers as men seemingly get their comeuppance. The intent of this paper is not to champion the wellbeing of either gender at the expense of the other, but to expose gender roles for the historical constructions they are. It is as Ketterer's analysis points out: "Atwood's concern is not with the destruction of either sex; it is with their mutual survival" (216). Once we realize that we have created these inequitable circumstances, and any other worse ones we may devise, we will realize we have the power, and the responsibility, to change our present for the better. Our expectations need not be sky-high, but even tempered ones could help: "[T]he best we can hope for, probably, is to create a society that tries hard not to leave people out. And to be vigilantly alert to the people we are leaving out, whoever they are. To listen. To try to make it right as often as we can. To imagine how it could be different" (Alderman). Humanity could do with a worse manifesto.



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