

## SUBJECT-POSITION AS VICTIM-POSITION IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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Much feminist criticism, although it assumes the existence of unequal gender-based relations of power, implicitly constructs those relations in such a way as to render them tragic—unchanging, universal, and monolithically imposed. . . . [When this happens], our own constructions of history might themselves be called patriarchal. Insofar as our constructions of history suggest that gender relations do not change, they distance us from a sense of their social construction and return us to a sense of their inevitability and tragic essentiality.

Judith Newton, "Making—and Remaking—  
History: Another Look at 'Patriarchy'."

Like all of Margaret Atwood's work in recent years, *The Handmaid's Tale* has triggered a staggering amount of critical commentary. Though the commentary is diverse, much of it has taken the line sketched out by Judith Fitzgerald, who in an early review praised the novel as a "necessary allegory":

The novel, superbly written, functions on several levels, from a compelling read to an indictment of 20th century life. Its message, alleviated by the novelist's delightful sense of humour, cannot be ignored. (31)

This paper is an attempt to read against the grain of that positive reading. The attempt is driven by my sense that *The Handmaid's Tale*, though intended to work against women's oppression, in fact reproduces the essentializing tendencies of a patriarchy that, as a feminist gesture, the novel should oppose. Like the "patriarchal" feminist constructions of history criticized by Newton, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a "tragic" view of gender relations, in which the oppression of women by men is seen as "unchanging, universal, and monolithically imposed." The result is that the text offers the

reader not a position of active resistance to patriarchy, but a position of abjection that shares in the fatalistic passivity of the protagonist. In this sense the dominant subject-position offered by *The Handmaid's Tale* is a victim-position.

One underlying context for my analysis is of course Atwood's own description of Basic Victim Positions in *Survival*. Atwood defines her four positions as follows:

One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.

Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.

Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.

Four: To be a creative non-victim. (36-39).

*The Handmaid's Tale*, I would argue, offers the reader a character trapped in Position Two. Atwood is right to point out that this is not necessarily a problem for the reader and writer aiming for Position Four. The writer, for Atwood, is "by definition . . . in Position Four at the moment of writing" (a somewhat romantic position), and the reader achieves Position Four at "the moment of insight—the time when the book makes sense or comes clear" (40). Atwood also rightly suggests that creative non-victimhood is invited less by "sloppy and unearned" representations of Position Four than by "consistent and tough-minded" representations of Position Two—presumably because the latter representations allow greater possibilities of making sense or coming clear (40-41). The key question Atwood's analysis raises is how a text that focuses on a character trapped in Position Two (like *The Handmaid's Tale*) positions a reader to work through that character's own belief in inevitable victimization to a refusal of inevitability (Position Three) and thus, it is hoped, to Position Four. This is done mainly, I would argue, by inviting the reader to assume a critical distance from the character. Such an invitation would take the form of hints within the text of viable alternatives to the character's own assumption of inevitable victimization (hints that, in my opinion, *The Handmaid's Tale* largely lacks).

A second key presupposition relates to the question of history. Feminism has an interest in history for the ironic reason that

the struggles of women, like the struggles of racial minorities and workers, have traditionally been excluded from it. Feminism seeks to remake traditional historical accounts to correct their essentialist exclusions of women (and others). Such a remaking, however, needs to be wary of reproducing the essentialist tendencies of the original. For Judith Newton, this means avoiding a "comedic essentialism" that simply promotes "women's nurturing and connecting qualities [as] somehow a cure for male domination," but likewise avoiding a "tragic essentialism" that describes women as passive victims of a monolithic male hegemony. Historical constructions of the latter variety, she argues, "rob women of a sense of agency and quite simply give men too much 'credit'" (126).

When Newton argues for analyses of history that emphasize "social construction, change, relationality, and women's participation" (127), she taps into some basic tenets of what might be called a materialist view of history. Materialists view history as changeable, filled with dialectical inversions, a site of on-going struggle (of class struggle, in more orthodox Marxist versions). The idea is to emphasize not only that history is made by human beings and not those "large general powerful ideas" noted by Atwood, but also to accommodate a grass-roots political truth: if no one believes things can be changed then no one will be motivated to seek change. An example of a materialist view of history in art might be Brecht's epic theatre. According to Brecht, in epic theatre "behaviour is shown as alterable; man himself as dependent on certain political and economic factors and at the same time as capable of altering them" (86). And: "The 'historical conditions' must of course not be imagined (nor will they be constructed) as mysterious Powers (in the background); on the contrary, they are created and maintained by men (and will in due course be altered by them)" (190). Benjamin's motto for epic theatre nicely sums up the materialist position: "it could happen this way, but it could also happen another way" (xii).

To what extent, then, does *The Handmaid's Tale* reproduce the essentialist tendencies of the patriarchy it seeks to undermine? Does it invite the reader to view the handmaid from a critical distance? Does it allow for the chance that "it could also happen another way"?

Let me begin by noting a formal peculiarity. In the novel, the handmaid's story is told apparently in the handmaid's own words,

but the handmaid's role in this telling is paradoxical. On the one hand, the handmaid offers apparently eye-witness testimony of the horrors of Gilead; on the other hand, she apparently deliberately withholds key pieces of information. In particular, she withholds information about the condition that has made her testimony possible: her presence at a place of struggle, a place not free from but representing a gap in the patriarchal Gileadean hegemony. This originating presence is elided from the apparently seamless discourse that is handed down to the reader in the main tale.

The origin of the handmaid's account is relegated in the text to what are called the "Historical Notes." These notes are found in an appendix at the back of the book, after the "completion" of the main tale. They seem at first to be not quite serious, literally "after-words," after-thoughts spawned by but not essential to the tale. Comprised entirely of academic speeches delivered centuries after the events of the first 307 pages, the "Notes" seem primarily designed to lampoon academics: the keynote speaker, a supposed "expert" on Gilead, reveals himself during the course of his lecture to be politically uninformed and unrepentantly sexist. The title, "Notes," suggests that the afterward is not quite serious, not fully shaped or developed, and that we should not expect an integrated argument or narrative from it. There is a sense in which the "Notes" are just a way for Atwood to speculate playfully about the "context" of the tale and to take a few ironic though perhaps justified jabs at academics.

And yet, an important strategy of feminist criticism has always been to read seriously what is presented as not quite serious, to read as central what is relegated to the back of the book, to the "notes." In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, what is relegated are the very facts that situate the handmaid at her place of struggle. According to Professor Pieixoto, the supposed expert, the story of the handmaid is a "transcription" of tape cassettes discovered in a footlocker in what was once Bangor, Maine (314). The handmaid's account, then, was made some time after the events of chapter forty-six (the ambiguous arrest/rescue). As Professor Pieixoto persuasively points out, the story "could not have been recorded during the period of time it recounts, since, if the author is telling the truth, no machine or tapes would have been available to her, nor would she have had a place of concealment for them" (315). More

than likely, the recordings were made while the woman was hiding out at a way-station on "The Underground Femaleroad" (313).

The apparent origin of the tale raises an intriguing question: What happened to the signs of this origin in the transcription? Even accounting for the editorial liberties of Professors Wade and Pieixoto, the tale seems very far away from an oral transcription. More importantly, nowhere in the entire transcription does the protagonist refer to her own situation at the moment of speaking. She does at one point call her tale "a reconstruction" (144), but in fact the narrative is relentlessly in the present tense, in the "now" of the handmaid's oppression in Gilead (which includes her memories of the former time). For example, near the beginning of chapter two, Offred notes, "A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?" (17). Or later: "In this house we all envy each other something" (57). Both of these passages would be deeply ironic if indeed they were spoken from a safe-house along "The Underground Femaleroad."

The absence of self-reference cannot be explained as an effect of the editorship of Professor Pieixoto, for most of his paper is devoted to a speculative attempt to reconstruct the information that such a reference, on the part of the speaker, would have already given. But that the speaker nowhere refers to her situation at the time of the telling may be criticized as trivial. Do we really need to have the handmaid self-reflexively situate herself in order to appreciate her story? Yet the absence, I think, is symptomatic of the limits of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a political text. It points to the operation of the very patriarchal ideology—an ideology that would relegate the fact and possibility of women's struggle to the "Notes" of history—that the text apparently seeks to oppose.

It has been argued, by Atwood and others, that the possibility of resistance to Gilead is implied by the "Historical Notes." Argues Atwood:

The optimism [in *The Handmaid's Tale*], I think, lies in a couple of places. First of all, I don't think you ever get a regime like this without a resistance. . . . The other form that the optimism takes is the historical note at the end of the book, which appears to be a comment on the regime after the regime is over. We have to assume—as we assume at the end of 1984 when we read the note on Newspeak which is written in the past tense—that it's ended. ("There's Nothing" 66)

W. J. Keith echoes Atwood when he writes: "that the epilogue is set in a post-Gilead age implies that the human race is still muddling through" (Keith 132-33). And yet, without an acknowledgement of the handmaid's partial escape, there is nothing in the main text to suggest that a resistance in fact exists, nothing to counter the possibility that the resistance movement in the tale is entirely ineffectual or, like the underground network in *1984*, a front for the regime itself. The "Historical Notes," rather than mitigating this situation, reinforce it. They do so by presenting the regime that follows Gilead as quite as misogynist as the original. The misogyny of the new regime suggests that Gilead has in fact not "ended," at least not in any satisfactory sense; the forces underlying it have merely taken on a new form.

Recall that in his lecture in the "Historical Notes" Professor Pieixoto makes a number of sexist remarks about the handmaid. In explaining how his colleague came up with the title for the transcription, he says that "all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*." "The Underground Femaleroad," he tells us, has been dubbed by certain historical wags as "The Underground Frailroad," and so on (313). What is remarkable is not that the professor says these things but that they are accompanied by "laughter" and "applause" and that not a single voice is raised in objection. Nobody, not even the female academics demonstrably present, speak up to counter Pieixoto's tasteless comments.

The single-minded misogyny of the conferees is only made possible, in terms of the narrative, by a continuing lack of acknowledgement of those who struggle on behalf of women. The "Historical Notes" do not acknowledge the presence and necessity of resistance, but rather perpetuate the elision of resistance evident in the tale proper. The "Notes," with their two-hundred-year hindsight, refocus history through the peep-hole of patriarchal ideology, creating the impression of a monolithic male hegemony—as if, though times have changed since Gilead, nothing ever really changes. Once again, such a conception relegates women's oppression to what Newton calls an "inevitable and tragic essentialism," as if power and gender relations were not socially constructed but somehow part of the unchanging order of things.

It might be argued that the "elision of resistance" is not so

much a criticism of *The Handmaid's Tale* itself as of the dystopian genre in general. By definition, a dystopian tale takes place in a world in which it is "too late" to act, a world in which there is no longer a possibility of resistance (think of *1984* or Hugh MacLennan's *Voices in Time*.) The idea is to shock the reader by the horror of what might follow if action is not taken now. In part, I think, this suggests a limit to my argument. And yet, it seems to me, a successful dystopian tale—one that could motivate people to take action now—must imply that at some point there was a choice, that things could have been different if action had been taken (even if action is no longer possible in the dystopian world of the tale). This is where *The Handmaid's Tale* shows its limits. Again, it has to do with the novel's "tragic essentialism," which suggests that the sources of women's oppression are "unchanging, universal, and monolithically imposed"—and hence that authentic resistance to this oppression is not possible *at any time*.

Take, for instance, the novel's analyses of history. Perhaps the best discussion of the limits of Atwood's historical analysis is Chinmoy Banerjee's "Alice in Disneyland: Criticism as Commodity in *The Handmaid's Tale*" (a groundbreaking study of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s limits as a political text). Banerjee argues that Atwood's fictional world "is grounded on a media-generated awareness of the threat of Christian fundamentalism" (78) and "requires us to forget the immense gains made in the last 20 years by the women's movement" (78). As a result, the critical force of the novel is seriously blunted: "Atwood's fantasy is unlikely to scare a new generation of women into following in their mothers' steps, precisely because its premises ignore history and, in so doing, communicate an absence of hope" (78).

Indeed, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a very limited description of Gilead. The novel offers no explanation of the larger political context of the regime, nor any explanation for its resort to such extreme levels of terror. Also, as Banerjee and others have pointed out, Gilead doesn't seem to have an economy (Banerjee 79). In fact the political "reality" of *The Handmaid's Tale*, much like that of *Bodily Harm*, is carefully circumscribed. From what real tendencies of the American Religious Right could come a regime in which there is both fanatical right-to-life (the death penalty for abortion, no anesthetics and so on) and the "shredding" of any child born with a birth defect? Or how to explain the lack of resis-

tance to the takeover—the assassination of the American President and the mass murder of the Congress—in the “real” United States, a country with an almost mystical belief in the model of its own government and in which there are over a hundred million guns in private hands?

The answer offered by the text is that the Gileadean revolution was motivated almost entirely by a desire to (re)oppress women. This is made explicit by the Commander. The takeover was necessary, the Commander explains, because there was nothing left for men “to do with women” (221). Sex, he says, with patriarchal understatement, was part of the problem. It was too easy; anyone could buy it. As a result, “There was nothing [for men] to work for, nothing to fight for. . . . Men were turning off on sex. . . . They were turning off on marriage” (221-22). The entire regime seems organized to subjugate women: women are silenced; forbidden to see themselves in mirrors or to read or write; “salvaged”; treated as property; “natural resources” and children; controlled with ropes and cattle prods. The oppression is so absolute and so otherwise unmotivated that it could be the result only of an instinctual need by men to oppress women.

*The Handmaid's Tale*, then, explains political violence as an expression of sexual instincts. The need to oppress women is virtually universal: even Luke, it turns out, “doesn't mind it at all” when the revolution takes away his lover's independence; “[maybe] he even likes it” (191). Remember that Luke is a killer of cats (202); he is also recognizable to the handmaid in the alleged rapist killed by the mob led by Ofglen (291). At times, a more complex historical context is hinted at for the revolution, but inevitably this context—with its possibility of conflicting political interests—is recuperated into the dominant motif. One paragraph begins, “Nothing changes instantaneously,” as if to promise an insight into the mechanism of historical change, but it merely continues to tell of an increase in sexual assaults on women (66). The same chapter ends with the juxtaposition of a college memory, in which Moira and the handmaid drop waterbombs on the boys on a panty-raid, with the image of the Commander and Nick getting into the car, as if the power-game of college sex were a sufficient explanation for this formation of political power (67-68).

The problem with explaining historical transformations in this way is not that it is unfair to men (one could find endless ex-



amples of violent or sexist behaviour by men), but that it essentializes history and thus undermines the possibility of a constructive response. *The Handmaid's Tale's* one-dimensional explanation for the Gileadean regime, because it leaves so much of the regime's violence as otherwise unmotivated, leaves the impression of an innate—and thus unchangeable—need on the part of men to oppress women. The explanation also tends to efface the differences between various forms of violence. Sexual assault and the assassination of a head of state are both acts of horrific violence, but they are not the same thing; it helps little to combat either to reduce one to the other. If the aim of *The Handmaid's Tale* is to motivate a constructive response by the reader, a more historically rooted analysis of various forms of violence is necessary; only if human relations are understood in their social and political—and not instinctual—origins is it possible to imagine human action to change them.

It might be argued that the limits of the historical analysis in *The Handmaid's Tale* only reflect the limitations in the handmaid herself. Atwood, perhaps anticipating criticisms of the novel, has explained (away) the lack of a "total picture" on exactly these grounds:

Well, the character, of course, is a first-person narrator. The information that she has access to is very limited since her life is very limited. She lives under constraint. Therefore, she cannot get any kind of total picture. ("There's Nothing" 66)

A similar explanation is implicit in the "Historical Notes," in which Professor Pieixoto assigns the "many gaps" in the tale to the limits of the narrator. Yet the handmaid is, after all, only a character within a fiction. Neither Professor Pieixoto nor the reader of *The Handmaid's Tale* is confronted by a real historical document—the "document" is just part of a novel. The handmaid's limited perceptions do not constitute a personal flaw (since the handmaid is not a "real" person) nor do they necessarily indicate political limits for the text. The key issue is to what extent the text invites the reader to maintain a critical distance from the handmaid—to what extent does it invite the reader to move on from the handmaid's own position (Victim Position Two) to a position of greater awareness.

One interesting possibility is that the elision of the partial escape might itself help to produce such a critical distance. By

forcing the reader to experience the handmaid's subjection as if through her own "eye/I," the elision, by intensifying the reader's identification to an unbearable degree, might contribute to a revulsion. With this revulsion would come an implied warning: smarten up and act now, or this is you! The point is well made by Stephanie Barbé Hammer:

On one hand the very fact that Offred is not a revolutionary but an average, college-educated working mother makes her both recognizable and sympathetic to us. But at the same time Atwood turns our empathy for Offred against us, suggesting that her protagonist (and thus we too, in so far as we resemble her) acts or fails to act based on a dangerous amalgamation of gender assumptions which have governed women's behaviour for centuries and which have guaranteed their oppression by men: a vicious circle of passivity and helplessness—wherein passivity perpetuates impotence which in turn justifies and excuses passivity. (44)

Out of this complex reaction there is perhaps the possibility for a productive critical perspective. Unfortunately, *The Handmaid's Tale* makes it difficult to realize this possibility, for even if the reader disidentifies with the handmaid and rejects the handmaid's passivity, the text leaves little opportunity for the formation of an alternative view. Without the possibility of an alternative, of another way, the dominant subject-position remains one of identification with the handmaid and her abjection.

I should digress a moment here to point out that not all readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* agree that the handmaid is a highly limited character. She does, it is true, start out passive and unaware: the revolution takes her by surprise; she does not resist, nor does she join in the demonstrations; she considers the activities of more militant women like her mother or her friend Moira to be either embarrassing or "frightening" (143). But according to, for instance, Barbara Rigney, all of Atwood's main characters begin this way only to learn gradually the necessity of accepting responsibility (104). In the case of Rennie in *Bodily Harm* and Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, political responsibility means the imperative to "tell" or, as Atwood herself often puts it, to "bear witness" (Rigney 120).

This line of argument depends upon a sense that the handmaid does finally accept responsibility. My own reading is that

the passivity of the handmaid, like the mind-boggling obtuseness of Rennie (picking up a package for a stranger, as if she's never been to the movies or seen a Canada Customs ad!) is quite constant. The handmaid performs minor acts of resistance—she steals a flower (109), asks the Commander to tell her "What's going on" (198), and consorts, up to a point, with Ofglen—but, in the end, she lacks as much awareness and resolve as in the beginning. The lack of change in the handmaid is most strongly signalled by her relationship with Nick. Some critics have read her relationship with Nick as an act of heroism and resistance (see Foley 56 and Yeoman 98), but, for me, it is deeply problematic. For one thing, the initial love scene is like a near-rape scene in a romance novel (109). For another thing, this "seduction" takes place on the very same night as the institutional rape of "the Ceremony"—as if, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the earlier rape, all the handmaid ever really wanted was a man. And once she is with Nick, the handmaid renounces any desire for resistance: "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him" (283). The relationship with Nick can be read as just another emblem for the determination of political relations by sexual instincts and for the hopelessness of women's struggle: resistance is betrayed by women's own insatiable, duplicitous desire.

By the end of her tale, the handmaid has repudiated all resistance: "I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject" (298). This final abjection seriously calls into question the potential value of her telling of her story, her "bearing witness."

*The Handmaid's Tale*, I would argue, quite strongly enforces the handmaid's limited perspective upon the reader. Two devices in particular seem to work towards this end. One is the large number of textual interpellations, in which the handmaid seems to speak for all women/all who would read the text as women. These are statements in the plural "we," statements which have the effect of creating an identification: you, reader, woman, are like me: abject. Interpellations begin on the first page. "We yearned for the future," says the handmaid from the Red Centre. "How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability?" (13). Later she suggests that all the women at the centre recognize their only resource as their bodies. "If only we could talk to [the guards]. Something could

be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy" (14). On numerous occasions the handmaid adopts this non-contradictory collective voice, as for instance when she describes the mode of living in the time before the revolution: "We lived, as usual, by ignoring" (66).

The implication is that all women share the characteristics of the handmaid, an impression ironically strengthened by the fact that, in her very namelessness, the handmaid takes on the guise of an Everywoman. The interpellations strengthen the reader's identification with the handmaid. Again, the political intention may be to produce a kind of revulsion: how dare this woman speak for me? But conventional reading practice accords a certain authority to a narrator, even a limited narrator, and there is little within *The Handmaid's Tale* to offer another position. To say, as the handmaid does, that "I resign my body freely" is of course the ultimate ideological effect; but without a sense of alternatives, of contradiction (I give up my body to live, but giving up my body attacks the very reason for me to be alive) the narrative implies that the resignation of her body is somehow "natural" for the handmaid, that the lack of contradiction (which is the very possibility of struggle) is not, in fact, an effect of ideology, but is somehow part of her woman's "being."

The second device is the presentation and devaluation of alternatives. The protagonist's mother, Moira, and Ofglen all seem to represent alternatives to the handmaid's passivity. But the "plot" of the novel (with all the conspiratorial resonances) works to delegitimize these alternatives. The handmaid's mother, who has spent her life in feminist struggle, is revealed by the middle of the story to have ended up as a bitter old alcoholic. She only retains her belief that history will absolve her "after the third drink" (131). The mother's sorry end is part of a satire directed against "radical" feminists, who are portrayed in the novel as contributing to the intolerant mentality that leads to Gilead. Moira, perhaps the most dynamic representative of resistance, is shown by the end to have cynically accepted her lot as a prostitute. "I mean, I'm not a martyr," she says. The whorehouse is not so bad: "Butch paradise, you might call it" (261). Ofglen distinguishes herself with two acts of courage: the mercy killing of the "rapist" and her own suicide to protect her comrades. Her courage, however, is devalued by the handmaid's reactions to it. The news of Ofglen's sacrifice does not

generate anger or sympathy in the handmaid. Instead she feels "thankful" (298). For the handmaid, Ofglen's courage only highlights the risks of action, and thus contributes to her own abjection. The result, for me as a reader, is to increase my feeling of hopelessness: if Ofglen's sacrifice cannot inspire the least resolve in the handmaid—the Everywoman of *The Handmaid's Tale*—then her sacrifice seems to be without value, to be even, perhaps, an act of madness.

The devaluations of the handmaid's mother, Moira, and Ofglen seem designed to demonstrate the impossibility of female heroes. The demonstration has the potentially positive effect of throwing the reader back on her own devices, of emphasizing that everyone is implicated in the construction of society and that everyone, therefore, has a responsibility to act. The handmaid's passivity is poignantly expressed in her yearning for heroes who will do what she herself lacks the courage to do:

I don't want [Moira] to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, singlehanded combat. Something I lack. (261)

By demonstrating the impossibility of heroes and pointing to the escapist character of the handmaid's yearning for heroes ("swashbuckling," "single-handed combat"), *The Handmaid's Tale* does perhaps suggest the need for everyone to act. Again, however, the lack of viable alternatives undermines the possibility of such action. The devaluation of alternatives returns the reader to the handmaid as possessor of the only possible or realistic view.

In her critical writings Atwood argues that the lack of positive models is potentially more motivating for the reader, because, by emphasizing the difficulty of the present situation, the lack adds to the urgency for change (*Second Words* 130). This recalls her preference in *Survival* for a "consistent and tough-minded Position Two poem." The difficulty, as she herself puts it in *Survival*, lies in how to distinguish between a text that is "a symptom or reflection of a Position" and one that is "a conscious examination of it" (41). *The Handmaid's Tale*, insofar as it is intended as a feminist text, is intended as a conscious examination of the handmaid's victimization and self-victimization, with the aim of drawing attention to the need for change. Yet the unrelenting denial of role models in the text, of alternatives to the main character trapped in Position

Two, can itself be enervating. Atwood sums up the danger in her own anticipation of a reviewer's response ("Minn" is a passive-victim character created by Marian Engel):

My own feeling is that there are a lot more Minn-like women than there are ideal women. The reviewer might have agreed, but might also have claimed that by depicting Minn and only Minn—by providing no alternative to Minn—the writer was making a statement about the nature of Woman that would merely reinforce these undesirable Minnish qualities, already too much in evidence. (*Second Words* 218)

The limits of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a political text are well summarized by this hypothetical self-criticism, a criticism to which Atwood offers no reply.

Fortunately, although *The Handmaid's Tale* does little to acknowledge it, there is always in history, as in reading, the possibility of struggle. A key lesson of feminist analysis is that the seamlessness of the discourse of power—patriarchal discourse, the discourse of a History that relegates women's struggle to the "Notes"—is an effect of exclusion. Feminist consciousness is rooted in the rejection of the "naturalness" of the role or rather non-role of women in history; it asserts that gender is socially constructed and that "bio-theological determinism" is not "natural," but is rather *represented* as natural by a self-serving patriarchal discourse.

To reaffirm the possibility of struggle, recover the contradictions, the positions critical of the handmaid that are elided from the tale: each time the handmaid says "we" she excludes from the collective voice the voices of those who struggle, of her mother, of Moira, of Ofglen. Another contradiction: she gives her real, original name only to Nick, the silent, sultry male, but declines to give it, declines to name herself to her reader and would-be collaborator, even though she has the chance from the half-way house. And the greatest contradiction of all: think of the difference in the handmaid's story, in herstory, if the tale's origin were recovered from the afterword and were boldly proclaimed in a foreword. From the beginning it would be known that the handmaid had at least partially escaped, that her tale is made possible only by her presence at a place of resistance, that the patriarchal order is never "seamless." Within the borders of the regime there are half-way houses, places of danger, admittedly, but also places of struggle. Knowing that the

handmaid speaks—can only speak—from such a place, every one of her self-abjected cries becomes a contradiction: "It's all I can do. . . . There is nothing I can do to change it. . . . I don't want to be telling this story." And the suspense of the "ambiguous" help-less ending is dismantled. As a final image of contradiction, consider these next-to-last words of the handmaid in light of the place from which they are spoken: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped" (307).

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