

Patriarchal Consciousness: Analysis of the Theory of Exchange in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

As Gayle Rubin grapples with the source of women's oppression in her essay, "The Traffic in Women," she examines the way in which society segregates itself according to rigid gender rules through the division of labor by sex, resulting in a binary system that grants men rights over women that women themselves lack. As a result of this gender stratification, women become little more than objects, traded and transferred throughout society for the benefit of men. This theory of the exchange of women is modelled in the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which a totalitarian, patriarchal regime of Gilead forms in response to falling birthrates, forcing fertile women to become Handmaids and bear children for the powerful men of the state and their barren wives. The show is told from the perspective of Offred, a Handmaid who narrates her struggle within the dehumanizing system that treats her as state property. The rigid division of society along the boundaries of gender clearly defines the role of women as subordinates to men, feeding a system that trafficks the labor and bodies of women for the benefit of the state. However, because the women are further divided amongst themselves on account of class, the roles of certain women force them to perform as intermediaries between the male authorities and the lower-class women, contributing to the exchange. Rubin's concept of a male giver and a female gift is complicated by the roles of women in Gilead that contribute to the exploitation of women in other classes as intermediaries in a masculine chain of command. Although Rubin's theory of the exchange of women demonstrates that men ultimately benefit from the exchanges in Gilead, its reliance on gender alone limits its scope, failing to account for the multiple levels of exchange facilitated by women themselves in a more complex, class-stratified society.

In accordance with Rubin's theory, the division of labor by sex splits the society of Gilead along gender lines, stripping women of their self-sufficiency and rendering them helplessly submissive before the wishes of the patriarchy. Rubin considers how societies assign different tasks to men and women in order to induce a "reciprocal state of dependency" between the genders (180). This process of division actively polarizes society into "two mutually exclusive categories" by pressuring individuals to meet the social and labor expectations of their gender while inhibiting traits that are considered proprietary to the opposite sex. Rubin links this process of gender separation to Biblical teachings, quoting Deuteronomy, "The woman shall not wear that which pertains unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination unto the Lord," which invokes the divine origins for this visual distinction between men and women (Rubin 180). In the theocratic nation of Gilead, the Bible lays the foundation for justifying gender inequality. Indeed, men are regarded as an extension of God's will and they carry titles such as "Guardians of the Faith," "Eyes of the Lord," and "Angels of the Apocalypse," while fertile women are said to be bestowed with "a gift directly from God" and are called to serve these men and their wives "like Bilhah served Rachel"

("Offred="). Propelled by these religious beliefs, Gilead segregates individuals according to gender, confining women to a set of rigid social expectations and responsibilities that attend to the desires of men. This sharp dichotomy of social standing between men and women, facilitated by the sexual division of labor, is conveyed through an early interaction between Offred, a Handmaid, and Nick, the Commander's driver. Her long, red robes and winged white bonnet engulf her body, leaving her nearly indistinguishable from the other Handmaids, and limiting her own perception of the world around her. This clothing is a symbol of the identity that the state has forced upon her as a fertile woman: a resource for breeding, devoid of personality or cognition. Nick, on the other hand, wears a dark shirt, pants, and boots as he shovels, which conjures an aura of strength and autonomy; while he also serves Commander Waterford, he is spared a degree of social autonomy on account of his gender. Offred stiffly descends the steps of the porch, her movements highlighting the painful awareness that she is, as if stepping within a world that is not hers, while Nick crassly shovels and asks, "Going shopping?" His confident, casual voice contrasts with Offred's meek utterances of "yes" and "peace be with you." Under the constant fear of surveillance, Offred's few words are these state-sanctioned phrases -- turned to a mouthpiece for those who exploit her. Her voiceover playfully invites the viewer beneath this meek, deferential exterior, her sarcastic "No Nick, I'm going to knock back a few at the Oyster House Bar, want to come along?" unmasking her genuine, yet forbidden personality ("Offred," 11:00-40). Because men rule and patrol Gilead, women must outwardly construct themselves in a way that aligns with the expectations of their gender. These differences in clothing and speech further demarcate the gender boundaries between men and women, fueling an interdependence between the sexes in which women are forced to relinquish control, assuming reproductive and household duties while depending on men to lead and govern them. In contrast to their prior economic freedoms, women are now tied to a chain of production, forced to fulfill a specific role in society while incapable of providing for themselves. The government established this labor division during the takeover by firing women from their jobs and freezing their bank accounts, forcing them to rely on their male kin for support. When Offred tells her husband that he now owns her money, he responds, "you know I'll take care of you" ("Late," 24:00-12). This line demonstrates the efficacy of the gender roles in creating a dependency; because Offred is unable to work or own property, she is robbed of her financial autonomy and must helplessly rely on the "care" of her husband. This power dynamic paves the way for the patriarchy in present-day Gilead, in which women exchanged throughout society for economic and social benefit of the men in charge. The handmaids are forbidden to use their real names, because this would suggest a degree of self-ownership. Instead, Offred is issued a name that literally means "Of Fred," marking her as property to her commander Fred Waterford. In the Ceremony, a ritualized form of rape for procreation, Offred is completely degraded to a womb, lying limply on the bed beneath her mistress while her Commander rapes her ("Offred," 30:30-31:50). The name "the ceremony" draws a connection to Rubin's theory that these ceremonies determine social relations, particularly that "men have certain rights to their female kin" (Rubin 177[MOU5]). This idea of male ownership over women illuminates the power

dynamic in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which Offred is forced to fulfill her role as a surrogate for her Commander, fully succumbing to him the right to her body. This scene reduces her function in society to that of a reproductive organ, endowed with the “gift” of fertility that the Commander assumes ownership over. Thus, Rubin’s theory of the sexual division of labor builds a foundation for Gilead’s system, which constrains women to subordinate roles in society and forces them to comply with the wishes of the men who own them.

While the sexual division of labor explains the overarching oppression of women by men, it is complicated by the complicity of women in the exchange of other women in the class-stratified system of Gilead. Rubin roots her theory of oppression in a binary understanding of gender, stating that men are the “exchangers” and women are the “gifts;” therefore women are purely a “conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it” (Rubin 174). While these speculations hold up on a macroscopic scale, Rubin’s reliance on gender as a premise for oppression limits the process of exchange to a one-dimensional flow of control by men over women. To refer to the “women” in *The Handmaid's Tale* as one group is a crude simplification: in reality, while all women face discrimination, variables like status, fertility, wealth, and race complicate the status of women, resulting in class stratifications -- a division of labor by *class* -- that further segregate society. Thus, what Rubin refers to as a “category” of women manifests itself in Gilead as a hierarchy in which some women gain a form of control over others (Rubin 178). For instance, the Aunts are among the highest-ranking women in Gilead, charged with overseeing and disciplining the handmaids. The Wives also enjoy a certain degree of power as a result of their role in the creation of Gilead and their relationship with men. Beneath them are the Handmaids, an essential but extremely oppressed social class, responsible for producing offspring for the nation. Below them are Marthas, who serve as domestic servants in the household. Finally, Unwomen are the lowest class of women, comprised of sterile women, gender traitors, and protestors who are sent to the Colonies, where they are exploited for slave labor (“Offred”). This caste system is a defining feature of the Republic because it is responsible for allocating responsibilities and power among women, further constraining a woman’s place in society. A power struggle develops between the various classes in pursuit of greater control and recognition by the male society, causing women to exchange those beneath them on the social ladder. Despite the collective plight of women in Gilead, their further division in society according to a class structure organizes women into different roles, creating multiple levels of exchange that prey on the lower classes.

As a result of the division among women according to a caste system, the Aunts derive power to enforce government rules upon the Handmaids, resulting in a layer of exchange between women for which Rubin’s male-based theory does not accommodate. While Gilead operates on laws created by men, it is the Aunts who drive the process of converting independent, free-thinking women into obedient servants to the state. Because their status confers them power over the handmaids, the aunts take on the role of “partners” rather than merely “gifts” to the male authorities, contradicting Rubin’s theory which casts women as solely victims of exchange (Rubin 174). In fact, by presenting women themselves as representatives of

the misogynistic, extremist government, Atwood seems to emphasize their complicity in the system. With the creation of Gilead, fertile women like Offred are captured and sent to the Red Center, where the Aunts lead their indoctrination. Rows of handmaids sit like schoolchildren before Aunt Lydia, whose voice rings through the silence as she informs them of their “biblical purpose.” Her brown, belted robes and severely tied back hair lend her a masculine quality, straying from the rigid gender expectations set forth by the sexual division of labor, which rejects the “sameness of men and women” (178). However, rather than promoting hyper-femininity among all women, Gilead actively segregates women into different categories, each with its own set of gender expectations that correlate with class and responsibility. Thus, the militant, practical attire of the Aunts is a mark of their authority over other women, whose effeminate appearance demarcates their status as objects. When she hears grumbling from one of the women, Aunt Lydia calmly states, “now we will have silence, like little mice,” as if speaking to kindergarten students, before approaching Janine and tasing her until her screams fill the schoolroom. “Blessed are the meek, dear,” she adds in a mocking, satisfied tone (“Offred,” 19:20-20:00). Under the auspices of saving the handmaids from their past impurity, Aunt Lydia unwaveringly inflicts physical and psychological torture until they comply, betraying her own satisfaction from their pain in the process. In a nation where power is scarce, she quickly assimilates to her role as an Aunt, incentivized by the alluring power to control and oppress others. Thus, the effectiveness of the female caste system lies in its ability to transform a desperation for power into an outlet of vicious sadism against other classes. A later scene contextualizes Aunt Lydia’s role within the broader societal hierarchy, which utilizes her as an invaluable tool for carrying out their wishes. Following the discovery of Ofglen’s relationship with a Martha, Offred is interrogated about her shopping partner’s “gender treachery.” The male investigator calmly sits on a couch across from Offred, questioning her and recording her answers onto a notepad as he leans on an elbow. Meanwhile, Aunt Lydia hovers beside the officer’s shoulders, her eyes darting back and forth as if to monitor the interaction and oversee the compliance of her handmaid, occasionally intervening and brandishing her taser to provoke a confession. Aunt Lydia’s physical stance in between the officer and Ofglen portrays her as literal intermediary between the male government officials and the handmaids, perpetrating the captivity she finds herself locked in. When Offred boldly declares, “she was my friend,” the interrogator glances up at Aunt Lydia, tacitly conveying his expectation that she be punished. Evidently, Aunt Lydia is like a mediator between a master and slave, tasked with the physical, treacherous work of enforcing the regime’s laws onto the handmaids while she herself is incapable of resisting against these higher rules. The hands of the male government remain bloodless as they rely on the Aunts to enforce their heinous laws. This degrading role reduces her to a complicit agent, merely an extension of the male authority as she carries out their desires. Yet while the theory of exchange as elucidated by Rubin would restrict her to a product of exchange, her role simultaneously renders her a perpetrator. The source of her oppression — her forced subservience to the regime — is the same source from which she draws control. In fact, Aunt Lydia blurs the lines between her professional responsibility of enforcement to a personal

venture of revenge and torture. When she states, “blessed are the meek,” Offred retorts, “and blessed are those who suffer for the cause of righteousness,” prompting Aunt Lydia to violently strike Offred to the ground and taser her neck until Mrs. Waterford intervenes (“Late,” 26:50-31:45). The dichotomy of these two Bible verses conveys the vastly different responses by women to Gilead’s system of oppression as a result of their class division. On one hand, Offred is willing to endure suffering in order to resist unjust authority, while Aunt Lydia prizes meekness and loyalty, a trait that she herself embodies through her unwavering subservience to the male demands. The Aunts sell themselves as a tool to the government and zealously sell the Handmaids to the state for their own power and recognition, chasing status and recognition at the cost of their own humanity. Thus, Offred’s scripture directly attacks Aunt Lydia’s collaboration with the system as she unwaveringly carries out the cruel demands of the Republic, allowing her dignity to dissolve in a pool of complacency. Confronted with this revelation of her own weakness before the male authorities, Aunt Lydia responds by maniacally incapacitating Offred, demonstrating her ability to silence her Handmaid’s autonomy. While Aunt Lydia is locked between her superiors and the handmaids, she grasps onto the power granted by her role and fervently reasserts her own sense of control by punishing Offred beyond what her job requires. The Aunts fully assimilate into their role as intermediaries between the repressive regime and its reproductive slaves, grasping onto the limited power their role confers by aggressively indoctrinating and punishing the Handmaids, perpetrating the process of exchange instigated by the state.

Similarly trapped in a position of simultaneous oppression and authority within Gilead’s class structure, the Wives regard their Handmaids as mere objects for reproduction, internalizing the consciousness of the state as they exploit their Handmaids for children and perpetrate a soulless exchange of women.

While Rubin suggests that the smallest viable economic unit consists of one man and one woman, facilitating interdependency between the sexes, Gilead splits the role of the woman into two persons: the Wife and Handmaid. The Wife is expected to fulfill the role of companionship and motherhood while the Handmaid accrues value by birthing children. Alone, neither woman can fulfill the duties expected of a woman, rendering them dependent on each other to provide a worthy counterpart to their Commander. Thus, while Serena Joy possesses a degree of status through her marriage to Commander Waterford, her worth in society, and consequently, her happiness, hinges on the successful pregnancy of her Handmaid, Offred. In fact, this contradiction between dominance and dependency underpins society on a larger scale: while Gilead ruthlessly oppresses the Handmaids, it is ultimately dependent on them for its reproductive survival. As an architect in the creation of Gilead, Serena helped devise this system which strips her of her independence, forcing her to share her husband with Offred for the purpose of reproduction. This dependency on her Handmaid visibly wears on her; when Offred first meets the Commander, she coldly asserts “he is *my* husband, till death do us part. Don’t get any ideas,” and after the first Ceremony, during which she must witness her husband have intercourse with Offred, the audience witnesses her silently weeping (, “Offred,” 31:50). Out of

unhappiness in her own situation, Serena ruthlessly preys on Offred in an attempt to assert her autonomy and benefit from a potential offspring. Despite her own trafficking by her male superiors, Serena is incentivized to transfer this oppression onto her Handmaid by the possibility of raising a child and the cathartic process of wielding power over another person. For instance, when Offred's late period suggests the possibility of a pregnancy, Serena's hostility is replaced by attentive care and concern. She sympathetically states, "what we do is so terrible... it's terribly hard and we must remain strong" ("Late," 19:56). As she stands within the future nursery, Serena confides, "Fred and I, we tried for so long, it was hard to keep faith. But here you are.. You're my miracle." She gasps with joy, reveling in the prospect of a baby. However, when Offred confesses that she had gotten her period the night before, Serena collapses into rage and drags Offred into her room by the wrist. Possessed by anger, she screams at Offred and warns her that "things can get much worse for you" ("Late," 46:40-48:54). This rapid transformation from hopeful gratitude to hysterical rage reveals Serena's cruel manipulation of her Handmaid. Her inability to truly sympathize with other women makes her an ideal accomplice within Gilead's structure, which depends on the willingness of women to prey on those beneath them in the social order. Serena's horrifying treatment of Offred provides a glimpse into what forms a large-scale, methodical exploitation of Handmaids by their Wives. On the birth day of Offred's baby, all Wives and Handmaids gather at her house to assist in the delivery. Light from outside streams within and a nurturing chorus of "breathe, breathe, breathe" emanates from each woman, flooding the room with an aura of femininity and delicacy that contrasts with the dark lair of the Commander and the harsh, grating din of guards' walkie-talkies. Yet it is in this feminine space, devoid of men, that the trafficking of women takes place. As she enters the house, Offred remarks, "it's the smell of genesis" ("Birth Day," 13:55). Her use of the word "genesis" alludes to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, in which Eve is gifted to Adam in order to make a baby for him. This primal, procreative purpose of women is achieved through the birth of a baby, giving the Wives and Handmaids a sense of self-worth. In addition to its literal and biblical interpretations, the word "genesis" also carries a symbolic connotation: the origin or formation of something. Deceptively nurturing, this birthplace forms the crux of Gilead's patriarchy, upholding the pinnacle of oppression — the exchange of babies from the Handmaids to the state — upon which society orders itself. This process seems to operate in the absence of men, suggesting that the Wives have fully adopted a patriarchal mindset towards their Handmaids, viewing them as resources for reproduction rather than human beings. At the time of delivery, Offred's mistress sits on a stool above her Handmaid, grimacing and moaning in a feigned imitation of labor, while Offred painfully gives birth to the newborn baby. After the birth, the Wife lays on a bed and is immediately given the baby to hold, while the other Wives gather around her with admiration and praise, creating a uniform ring of blue dresses around the bed. For a moment, Serena glances across the room at the subdued, huddled group of handmaids in their deep red cloaks, and her gaze seems to evoke the slightest tinge of sympathy for the abused women ("Birth Day," 25: 44). However, her ingroup mentality, so strikingly illustrated by the defined separation of blue and red in the room, regards the Handmaids as an "other,"

subservient class, leading her to place the desires and interests of her group above the wellbeing of the other women. As her eyes fall back on the group of contented Wives, she can erase from her mind the momentary view of the women as individuals, thinking of them instead as merely wombs whose purpose fades once the baby is born. Serena, along with the other Wives, willingly sets aside their own humanity and sympathy by mercilessly trafficking the Handmaids for their own selfish ends, helping sustain the oppression of their gender. Thus, the Wives constitute a crucial link in the operation of Gilead as they adopt the consciousness of the state by claiming ownership over the Handmaids and relentlessly pursuing their reproductive exploitation. In conjunction with the exchange of women by women in power, the high surveillance environment of Gilead breeds collective paranoia, leading women within the same class to distrust and envy one another rather than band together as allies. Despite the similar circumstances that the handmaids face at the intersection of their femininity and fertility, they still regard one another with suspicion and even feign piety as a self-defensive mechanism to protect themselves from spies and preserve their image as obedient, faithful members of society. Offred initially believes that her shopping partner, Ofglen, is a firm believer, telling the audience, “we go everywhere in twos. It’s supposed to be for our protection... There are no friends here. Can’t be. The truth is we’re watching each other. She’s my spy, and I am hers” (“Offred,” 12:26). Their suspicions of each other lead them both to adopt a pious persona, communicating with trite language such as “Blessed be the fruit” and rarely straying from the topics of shopping and the weather (“Offred,” 11:50). This stiff, artificial interaction between Offred and Ofglen is vastly different from the supportive and animated relationship between Offred and her friend Moira before the takeover, demonstrating how Gilead’s system of exchange suppresses the companionship of women by cultivating a fear of exploitation by the hands of other women. When Ofglen lets down her guard by revealing snippets of her prior life to Offred, a mutual understanding and sympathy blossoms between them as they realize they are both on the same side. However, these bonds of friendship are fragile and transient, taking the form of whispered words of comfort and stories of the past shared in hushed tones. Ofglen’s sudden disappearance and replacement by a new Handmaid, who declares herself to be “Ofglen,” further emphasizes the dangerous volatility of these intimate, intraclass relationships (“Birth Day,” 45:10). In a society that relies on women to act as spies for one another, even the most oppressed groups of women are inhibited from forming genuine friendships out of fear of being betrayed to the state. Rather, these women are forced to fulfill a role of surveillance which contributes to the oppression of their own class.

The multiple layers of exchange that occur between and within classes heightens the oppression of women as a whole, ultimately working in favor of the male government and coinciding with Rubin’s conclusion that men are the beneficiaries of these exchanges. The group of women in Gilead is like a staggered pyramid, comprised of various social classes that compete for the limited power they are granted. As long as each individual fulfills their role by oppressing those beneath them and monitoring those within the same class, the social order of women keeps itself disciplined. The interests of the state are perpetuated through this power struggle of

women, because each woman is ultimately a slave to her precise role and her oppression and surveillance of others ensures their obedience to the state. Thus, while the overlapping factors of class and gender facilitate exchanges between women, these exchanges serve the interests of the government by exercising male wishes, such as the Aunts' disciplinary power over the Handmaids and the Wives' reproductive exploitation of the Handmaids. While these women reap rewards for fulfilling their roles, such as the Aunts' power to control others and the Wives' ability to raise a child, these incentives ultimately feed back into the interests of the state, designed to keep the Aunts and Wives complacent within this system while keeping the real power in the hands of men. The women who claim any sort of authority in this system are merely exercising an extension of male authority, grasping an illusory source of power that ultimately contributes to the system that oppresses them. Therefore, while Rubin's theory of exchange is rooted in a binary system divided solely on the grounds of gender, her conclusion that "women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation" remains true even in a class-stratified system (Rubin 174).

While Rubin's theory of the exchange of women arrives at the same conclusion — the oppression of women by men — it does not account for the class divisions which lead women to become complicit in Gilead's reproductive trafficking and contribute to their own oppression. The overlapping factors of class and gender within Gilead's rigid social order trap women within certain roles, such as that of Aunt, Wife, or Handmaid. The power struggle between these classes and the paranoia that pervades them enable men to use women as tools for the exploitation of other women. While men rule and govern Gilead, this patriarchal system depends on the willingness of women to readily accept the role assigned to them by society, creating a chain of exploitation that can only be weakened if individuals refuse to perpetrate their own oppression onto others.

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