

Identity and female power in the handmaids tale



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Television has played an integral role in globalizing the world and shaping the thoughts, ideas and perspectives of the people in it. Many argue that television generalizes women in a sexualized and objectified way, portraying them as subordinate humans that are dependent on men, all while being sexualized and stereotyped to unrealistic standards of character and body type. Television often objectifies women as mindless and incompetent in comparison to men in television.

While television has developed and created more roles where women are seen as powerful and impactful, there are still times where women are characterized in a stereotypical manner. The TV series *The Handmaid's Tale* is a unique case because it creates a world where women appear to be victims to the dystopic world they live in, while at the same time holding a great deal of power over men and the society. It is a story about the ways in which women are oppressed in a society run by men for their own benefit, and about how certain women take advantage of the situation to ally themselves with male power for personal gain (Schwartz, 2017).

Now, imagine a world where all women have no rights, and are, in a sense, slaves to the high-powered men in charge of the government. A society where a woman's place is cemented in whether or not she can bear a child. Women who can have a child become surrogates for the wealthy and powerful families who can't. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a Hulu original television series based off of the 1985 best-selling novel of the same name by Margaret Atwood. The dystopian science fiction series creates an alternate reality set in the future where women are stripped of their rights and turned into servants of society. Men are superior to women, and the regime kills gay

people, abortionists, and anyone who protests their version of what society should look like. Due to the new laws created by the Sons of Jacob, women are supposed to stand by the side of their husbands. Set in a dystopic society referred to as the Gilead Regime, the show is centered around main character Offred. Offred, formerly known as June, is separated from her husband and daughter, and later becomes a handmaiden to the very powerful Commander Waterford and his wife Serena Joy. She is now subjected to life as a handmaiden because she is one of the few fertile women left in society.

Each month, Offred partakes in a monthly ceremony where The Commander rapes her while his wife watches on, in an attempt to get her pregnant. Offred becomes the centerpiece in the rebellion against the regime, taking on the powerful men who rule in Gilead. Offred is a symbol of female power as she fights against the world that's been created for her. Through all she experiences, Offred never loses sight of her past, holding onto her old identity which helps shape her into the powerful female character she becomes. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a vivid expression of female power and identity and how it can contribute to the shape and construct of society.

Throughout the show, the audience sees Offred trying to maintain her old identity while keeping up her with her new identity and new life. Before she was Offred, she was June Osbourne. June was a mother, a wife, and an employed woman who had an independent life and created a merit of her own in society. In season one episode three, in the episode titled *Late*, all of the women in June's office are fired, and later in the day June is informed that she no longer has access to her bank account because it is now

controlled by her husband. As the women are all leaving their office having just been fired, they see guards with guns at the door and lining the streets. This signified the beginning of the uprising and the start of the new regime. Throughout the series, the show rewinds to times in June's life between her being fired and becoming Offred. Offred doesn't want to forget her old life, as she had a husband and a child. Now, in her new role as handmaid, she must bear the child of the powerful Commander Waterford. The Gilead regime creates an identity for the handmaids, taking away who they once were and creating them into someone different. Offred tries to hold on to her memories of who she once was, including her husband and child, but her memories fade as the regime pushes her further and further away from her past identity. The handmaid's lack of connection with others in the outside world creates another part of their lacking identity, because the only people they really spend a lot of time with are the families they are assigned to be a part of. Offred's lack of satisfying social interaction impedes her development of her sense of self in the regime. Offred also fails to maintain her identity to structure a sense of self, to connect with others, and to act because in Gilead even apparent forms of resistance or attempts to create, maintain or grasp an identity frequently turn into complicity with the regime. (Stillman & Johnson, pg. 75) Handmaids are forced to not have an identity besides the one created for them because the only identity that matters is the one created by the regime. Any attempt to connect with who they once were or try to develop an identity outside the lines, is seen as a resistance to the regime and a rebellion against it. Within this vortex of fear and vulnerability, this contrast of blank time and intense interactions with powerful, inscrutable individuals, the Handmaid ultimately fails to maintain

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her identity. (Stillman & Johnson, 1994, p. 74) Offred is able to use her old identity to help shape her new identity. She takes aspects from her past life to help her develop into her new role as a handmaid. While holding onto pieces of the past, she must fully become Offred in order to stay alive.

When June is captured while trying to flee to Canada, she becomes a handmaid and is given her new name; Offred. Offred is the name she is given by the family she is assigned to. It means Of-Fred, Fred being the name of Commander Waterford. Each handmaid is given a name like this, others including Ofglen and Ofwarren. Their new names signify who they belong to, meaning Offred belongs to Fred, and Ofglen belongs to Glen, and so on. This parallels to slavery in the 1800's, where slaves were given names that turned them into property. Many aspects of Offred's life are clear parallels to the enslavement of African Americans. She required a special pass or permission to leave the house, she was forbidden from reading or learning, and she is repeatedly raped by her Commander in order to conceive a child for him. Offred endures domestic slavery and forced sex?"? hardships that are strikingly similar to those experienced by non-white women in much higher numbers throughout history, and in various parts of the world still today (Cottle, 2017). Her identity in the show is based around what she is or isn't allowed to do. In the series, the audience sees transitions between Offred's old life and her new life. Each episode of the show gives new information about who Offred used to be, and the audience is able to see how it shaped her into who she is now. This helps the audience continue to develop her identity as a character, and shows more of the theme of identity in the show. ' These shifting reminiscences offer glimpses of a life,

though not ideal, still filled with energy, creativity, humaneness and a sense of selfhood, a life that sharply contrasts with the alienation, slavery, and suffering under totalitarianism" (Feuer, pg. 86) While the audience is seeing more and more of Offred's past life and learning more about her old identity, Offred is drifting further away from her old life and getting deeper into her new one. Offred's rebuilding of a self all but obliterated by the pain of her experience and the necessity of forgetting in order to survive. She must create, or recreate, herself after having been "erased" as a person (Feuer, pg. 90). Offred's transition into being a handmaid is more of a struggle for her because she had a life before becoming a handmaid. Future handmaids and members of the society will have an easier time transitioning into the roles they are set to be a part of, as they will not have any life outside of what the regime teaches them. By using parts of her past self as June in her development of her identity as Offred, she blends her two senses of self which lead to her growth and development as a powerful female character and a powerful female in within the Gilead regime.

The Handmaid's Tale is a strong representation of female power, feminism and sexuality. Offred is able to use her power as a woman and her sexuality to her advantage in her relationship with The Commander. Offred knows that she is a desirable woman. She knows and sees that The Commander is interested in a relationship with her outside of her being the family's handmaid. Offred was put into the handmaid role in the new society because she is able to have children. She knows that in the family dynamic, she holds a lot of power because she could potentially carry the child of The Commander that his wife, Serena Joy, so desperately wants. Offred is

portrayed as a victim, but also someone who holds a great deal of power in her situation. The Commander frequently invites her into his study to play Scrabble, something he can't do with his wife. The Commander is interested in Offred's mind and her ability to play and compete with him in Scrabble. In Offred's past life, she was a well-educated woman, so this part of her new life comes from what she was able to learn in the old society before it became the new society. Her power in this situation stems from her mind and she uses it to get gifts and favors from The Commander in exchange for her time with him. Offred later on has a private intimate relationship with The Commander, which breaks all of the laws put into place about handmaids and their relationships with their Commanders. Offred and The Commander are never supposed to be alone together, and they are only supposed to be intimate during the ceremony each month while the wives watch on. Offred knows that she is breaking the law, but she sees The Commander enjoys her company and uses it to her advantage to get information from him as well as special treatment, while showing how she uses her power as a female over a man.

Commander Waterford is an example of a man who feels powerless to a woman's power. The Commander repeatedly rapes Offred in the monthly conception ceremony, and uses Offred's daughter, who she thought was gone, as a bargaining chip in order to get what he wants. In spite of the multiple rapes and the lies that Waterford and the other men in Gilead use to maintain control over women, the most powerful weapon they have is turning the women against each other. When Commander Waterford finds out about the music box his wife gave to Offred as a gift, he realizes that

Serena Joy and Offred are starting to form a relationship. In season two episode eight, in the episode titled Women's Work, the Commander beats Serena Joy in a show of dominance that also serves to humiliate her in front of Offred, who he forces to watch. He beats her because she went behind his back and did a favor for Offred. Commander Waterford feels threatened by the two women's developing friendship because he doesn't want them to become close. The Commander fears that if Serena Joy and Offred become close, they will continue to go around him and do things to disobey him. Commander Waterford also fears their friendship because before Gilead, Serena Joy was an author who wrote a book titled A Woman's Place. In a series of flashbacks, Serena Joy and Commander Waterford are shown as having a large role in the creation of Gilead. Serena Joy was once an impassioned woman with conservative views on woman's rights, which she details in her book, saying that a woman's duty in the world was to bear children and stand by their husband's side. Once Serena Joy realizes that her future child won't be protected under the new laws, she decides to fight back against the regime to try and get women the right to read the Bible, which she loses a finger for advocating for. This scene, which occurs in season two, episode thirteen titled The Word, Serena Joy finally transforms into a powerful character after being suppressed by her husband and society.

While not obvious, the use of female sexuality is also prominent in The Handmaid's Tale. Women are forced to dress very modestly, adorning long dresses with sleeves, meant to take any sexual appeal they have away from them. Women also must cover their heads in order to appear as invisible as possible. In Gilead, they get rid of anything that remotely represents

anything sexual, including pornography and revealing clothing. The regime executes gays and lesbians, unless the women are fertile and can be used as handmaids. In Gilead, they also execute abortion doctors because Gilead's rule is based on the Bible which outlines the woman's place as a child bearer. Sexuality is meant to be concealed, but Offred is able to use hers when she is alone with Commander Waterford, as it gives her a small feeling of power over him. She also recognizes and acknowledges her enjoyment of her own small exercises of power, however ignoble: her slight power not only over the Commander, because he wants something from her, but over his wife, whom they are deceiving. She comes to understand that the Commander craves some unspoken forgiveness for the conditions of her life and that to bestow or to withhold forgiveness is a power as well as a temptation (Neuman, 863). This small power grab gives Offred the feeling of being in control in sexual situations with the Commander, as well as an unspoken feeling of power over Serena Joy, because she is the one who is sleeping with her husband and she is the object of the Commander's affection.

The Handmaid's Tale, in later episodes, brings into light the power of confidence and self-actualization. Gaining her confidence from her small acts of rebellion, Offred realizes that she must stand up for herself, for what she believes in, and for what she feels is right. Offred begins to support the secret female rights movement called Mayday, and starts searching for ways to escape Gilead with her daughter. Soon after, when all handmaids are ordered to stone Janine, formerly Ofwarren, to death, Offred refuses to do so despite what the consequences may be, which inspires the other handmaids

not to stone Janine. These acts demonstrate that sensing the need of time, Offred turns out to be a brave female who knows how to get what is hers. On the other hand, Offred is not the only female character in the show that demonstrates power and strives to break the chains that Gilead has placed on them. In season one episode seven, titled *The Other Side*, through a series of flashbacks to June's attempted escape and after her capture, the audience sees many details the life of June's husband, Luke. In this episode, the audience is introduced to Zoe, who is an ex-Army doctor who is fleeing Gilead and helping others do so as well. Her brave personality is the opposite of what the Gilead regime would want her to be. Such portrayals of Offred and other strong women show that women have the power to fight back and speak for what they believe in.

The *Handmaid's Tale* creates a far-off, futuristic society where women are stripped of their rights and turned into child bearers. While the concept is dystopian, the themes of identity, sexuality, and female power are still visible, even in a society where women aren't meant to have any of them. The show supports female empowerment and the strive for equality among genders, and how women in Gilead fight back against oppression and objectification by their government. The women become of themselves, coming into their own as women instead of a property of another. At surface level, *The Handmaid's Tale* appears to be a sexist, anti-feminist television show. Upon analysis, the many instances of female power, identity, and sexuality show that the series wants women to fight back when put into situations where they're not meant to. The show later turns into a rebellion against the dystopian society, with the women and other characters trying to

take down the society that has taken away who they once were. While the future of the fictional society is not yet revealed, the development of the themes continues throughout the show, pushing the boundaries of identity, sexuality, and power in dystopic, disturbing ways, making *The Handmaid's Tale* an anti-feminist, feminist work of art.