

The Handmaid's Tale: Women's Culture, Women's Pain

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“Mother... You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.”¹

Feminists have long attached near-divine importance to the bonds between women. From witches' covens to modern shows of solidarity like the Women's March, there's something magical – and elusive – about the concept of a women's culture, a sacred space in which women can connect over their shared experiences. From the smallest favors (lending a tampon, braiding hair) to the biggest battles (the #MeToo movement, equal pay rallies), women supporting women is the ultimate flex of feminist power.

However, the concept of women's culture is also key to the structure of Margaret Atwood's Gilead, the ultra-patriarchal regime in which her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is set. Aunt Lydia claims “camaraderie between women” as the goal of the Red Center, where Handmaids are trained; women-only ceremonies such as the Birth and the Particution draw women together in a disturbing hive mind.² Gilead shows the ominous side of women's culture: conformity, hyperfemininity, and quiet suffering mar the Handmaids' shared experiences.

Thus, Atwood presents women's culture with a confusing duality: sometimes liberating, sometimes toxic. It is a tool used in turn by the powerful and the powerless. How is it possible for women's culture to be central to both a dystopian patriarchy and modern feminism? Which group uses it more effectively to their purposes?

Although elements of the elusive women's culture can be seen in both Gilead's strict structure and everyday American life, the concept has greater success in the dystopia, where women conform to similar goals and behaviors. Examples of women's culture in Gilead, from the collective longing for pregnancy to the cult-like Birth ceremony, present the ability of Gilead's creators to use women's culture as a tool of oppression. Gileadean society is composed mainly of Wives, Marthas, and Handmaids. Offred, the protagonist, and other Handmaids are reduced to their uteruses, forced to offer their bodies as vessels for conception and childbearing. The fierce desire for pregnancy possessed by Gileadean women is the ultimate example of women's culture, as shown by the Birth ceremony: Handmaids gather in a haze, chanting with an atmosphere of religious zealotry. In fact, the Handmaids become so connected with one another that they each experience labor pains and give birth to a “ghost baby.”³ In this moment, the women of Gilead are united by common experience and lifestyle – as Offred quips, it's just what her feminist mother would have wanted. The obsession with childbirth central to Gilead's

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017), 127.

² *Ibid.*, 222.

³ *Ibid.*, 127.

women's culture, as well as the piety and submissiveness expected of Gileadean women, is built into the dystopian society as a means of keeping women helpless and harmless.

Thus, rather than building American feminism on the fragile foundation of a mysterious common denominator between all women (as Gilead does), modern America would be better served by equally exalting the *differences* between American women. Although many examples of women's culture can also be found in the modern United States, no one issue is capable of uniting American women due to their diversity of experience and identity. In our society, there are many cultural and biological factors that are associated with being a woman: anything from wearing a dress to having a vagina. However, using any of these elements on a checklist in order to verify someone's womanhood is bound to be exclusionary. Thus, the search for an American women's culture is a fruitless exercise. Even the much-cited example of feminine solidarity, the Women's March, stirs controversy: women of color rightfully highlight the failure of white women to support their black and brown sisters. American women are divided in so many ways, from race to socioeconomic status to religion, that it is impossible to unite them under any one umbrella. In other words, there is no common denominator between all women except for the fact that they are women, making a women's culture more fantasy than reality.

Perhaps, then, the biggest issue is not with Gileadeans or Americans but with the concept of women's culture itself. Gilead's transgressions are reflected in modern America, after all, from struggles surrounding reproductive freedom to the societal expectations that continue to press survivors of sexual assault into silence. The search for the magical women's culture is not combating these issues; it is legitimizing them. The very existence of women's culture in Gilead and modern America depends upon assigning common traits to all women. In other words, the "encouragement" of women's culture is, in reality, enforcement.

In modern America, there is a lot of buzz around the word divisive – it's often said the United States is a divided nation, and thus irreparably broken. But *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a different message regarding what divides us: the true magic of womanhood is its ability to capture so many different kinds of people under one term. The Handmaids in Gilead are Caucasian, Protestant, and young, designed to be childbearing vessels; the women in America are black, brown, disabled, Muslim, Jewish, queer, fat, undocumented, old, married, single, divorced, working, retired, and perhaps mothers... the list goes on. *The Handmaid's Tale* tells us that American women are most powerful when they are simply themselves: multifaceted, diverse, and complex in an absolutely ordinary way that would shock the socks off of Aunt Lydia.

Bibliography

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books, 2017.