

Srishti Ganu

Dr. Roseanne Quinn

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### The Power of Women in *The Testaments*

In *The Testaments*, by Margaret Atwood, three women narrate their experience in the dystopian society of Gilead, which is ruled by a totalitarian government that bases its social structure on parts of the Bible. One of the women, Aunt Lydia, is an Aunt who lived before Gilead's time and joined its leaders shortly after it began. Agnes Jemima is a girl who was born into Gilead and becomes a Suppliant or Aunt in training later on to avoid marrying a very old, high-ranking Commander. The third narrator is Nicole, who was born in Gilead but raised in Canada which is a democratic society in the book. Dystopian novels take aspects of real life and magnify them in a way that creates greater injustice and suffering in a reimagining of society. In this book, the magnified aspect is harsh gender roles, and the totalitarian government of Gilead is the medium that serves them. At the end of the story, Gilead is brought to an end through the power of women. The themes of totalitarianism, gender roles, and power go hand in hand in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, as the religion-based government strictly enforces roles on each member of society and forces them to keep to them using secrecy; with no power over the men enforcing these roles in their lives, women turn towards using their power over other women to survive but ultimately are able to take down the totalitarian government by relinquishing that power to other women.

First of all, Gilead enforces gender roles through a totalitarian government based on religion while keeping religion secretive to prevent women from gaining power. When Agnes

describes her training and progression as an Aunt, she explains, “The first of my inner storms came about when, after four years of reading more elementary texts, I was finally granted reading access to the full Bible. Our Bibles were kept locked up, as elsewhere in Gilead: only those of strong mind and steadfast character could be trusted with them, and that ruled out women, except for the Aunts” (Atwood np). In this quote, Agnes describes that it took her four years of reading until she was allowed to read the full Bible. In addition, Bibles are kept locked away from regular people and Aunts only get to read them when they have a strong-enough mind. Essentially, women can only read the Bible when they are indoctrinated enough into the ideals of their society. Gilead uses parts of the Bible to justify their laws and deeds, however, regular people are not allowed to read the contents of the Bible for themselves to check. Everything they learn about God and how they should behave according to the Bible is told to them through the upholders of Gilead such as the Aunts. The Aunts have the power to actually read the Bible and realize many of the stories told from the Bible were misconstrued or over-emphasized compared to how they actually are. The theme of totalitarianism is explored in *The Testaments* by depicting how keeping the power of knowledge away from the citizens is what enables the government to keep order and enforce gender roles. This is further highlighted when Agnes reads the true story of the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces and is shocked to find out that the concubine did not sacrifice herself, she was simply thrown out to the wolves. Agnes narrates, “This was what the Aunts meant, then, when they said women’s minds were too weak for reading. We would crumble, we would fall apart under the contradictions, we would not be able to hold firm. Up until that time I had not seriously doubted the rightness and especially the truthfulness of Gilead’s theology. If I’d failed at perfection, I’d concluded that the fault was mine. But as I discovered what had been changed by Gilead, what had been added, and what had

been omitted, I feared I might lose my faith” (np). In this passage, Agnes shows how she is scared to lose her faith in religion and in Gilead itself because of the dishonesty of the stories told by those with power. By basing its law and societal roles on cherry-picked stories and ideas from religion, the government weakens its own standing. They prevented women from being literate and stated that their minds were too weak to handle it to take power away from women and were able to enforce their gender expectations on women through untruthful teachings from the Bible. Agnes also mentions that before, if she ever failed at being perfect, she thought that it was her fault or something was wrong with her innately. Reading the real stories helped her to realize that a lot of what Gilead says about the roles of women in society is not true since she does have the ability to read. Her brain is able to comprehend everything the same way a man can, so her faith in Gilead wavers because they lied. By keeping the religious texts secretive, they prevent women from gaining power and the dictatorial government is able to enforce their gender ideals upon their citizens. This portrays how the themes of gender roles, totalitarianism, and power are intertwined because without keeping the power of knowledge away from common people, Gilead would not be able to control the roles of its people.

With no power over the men and the government dictating their social roles, women turned to taking power for themselves and using that power on other women. At the start of Gilead, Aunt Lydia gained power for herself when she took a chance and says to Commander Judd, “If it is to be a separate female sphere... it must be truly separate. Within it, women must command. Except in extreme need, men must not pass the threshold of our allotted premises, nor shall our methods be questioned. We shall be judged solely by our results. Though we will of course report to the authorities if and when it’s necessary” (np). In this quote, Lydia gains power for herself by creating a separate female sphere that she can command on her own without the

intervention of men. Lydia does make it seem like the men have the final say, but she gains control and even puts herself above Aunt Vidala, who genuinely believed in the ideology of Gilead and was there from the start. In a different part of the story, she likens herself to both a cat and a fox because she is able to use cunning tricks while also being too high up in the tree to be hurt. Her position commanding the female sphere as the Aunt in charge allows her to have some amount of safety like a cat in a tall tree, but she also has the resources to be scheming like a fox. The reasoning behind Aunt Lydia joining Gilead and suggesting a separate female sphere is for the sake of survival. Often while reading the book, I wondered why the Aunts believed in Gilead and did their job of indoctrinating the young girls so well. Why did Aunt Vidala behave so cruelly and frighten the girls into conforming? This type of behavior seems overly harsh and somewhat overboard, especially because it instills too much fear in some girls such as Becka. Aunt Lydia explains why people behave this way when she says, “What good is it to throw yourself in front of a steamroller out of moral principles and then be crushed flat like a sock emptied of its foot? Better to fade into the crowd, the piously praising, unctuous, hatemongering crowd. Better to hurl rocks than to have them hurled at you. Or better for your chances of staying alive” (np). Aunt Lydia had no choice but to conform to the expectations of Gilead if she wanted to survive. She ended up hurling rocks so that they wouldn’t be hurled at her. This is a common tactic for the women of Gilead to protect themselves. The more they showed their trustworthiness and enforced Gilead’s gender roles, the greater power they had and therefore, the greater safety they had. As Aunts, it was part of their job to properly educate girls into accepting their place in society. By adopting the patriarchal views and supporting them by using their power to keep other women down, they are deflecting the dictatorship’s and the men’s hatred and violence away from themselves. Power can make people forget what they believe in and the

chase for it is what helped support the authoritarianism of Gilead, which expresses how the themes of power, totalitarianism, and gender roles are knitted together in *The Testaments*.

Thirdly, Atwood conveys that totalitarianism and gender roles can be brought down when women relinquish their power to other women and work together. When Aunt Lydia asks Agnes and Becka to do the monumental task of setting Gilead on the right path, she leaves Agnes and Becka to decide for themselves what to do. When Lydia and Nicole leave the room, Becka says, “She’s asking for obedience and loyalty... Remember how she rescued us—both of us? We have to say yes” (np). Agnes and Becka chose to listen to her, despite not even knowing what exactly Aunt Lydia was going to ask them to do. Earlier in the story, Agnes discussed how Aunts have a lot of secrets and this is the source of their power. Aunt Lydia relinquishes her own power in the form of a microdot to send to the rest of the world. She finds the right three girls who she could entrust her information with to bring down Gilead. Similarly, Becka and Agnes trust Lydia to lead them on the right path as well by offering their loyalty and obedience. After everything has been set in motion, Aunt Lydia is ready to die before the Eyes torture her. I think Margaret Atwood is trying to show how the future of women can be saved by women. The men and totalitarian government in the book were the main cause of the oppression. They did many bad deeds and inflicted their own ideals about gender onto the people. The secrets of the Aunts often created a divide between them and women could not truly express how they felt or thought to each other. Despite all these odds, there were women in the story that recognized the contradictions in Gilead’s ideology and were able to rise up, work together, and trust each other to fix it. Atwood’s book is dark and feels hopeless at times, but it is also inspirational because it displays how much ability women have through Agnes and Becka, who managed to rise up despite being indoctrinated into Gilead since birth. In the end, Agnes was able to realize that her

own capabilities can go outside of the gender roles that were imprinted into her when she did new things like rowing a boat or wearing pants. She recognized that her abilities went beyond the gender roles that were assigned to her and played a key figure in taking down the totalitarian government. In the same way that the themes of power, gender roles, and totalitarianism relied on each other, by giving up one of them, the gender roles and dictatorship of Gilead came crumbling down.

All in all, the themes of totalitarianism, gender roles, and power were intertwined in *The Testaments*, and by giving up their power of secrets to work together, the women were able to break free of the gender roles that the totalitarian government enforced. At the end of the book, we learn that all the work and sacrifice the three main characters and Becka put in had paid off since Gilead was being studied as history. In addition, the professor leading the symposium is a woman, which demonstrates how far society has come since Gilead. From the sacrifices of several key women, they created a brighter future in which women can pursue academia to the highest level and are unhindered by roles set by a totalitarian regime.