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Gender Roles and Resistance in Science Fiction

Historically, science fiction has been a male-dominated genre, both in its target audience and in its characters. While science fiction today is enjoyed by all audiences, and its female characters are often developed to the same extent as male characters, this was not always the case. As more female authors entered the genre, they often used their works to explore gender dynamics throughout a variety of time periods and societies. Notably, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1986 during the second wave of feminism, envisions an oppressive, patriarchal society—the Republic of Gilead. Through this work, Atwood builds upon the gender roles of 20th century America, describing a society where the oppression of women has been taken to the absolute extreme. Gilead completely controls the bodies of women; the Handmaids are a social class of women that are solely assigned to the duty of reproduction. The novel's main character, Offred, belongs to this social class. Offred has no autonomy or independence, and her worth to society is defined purely by her fertility. At the end of the story, Offred's fate remains uncertain as she steps into a mysterious van. The ending of *The Handmaid's Tale* prompts the reader to reflect upon Offred's unresolved struggles against Gilead. There is a glimpse of potential for Offred's rebellion or escape, but this hauntingly ambiguous ending conveys the uncertainty and fear felt by all women within Gilead.

Conversely, Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* depicts a female protagonist with an incredibly nuanced and complex background as well as a vast amount of agency. Ye Wenjie is an

astrophysicist and a respected member of the scientific community, and she later takes a significant action with massive implications for humanity's future. *The Three-Body Problem* is set against the backdrop of China's Cultural Revolution—the majority of the story takes place in the politically charged time period after these events. Ye Wenjie's character is intricately woven into these historical events; she experiences tragedy and displays strength in the face of adversity and loss. She works under China's Red Coast project, aiming to discover extraterrestrial life. When contact is made with an advanced alien civilization known as the Trisolarians, Ye Wenjie uses the base's facilities to transmit a message, calling for the Trisolarians to come to Earth to solve humanity's problems. She does this due to her disillusionment with her country's political turmoil. In fact, Ye despises humanity and even commits murder to cover up her involvement with the transmission. She dooms humanity to the fate of alien invasion, all as a result of her individual actions, demonstrating the agency she holds even in a society which has wronged her. Additionally, while this topic extends slightly beyond the scope of my essay, it is notable to mention that the U.S. publisher of the English edition of the novel (and its sequels) has edited the work to remove expressions deemed as "gender-biased" (Li). For the sake of this essay, I will be examining the depiction of Ye Wenjie in the English translation of the novel. Despite these adjustments, the depiction of Ye in the translated text retains the essence of her complex character and highlights her unwavering determination. Through Ye's societal disillusionment, her monumental choices contribute to the narrative's depth, and an analysis of how she asserts her agency reveals a departure from the stereotypical portrayal of women in science fiction.

Clearly, *The Handmaid's Tale's* Offred and *The Three-Body Problem's* Ye Wenjie are both female characters that navigate oppressive societies. As mentioned, Offred lives in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, where women are stripped of their rights and bodily autonomy,

while Ye Wenjie experiences personal tragedies in the politically charged aftermath of China's Cultural Revolution. Despite their unique circumstances, both characters display resilience and inner strength. Ye Wenjie copes with her personal losses and disillusionment through contacting the Trisolarians, and her plea to them is an ultimately display of her agency. Offred struggles to navigate her life in Gilead, and she takes small but symbolic actions to rebel against the regime's control. Through the characters of Offred and Ye Wenjie, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Three-Body Problem* offer distinct portrayals of female protagonists navigating oppressive societies, revealing the contrast between Offred's resilience and Ye's resistance in the face of sexism, misogyny, and other societal limitations.

By analyzing the societal constraints present within the worlds of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Three-Body Problem*, we can gain a greater understanding of the characters' actions. By contextualizing their acts of resilience and resistance in the context of the societies they live in, the importance of their actions becomes clear. As mentioned previously, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts the oppressive regime of Gilead, an imaginary society where the patriarchal conservatism of the 20th century has been taken to an extreme. Offred has no control over her body or her life as a whole. In the text, she mentions that "she doesn't want to look at something [(her body)] that determines [her] so completely," highlighting the isolation and lack of agency she experiences within Gilead (Atwood 63). To combat this, Offred displays resiliency through small acts of rebellion. She holds onto the memories of her past life, seeks human connections despite the risks associated with doing so, and maintains hope for the future even in the bleak present conditions. Offred remarks on the role of women in Gilead, explaining how they find freedom in face of isolation and oppression: "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edge of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the

gaps between the stories” (Atwood 57). While she may not have changed Gilead significantly by the end of the novel, her small acts of resilience are her way of asserting her agency while living a regime that denies her bodily autonomy.

In contrast to Gilead, the society depicted in *The Three-Body Problem* (post-Cultural Revolution China) does not necessarily deny women their autonomy to the same extent, although Ye Wenjie has struggled greatly for other reasons. Despite her multitude of personal losses, such as the death of her father, she is still a prominent figure in the scientific community that is respected by her colleagues. In response to the oppressive and anti-scientific movement that result in the death of her father, Ye perseveres and demonstrates remarkable strength. In the text, she remarks: “But she was a woman. A woman should be like water, able to flow over and around anything” (Liu 116). This quote is empowering, as Ye is suggesting that women have the capability to navigate societal restrictions when faced with adversity. Much like water flows around the obstacles in its path, women frequently demonstrate strength and adaptability, overcoming obstacles. Although she has suffered personal tragedy and becomes disillusioned with humanity, Ye channels her energy into her work and finds respect for it.

After understanding the hardships Ye and Offred face, we must now examine the characters’ contrasting responses to them. Comparing and contrasting Offred’s resiliency and Ye’s resistance highlights the various ways in which these characters deal with their oppression. As mentioned above, Offred struggles due to the limited agency women are given in Gilead. As a handmaid, her worth is defined solely by her fertility and obedience rather than her unique contributions to society. To cope with this, Offred often finds hope for a better future by reminiscing about her past life. She explains how reflecting on her life pre-Gilead gives her hope for the future: “I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling... If it’s a story I’m telling, then I

have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off” (Atwood 39). By holding onto the memories of her past life, Offred is displaying resilience and resistance against a regime that imposes a new social order that denies women social mobility. Instead of remaining trapped in her current circumstances, Offred’s hope for a better future is a small act of resistance; she denies Gilead’s assertion that her circumstances are permanent. However, the ending of Offred’s story is intentionally left ambiguous—when she is ushered into a van by mysterious men that may be associated with either a resistance movement or authorities of the regime, the narrative is left unresolved. As she approaches the van, Offred considers to herself: “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” (295). *The Handmaid’s Tale* does not end with a successful resistance movement overthrowing the government, and Offred’s small acts of rebellion could be ultimately insignificant.

However, in *The Three-Body Problem*, Ye Wenjie does have a significant amount of agency. By transmitting a message to the Trisolarian race, giving them Earth’s precise location, and enabling them to invade humanity, Ye exercises her agency on an unprecedented scale, transcending the confines of her oppressive society and humanity as a whole. As a result of her disillusionment with humanity, she sets in motion a chain of events that will ultimately have dire, potentially world-ending consequences. Right as she is about to transmit the message to the Trisolarians, Liu mentions that “The fate of the entire human race was now tied to these slender fingers” (Liu 275). This quotation is especially significant as it mentions Ye’s “slender fingers,” a trait frequently associated with femininity and weakness. By juxtaposing her femininity against her ability to (essentially) end the world, Liu is intentionally conveying the massive amount of

agency afforded to Ye in this moment, underscoring the contrast between societal perceptions of femininity as weak and the massive power she truly holds. Similarly, when Ye murders her husband while pregnant in an attempt to cover up her actions, she is rejecting the institution of marriage for her personal benefit. While Ye's decision to murder her husband was practical and motivated by self-preservation, her decision to kill a man she is expected to be subservient to is still a demonstration of her agency in the face of patriarchal norms. Ye Wenjie's agency throughout the narrative of *The Three-Body Problem* transcends societal expectations and traditional roles; her ability to wield immense power and make consequential decisions that directly impact humanity's fate contrasts with Offred's small and potentially futile acts of resilience.

Finally, directly comparing the various responses of Offred and Ye Wenjie to their oppressive conditions underscores the complexity of female agency. While Offred's actions are largely confined to subtle acts of resilience, such as reminiscing about the past and holding onto hope for a better future, they are her only means of reclaiming her autonomy and identity despite Gilead's control. While her resilience is limited in scope, it highlights the strength of the female spirit in the face of oppression. Offred's strategy is not necessarily to lead a resistance movement that restructures the current government, but to maintain a semblance of hope and individuality as she carries on her life within the oppressive regime. When she arrives at the Commander's house, Offred thinks: "I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight" (Atwood 8). This demonstrates how important survival is to Offred. While she is not necessarily directly rebellious against Gilead, her survival instinct enables her to hold onto hope. Offred's small actions of resistance help keep her alive as she contemplates suicide throughout the novel.

Conversely, Ye's agency, which is ultimately manifested through her decision to contact the Trisolarians, extends beyond individual resilience, survival, and hope. Her actions reshape the entire destiny of humanity itself, showcasing her strength and conviction despite her personal losses. In the text, it is mentioned that "She had once been an idealist who needed to give all her talent to a great goal, but now she realized that all that she had done was meaningless, and the future could not have any meaningful pursuits, either. As this mental state persisted, she gradually felt more and more alienated from the world" (Liu 271). This demonstrates that Ye's actions are not motivated by a need to guarantee her survival or hope for humanity like Offred's, but to assert her agency in a society where she feels severely alienated and cast aside. Overall, Ye's actions are not confined to small acts of personal resilience—they are vast, powerful examples of resistance against human society as a whole.

In conclusion, the female protagonists Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale* and Ye Wenjie from *The Three-Body Problem* navigate distinctly oppressive societies, and each one responds to their societal constraints in different ways. Offred's life within the totalitarian and patriarchal Republic of Gilead exemplifies Gilead's extreme subjugation of women. She is denied autonomy and individuality, as her identity and worth are solely confined to her fertility. In response to this, she displays resilience through small yet symbolic acts of rebellion. By holding on to memories of her past life and remaining hopeful, she is, in a way, able to resist the regime's control even though it overwhelmingly dominates every aspect of her life. Despite this, her fate is ultimately left ambiguous.

On the other hand, Ye Wenjie's agency in post-Cultural Revolution China extends beyond mere societal expectations—her actions have massive implications for the fate of humanity as a whole. When she dooms humanity to the fate of contact with the Trisolarians, her immense

power and influence contrasts starkly with Offred's limited impact within Gilead. Ye's defiance of patriarchal norms, including her murder of her husband, underscores her agency against societal expectations. The contrasting responses of Offred and Ye Wenjie to their oppressive societies highlight the varied ways in which female characters in science fiction navigate societal constraints. Offred's resilience through small acts of rebellion starkly contrasts with Ye's impactful, morally ambiguous actions of resistance that transcend humanity's limitations.

The narratives of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Three-Body Problem* offer contemporary women a diverse spectrum of representation, underscoring the numerous ways which female characters challenge the oppressive structures they find themselves in. The portrayals of Offred and Ye Wenjie reflect the ongoing oppression and persecution of women today, and both novels have prompted discourse on the depiction of women in literature. The contrast between Offred's resilience and Ye's resistance highlights the diverse range of options women have to assert their autonomy in the real world, and both novels encourage the exploration of female agency in the face of both literary and societal norms.

Works Cited

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