

The Epitome of Femininity

ABSTRACT:

Do women uniquely enable their own oppression? As literature often reflects reality, critics have argued that novels can perpetuate female suppression omnipresent within larger social institutions. The characterization of women in literature allows authors to explore systemic sexism as a real-world issue within the imaginative realm of speculative fiction. While experts in the field have argued that gender stereotypes enable female subordination in the status quo, the manifestation of internalized sexism, or sexist behavior enacted by women onto other women, is a roadblock to the feminist movement which is far less studied. Speculative fiction embodies female oppression through the illustration of women-against-women conflict. Therefore, I argue that literary females who are made to surveil one another present readers with a distinct space to draw conclusions about internalized misogyny as a roadblock to real-world feminism.

INTRODUCTION:

The Republic of Gilead within *The Handmaid's Tale* and Area X of *Annihilation* force society to adapt to newfound government structures which ultimately suppress women. In Gilead, declining birth rates result in female Handmaids who are relegated to breeders in Commanders' households. For example, Serena Joy is given power over her husband's Handmaid, Offred, and must surveil her actions. In Area X, the mysterious border prompts the government to dispatch an all-female twelfth expedition. The Biologist must then escape from the control of the ever-powerful Psychologist by refusing her hypnosis. Overall, both novels' depiction of women-against-women conflict reflects larger gender inequities experienced under the literary status quo.

To rectify real-world internalized sexism, I argue that women must stop controlling one another and collaborate to dismantle the institutional patriarchy. The extensive characterization of speculative fiction females as internally oppressed has wider implications, as readers learn that gender equality cannot be achieved until women stop normalizing gender suppressing stereotypes and begin embracing present-day feminism. Therefore, the thesis is: ***The***

***Handmaid's Tale* and *Annihilation* illustrate women-against-women power dynamics; this illustration is significant because speculative fiction offers a space for exploring the tensions that exist in real-world feminism.** This paper will mostly parallel the relationships between Offred and Serena Joy in *The Handmaid's Tale* to that of the Biologist and Psychologist in *Annihilation*, analyzing how suppressed protagonists interact with more powerful females or “superiors” in newly established power structures.

First, I will build upon my thesis by exploring three main premises: (1) the ongoing threat of oppressive government creates unreliable female narrators who adapt to social norms instead of exercising true identity; (2) removing toxic norms from gender is more effective than subverting gender through parody because it helps society stray from stereotypes; and (3) women are able to overcome the wrath of their female “superiors” by either befriend them or resisting their control. I analyze the veracity of Judith Butler’s ideas about gender as an evolving process, identity resulting from gender norms, and subverting gender through parody within the scope of my paper. I then use textual evidence from *Annihilation*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and outside authors to prove my thesis before addressing assumptions about the inevitability of women-against-women power dynamics specifically within Area X.

PRACTICAL BACKGROUND:

Real-world feminism has attempted to offset the prevalence of the institutional patriarchy, or the ubiquitous social system which inherently roots men in positions of power, throughout distinct time periods. While femininity was once considered a precursor to exercising female characteristics, today’s feminism has strived to redefine what it *means* to be feminine. Judith Butler, a prominent scholar and a hallmark of today’s feminist movement, believes that gender, masculinity, femininity, and other gender-specific terms cannot be simplified to one

definition. Instead, gender is a paradox that is more performative than physical. Since Butler is arguably one of the most influential authors in support of present-day feminism, the theoretical lens will unpack her beliefs about gender and femininity as a constantly evolving and influential process on identity.

THEORETICAL LENS:

Butler's *Gender Troubles* examines the intersection between gender, identity, and performativity. Butler defines performativity as the process by which repeated gestures, speech acts, performances, interactions, etc. become discursive or "normalized" social constructs. Butler's definition of gender expression as resulting from social norms and requiring parody for subversion will be vital in the strengthening of my central thesis. According to Butler, "gender is an open-ended process, a sequence of acts or events which does not originate and which is never fully or finally 'realized'" (90). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this ideology is pushed back against by the women of Gilead, who are forced to exercise their gender by providing fertility for male Commanders. However, the description of Offred's mother as refusing to conform to the patriarchy's expectation of femininity is in-line with Butler's belief that gender is constantly evolving and never fixed. Instead of exercising her gender through marriage, Offred's mother tells Offred's father, "'just do the job, then you can bugger off'" (Atwood 120). Similarly, the portrayal of female characters in *Annihilation* as androgynous and gender non-conforming proves that one can defy what it means to be "feminine" within the constant modification of the gender process.

I agree with Butler's second premise that gender expression follows social norms and performativity because it clarifies *why* each protagonist has a diminished identity within the realm of feminist literature. Butler explains, "the point of [*Gender Troubles*] is [to examine]...

the extent gender norms... establish what will and will not be intelligibly human (100-101).” In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women are assigned new identities which reflect their ability to reproduce and their importance to the Commander’s household. Serena Joy watches over Offred, the Handmaid or “breeder” who must perform her identity by birthing a child for the Commander. Similarly in *Annihilation*, the female characters must only refer to one another by their careers (Biologist, Psychologist, Surveyor, etc.) while in Area X. Each character’s loss of identity ultimately prompts changes in their reactions to social phenomena, aligning with Butler’s second premise.

As a result, **the ongoing threat of oppressive government creates unreliable female narrators who adapt to social norms instead of exercising true identity.** The evidence for this premise comes from the accuracy of diary and journal entries in both novels because Offred and the Biologist act out of fear of “surveillance” from more powerful women. Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* unravels the concept of “panopticism”: a model of external surveillance dependent upon hierarchical control to subjugate suppressed civilians. In a similarly stratified system to that of Gilead and Area X, “the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). Foucault describes panopticism as creating a type of self-discipline in which “inmates” eventually learn to regulate themselves based upon social expectations outlining how they are *supposed* to act. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, all women are surveilled by Gilead, but those closer to the top of the social hierarchy (Serena Joy) are given more ability to exert surveillance over “inmates” (Offred). In *Annihilation*, the expedition members must similarly exert panopticism over one another through constant journal entries. However, the “superior” (Psychologist) is ultimately given the largest ability to control her

“inmates” (the other expedition members) through hypnosis. The panopticism of Offred and the Biologist by “superiors” in the social hierarchy is in-line with Butler’s belief that identity is an illusion created by performances.

As a result of panopticism, suppressed female narrators are rendered irrational and unreliable. In *Annihilation*, the narrator’s decision-making is being altered by her memory loss. She writes, “I saw this in vast and intricate detail as we all stood there, and looking back, I mark it as the first irrational thought I had once we had reached our destination” (Vandermeer 7). The biologist makes note of the fact that the other team members stood with her because her irrational action is likely a result of heightened watchfulness, surveillance, and conditioning from the government. Further, the Biologist’s discovery that she is immune to hypnosis forces her to obey the Psychologist to prevent herself from being “annihilated” (VanderMeer 32). Therefore, the Biologist must agree with the Psychologist and cannot exercise true identity.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, females must react in accordance to Gilead’s societal norms. This premise is portrayed by Offred’s mother explaining, “Humanity is so adaptable [...] Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations” (Atwood 49). Offred also cannot refer to Serena Joy by her true identity, writing, “...[Serena Joy] has become speechless...How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (Atwood 46). The quote explains that, despite the power dynamics within Gilead, Serena Joy’s identity is also altered by new social norms. Serena Joy was once a “narrator” of her own show, but she is now censored by surveillance from other women. Atwood uses Serena Joy’s inability to exercise free will as a parallel to real-world females; she believes both will attempt to exert free will within a male-dominated political system, but will be unable to do so because of internalized sexism. In

both literature and reality, womens' ability to progress despite the patriarchy must originate from working together instead of being sidetracked by women-against-women conflict.

However, I disagree with Butler's third premise which asserts that the only way to subvert gender is through parody. Butler writes, "I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts... both the model of gender and the notion of true gender identity" (111). Butler's premise in *Gender Troubles* is hypocritical because, in order for gender to be subverted, it must stop evolving to be inherently realized by the individual. Further, Butler is assuming that gender *must* be subverted, when instead, it can simply be exercised without binary classifications and the constant influence of stereotypical norms.

I argue that **removing toxic norms from gender is more effective than subverting gender through parody because it helps society stray from stereotypes.** In *Annihilation*, female characters are portrayed as strong explorers and women in STEM, but are still performing femininity. The characters are subvertly feminist, as the novel defies stereotypes without making feminine power the main focus of the novel. Both *Annihilation* and *The Handmaid's Tale* test the limits of what it *means* to be feminine. Instead of being controlled by the bounds of femininity, each novel portrays strong female characters as able to defy feminine norms while still exercising femininity. While *The Handmaid's Tale*'s characters are more in-line with feminine stereotypes, Offred breaks from the restrictions of her role as a Handmaid when engaging in an affair with the Commander, and, at times, uses her relationship with him to exercise more power. For example, the Commander allowing Offred to read and play Scrabble provides Offred a type of freedom above the institutional patriarchy. Offred's mother also departs from feminine norms, as she was described as having work during the week when Offred was little. Offred's mother pushes back against the notion that men are meant to work while the women remain in the

domestic sphere. As a feminist character, Offred's mother challenges traditional gender norms while still exercising femininity.

Julie R. Sanchez's *Liminality, Marginality, Futurity: Case Studies in Contemporary Science Fiction* adds onto the belief that feminist literary characters can be used to overcome roadblocks to the feminist movement. Sanchez explains, "by placing marginalized groups at the center of fictional worlds and narratives, these works have the potential to challenge the dominant social order" (2). Therefore, Atwood's and VanderMeer's placement of strong women at the center of each novel proves to readers that gender does not have to be parodied or subverted. Rather, real-life females can defy stereotypes and toxic norms in the same way as each novel's female characters. The progressive and forward-thinking portrayal of femininity in these novels serve to generate dialogue about real-world feminism more effectively than using parody to subvert gender completely.

STAKES:

The women-against-women conflicts explored in *Gilead* and *Area X* are reflective of larger social stakes, as gender dynamics contribute to central aspects of life such as marriage, families, and jobs. The depiction of females in both novels is multifaceted; at times they are portrayed as feeding into the gender hierarchy by competing with their "superiors" for power, but at other times, they are portrayed as more feminist and powerful individuals than stereotypically expected. Protagonists' fear of surveillance from "superiors" conveys tensions between real-world females in different social strata. Speculative fiction females are part of an ongoing conversation about empowerment because their characterization offers an avenue to discuss tensions between women in the real-world.

The Handmaid's Tale's and *Annihilation's* use of large-scale societal issues to resist pre-established power dynamics offers a possible solution to tensions between real-life females. In *Annihilation*, the uncertainty of Area X has still not been explained by the end of the novel. The Biologist's and Psychologist's competition for power proves to have impeded a meaningful solution to the novel's initial conflict. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, the overwhelming fear of becoming an Unwoman drives the two-tiered relationship between Serena Joy and Offred. While the two engage in woman-against-woman conflict, they temporarily overcome power dynamics when Serena Joy offers to help Offred deliver a baby. As a result, Offred is able to escape being branded an Unwoman. Nevertheless, these power dynamics are again reversed after Offred's affair with the Commander is revealed. The differences between Area X's and Gilead's female relationships allows readers to draw conclusions about roadblocks to the feminist movement.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE:

Both novels elaborate upon extensive social tensions by pinning women against other women. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Serena Joy and Offred perpetually stratify each other further within the institutional patriarchy. For example, "...but I envy the Commander's Wife" (23) displays Offred's jealousy and creates disunity within Gilead's social structure. Similarly, Atwood uses the characters of Serena Joy and Offred to make a statement about redeeming evil men. Atwood writes, "[Hitler's mistress] did not believe he was a monster... how easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all....all this she would have believed, because otherwise how could she have kept on living?" (155). Offred and the Commander's Wife are both representative of the Nazi's wife, as both see the more human and redeemable side of an evil man (the Commander). Instead of confronting the evils of the Commander, the two begin opposing one

another. In *Annihilation*, the novel is centered around the Psychologist's control over other female characters. The Anthropologist's phrase: "Silence creates its own violence" represents the restrictions of suppressed characters, as they fear "annihilation" from the Psychologist (Vandermeer 135). The Biologist's willingness to relinquish control to the Psychologist proves that even subjected female characters deflect from completing a larger mission and become preoccupied with women-against-women tensions.

Despite the power dynamics existing in both novels, **women are able to overcome the wrath of their female superiors by either befriending them or resisting their control.** In *Annihilation*'s Area X, the psychologist successfully controls other women by hypnotizing the surveyor and anthropologist. Unlike these other characters, however, the biologist resists the psychologist's control. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's "superior," Serena Joy, befriends her and helps her learn more about Offred's daughter. However, Offred stands up to Serena Joy by beginning an affair with the Commander. Once Serena Joy discovers this affair, she confronts Offred: "'How could you be so vulgar?... Behind my back,' she says. 'You could have left me something.' Does she love him, after all?'" (Atwood 51). This quote reveals Serena Joy's unwillingness to confront the Commander and instead "blame the woman." Atwood is implying that, when women blame one another instead of evil men, internalized oppression serves as a barrier to feminism and equality.

Instead of allowing for mobility within Gilead, Serena Joy and Offred are preoccupied with woman-against-woman conflict. In *Women Disunited: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as a critique of feminism*, Alanna Callaway argues, "it is posited that within *The Handmaid's Tale* the real threat in Gilead comes not from male but from female control. The ultimate result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny,

not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as *women's* hatred of women" (9).

Callaway's argument explains how Gilead's social structure enables female's suppression by other women, not solely by the institutional patriarchy. Both Offred and the Psychologist focused on resisting "superiors'" control instead of solving a larger "issue" present within Gilead and Area X.

ASSUMPTIONS AND NAYSAYERS:

The biggest assumption I make in my argument is that, within these novels, the creation of power dynamics which pin women against one another is inevitable. While both societies feature these female-against-female relationships, naysayers could argue that the "issues" of childbearing and mysteriousness of Area X did not *have* to send in women to fix the problem. Most notably, in *Annihilation*, all-male expeditions (such as the expedition the Biologist's husband was on) were sent to solve the same problem as the all-female expedition.

Marleen S. Barr's *Alien to femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* addresses these naysayers. Specifically, Barr's argument that speculative fiction has "the potential power to change women's place in the world" responds to the assumption that women-against-women conflict is not inevitable within speculative fiction literary tropes (27). She explains that, while not all speculative fiction novels are outright feminist or anti-feminist, speculative fiction is intrinsically tied to changing feminine structures within the institutional patriarchy. This is *why* Vandermeer focuses on the all-female expedition instead of the all-male expedition. This is also *why* Atwood decided to suppress females instead of males within Gilead's power dynamics. Female subordination within both novels reflects real-world gender inequalities and outlines the inevitability of women-against-women conflict as a potential downfall to the feminist movement.

While females' roles in the real-world are evolving and progressing, they can still be suppressed in literature by more powerful characters. Thus, the debate becomes: are women in power still inherently feminist if they use their power to control less powerful females? The conversations which emerge from analyzing power dynamics in speculative fiction guides readers to develop real-world answers about how to resist power's initial stratification. Therefore, the assumptions I make surrounding the inevitability of women-against-women relations are crucial for teaching readers about internalized sexism in the real-world.

CONCLUSION:

The Handmaid's Tale and *Annihilation* feature strong female characters who are too preoccupied with the quest for power to escape women-against-women conflict; this offers readers an insight into the result of tensions within the real-world feminist movement. Both novels exemplify how external issues such as declining female birth rates and a mysterious border could both use females as a solution to an overarching problem, while simultaneously pinning them against one another in the process. Feminine relationships within speculative fiction gesture towards a type of internalized misogyny and oppression uniquely enabled by surveillance from more powerful females. Speculative fiction females are able to transcend the literary realm and invite discussions surrounding real-world feminism for generations to come.

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