

Blaire Palmer

Professor Taylor

Global

22 March 2019

Handmaids and the Technologies that Challenge Them

In Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, women in Gilead are separated between classes of women, which makes solidarity difficult. Interpersonal relationships between Offred, Serena Joy, and Ofglen all characterize the possibility for solidarity among the women of Gilead. To what extent do these women transition the possibility of solidarity into collective resistance, as defined by Amrita Pande and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz? The women of Gilead do not overcome the types of power exercised by the Gileadean regime, but Atwood creates an opportunity of solidarity for readers of the book. In the first section of this paper, I will introduce types of biopower as defined by Foucault, and the way these powers are exercised by Gilead. Then, I will introduce the problems of international surrogacy and how to 'shift the narrative' of surrogacy, as explained by Amrita Pande and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz. Finally, I will bring together all of the previous points and prove that the women of Gilead attempt to shift the narrative but ultimately fail, and prove that Atwood's writing of this novel is an example of shifting the narrative positively.

Power in the Handmaid's Tale

The power which is held and exercised in Gilead is best understood if defined through a Foucauldian lens. In this section, I am going to define positive and negative power through the

terms of Michel Foucault's groundbreaking book on philosophy, *Discipline and Punishment*, and move into the ways in which these technologies are utilized by Gilead. Foucault categorizes power into positive and negative power. Foucault defines negative power as a 'sovereign power,' which is conspicuous and held (Foucault 258). "The right which was formulated as the 'power of life and death' was in reality the right to take life or let live" (Foucault 259). This means that negative power is taking away life from all it is enforced upon. Negative power does not always mean murder, but it most often does, because ending a life is ending all possibilities that said life could have amounted to. Foucault then defines the other type of power, positive 'biopower,' as "a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault 259). In this quote, Foucault is explaining that biopower is centered around 'managing' life, instead of eliminating it. In managing life, possibilities are produced for what can come of these lives, and the lives are formed into acting in the ways the person exerting power wants them to act. This is the next important facet of positive power, that the purpose of exercising positive power is to create docile bodies that can be molded to complete tasks. Foucault says, "the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault 173). To expand on this, Foucault is pointing out that in order for a person who is being subjugated by positive power to be useful, they have to do what is told of them without question, which will be referred to in the remainder of this paper as fulfilling the roles of a 'docile body.'

The ways in which positive and negative power is held and exercised in *The Handmaid's Tale* are reflected in two distinct ways. Negative power is held obviously during ceremonies and killings. For example, there is a wall that holds the citizens in their specified cities, and on this

wall are dead bodies hanging for various crimes (Atwood 31). This is negative power because the wall represents a sovereign power, and because murders have occurred on the wall, which eliminates the possibilities that those bodies would have had in life. Another example of negative power is the Salvaging that occurs near the end of the book. In this scene, the women of Gilead are brought together to watch two Handmaids and a wife be hanged for crimes against the state (Atwood 276). This is negative power because an Aunt hangs the women, and the Aunt is an example of Gilead's sovereign power. Also, the three women being killed have, as earlier stated, eliminated all future possibilities of the bodies doing anything for or against the society of Gilead.

Positive power in Gilead is harder to place a finger on, because positive power is not held, but exercised (Foucault 259). Positive power is clearly exercised in many ways by Gilead, but the powers that I will be examining today are the technologies of restricted information and division. First, division is used to separate women who are in different classes. Serena Joy is the wife of the Commander that Offred is assigned to, and is in a higher class than Offred (Atwood 13). Gilead separates these two women through the technology of division. For example, Serena has to 'allow' Offred to enter the household through the front door during the first days of Offred's time at the Commander's house (Atwood 13). Gilead also uses the power of division by leading Handmaids and Wives to hate each other. To give an instance of this, Gilead's system of surrogacy involves the Commander having sex with the Handmaids in order to inseminate them (Atwood 93). This clearly divides the two women, and Offred describes an instance of this. "Serena has begun to cry. I can hear her, behind my back. It isn't the first time. She always does this, the night of the ceremony" (Atwood 90). Serena's crying is representative of the anger that

she feels towards her husband having sex with another woman, and thus, the anger that Gilead is causing her to have towards Offred.

Positive power is also enacted upon women within the same class, as can be seen through the relationship of Offred and Ofglen. The technology of division is exercised against Handmaids, such as Offred realizing that Ofglen has to accompany her to the market everyday because they are each other's spies (Atwood 19). However, I am going to be focusing on how the technology of restricted information divides Offred and Ofglen, because this biopower is much more prominent among Handmaids. The pictures on signs that the Handmaids see when they are grocery shopping are an example that women in Gilead are not allowed to read anymore (Atwood 25). This is exemplified in an instance when Offred reads writing that is forbidden, on a tape in the red center. "The women around me breathe in, there's a stirring in the room, like wind over grass. Is this an oversight, have we gotten away with something?" (Atwood 119). Offred characterizes the women breathing in all together to show the collectivity gained from even a single moment of being able to read. This shows just how powerful the restriction of language is, because a singular moment of being able to read something sends the Handmaids into shock. A second instance of restricted information is shown through the exchanges between Offred and Ofglen during their shopping trips. "'The war is going well, I hear,' she says. 'Praise be,' I reply'" (Atwood 19). This is an example of the Handmaids only being able to communicate in state-sanctioned phrases with each other, so they can not communicate information to each other.

The negative and positive powers held and exercised against Offred, Serena, and Ofglen can be seen in the ways that their personal relationships play out through the book. (We will

examine how their relationships play out later.) Next, I am going to explain the problems facing contemporary international surrogacy, as explained by Pande and Fixmer-Oraiz.

A Feminist Approach to Surrogacy

International gestational surrogacy is a worldwide problem faced today, as it is increasing rapidly with no international oversight as of 2008 (Fixmer-Oraiz 131). From 2004 to 2008, children born to gestational surrogates has risen from around 700 babies to around 1,400 (Fixmer-Oraiz 130). The rapid rise of surrogacy is not what has many worried, though. Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz and Amrita Pande defines the problem as a problem of rhetorics, or narratives used by well known media sources to describe the industry of surrogacy. The three problematic rhetorics that will be defined here are the ‘global sisterhood’ rhetoric, the ‘gift giving’ rhetoric, and the ‘choice’ rhetoric.

The ‘global sisterhood’ rhetoric is explained by Fixmer-Oraiz as the reasons behind surrogacy being women wanting to help other women (Fixmer-Oraiz 140). She describes it as “[s]urrogacy as the new philanthropy” (Fixmer-Oraiz 141), and quotes a CNN interview, with an intending mother who hired a surrogate saying, “I ended up feeling like her big sister. I wanted her to be comfortable, happy and safe. I just wanted to take care of her...” (Fixmer-Oraiz 145). This is an example of what people are being told worldwide, through rhetorics displayed on television and through non-scholarly media sources. Next, the ‘gift giver versus gift receiver’ rhetoric is shown in two ways, based on the national context, meaning whether viewed in the Indian or American context. In the American context, the women are receiving a gift from Indian women. In an interview with Oprah, one woman says, “It’s horrible. It’s excruciating. I think so

many of us are taught, as kids by our parents, that you can do anything you set your mind to... Infertility is completely different..." (Fixmer-Oraiz 136). This quote paints American women as desperate, and as their last hope being the Indian surrogates. The Indian surrogates then generously step in and provide them with a child, making American women gift receivers. Looking at the Indian context, however, we see that Indian women are painted as gift receivers from God. Divya, a surrogacy hostel matron at New Hope Clinic, tells her patrons to treat being a surrogate as "God's gift to you" (Pande, 621). Along with Indian women being gift receivers from God, they are also receiving gifts from American families. Joana and Preeti, intending parents buying services from New Hope Clinic, "emphatically declares their own generosity in compensating the surrogate by highlighting all the payments in cash or kind" (Pande 623). This shows that Indian women are feeling like they are receiving gifts on multiple levels, and never giving gifts. Finally, the choice rhetoric illustrates Indian women as trying to lift themselves out of poverty. "Western audiences are then invited to understand surrogacy as an unprecedented opportunity for education, financial stability, and economic independence for women and their families" (Fixmer-Oraiz 141).

These articles are ethnographies in today's times are because technologies utilized in *The Handmaid's Tale* are also seen in real life. For example, the technology of division is featured in the ways that the rhetorics divide Indian and American women. In the CNN interview mentioned above, the intending mother comments that she feels like the surrogates older sister (Fixmer-Oraiz 145). While this may seem like a uniting factor, it is actually divisive, because the power difference is still apparent. "She calls me *didi* (sister) and I call her *barhi didi* (elder sister)," says a surrogate when referring to the intending mother (Pande 622). The power is

always shifted towards the American mothers, which inevitably divides the women. The second technology utilized is restricted information. The entirety of the rhetorics utilized, including the ones on CNN and Oprah that were mentioned above, are all examples of restricting information to the general public. This is because when the exact conditions of the Indian women are not given to the public, or if all of the information is not mentioned in common rhetorics, the American public paints a picture which does not reflect the social injustices and power inequities that are actually occurring in the international gestational surrogacy industry.

These rhetorics are problematic because reproductive rhetorics do not take into account race, social justice, class, or nationality. It does not take into account “a system in which low-wealth and under resourced women and communities disproportionately assume risks to their health and livelihoods for the benefit of global capital and wealth, largely white nationals of the global North” (Fixmer-Oraiz 147). This means that instead of taking into the account the social injustices that are in place in the surrogacy industry and the world currently, white Northern women rely on the use of rhetorics to rationalize and moralize the use of international surrogacy. In understanding that surrogacy is a transaction for a service instead of a ‘global sisterhood,’ it may be easier regulate surrogacy as the industry it is. The second way in which the authors suggest fixing the rhetorics is listening to all women. In different contexts, Indian and American women are seen through different rhetorics, as seen above in the different gift-giving versus gift-receiving rhetorics. Hearing out the opinions and views of all women, then, would eliminate some of the conflicting rhetorics that currently exist in the modern media sphere. The final solution these authors suggest are shifting rhetorics. They suggest changing the narrative to fix these problems, with solutions such as using the words ‘cross-border reproductive care’

instead of ‘fertility tourism’ (Pande 624). This shift of rhetorics stops the portrayal of “the image of women as dutiful mothers rather than wage-earning workers...” (Pande 624).

To summarize, many of the technologies shown in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are actually occurring around the world currently, through the industry of transnational gestational surrogacy. Three types of rhetorics are used currently: the ‘gift giving,’ ‘global sisterhood,’ and ‘choice,’ and all three rhetorics are problematic because they overlook the social injustices that this industry exacerbates for Indian women. Pande and Fixmer-Oraiz suggest various ways to shift these rhetorics, which all lead to the common goal of solidarity among women. Next, I will be showing that although the women in Gilead had the opportunities for solidarity, they did not do enough to shift the narrative and achieve collective resistance. I will also be proving that Atwood uses her novel as a way to shift the narrative to readers.

Solidarity And Collective Resistance

The women of Gilead try their best to resist the positive biopower that is exercised against them by forming relationships with other women, however they ultimately fail in forming a collective resistance. Serena Joy and Offred, for example, resist the technology of division by doing things that blur the borders of class. When Serena sends Offred to have sexual relations with Nick, she whispers to Offred before sending her outside (Atwood 260). Offred recalls, “Odd, to hear her whispering, as if she is one of us. Usually wives do not lower their voices” (Atwood 260). Although this is a small gesture, it shows that Serena is disregarding, if even for a moment, her idea of class that Gilead works so hard to instill into her. Serena also gives Offred a cigarette when Offred agrees to try to get pregnant through any way possible (Atwood 206). This

is a sign of her disregarding the technology of division because she is giving a peace offering to Offred, instead of being offensive as usual. This resistance to the technology of division ultimately fails, however, because Serena finds out that Offred and the Commander have been having sex (Atwood 287). When Serena learns that Offred has been defying class lines with the Commander, instead of on Serena's terms, she falls back under Gilead's power, and is angry with herself for rebelling against the technology of division, saying, "I trusted you" (Atwood 287), and going on to tell Offred to hang herself (Atwood 287).

Offred and Ofglen also try to defy the technology of restricted information, but ultimately fail. They spread information, even with a lack of language, by creating secret passwords such as 'Mayday' to see if other Handmaids are part of the underground resistance (Atwood 43). Also, they use community events such as the Particicution mentioned above to ask about names of friends and gather information (Atwood 274). This resistance also ultimately fails though, because there is not enough power there to fully shift any kind of narrative that Gilead puts onto them. Eventually, Offred is so content with the bond she establishes with Nick that she does not even listen to what Ofglen whispers to her when they are on their shopping trips (Atwood 270).

Although the minimal amounts of solidarity that women have in *The Handmaid's Tale* fail to evolve into collective resistance, the novel itself is an example of an effort to shift the narrative. Atwood sends a warning to the readers that this book is more of an ethnography than a dystopian novel. In the introduction, Atwood comments that she did not put a single event into this book that is not already happening or has happened (Atwood *xiv*). She also includes various warnings throughout the book, such as using various flashbacks of Offred to show how society ignored large problems before the Coup occurred. Offred says, "we lived, as usual, by ignoring"

(Atwood 56), which is a comment also on today's society, and how people are ignoring deplorable conditions women are facing around the world.

One of these deplorable conditions are the lack of international regulations that transnational global surrogacy is suffering from. In this essay, I proved through articles by Amrita Pande and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz that rhetorics of global surrogacy need to be shifted in order for conditions to improve and solidarity to prevail. The women of Gilead are not able to overcome technologies exercised against them, but Atwood uses the novel to begin to shift the rhetorics for readers to pay attention to the world around them, and find a strong solidarity to fix the world's injustices. Atwood's message is one meant for us all; to pay attention to the world's changing climate, and to form a collective resistance against forces that are trying to prevent women around the world from coming together.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. "Handmaid's Tale." Jonathan Cape LTD, 2017.

Fixmer-Oraiz, Natalie. "Transnational Gestational Surrogacy and the Rhetorics of Reproductive Justice." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2013.

Foucault, Michel. "The Foucault Reader." Pantheon Books, Edited by Paul Rabinow, 1984.

Pande, Amrita. "Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India: Gifts for Global Sisters?" *Reproductive BioMedicine Online*, 2011.