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# The Body of Margaret Atwood: Sex Work and Prostitution within Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*

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**The Body of Margaret Atwood: Sex Work and Prostitution within Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood***

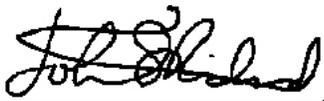
by

**R. Tyler Dinucci**

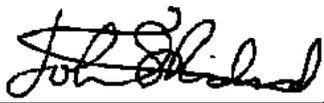
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### Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that Canadian author Margaret Atwood uses fiscal and socially conservative dystopias to show how sex work and prostitution are choices that women would never have to make in a world with true gender equality. In these radically different worlds, women have no agency beyond their sexuality and no ability to express themselves as equals within either society. And while the structures of both societies, the society of *The Handmaid's Tale* and that of both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, are inherently different, they both stem from modern conservative philosophies: for example, the country of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* holds Christian conservative beliefs on the role of religion in the state and the culturally designated roles of women. I define social conservatism as the idea that government organizations are used to pursue an agenda promoting traditional religious values such as “public morality” and opposing “immoralities” such as abortion, prostitution, and homosexuality. I define fiscal conservatism as an agenda promoting privatization of the market, deregulation and lower taxes.

In this paper I argue that because these philosophies are incompatible with gender equality, they drive women to occupations such as sex work. Women find that they have no choices and sex work provides something to “trade.” For Offred, this “trading” is more limited, because she is a sex slave. For Oryx, this trading allows her to travel to the West, yet not before her childhood is marked by prostitution and pornography. Sex work allows for Ren to reclaim some agency over her life, yet she only chooses sex work

because she is presented with few other options. All of these issues stem from the philosophies that define these dystopias.

## Introduction

Unlike many other literary genres, the encompassing genre of “science fiction” has never achieved the literary merit that the genre’s stories often deserve. Glancing over the recipients of major literary awards such as the Pulitzer Prize or the Man Booker Prize results in a limited list of winners whose genre could even be fleetingly described as “science fiction.” In defense of teaching science fiction literature within public schools, John Aquino wrote that:

Science fiction, long popular with the reading public, has struggled for acceptance as a literary form. Yet much of it merits critical appraisal for structure, characterization, language, and stylistic elements that it shares with other prose forms. Its appeal to young people, and its application for those areas of future studies concerned with the problems caused by our society’s increasing scientific and mechanical sophistication, give it relevance for today’s classroom. (3)

Because of the inherent imagination involved in science fiction literature, this genre can be a powerful tool when constructing literature to critique aspects of modernity. As with every genre, there are those pieces of literature that are dull, uninspired, and inartistic, but science fiction as a genre opens a myriad of possibilities for authors who wish to explore aspects of culture that could not necessarily be addressed within the confines of the imagined worlds of literary realism.

In particular, dystopian literature allows for authors to create fascinatingly terrible worlds that examine some ill in modern society. The word “dystopia” is taken from the word “utopia,” a word created by Sir Thomas More in his treatise *Utopia* to describe a

perfect and ideal society. The idea of the utopia predates More and can find its roots in the Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato (Featherstone 37) and even the paradises of Eden and Heaven from Christian doctrine. Krishan Kumar comments on the development of the utopia from the time of Socrates and Plato to the Renaissance, stating that modern utopias “inherit classical and Christian forms and themes,” but that this genre “transforms [these forms and themes] into a distinctive novelty, a distinctive literary genre carrying a distinctive social philosophy” (3). The modern utopia, unlike political treatises, developed a narrative instead of a simple explanation of the author’s philosophy for an ideal nation. Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* uses a weak narrative within his novel to showcase his utopian vision, similar to how Aldous Huxley uses a narrative to present his utopia in *Island*.

Dystopias are the opposite of utopias: they are imagined societies that are destructive or debilitating to their citizens. This paper will define “dystopian fiction” as any fiction that uses amoral, corrupt, and ruined societies (including those that are technologically advanced yet contain terribly deficient characteristics) to explore the current ills of society or warn against the path that society is currently traveling. This can be as uncomplicated as Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (whose only real defining differences were the absence of books and talking walls) or as lavishly imagined as Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*. Dystopian novels can show the faults of censorship taken too far (*Fahrenheit 451*), the replacement of the human by the machine (*Player Piano*), or the dangers of a totalitarian dictatorship (*1984*). Dystopian novels intend to warn about courses of actions within current society that could lead to these worlds.

These dystopias are “utopia’s twentieth-century doppelgänger” (Gordon 1) and emerged later than the idealistic utopian thought-experiments. The dystopia “is formed by the utopia, feeds parasitically on it [...] it is the mirror-image of utopia – but a distorted image, seen in a cracked mirror” (Kumar 100). Dystopias could not develop as a genre until Sir Thomas More established a utopian narrative.

While the dystopian genre grew into a popular sub-genre of science fiction, few female authors emerged. Notable exceptions include the libertarian Ayn Rand, who used the dystopian genre to show the troubles of government regulation and collectivism in novels such as *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who penned the feminist utopian novel *Herland*. Yet the majority of the landscape was dominated by male authors and novels such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, George Orwell’s *1984*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach*, and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, the latter of which is different in its setting yet still uses a makeshift society to examine human nature.

In the 1960s, there was a torrent of feminist dystopian literature that used the genre to show the plight of women in modernity and the ills of inequality. There was a fundamental change in the way that women viewed their lives, thanks to first wave feminists such as Betty Friedan. Her *The Feminine Mystique* was the turning point for the feminist movement during the 1960s and helped the feminist movement emerge into mainstream society along with the civil rights movement and the gay rights movement. Women no longer accepted that they were to be mere housewives; they demanded equal pay, equal job opportunities, control over their bodies, and reproductive freedom.

Feminist authors such as Marge Piercy and Sheri S. Tepper continued the legacy of Gilman by using dystopian literature to write about societal inequality, entering into the conversation with first (and eventually second) wave feminists. Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country*, and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* were important, if never exceedingly popular, feminist dystopian novels that began to explore a feminist perspective on the genre. It was during this time that Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, a classic dystopian novel on the dangers of religious and social conservatism. Atwood is a Canadian novelist who had previously achieved moderate success with her profeminist novel *The Edible Woman* (Nischik 101), but achieved more international name recognition with *The Handmaid's Tale* (Howells xv). Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson writes that "the most important contexts for situating the world of Margaret Atwood include her position as a Canadian writer; her own criticism; and her relationship with feminism" (11).

Atwood's novels engage the feminist conversation, using the dystopian genre as a way to showcase inequality within society and the plight of women during the 20th and 21st century. Intriguingly, Atwood divorces her novels, which she defines as "speculative fiction," from the dystopian and science fiction genres. Coral Ann Howells defines speculative as a subgenre within dystopian fiction, stating that "Atwood has resisted the ghetto of science fiction, insisting that she writes 'speculative fiction' which rehearses possible futures on the basis of historical and contemporary evidence" (Howells 162). Atwood believes there is an inherent difference between speculative fiction and classic science fiction, and that this definition is significant to understanding the framework in

which readers must look at each novel. In an editorial for *The Guardian*, Atwood commented on this distinction by stating that:

If you're writing about the future and you aren't doing forecast journalism, you'll probably be writing something people will call either science fiction or speculative fiction[...] For me, the science fiction label belongs on books with things in them that we can't yet do, such as going through a wormhole in space to another universe; and speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand, such as DNA identification and credit cards, and that takes place on Planet Earth. (Atwood, *Aliens*)

In a more famous quotation within the science fiction community, she explained during an interview that "*Oryx and Crake* is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians" (Langford). Later, she stressed that her novels contained no "talking squids in outer space" (Langford). Atwood's definition of speculative fiction is paramount, especially when the reader examines her work from a feminist perspective. Atwood would see classic dystopian novels such as *We* or *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* as metaphors for the struggles of the modern human, yet they also exist in a future relatively far off from our current society. Atwood sees speculative fiction as addressing a core issue of relevance to the reader: instead of removing metaphors from the modern world and placing them in a land populated by Klingons or Cylons, she places her novels in a future that could exist within the span of five years.

Specifically, Atwood uses speculative fiction to show the plight of women within societies that could potentially resemble real-world nations. These two worlds, the nation of Gilead from *The Handmaid's Tale* and the unnamed world from *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, are worlds defined by social conservatism and fiscal conservatism. This paper will define social conservatism as the idea that government organizations should be used to pursue an agenda promoting traditional religious values such as “public morality” and opposing “immoralities” such as abortion, prostitution, and homosexuality; fiscal conservatism will be defined as an agenda promoting privatization of the market, deregulation, and lower taxes. Each world contains social constructs that foster inherent gender inequality. Because of this, the women in these worlds must use their bodies, their only form of monetary value, in order to achieve their goals. This paper will argue that Margaret Atwood sees prostitution and sex work as products of inherent inequalities within society. Pilar Somacarrera explains that “the issue of sexual and national power politics is a wide-ranging and crucial topic in Margaret Atwood’s work” (43). The limited power of women within patriarchy causes women to make sacrifices within the choices presented. While Atwood is not hostile towards those involved with prostitution and sex work, she uses the characters of Offred, Oryx, and Ren to enter the feminist conversation regarding prostitution and sex work, stating that these professions are not ones that women would choose to take in a world where equality between men and women exists. Instead, they are taken because the female body has an inherent financial value within patriarchy.

The first chapter will discuss the exact role of women within these dystopian worlds, identifying how women lack agency within these dystopias. This will specifically address the caste system of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the plight of poorer women within *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. The second chapter will discuss the nature of sex work within these dystopias, and how Atwood uses sex work and prostitution to show the limited choices that these women have within these societies (and, by implication, within our society). It will also discuss how Atwood makes statements against sex work as an occupation by creating protagonists who must choose prostitution as their best chance to survive. This chapter also contains statements from contemporary feminist theorists on the nature of sex work and pornography. The third chapter will examine how these dystopias, created through social and fiscal conservative ideals, allow for patriarchy to flourish and how Atwood finds patriarchy to be the root of gender inequality within her dystopias and modern society. She uses her dystopias to satirize neo-conservative religion and laissez-faire capitalism and the patriarchy that supports them.

## Chapter 1: Atwood's Dystopian Woman

The role of women within *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* is essential to Atwood's dystopian novels. Her protagonists provide an evolution in Atwood's thoughts on both women and the feminist movement. In a 2009 interview with the *Independent*, Margaret Atwood asserted that she may not consider herself a traditional feminist:

Who is the 'we' that we are talking about [in feminism]? Are we talking about the children who are involved in sex trafficking, or the women in Bangladesh? Are we talking about the Eastern European women who are promised a place in the West and end up as sex slaves? Feminism is a big term. If we are asking 'Are women human beings?' we don't need to vote on that. But where do we go from there? Are women better than men? No. Are they different? Yes. How are they different? We're still trying to figure that out. (Akbar)

Atwood's definition of equality focuses on "humanistic ideals" (Akbar) rather than biological similarities. Similarly, she describes in a 1979 interview that she 'belie[ves] in the rights of women ... [as] equal human beings" (Meese 183), but distances herself from the world "feminism." After her *Independent* interview, some feminists began to wonder if "they were becoming an endangered species" (Khaleeli). Since *The Handmaid's Tale* was one of the few feminist dystopian novels published in the 1980s, Atwood's suspicion of the usage of the word "feminism" is initially chilling to feminists and advocates of women's rights. An entire article from *Jezebel* was even dedicated to Margaret Atwood's idea of "feminism" and the comments she made during her *Independent* interview. In it,

author Anna North defends Atwood's comments and mentions how Atwood's wrestling with the term "feminism" makes her no different than many other women (North).

Though Atwood may suspect the term, feminist writers and theorists still believe in the importance of Atwood's dystopian novels. Shirley Neuman describes Atwood's effect on feminism by stating that "Atwood herself had been embraced as a feminist novelist by a panoply of writers and critics representing a wide variety of feminist positions" (857).

*The Handmaid's Tale's* themes of sexism, oppression, and religion made the novel extremely palpable to a 1980s feminist audience dealing with the erosion of their rights.

As Neuman chillingly describes it:

One-third of all federal budget cuts under Reagan's presidency came from programs that served mainly women, even though these programs represented only 10 per cent of the federal budget. The average amount a divorced man paid in child support fell 25 per cent. Murders related to sexual assault and domestic violence increased by 160 per cent while the overall murder rate declined; meanwhile the federal government defeated bills to fund shelters for battered women, stalled already approved funding, and in 1981 closed down the Office of Domestic Violence it had opened only two years earlier. Pro-natalists bombed and set fire to abortion clinics and harassed their staff and patients; Medicaid ceased to fund legal abortions, effectively eliminating freedom of choice for most teenage girls and poor women; several states passed laws restricting not only legal abortion but even the provision of information about abortion. The debate about

freedom of choice for women flipped over into court rulings about the rights and freedom of the fetus. The Equal Rights Amendment died. (860)

Instead of progressing towards a goal of equality in a variety of areas, this clear regression echoed Atwood's world of Gilead. Sylvia Bashevkin mentions that even in "basic empirical terms, an account of major federal legislative and judicial decisions from the years prior to Ronald Reagan's initial election shows about 73 per cent pro-feminist outcomes, a figure which reverses to about 70 per cent *antifeminist* outcomes during the Bush administration" (671). The 1980s coalition, including the "moral majority" of Jerry Falwell and Phylis Schlafly, was directly responsible for the negative attitudes towards the feminist movement at the time of *The Handmaid's Tale's* publication. It is not surprising that *The Handmaid's Tale* quickly became an important book within the feminist literary canon and was widely taught (and challenged) within high schools in both the United States and Canada ("Too Controversial").

Margaret Atwood's discussion of the term "feminism" poses an interesting question on the nature of the movement: Is it possible to be a feminist and reject the notion that men and women have no differences besides basic physiology? The answer is that of course feminists can recognize and even embrace these differences, but the nuance of this discussion between first-wave and second-wave feminists on these distinctions is still a matter of debate within feminist circles. A core debate within feminist scholarship is between the "first wave" and "second wave" of feminism – the first calls "for the equal treatment of women with regards to civil and social rights and [the] second for the recognition of women's right to difference" (Gambaudo 94). According to Sylvia

Gambaudo, this “equality vs difference” discussion is “at the core of feminist debates” (Gambaudo 94) and began long before the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski explain that:

Labor advocates often used women’s bodily differences and their role as child bearers to argue for protective measures that would shorten their hours and improve their working conditions. Others, like Alice Paul and the Women’s Party campaigners for an Equal Rights Amendment, saw such arguments for protection based on bodily difference as dooming women to continued second-class status.

(43)

These ideas are further classified by “essentialist” and “social constructionist” ideas on feminism, ideas later adopted by the first and second wave feminist movements, respectively: “For the essentialist, sexual difference is innate, natural, inborn, and persistent, whereas the social constructionist would argue, [...] that “one is not born a woman” but becomes one through social and cultural practices” (Kolmar 47). This debate can be viewed through multiple lenses, as Atwood does in her novels.

Even though she herself might not identify as a “traditional” feminist (if there is such a thing), Atwood’s dystopian novels enter into this feminist conversation. Atwood’s novels focus on the oppression of women within her dystopian societies in regards to their social status and, at first, avoid the second wave debate concerning the importance of the biological differences between men and women. Yet each novel also creates compelling examples of women who use their bodies and sexuality as a form of exchange. Neither *Offred*, *Oryx*, nor *Ren* attempts to conform to social standards and

view herself through the eyes of a patriarchal society; in fact, Oryx and Ren are able to use their bodies to achieve their goals in ways that heterosexual men could never successfully accomplish (though their ability to do so is not necessarily an ideal situation). Though each society contains an undeniable ceiling for the potential of achievement for women, the difference of the female body is paramount to the inequality of women within Atwood's novels. The body, specifically the female body, is also integral to the oppression that women face, because these physical differences define the female experience in ways that men cannot understand.

While this chapter will talk about the consequences of overt societal limits on women within the context of Atwood's dystopias, the following chapters will specifically look at the female body, sex work, and how Atwood engages in the debate within feminist theory by looking at the stigmatization of women in Atwood's social and fiscal dystopias. Specifically, the following chapters will examine how the female body can be used as currency for trade and how this is an unfortunate but understandable avenue that some women choose when there are few other options.

The most overt limit to female success<sup>1</sup> is found within *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's first dystopian novel. After a sparsely described socio-political uprising, America is transformed into a neo-Conservative, fundamentalist Christian nation known as the Republic of Gilead. Gilead draws heavily on the Old Testament to structure its theocracy. There is a strict caste system for all members of Gilead, and men and women

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<sup>1</sup> For this paper, female success is defined as the ability for women to achieve the same level of power in society that men hold, similar to the goals of first wave feminists in achieving a level of equality that allows women to assimilate into a world for equality. Success can manifest itself in different ways: the breadwinner, a CEO, or simply obtaining the same rights as men within society.

function in wholly distinct capacities. While men rule Gilead and fight for its army, women are relegated to homemaking, cooking, and childbearing. The ruling men of Gilead use the Old Testament to justify their blatantly misogynistic policies and divide the women into a rigid caste system: “Wives” (the spouses of the ruling men), “Aunts” (trainers of the handmaids), “Marthas” (domestic servants), and “Econowives” (lower class women who must perform all of the duties of the house). “Handmaids” are fertile women who produce offspring for members of the ruling class who otherwise could not conceive with their wives. Gilead employs a strict dress code for each of its castes in order to designate its role in society. This caste system is supported by the motto: “*From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs.* We recited that, three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts” (Handmaid, 117). In fact, the slogan is a corrupted combination of Acts 11:29: “The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea” and Karl Marx’s works. Marx stated famously “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Atwood also designates women as those “from” whom things come and men as those “to” whom things go. She is simultaneously showing the danger of the dogmas that each woman has a fixed station in society, that a woman’s goal is to service men, and the irony of Gilead’s neo-conservative rulers by indoctrinating the handmaids with Marxist ideology. While communism was chastised by neo-conservatives in the United States as being “Godless” and evil, Atwood twists Marx’s words in order to frame them in the context of neo-conservative arguments. This religious dogma of service and duty hinders

all women in Gilead from any form of liberty and choice with their bodies and lives. Even female literacy is outlawed.

Most notably, the titular “handmaids” are required to bear children for members of the ruling class. They must don shapeless, red habits that signify their status as fertile women, yet give no hints of sexuality. Their vision is even impaired, as they are required to wear white wings that severely limit their peripheral vision, symbolizing the limited way that Gilead wishes them to view their world. Not only has their humanity been reduced to purely procreative purposes, but their ability to travel freely in Gilead is restricted. Rarely are they ever left alone, and handmaids are only allowed on strolls while accompanied by another handmaid. Even their names are reduced to those of the men that they service (the main character, Offred, literally means “the handmaid of Fred”).

This authoritarian caste system is offensive to women at all levels of the social hierarchy, even to female members of the upper echelons of the society. Offred mentions that wives “get sick a lot, these Wives of the Commanders. It adds interest to their lives” (154), implying that the ennui of life as a wife leads to an unfulfilling existence. Wives are the distilled form of the traditional homemaker; they sit at home, socialize with their friends, but are not involved in any affairs that could provide them with proper agency (a slap in the face to someone such as Schlafly). A notable example is Serena Joy, a former televangelist and wife of Commander Fred. The world that she advocated for helped engineer the Republic of Gilead, yet this same world also severely restricts her freedoms. Worse, she must watch in contempt as her husband attempts to procreate with another

woman, a union that fails to produce a child. Serena is so desperate for a child that she even offers Offred the option of an alternative to certain failure with the Commander. Even Offred mentions that “[Serena] does want that baby” (Handmaid 205). A baby is the only real pleasure that Serena can experience in this new world order, and it is what she lacks throughout the novel. It is also a status symbol among the strict caste system that Gilead employs; there is a clear difference between being a wife and rearing a child in the ideal and revered nuclear family when so few are able to produce children. This caste system affects those at all levels of society; women are oppressed in a multitude of ways, even if that oppression is not manifested in the same manner.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* has been described as the “logical extension not only of Puritan government but also the agenda articulated during the 1980s by America’s fundamentalist Christian Right” (Neuman 857). The rise of the Christian Right during the “Reagan Revolution” and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 were direct backdrops to the social mood when Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale*. As Neuman states, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the logical extension of the policies advocated by these religious groups. Figures such as Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell wished to separate the roles of men and women so dramatically that the equal rights women achieved during the 1960s and 70s began to disappear. They framed their message to imply that these rights that feminists clamored about were not truly women’s rights, but instead notions that would destroy the traditional family unit. Equality of men and women under the law was no longer a goal; it was a victim of “traditional” values.

The role of women in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* is much more nuanced than in *The Handmaid's Tale*. While women in these later novels enjoy a plethora of rights, their suffering is considerably more subtle and variable and is limited by lateral mobility that constrains true equality. Both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, while existing in the same world at the same time, are primarily set in distinct cultures. *Oryx and Crake*'s narrative occurs in two separate time periods: the past of the commercial, for-profit dystopia that thrives through the extension of modern society's hedonistic capitalism and the present post-apocalyptic world apparently devoid of humans and run amok with genetically spliced creatures and perfected child-like humans named "Crakers." *The Year of the Flood* ventures into the eco-religious cult of God's Gardeners. It floats between the outside commercial world depicted in *Oryx and Crake* and the aforementioned sect.

Because the for-profit nature of *Oryx and Crake*'s world contains none of the tyrannical Christian dogma instilled within society (such as in Gilead), there is less overt oppression than the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*. But this commercialized world allows for women to be exploited in other ways. Even those in places of power are discarded: Jimmy's mother, a head researcher at HealthWyzer, is used as a lab rat to test a new disease that HealthWyzer is producing. The lack of ethics and the necessity to create new diseases (in order to create antidotes) to drive the health market results in a frivolous casualty of human life (i.e. men and women) to achieve an immoral corporate objective.

The most flagrant abuses felt by women in *Oryx and Crake* are those of the underage sex market. While there are multitudes of examples in the world of *Oryx and Crake* of female oppression, this oppression manifests itself most visibly in the young, third-world girls sold into sexual slavery. Because of the heavily commercialized setting, there is a thriving industry for underage pornography and underage sex trafficking. Both Jimmy and Crake discover HotTots, a website specifically designed for pedophilic pleasures, with relative ease. No firewall or government attempts to block their access to these websites; it does not even seem that the underage pornographic industry is more than mildly affected by laws and restraints. Though it is a lucrative industry, girls are exploited in the process. And though Oryx describes her experience as underage pornographic “actress” candidly and with little anger or humiliation, her childhood was severely blemished by her experiences. She recalls her childhood without her parents, and that “having a money value was no substitute for love” (Oryx 126). Even if it was “good to have a money value [...] every child should have love, every person have it” (Oryx 126). Despite the fact that Oryx could use her sexuality to eventually accomplish her goals, she is still fundamentally missing a loving family. Oryx fundamentally lacks even the possibility of a loving family, as her birth family sells her away with little pain described in the decision.

Even Oryx’s transportation to the West, supposedly a society that epitomizes freedom, is an exploitative undertaking: Oryx mentions that the man who kept her in his garage for sex “was a kind man [...] He was rescuing young girls. He paid for my plane ticket, just like he said” (Oryx, 316). Even though Oryx seems comfortable with the

economic transaction, her sexuality is the only real power that she has in the commercially-centered world of the novel. Because this world is so profit-driven, a woman's sexuality is the most powerful economic bartering card that she has. These women intrinsically have an item that men desire: their bodies. Thus, they can use their own bodies as currency for men's sexual desires.

Because of Oryx's candidness concerning her previous sexual exploitation and her seeming acceptance of the situations she found herself in while still young, Atwood upends many conceptions that traditional feminists hold towards underage sexual violence. Though she experiences abandonment, statutory rape, film pornography, and sex slavery, she has no visible regrets concerning her previous life. Her life seemingly *improved* because of the situations that she found herself in and her use of her sexuality to accomplish her goals. In fact, she chastises Jimmy for implying that the man that kept her locked in a garage was a bad person. Oryx comments that "you always think the worst of people, Jimmy" and that he should not "care about things that happened so long ago" (Oryx 316). Modern psychology would dictate that Oryx must have some negative emotions or traumatic memories concerning these events; is it possible that she has twisted these memories into positive experiences in order to cope with them? Oryx is too unknowable for the reader to provide a clear answer about her psyche. Yet Oryx's seeming contentment with her past raises questions about Atwood's intent for Oryx's character: is Atwood trying to say that sex-work is a respectable career that must be celebrated and not chastised, or is sex work a product of commercialism and corruption that leaves young girls without any alternatives?

Atwood's suspicion of the term "feminism" can be witnessed within Oryx herself. Atwood mentions that she is concerned about women within the third-world who do not have access to even the most basic of protections from sex-trafficking and sexual slavery. These are the women that Atwood apparently believes are overlooked by bourgeois, first-world feminists. By creating characters such as Oryx, Atwood illustrates how easily young women can be drawn into these horrendous situations. While all three of the female protagonists in Atwood's dystopian novels are sex workers in one way or another, she does not necessarily advocate this path. In fact, she creates conservative and fiscal dystopias to show how women are forced to use sex work as an option to survive. And though Oryx laments that she never received proper familiar love as a child, she is not a "broken" woman. Even though she has been victimized, she has an amazing resilience over that victimization. That price, of course, has come with the loss of a childhood and the gain of skills for seducing the male gaze, but she is not irreparably damaged due to her victimization. Oryx's outcome as a "product" designed for male seduction will be discussed later in this paper, but Oryx's resilience to her past traumas is otherwise noteworthy. Even though there is a stigma that women who have been raped or victims of sexual assaults are somehow damaged, Atwood is portraying Oryx as a woman who is not necessarily "damaged goods," though her experience as a sex worker and pornographic actress does affect her demeanor in other ways that will be explored in a later chapter.

While *The Year of the Flood* takes place in the same world as *Oryx and Crake*, it examines the eco-religious cult of God's Gardeners, whose lifestyle is the seeming

antithesis to the world at large. The Gardeners view the world of *Oryx and Crake* as irreparably fallen, and lament “How shrunk, how dwindled, in our times/ Creation’s mighty seed -/ For Man has broke the Fellowship/ With murder, lust, and greed” (Flood 14). The Gardeners are ruled by the benevolent Adam One, who is almost as mystifying and enchanting as Oryx. And while there are other levels of leadership within the Gardeners there is never a female leader with power comparable to Adam One. Toby, for instance, is designed as the “Eve Six,” a hierarchy within the Gardeners ruled by a man named “Adam One.” There is a separate hierarchy for women and it is seemingly impossible for a woman to achieve the title of “Adam.” The Gardeners still adhere to the patriarchal society that has plagued Abrahamic religions, failing to be a true utopia for gender equality. While women can have positions of power within the Gardeners, there is still a ceiling on their eventual success that impedes them from truly being a force within the Garden.

The role of women in this society is much more apparent than in *Oryx and Crake* due to the two central female characters.<sup>2</sup> Instead of viewing the world through the thin, opaque and potentially misconstrued view of Oryx, Ren and Toby provide a much more lucid view of the role of women in this for-profit society. While Oryx is fundamentally vague about her own experiences, Ren and Toby’s first-person narration allows for a much more intimate knowledge of this dystopia through the eyes of women who have suffered sexual violence. Toby is first seen working for a violent man named Blanco,

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<sup>2</sup> While the narrative of *Oryx and Crake* switches from Ren and Toby chapter by chapter, Ren is much more important for this essay on the topic of sex work. While both Ren and Toby *do* experience oppression, Ren’s plight is more germane to this thesis.

whose abusive, dominating, and terrorizing actions almost kill Toby: “Day by day she was hungrier and more exhausted. She had her own bruises now, like poor Dora’s. Despair was taking her over: she could see where this was going, and it looked like a dark tunnel. She’d be used up soon” (Flood 38). Toby has no legal alternative because of the corrupt for-profit CorpSeCorp police. Because Blanco has power within the CorpSeCorp, she has no one to turn to while she is being sexually abused. Thus, her body is at the mercy of a patriarchal power structure.

Outside of the Garden, there are many examples of women abused and exploited due to some monetary incentive. For example, Amanda recalls one Mo’Hair shop that: lured girls in, and once you were in the scalp-transplant room they’d knock you out, and when you woke up you’d not only have different hair but different fingerprints, and then you’d be locked in a membrane house and forced into bristle work, and even if you escaped you’d never be able to prove who you were because they’d stolen your identity (Flood 142).

And while the Mo’Hair shops purposefully kidnap in order to create female slaves, there are more even unfortunate exploitations of women due to their sexual value. Mordis, the head of the strip-club and exotic dancing club Scales and Tails, explains how Painball survivors (men who were once prisoners but had survived the for-profit game of “painball” to earn their freedom) are brutal and savage, but that “Seksmart pays us a big-time extra bonus when it’s them” (Flood 130). Instead of providing these Painballers with actual employees of Scales, Mordis provides them with temporaries, because “Painball guys wanted membrane, and after they were finished you’d be judged contaminated”

(Flood 130). And even though Mordis is shown to be a compassionate figure throughout the novel, a younger Ren recalls spotting a dead girl outside of Scales. She “didn’t have any hair or clothes: she only had a few green scales left clinging to her” (Flood 75). Though there were no details concerning this woman’s death, she is a discarded object. These women are especially at risk because of the protections that they lack in society. As with many women involved within sex work, they lack a voice and are only defined by their bodies. Atwood here uses this woman to exemplify the beaten and abused women of society who are voiceless.

Women such as Lucerne resemble the “wives” found in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Lucerne’s life is based on trivialities and social status. In a moment of passion, she temporarily rescinds her hedonist and traditional way of life to pursue Zeb and a humble life without any superfluities. This ultimately proves disastrous, as Ren is taken from her father and Lucerne is left continuously fighting with Zeb. She reacts so strongly to her more modest living situation that Adam One states that Lucerne is in a “fallow state.” Once she returns to the HealthWyzer compound, Lucerne continues to envelop herself in her trivial life with few motivations outside of reclaiming her youth. Toby recalls seeing her at AnooYoo, a spa whose goal was to “sell hope” on the “whole signs-of-mortality thing” (Flood 264), commenting on her “signs of decay” (Flood 267). Yet even when Lucerne coincidentally comes across Ren at AnooYoo, “she [blows Ren] off like a piece of lint” (Flood 301). Lucerne’s concern is wholly self-centered, and Ren realizes “it was like being erased off the state of the universe – to have your own mother act as if you’d never been born” (Flood 301). Commercialism has fostered a ‘me-first’ society, where

basic societal building blocks such as the family unit and motherhood have been cast asunder and replaced by luxury. Instead of aspiring for a world in which men and women hold equal rights under the law, or where young women are no longer trafficked as sex slaves, Lucerne is more concerned about her appearance, social status, and the small trivialities of upper-class society. Atwood may be making a comparison here to the priorities of the feminist movement: while Lucerne is by no definition a “feminist,” her concern with upper-class vanity underscores the struggles that characters such as Oryx face as lower-class women with no power. Instead of fighting for gender equality, Lucerne finds comfort in high society, even if she herself lacks power compared to the men of the compound. Lucerne’s lack of social status within the Garden results in paralysis that ultimately leads to her eventual return to the comforts of her previous life. Even her love for Zeb is not enough for her stay with the Gardeners and witness the struggles of poorer members of society.

While Lucerne is the antithesis of female equality, Amanda is a force of power. She is more powerful than any other female in the novel, easily taking down men with street fighting skills (though she is raped at the end of the novel, showing that even the strongest women are still susceptible to sexual violence). She impresses the children of the Garden, and even looking back, Ren realizes that Amanda “doesn’t judge. She says you trade what you have to. You don’t always have choices” (Flood 58). Amanda understands the pragmatic reasons why Ren works at Scales, knowing that women must make sacrifices. Early in the novel, Amanda attempts to use her sexuality as a form of exchange for drugs, though the cost is considerable. Amanda exclaims that she “traded!

[..] I traded a lot!” (154) for the drugs from Shackie and Croze. Yet instead of becoming a street thug or a prostitute, Amanda becomes an artist, synthesizing nature and art together to create powerful messages about the human condition. Her art even inadvertently saves her from the Waterless Flood. Amanda is one of the more intriguing characters in Atwood’s novels because she recognizes the value of her body in the eyes of patriarchy, yet rebels against conventional norms through her art. In a way, she is similar to Ren in that she must reject societal norms in order to find herself. Yet unlike Ren, she finds a much more expressive and less oppressive way of coming into her own.

Atwood creates these dystopias to specifically resemble aspects of modern society that are dangerous to women within them. Whether that is through overt oppression through religious means, as in *Gilead*, or through the lack of options and social safety nets for women within the commercially centered worlds in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, women suffer at every level of society. Even characters such as Serena Joy, Lucerne, and Amanda suffer at some level within these dystopias because of the inherent nature of the world. The social structures presented are fundamentally incompatible with gender equality.

## Chapter 2: Sex Work Within Atwood's Dystopias

Madeline Davies' examination of Margaret Atwood's writing reveals Atwood's obsession with the female body: "In Atwood's body of work the bodies at work are never neutral sites but are always active articulations of territorial disputes" (58). Davies attributes the origin of this philosophy on the body to French feminist Hélène Cixous, who argued in her opus "The Laugh of the Medusa" that "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous 334). While Atwood resists women being defined as an eternal, all-encompassing definition of "Woman," the female body is constantly defined by patriarchy within Atwood's novels. This manifests itself within *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* through sex work and prostitution: all contain female protagonists whose main profession is some form of sex work. Atwood engages in a very present and lively debate within feminist scholarship on the nature of sex work and pornography: are pornography and sex work manifestations of female sexuality and criticism of pornography is based on prudishness, or are they violent attacks on the rights of women, victimizing women as mere receptacles for male dominance? This chapter will examine how Atwood uses three characters, Offred, Oryx, and Ren, to enter into the current dialogue. All three of these characters experience sex work in different ways, and while each is able to use her sexuality for small gains, each is forced to become a sex worker because of the choices presented to her.

To Offred, this is manifested as sex slavery. She is forced to procreate in order to bear children that will not even be hers. She has no power over her body, no choice over

her ability to make love or to have children. The idea of a woman having a choice over her body, often exemplified in pro-choice versus pro-life debates, has been taken further in Gilead to mean that women must be forced to create life. Women no longer have agency over their own bodies or choices regarding the employment, recalling much of the rhetoric from pro-life groups. This rhetoric stresses the life of the unborn and the importance of the mother to the traditional family unit. The limits of freedom are, humorously, justified by God's will. The will of God is used to justify sexual enslavement, a strict caste system, and the murder of those who dissent. Offred's womb is a necessity of society and she has no choice over how her body is used. Her body is literally only a womb: her thoughts, feelings, wishes, and even sexuality are seen as destructive and sinful to the more pious of Gilead. Offred nostalgically recalls even the minutest level of choice, something as simple as to go the laundromat with "my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself. I think about having such control" (24). It is not necessarily the magnitude of the laundromat, but the ownership that Offred had over her own life and choices. The irony is that the ability to do one's laundry would not be seen as anything extraordinary, yet to Offred it is those little choices that now hold such weight. Offred's experiences in Gilead begin with the loss of choice: her child is taken from her by Gilead to be raised by another: "She fades, I can't keep her with me, she's gone now [...] it's easier, to think of her as dead" (64). Instead of having the choice to raise one's child as she sees fit, Offred is stripped of her power to make her own reproductive and parenting choices. Susan G. Cole describes the role of

surrogate motherhood as a “womb for rent” (126) and shows a very diverse set of opinions from multiple feminist scholars on the issue. She mentions how:

Janice Raymond, a radical feminist, refers to surrogacy arrangements as a “productive ménage a trios” in which two women do the bidding of one man; Andrea Dworkin, in 1982, anticipated the new trend to surrogacy with a grim vision of women in cages, some enslaved for sex, some enslaved for reproduction. Feminist sociologist Margit Eichler has already petitioned the federal government for a royal commission on surrogacy. And Phyllis Chesler has been active and vocal in her support for the now notorious Mary Beth Whitehead (127).

Offred’s sexual slavery is similar to the contract that Mary Beth Whitehead signed: “[she] signed everything away – what she could eat, drink, any control over her body. Even control over her emotions was negotiated – the contract stipulated that Mary Beth would not love the baby she was carrying” (129). Offred’s womb is also owned by the Commander, as her entire life is controlled by the patriarchy of Gilead. Not only does she lack choices concerning her own body, but she lacks any choice concerning her ability to make a family. Similarly to the mechanical birthing stations in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Offred and her fellow handmaids are expected to populate Gilead, not raise it.

Offred also realizes that her sexuality is the only real resource that she has; the Commander even escorts her to a secret Jezebel sex club because of his fascination with her. Offred is able to exploit her position at Jezebel’s because of the Commander’s lust. Even when she is trying on an archaic sequin outfit, she states that she “want[s] him to

feel like I'm doing him a favor" (Handmaid 231). The Commander uses the night to show her off to his fellow commanders, but Offred also realizes that he is attempting to "show off to me" (Handmaid 236). While Offred does not gain anything beyond a bizarre night-on-the-town and a conversation with her lost friend Moira, her relationship with the Commander has changed, even if just slightly. Their sexual relationship is no longer strictly procreative and now contains tinges of actual emotion and lust. The Commander attempts to make their sexual encounter that night at Jezebel's more than just routine breeding. Offred recalls telling herself to "bestir herself. Move your flesh around, breath audibly. It's the least you can do" (Handmaid 255).

At the same time, Offred is still having sex against her will. She is going through these motions because it is expected of her, not because she chooses to. There is also a hope that she will be able to gain something from the men of Gilead, whether that is a game of scrabble or her eventual freedom. It is the same impossible choice that the Jezebels are presented: go to the Colonies and die from radiation poisoning, or become a prostitute. Moira discusses the conundrum, stating that all of those people in the Colonies are:

Sterile, of course. If they aren't that way to begin with, they are after they've been there for a while[...] They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves. (Handmaid 248).

Just because there is the appearance of choice does not make the sexual acts that the Jezebels must go through a valid choice, a theme that links all of Atwood's sex work

protagonists. Between a slow death and a life with some vanities and liberties, any sane woman would obviously choose the later. The illusion of choice does not make these decisions any less forced. What they go through is still rape, however, even if it is the best available option. There is a fundamental problem with sexual choice that permeates all of Atwood's dystopian novels: even if there is a "choice" to become a sex worker, rarely is it an actual choice, and usually it is one fraught with multiple complications.

None of the sexual encounters with the Commander provide Offred with any satisfaction or benefit; she is at the mercy of the men of Gilead. Oryx goes through many of the same experiences, but is able to use her sexuality as leverage over the men in her life. This small yet tangible amount of agency is somewhat similar to how the Commander fleetingly wishes to impress Offred at Jezebel's. Offred is able to use her body and sexuality to impress the Commander when he shows her off to other members of the elite. While Offred can only hope for mercy from the Commander and others within Gilead by charming them, Oryx is able to use her sexuality to secure her passage to the West. Oryx is sold into the sex trade by her parents, but she realizes that she has a money value. Oryx ultimately uses her sex work as a way to manipulate outcomes: she is able to travel to America through sex and she is able to gain the trust and hearts of both Jimmy and Crake through her sexuality. Her sexuality is her biggest asset, and she is able to inspire lust in numerous men, most notably Jimmy and even the ever-rational Crake. While watching Crake and Oryx have sex on a video screen, Ren comments that:

She was acting all the time, giving nothing away about herself. I'd watch them onscreen: I was curious because Glenn was such a cold fish, but he could have sex

all right, just like a human being. This girl had more moves than an octopus, and her plankwork was astounding.” (Flood 306)

Because she is “always acting” and has exquisite sexual prowess, Oryx becomes a fetish for the men that she entrances. Even Jimmy comments at one point that “was there only one Oryx, or was she legion?” (Oryx 308). Throughout the novel, she comments on her sexual past and the multiple older men who used her sexually. Even then, she relies on the compassion of men in her life and is never truly in control. This should not understate the hardship that Oryx has incurred and the longing for a true family that she briefly mentions. While it might be simple to believe that Oryx is not a victim because of the manner in which she carries herself, her past has severe implications on her life in the West. Instead of being bitter, she is thankful for the experiences that they gave her and the care she received. She recalls her reaction to Uncle En’s death, and that “he could have done much worse things to me, and he didn’t do them. I cried when I heard he was dead. I cried and cried” (Orxy 136). Instead of contextualizing these experiences in order to hate and loathe these rapists, she views their sexual encounters as something oddly romantic or loving. Eventually, her experiences lead her to a revelation that lives at the crux of *Oryx and Crake*’s society: “Everything has a price” (Oryx 139), even love. These discussions are marked with an extreme, and rather unsettling, level of candidness; Oryx is painting her nails while discussing her sexual history to Jimmy, without “a smudge on her” (Oryx 139). The only means by which Oryx has any agency is through sex work and her ability to mystify the male gaze. Yet this lifestyle and means to an end have given Oryx no real familiar connection and no one whom she truly connects with. She gains

some agency through fetishizing herself, yet she is never able to lower her guard and truly connect with any other characters.

On the other hand, Ren requires little coercion from others to choose a life of sex work; she chooses a life at Scales because she “needed to be on [her] own” and she “wanted to be something else entirely” without “ow[ing] anyone anything, or being owed anything either. [She] wanted no strings, no past, and no questions asked” (Flood 301). That is not to say that sex work is a profession that Ren dreamed of; rather, it was the only real option she had while biding her time at AnooYoo. She embraces the sex work at Scales as a way for her finally to become her own person and shed the dependences she has long held. She views Scales as a new life, where she does not have to be constrained by her mother or her past. Amanda inadvertently inspires Ren to this conclusion; being reminded of Jimmy made her feel “dumped out and hollow” (Flood 301) because of the memories recalled. Working for Scales also meant giving up on Jimmy and being her own woman, something that she had been unable to do since returning from the Gardeners. The Scales women are exotic and strive to be unusual representations of sexuality and femininity for the sake of men. They specifically use their bodies to appeal to the atypical sexual fantasies of the male visitors. Even though Ren desperately needs to escape from her mother, Jimmy and her old life, her options are severely limited by the fundamentals of *The Year of the Flood*'s world. Working at Scales is her best option, even if it is nowhere near an ideal one.

Because all three of these characters are sex workers, this raises a question that strikes at the heart of a feminist debate: is it possible for a person to be a sex-worker and a feminist? Sheila Jeffereys states that:

Within the academy the 'sex work' position, i.e. that prostitution should be understood as legitimate work, and an expression of women's choice and agency, has become the dominant perspective. Most feminist scholars now take this point of view or show sympathy towards it. The critical approach to prostitution that was almost universal amongst feminists from the nineteenth century up till the 1980s, that prostitution arises from and symbolizes the subordination of women, is much less often expressed. (Jeffreys 316).

In their book *Feminism and Pornography*, Berger, Searles and Cottle examine the odd alliances formed within the debate on pornography, noting that:

Both antipornography and anticensorship feminists have found themselves in precarious political alliances with nonfeminist forces – antipornography feminists with religious-conservatives and anticensorship feminists with civil libertarians [...] clearly, the traditional "left-right" political continuum is insufficient to characterize different sides of the pornography debate. (31)

They characterize the debate on pornography and sex work within feminist circles as "polarized" and "one of the most hotly contested social issues" of the 1980s (1).

Feminists who assert that pornography and sex work are not necessarily negative and violent attacks on female sexuality argue that "women can be autonomous agents of their own sexuality and that they are capable of negotiating this terrain for their own

purposes” (Berger 42). Feminists such as Berger, Kipnis, and Willis believe that women should be able to express their sexuality in ways that they see fit and that pornography is just another expression of human sexuality. Oryx is able to negotiate and make arrangements for travel through her sexuality, and accomplish a laundry list of goals that would have been otherwise insurmountable. Feminist scholars have often linked pornography and sex work together, with many theorists taking sides against or for both. Laura Kipnis sees pornography as a "realm of transgression" where people can "indulge in a range of longings and desires without regard to the appropriateness and propriety of those desires” (Bernstein). While Kipnis does not see pornography as a cultured or high form of expression, she views pornography as a cultural expression that transcends taboos (161). Similarly, Ellen Willis sees “this goody-goody concept of eroticism [as] not feminist but feminine” (224). She believes that by rejecting pornography and prostitution, feminists are adhering to the prudish and oppressive societal norms that are also the genesis of female oppression. According to this view, feminism should embrace an expression of sexuality and the freedom of women to make their own choices with their bodies, not shy away from those expressions because they might happen to be filmed or paid for. Ren is able to use her body as a means of expressing female sexuality and eroticism and as a way to make a quick buck. The precise idea of Scales and Tails is the fetishization of women as something more than just human beings, but as exotic, sexual beings.

There is also a substantial number of feminist theorists who believe that pornography and prostitution are nothing more than violence against women and must be

curbed. Even though theorists such as Kipnis argue that pornography is only an erotic and exotic experience, Crake carries this erotic experience from his computer to the real world. He is so enamored by Oryx's persona from her videos that he searches for her. The fetish evolves into something more substantial to Crake. Some research shows that viewing pornography "alters viewers' perceptions of sexuality" (Paul 77). Pamela Paul postulates that "the porn star is a blank slate on which each observer can graft his own recipe for reciprocal lust and pleasure" (78). This is exactly what Crake does with Oryx; he takes his own fantasy with the young girl that he once saw and transplants those feelings onto the physical Oryx. Worse, Oryx is herself enigmatic, making her the perfect blank slate for others' imaginations. Oryx embodies Paul's typical porn star: a blank woman whose mission is to be a reflector for men. Oryx spends much of her time with Crake and Jimmy fulfilling their fantasies. While Jimmy is dedicated to "filling in" Oryx's blank state with her true feelings and persona, Crake seems more than happy for Oryx to embody the fantasy that he holds.

Carrying the torch from scholars such as Andrea Dworkin, feminist scholars such as Rebecca Whisnant and Christine Stark believe that feminism has avoided or censored critiques of prostitution and pornography due to racist undertones or fear of retaliation from men (Manzano 25). Whisnant believes that "many, many feminists do not want to think about or deal with prostitution or pornography, they don't want to deal with the controversy and what happens is the voices of survivors are shut down and we do not receive the kind of support we deserve" (Manzano 26). Chris Stark believes that the only differences between pornography and prostitution are "cameras and eternity," adding that

“pornography is technologized prostitution” (Manzano 27). She adds that “men are buying and selling your rape so that they can orgasm to the pain and humiliation and make money off of it” (Manzano 27). Similarly, Oryx becomes a fascination for Jimmy and Crake because of her intrigue within her pornographic video. Men exploit girls such as Oryx because of their “money value” and because there is a high demand for young girls to experience pain through sex. Oryx recounts how “if they wanted you to cry you had to do that too” (Oryx 139). The aforementioned feminist scholars would see this fantasy of women crying while engaging in filmed sex to be abhorrent because of the power that men are exerting over a woman’s body through sex (this does not take into account that this fantasy deals specifically with *underage* girls, further characterizing these men as repugnant). Berger, Searles, and Cottle assert that “radical” feminists believe that “pornography is not an ‘idea’ any more than racial segregation is an ‘idea.’ Like segregation, it is a concrete, discriminatory social practice that institutionalizes the inferiority and subordination of one group to another” (Berger 37). There is an inherently unequal relationship between women and men in sex work and prostitution, as the woman is supposed to take orders and do as the man wishes. Even though Oryx appears to be grateful for the experiences she has had, none of those experiences were by her own volition. Just as with Moira and Offred, there are “choices,” yet these choices are usually between two horrifying options. Atwood states that “if writing novels – and reading them – have any redeeming social value, it’s probably that they force you to imagine what it’s like to be somebody else. Which, increasingly, is something we all need to know” (Second Words 430). Through Oryx, Atwood is showing how women from third-world

nations often do not have choices when it concerns their bodies. She is providing a voice to these women who should be the centerpiece of feminist causes. Even Ren, who is from the same nation as Jimmy, Crake, and Amanda, is from a “third-world” within that same nation because of her lower socio-economic status after Lucerne cuts off her funding.

Atwood engages in this debate with Offred, Oryx, and Ren, staying seemingly ambivalent on the answer. While Offred’s sexual enslavement is clearly horrendous and immoral, both Oryx and Ren are able to use their sex work to achieve their goals. Ren even chooses sex work as a professional after being employed at more reputable professions. Ren comments on the differing opinions that members of the Graden would have concerning her occupation:

Some of them would be disappointed, like Adam One. Bernice would say I was backslidden and it served me right. Lucerne would say I’m a slut, and I’d say takes one to know one. Pilar would look at me wisely. Shackie and Croze would laugh. Toby would be mad at Scales. What about Zeb? I think he’d try to rescue me because it would be a challenge. Amanda knows already. She doesn’t judge.

She says you trade what you have to. You don’t always have choices.” (Flood 58)

While both Oryx and Ren (and to a limited extent Offred) are able to gain some leverage using their sexuality, they are in sex work situations because of the choices that have been made for them and the world that they reside in.

There is also the question of genre. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* are, above all else, dystopian novels. They center on societies that are not ideal and are the antithesis of the common good. Though each novel centers on

differing themes (religious conservatism, capitalism, scientific ethics, cults), each also shows how women suffer. Dystopian novels are appealing for novelists because they allow the author to take metaphors outside of the confines of the real world, even if only slightly. While Atwood uses “speculative fiction” to create worlds that could exist, they still do not technically exist within the real world. If Oryx was depicted as a hooker from the streets of Las Vegas, the reader would already be aware of different stereotypes that are associated with that woman’s life. The reader is living in the world that exists in the novel and might not be willing to accept the realities presented by the author. The same would be true of an Afghan woman in an arranged marriage; the reader is already aware of a myriad of stereotypes associated with Afghan women. Dystopias are also innately societies that the reader would not wish to live in. Because the reader knows that this is a dystopian novel, he or she assumes (correctly) that these women will suffer from problems that are fundamental to the societies that they live in. Within these worlds that are innately flawed due to their setting and genre, Atwood establishes occupations and social statuses for women that are also dystopian; they are the opposite of an ideal. Even if sex work seems to be a positive force for Ren, the nature of the genre automatically makes this positive experience suspect. The use of genre is most evident in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where the dystopia is overt and explicit. Yet in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, there is a more implicit dystopia. In fact, the Gardeners attempt to construct a utopia while they wait for the prophesized “waterless flood,” but the Garden is not a perfect utopia for some of its inhabitants by design, including Ren and Amanda.

Ren sees the fundamental difference between her and Amanda as Amanda's natural strength, both physical and mental. Ren describes the distinction between her two friends at the Garden, saying that "Bernice was mean, but Amanda was tough, which is different" (Flood 137). Amanda has an inner strength that allows her to avoid a life at a facility similar to Scales even though she too "trades." While Amanda recognizes the value of trading, she is still able to find an occupation that does not require her to trade her body as a source of income. Her expression through art is a direct contrast to Ren's sexual agency, not only because of its societal acceptance but also because of the modes of expression. Ren conceals her true body and self behind her exotic costumes at Scales, becoming a mere fetish for a man's desire. Amanda engages in the most basic form of creative self-expression – art – placing her work on a large stage for public viewing. But even though Amanda and Ren originate from similar backgrounds within the Garden, only Amanda is able to escape the chaos of the Pleeblands. Even though Atwood may present Ren's work at Scales and characters within the club somewhat positively, it is not an ideal. Atwood uses the dynamic of a dystopian society to show that while women with immeasurable strength and conviction, such as Amanda and even Moira of *The Handmaid's Tale*, can free themselves, their experiences are few and rarely repeatable. Even these characters are susceptible to sexual violence, though. Amanda experiences rape by Blanco's men at the end of *The Year of the Flood*. Looking through the bushes, Ren notes that she can "see Amanda as they see her: used up, worn out. Worthless" (Flood 417). Even Moira is sent to Jezebel's after attempting to escape from the handmaid's compound. Both characters are the "strongest" women both emotionally and

physically within the novels, yet they still cannot escape patriarchy. While Amanda escapes the confines of the dystopia to the extent that she is able to fully express herself and is not defined by men, Ren, like most women within these dystopias, remains without a voice.

Atwood enters into the discussion of sex work with *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*. While *The Handmaid's Tale* draws a more obvious conclusion on the role of sex work as a profession, her addition to the anti-pornography and sex-positive debate becomes initially more indistinct within *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. Oryx has few scars from her previous sexual exploitation and Ren chooses a life of sex work by choice. Yet Oryx makes these choices because she must, not because there is an appeal to the lifestyle. Ren does choose a life of sex work at Scales, but this life is chosen by virtue of the few positive options for her. The nature of the dystopias that all three live in dictates the choices that they must make as women. Each woman has few options except for her body and exploiting her sexual value in order to achieve a goal. Again, it is Amanda who states that “you don’t always have choices” and that “you trade what you have to” (Flood 58). Yet the situations where those trades happen would not happen in a world where women have equal access and equal opportunity.

### **Chapter 3: Social Conservatism, Fiscal Conservatism, and Patriarchy**

When the Equal Rights Amendment was seeking ratification, the “Moral Majority” was instrumental in halting its passage. Phyllis Schlafly famously stated that “a Positive Woman cannot defeat a man in a wrestling or boxing match, but she can motivate him, inspire him, encourage him, teach him, restrain him, and reward him, and have power over him that he can never achieve over her with all his muscle” (127). To Schlafly, a woman’s role is not within the working world, but instead within the household to support her husband. This stands in direct contrast to feminists, such as Emma Goldman, who would view marriage as a form of sex slavery (Goldman). Schlafly abandoned her home (somewhat ironically) and became extremely involved within the conservative movement, establishing herself as a national activist and speaker. Schlafly’s political activism exists as a female counter-movement to the “radical feminism” of the 1970s. Instead of advocating for sexual freedom, “conservative feminism” would argue women to take a more subordinate role within society. Schlafly herself is not a feminist, yet presents a conservative world-view from a female perspective. Feminist utopias written by progressive feminists also are at odds with Schlafly’s conservative feminism. These utopias stress that education and intellectual development are an significant part of a woman’s development, that human nature as malleable, and that gender is socially constructed, that there must be a gradual approach to change instead of a dynamic revolution, that the non-human natural world as dynamic that must be cared for, and that feminists must take a pragmatic approach to gender equality (Johns 178). Schlafly’s

vision of a utopia within the context of social conservatism is far different than many feminist utopias.

Social conservatism is also politically married to fiscal conservatism. As stated earlier, this paper defines social conservatism as the idea that government organizations should be used to pursue an agenda promoting traditional religious values, such as public morality, and opposing immoralities such as abortion, prostitution, and homosexuality. This paper also defines fiscal conservatism as an agenda promoting privatization of the market, deregulation, lower taxes, with importance placed on individualism. Atwood's three dystopias, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*, all exist within worlds dominated by these philosophies. Gilead is strikingly conservative, with the Republic instilling piety within every aspect of its culture, comparable to modern theocratic Republics such as Iran. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* exist within a world whose philosophy is deregulation and consumerism. Money is valued above all else, as is a tangible "money value" for all items (including the female body). Corporations control everything from development of drugs to the police, with no governmental regulatory bodies to stay corruption. This fiscal conservative and libertarian utopia, where there is little to stop corporate development and business, becomes a dystopia for Atwood.

Both the social and fiscal conservative philosophies within these worlds are constructed within the framework of patriarchy. Social conservatism relies on an agenda of "traditional values" that stresses a woman's place as subordinate to a man's. This is inherently patriarchal, where men dominate the social framework. Social conservatism

would most likely not label this as “patriarchy” due to its negative connotations within academic circles, but stress that there are traditional values that must be respected in order for society to remain harmonious. The fiscal conservative and consumerist culture also lend themselves towards patriarchy: where there is no regulation, there are no real guards for minorities and women. Women also have fewer protections against sexual violence because of a corporate and corrupt police force. And because of the money value innate to women’s bodies, there is a larger (and again, unregulated) market for female sex work. Even in a free-market society where anyone should have the ability to succeed regardless of gender, men are the only ones who are in control when money is king. In an interview, Zillah Eisenstein supposes that:

In my writing in *Capitalist Patriarchy*, I never use the term "sexual class." I use it now and think it is important to distinguish between whether you're talking about an economic class or a sexual class. Although he didn't mean it to be used this way, E.P. Thompson has a wonderful comment that classes don't look around and choose an enemy and start to fight, that classes develop out of everyday struggles. (Douglas 11)

Eisenstein suggests that because women are repressed by capitalist patriarchy, they develop a “sexual class,” similar to Marx’s economic class structure. According to Eisenstein, an adherent of Marxist feminist ideology, this class is formed only because of the inherent patriarchy of capitalism and can only be overcome through a “fundamental change in direction and priority in trying to organize a strong feminist movement in the United States” (Douglas 11) . Atwood never goes as far as Eisenstein’s Marxist feminist

ideology, but Atwood does take issue with complete laissez faire capitalism with a total free market and a strict, organized state religion. She views patriarchy as the true enemy of gender equality under everything: even the post-flood world within *The Year of the Flood* contains patriarchal elements. This excessive consumerism and deregulation, coupled with a disregard for human rights, results in the struggles of women such as Ren and Oryx. Because patriarchy continues to exist even when the world has literally been “scrubbed clean,” patriarchy seems to be a result of human nature. Social and fiscal conservative policies only allow for patriarchy to subsist further.

As noted in the first chapter, Atwood uses social and fiscal conservative philosophies as the dominating policies of her dystopias. *The Handmaid's Tale* is an augmentation of the arguments and ideas proposed by socially conservative activists. Instead of women simply having a place within the home, women have a specific role that must be adhered to because of a social and religious obligation. Instead of just banning women from being able to have an abortion, women no longer can choose who they reproduce with. Worse, their freedoms are even more curtailed when their children are taken from them and given to the ruling class, the most pious members of society. Instead of making homosexuality illegal, homosexuality is punishable by death on “The Wall” for all to see. Atwood is intelligently following a line of reasoning with these arguments, taking them further than what would normally be acceptable in Western society. Social conservatism is cancerous to the equality championed by Offred's mother prior to Gilead's creation. At one point, the handmaid training compound provides a video about the handmaids-in-training on the sins women committed in the past. Offred

notices her mother, along with other women, holding signs that read “FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN’S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE? Under the last sign there’s a line drawing of a woman’s body, lying on a table, blood dripping out of it” (Handmaid 120). These are the freedoms that feminists fought for since the 1960s, yet they are considered capital offenses within Gilead. Offred recalls seeing her mother “smiling, laughing” (Handmaid 120) at this rally, celebrating the freedoms that they wished to secure. While these signs would not be uncommon at a modern political rally, even the advocacy of these ideas is punishable by death in Gilead. This social conservatism is founded on moral absolutism, where there is one truth (that of the Christian God of one particular denomination) and all other beliefs are heretical. This moral absolutism is absolutely cancerous to the efforts to achieve gender equality, because moral absolutism leaves no space for secular or rational evidence within a debate.

Even the excessive consumerism and corporate-dominated landscape provides roadblocks in the struggle for gender equality because these philosophies allow for patriarchy to exist. Because there are few protections for women in both the third-world and the West, these women are exploited due to patriarchal undertones within human nature. There is no doubt that the moral absolutism of social conservatism within *The Handmaid’s Tale* is more overt in its subjugation of women, but the fiscally conservative dystopias of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* still discriminate against women through socially-instilled patriarchy. As with Gilead, the social structure within this

unnamed nation is inherently constructed in a way that favors men over women. Even Ren, a college graduate, resolves to take sex work as a profession. She recalls looking at a career fair for some jobs, but because of the excessive consumer market within this world, there are few places for artists within the world: “They wouldn’t bother recruiting at Martha Graham, they wanted numbers people” (Flood 294). Even with a degree, her career options are limited to housewife, working at the AnooYoo spa, or as a sex worker at Scales. Though the plight of the artist balancing creation with monetary success is no strange concept in modernity, the options provided to Ren are comparatively limited. Ren’s only real skill that can be monetarily appraised her sexual skill: like all women, her body itself holds value in the eyes of patriarchy. Her dancing skills save her from a more dangerous brothel, yet she still is a sex worker. Ren is not from a third world country; she is only cut off from her family’s capital by Lucerne. Even women from the same nation have wildly differing experience due to their social class. While Jimmy’s mother is able to work as a successful microbiologist, women from lower socio-economic statuses suffer (to be fair, Jimmy’s mother’s strong moral compass results in her abandoning her life on her volition). While Ren may have originated from the HealthWyzer complex, her lack of funds, distanced family connections, and third-rate education provide her with few real choices and no resources aside from her body

Toby’s father attempts to defy the CorpSeCorp, driving Toby’s father into poverty and showcasing the unparalleled corporate power that the CorpSeCorp has consolidated. By attempting to defy the corporate-controlled power system, he seals his fate. He loses his job, his wife is contaminated with a mysterious illness, and he sells his house. Toby is

eventually left without parents, a complete college education, or any financial service. Toby's plight exemplifies the tyrannical power of corporations, also known as a corporatocracy. Fiscal conservative philosophies of deregulation and small government perpetuate the power that corporations amass, allowing for organizations such as CorpSeCorp to emerge. Even Toby mentions that the "CorpSeCorp had outlawed firearms in the interest of public security, reserving the newly invented sprayguns for themselves" (Flood 24). Corporations are able to dictate policy changes without lobbying efforts. Even the public health options that do exist are nothing more than "pok[ing] at your tongue and giv[ing] you a few germs and viruses you didn't already have" (Flood 26). Public accommodations do not truly exist, and there is no concept of public welfare. Toby must fend for herself at SecretBurger, where she is subjected to intense sexual violence by her employer. While women such as Lucerne might have the benefit of living within heavily guarded establishments that protect the families of these mega-corporation executives, women from lower socio-economic statuses do not have this luxury and must fend for themselves, often with disastrous results. Lucerne's position within HealthWyzer's compound is subordinate to the predominately male scientists; it is always the women at the bottom. Again, it is the key similarity between neo-conservatism and free-market capitalism is the inherent patriarchy: women are the ones who, more often than not, suffer because of the social structures in place. Not only is Toby's poverty limiting in a world controlled by wealth, but her status as a woman means that she is more vulnerable to sexual violence. Indeed, Blanco takes advantage of Toby: "Better, she should thank him: he demanded a thank you after every degrading act. He

didn't want her to feel pleasure, though: only submission" (Flood 38). The corporate police will not help here because "the local pleebmobs paid the CorpSeCorpMen to turn a blind eye" (Flood 33). Without any government organization, corporations such as the CorpSeCorp are too corrupt to protect young women such as Toby from sexual violence and rape. And the idea of public health is non-existent, echoing modern capitalist societies that believe that people who use these entitlement programs are nothing more than leeches on government funds.

Oryx's circumstances are even more perilous, having been sold by her parents because of her money value. Because there are no real regulations on underage pornography and prostitution, there is a thriving market for young girls such as Oryx. Oryx's third-world nation also lacks any governmental regulations that allow for men to take advantage of girls such as Oryx without any real police force or government agency to stop them. This underage pornography is not explicitly filmed in the West, yet it is easily accessed as a commercial website for an international community. If there is a market for this type of pornography, why not exploit these young girls in the name of competition and consumerism? And because of the patriarchal undertones within this excessive consumerist market, it is the women who suffer because their bodies have an inherent value in the eyes of men. Oryx's body certainly carries an inherent worth, most notably due to her enigmatic personality and sexual athleticism. Oryx's skills lie specifically in courting of men, though she knows little else. Since her youth, she has been deceiving men, showing men what they want in person and in film, all without her own wishes taken into consideration. Even Mordis mentions how perfect Oryx would be

for Scales: “[he] used to watch them too, and he said Scales would pay this girl top dollar. But I told him he couldn’t afford her: she was way out of his price range” (Flood 306). Oryx is the product of this patriarchal consumerism because she is the perfect product for patriarchy: a woman with seemingly no needs or cares of her own who has been groomed since her youth to fulfill the wishes of men. It’s a patriarchal utopian design, similar to Joss Whedon’s *Dollhouse* or *The Stepford Wives* (the former an avant-garde television show about programmable people and the latter a satirical thriller about a group of men who attempt to create the perfect wife). Even Jimmy realizes that his intrigue for Oryx originates from his innate curiosity with her mystique. The only regret that Oryx verbally admits is that love is more important than a money value: “She herself would rather have had her mother’s love – the love she still continued to believe in, the love that had followed her through the jungle in the form of a bird so she would not be too frightened or lonely” (Oryx 126). That is, she would rather her parents kept her and loved her, even if that meant living in squalor.

If social and fiscal conservative allow for patriarchy to flourish, is there a solution? The only “Eden” provided within Atwood’s dystopias is the God’s Gardeners, which is far away from a perfect society due to its societal bounds. The Gardeners must attempt to exist within this society of excessive consumerism, which limits both their living quarters and resources. Still, the Gardeners are the most egalitarian of the societies (if one could call the Garden itself a society) presented in Atwood’s work. It is the most female-friendly, yet it still exhibits patriarchal tendencies. While women are able to hold roles of power as Eves, their patriarch is still Adam One. Eves are allowed to provide

input into policy decisions of that particular sect of the Gardeners, but Adam One is still the ultimate authority. While a male leader does not necessarily imply patriarchy, there is no indication that Adam One could or would relinquish his power to a woman. The names “Adam” and “Eve” also reference the characters from the book of Genesis. Eve is often blamed for instigating the fall of Man in Christian doctrine and has been used to justify the supposed inferiority of women. If there is a utopia of gender equality, the Gardeners is close, but not ideal. Patriarchy is too ingrained within human nature to be divorced from culture. While the Gardeners come close, even this society is marred by patriarchal tendencies.

Atwood never truly provides an answer to a “solution,” though the world after the waterless flood implies that patriarchy is too ingrained within our culture and must be “washed clean” in order to achieve a more ideal state of equality. Patriarchy is so deep within these dystopias that the only way to erase it from the world is for an event such as the waterless flood. Crake’s actual goal is to create the ideal human (the Crakers, though their status as ideal is suspect) and erase the social ills that plague humanity. Crake is a utopian, though his utopia is a world without any higher-order thought and populated with the uncanny child-like Crakers. The Crake’s utopia is certainly not utopian for Jimmy or any of Atwood’s readers. At the conclusion of *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy appears to be the only remaining human; once he is dead, the remains of the old world will have died with him. The end of *The Year of the Flood* suggests that there are many who survived, including Blanco and his men, who carry their misogyny with them, yet there is still a hope that Ren, Toby, Zeb and the other MaddAdam survivors can create a society

much more idealistic than what preceded. This is survivors are unintended, yet the possibility still exists for them to build a new world. Each dystopian novel also ends in a hope that there is a better world out there for these protagonists. When Offred views Nick's van in the distance, she ends her oral narrative with a moment of hope amid the ambiguity of the future: "And so I step up, into the darkness; or else the light" (*Handmaid* 295). Jimmy's fate at the end of *Oryx and Crake* is similarly ambiguous. He is bleeding, dying, and says that it's "Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go" (*Oryx* 374). Even Ren and Jimmy's ending in *The Year of the Flood* is ambiguous on the outcome. All they can see is "the flickering of their torches, winding towards us through the darkness of the trees" (*Flood* 431). While it is true that the historical notes after the main narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the existence of *The Year of the Flood* somewhat diminish this ambiguity in outcome, all three novels provide ambiguity about the future, but also a future where all three protagonists must continue on in order to create a better world. This is especially true in *The Year of the Flood* where the post-apocalyptic world is sparsely populated by the socially conscious MaddAdam activists. Whatever the structure of this utopia would look like, fiscal and social conservative philosophies would certainly not be the backbone.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the ways in which Margaret Atwood uses patriarchal structure, implicit within human nature, to develop worlds that are hostile towards gender equality. Even worse, these societies have driven women towards careers of sex work because of their bodies' implicit money value within a patriarchal society. Most of the time, this choice is little more than a choice between sex work and death. Some are forced into this work, such as Offred and, briefly, Toby and Amanda. Few women are safe from the dangers that persist and fester within a patriarchal society, even those who exhibit enormous strength and character. Patriarchy itself is dangerous to an equal society because it demotes women to a second-class, below men. There is no way that there can be an ideal society when over half of the population is considered inferior to the other. Other dystopian novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* explore the dangers of classism and eugenics, though few early 20<sup>th</sup> century authors wrote from a woman's perspective. Katharine Burdekin described the oppression of women under a continuous fascist regime in her famous (and homophobic) *Swastika Night*. Kazuo Ishiguro's tragic *Never Let Me Go* examines female and male clones who are groomed for their organs through the eyes of a female character. Dystopian novels are written from the point of the view of the oppressed as a means of showing not only their hopelessness, but also the power of their oppressors. Atwood too uses dystopias to give a voice to those who are voiceless: the women within these social and fiscal conservative worlds. Even women in poorly-regulated third-world countries are given a voice.

These women engage in sex work not because they choose to, but because it is the best option presented to them. Some, such as Offred, can only hope that they can secure kindness from their owners through sexual coercion. Others, such as Oryx and Ren, realize that their bodies have money values and that they can achieve many of their goals through sex work and prostitution. To Atwood, these are not choices that would be made in a society that values women as equals to men. Instead, they are a result of the diminishing options for women who are poor or powerless and wish for a better life. Because patriarchy values a woman's body over her actual person, it is no surprise that women would find a lucrative market for their bodies. Though Atwood is never as hostile towards pornography as Andrea Dworkin, she does sympathize with those involved with sex work and the pornographic industry.

Atwood is intentionally ambiguous on how a world without patriarchy would appear because patriarchy seems everlasting. She is not a political philosopher, so a manifesto in the vein of Hobbes, Locke or Marx would be too much of a positive statement on how one philosophy can solve the ills of the world. This style of literature, one part utopian description, one part political treatise, is too hubristic for a social commentator such as Atwood. Instead, Atwood places the inequalities of women under a microscope through dystopian literature. The characters of Offred, Oryx, and Ren are more than just characters; they also represent women in society who have been wronged by the seemingly innate patriarchy instilled within both people and society.

Atwood continues to provide a provocative critique of modern society through her dystopian novels, using the genre to create compelling social commentary. Even though

she may be suspect of the term, Atwood's advocacy for third-world women and women of lower socio-economic statuses within *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood* underscores her importance to the feminist movement, or at least to a movement set on complete gender and class equality. She may be the first to admit that this utopia of gender equality is idealistic without a real shape or structure; she also knows the importance of continuing to fight for this equality. Even as Offred steps into her van, as Jimmy steps out of his tree, and as Ren carries Jimmy towards an unspecified future and fate, each is looking for this intangible utopia where the horrors of the past are never repeated. Atwood ends these novels with the same amount of uncertainty and hope because she too is hopeful for a more perfect future (a more skeptical reader may assess that this is deliberately done to provide room for sequels, but Atwood's artistic integrity is too strong for this). The probability of that future coming to fruition is suspect, but the struggle for the goal is no less admirable.

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