

# FEMINIST CONTEMPORARY STRUGLES

1. “Marked by characteristics of the present period : MODERN; CURRENT; SIMULTANEOUS
2. Happening, existing, living, or coming into being during the same period of time” (“Definition of CONTEMPORARY,” 2019)



# CENTURY OF EQUALITY

“Following are UN Secretary-General António Guterres’ remarks on “women and power” at The New School in New York today: It is a great pleasure to be here today. Thank you for honouring me with this degree, and, through me, the United Nations and our staff around the world.” (United Nations, 2020)

# SAFE PLACE

PART 4 - FEMINIST CONTEMPORARY STRUGLES - CENTURY OF EQUALITY - SAFE PLACE

“I am an engineer by training and physics has been the biggest intellectual passion of my life. But I reserve my greatest admiration for artists, philosophers, social scientists and those who explain the world and make it more beautiful. I thank the New School for helping to uplift us and give meaning to our lives.

No place is better than the New School for me to explain our view on women and power, and our very strong commitment to gender equality in everything we do.

As a man born in Western Europe, I have enjoyed many privileges. But my childhood under a military dictatorship in Portugal opened my eyes to injustice and oppression.

As a student doing volunteer work in the slums of Lisbon, throughout my political career, and as the leader of the United Nations refugee agency, I have always felt compelled to fight against injustice, inequality and the denial of human rights.

Today, as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I see one overwhelming injustice across the globe; an abuse that is crying out for attention. That is gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls.” (United Nations, 2020)

“Everywhere, women are worse off than men, simply because they are women. Migrant and refugee women, those with disabilities, and women members of minorities of all kinds face even greater barriers. This discrimination harms us all.

Just as slavery and colonialism were a stain on previous centuries, women’s inequality should shame us all in the twenty-first. Because it is not only unacceptable; it is stupid.

Only through the equal participation of women can we benefit from the intelligence, experience and insights of all of humanity. Women’s equal participation is vital to stability, helps prevent conflict, and promotes sustainable, inclusive development. Gender equality is the prerequisite for a better world.

This is not a new issue. Women have been fighting for their rights for centuries. Five hundred years ago, Queen Nzinga Mbandi of the Mbundu waged war against Portuguese colonial rule in present-day Angola. Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, is often seen as the mother of western feminism. Sixty years later, Sojourner Truth delivered an impassioned plea for women’s rights while she worked to abolish slavery.” (United Nations, 2020)

“The women’s rights movement came of age in the twentieth century. Women Heads of State dispelled any doubts about women’s ability to lead. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted the equal rights of men and women, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women outlined a vision of gender equality.

Today, young women like Malala Yousafzai and Nadia Murad are breaking barriers and creating new models of leadership.

But despite these advances, the state of women’s rights remains dire. Inequality and discrimination are the norm, everywhere. Progress has slowed to a standstill — and in some cases, been reversed.

There is a strong and relentless pushback against women’s rights. Violence against women, including femicide, is at epidemic levels. More than one in three women will experience violence in some form during her lifetime.

Legal protections against rape and domestic violence are being diluted or rolled back in some places. Rape within marriage continues to be legal in 34 countries. Women’s sexual and reproductive rights are under threat from different sides.” (United Nations, 2020)



# ABUSE

“The policing of personal freedom and dress are a daily reality for millions of women and girls. From Governments to corporate boards to awards ceremonies, women are still excluded from the top table.

Policies that penalize women, like austerity and coercive reproduction, are back in fashion. Peace negotiations still exclude women, 20 years after all countries pledged to include them. And the digital age could make these inequalities even more entrenched.

Gender equality is fundamentally a question of power. We live in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture. We have done so for millennia. The historian Mary Beard has identified the deep historical roots of patriarchy in Western culture.

In the Odyssey, written 3,000 years ago, Homer describes Telemachus telling his mother, Penelope, to be quiet and to leave the talking to men. Unfortunately, Telemachus would not be out of place in some of my meetings today.” (United Nations, 2020)

“Patriarchy — a social system founded on inheritance through the male line — continues to affect every area of our lives. We are all — men and women, girls and boys — suffering the consequences.

Male-dominated power structures underpin our economies, our political systems and our corporations.

Even Hollywood fame does not protect women from men who wield physical, emotional and professional power over them. I salute those who have courageously spoken up and fought back.

A hidden layer of inequality is built into the institutions and structures that govern all our lives — but are based on the needs of just half the population.

The writer Caroline Criado Perez calls this “default man” thinking: The unquestioned assumption that men are standard, and women the exception. This has led to the biggest data gap in the world. Very often, women are not counted, and their experiences don’t count.

The consequences are everywhere, from toilet facilities to bus routes. Women are at higher risk of being injured in a car accident, because seats and safety belts fit default man. Women have a higher fatality rate from heart attacks because diagnostic tools are designed around default man.” (United Nations, 2020)

“Default man thinking even extends into space, which is indeed the final frontier — for women. More than 150 men have walked in space, but just a handful of women, particularly because spacesuits are designed for default man. No woman has walked on the moon — although women mathematicians played an essential part in putting men there.

At last, we are finally celebrating the achievements of these women, including Katherine Johnson, who passed away this week.

All too often, alongside violence, control, male-dominated power structures and hidden discrimination, women and girls contend with centuries of misogyny and the erasure of their achievements.

From the ridiculing of women as hysterical or hormonal, to the routine judgement of women based on their looks; from the myths and taboos that surround women’s natural body functions, to mansplaining and victim-blaming — misogyny has been everywhere.

Conversely, across centuries and cultures, words like “genius” and “brilliant” are used far more often to describe men than women.

Which is less surprising when men have made the rules and banned women from participating in it. The damage done by patriarchy and inequality goes far beyond women and girls.” (United Nations, 2020)

# “MASCULINITY IS A HARD, SMALL CAGE, AND WE PUT BOYS INSIDE THIS CAGE.”

(N.Adichie)

“Men have a gender too. It is defined so rigidly that it can trap men and boys into stereotypes that involve risky behaviour, physical aggression and an unwillingness to seek advice or support.

Around the world, men have shorter life spans than women; they are more likely to be in prison and to use and experience violence; and they are less likely to seek help. We have defined men’s power in ways that come at great cost — to men themselves.

Gender equality has enormous benefits for men’s personal relationships. Men who share caregiving and spend more time with their families are happier and have happier children.

On a larger scale, transforming the balance of power is essential, not only as a question of human rights, personal development, health and well-being.

It is critical to solving some of the most damaging and intractable problems of our age, from deepening inequality and polarization to the climate crisis.

I see five areas in which achieving gender equality can transform our world.” (United Nations, 2020)



# OPPRESSION

“There is a straight line between violence against women, civil oppression and conflict. Trillions of dollars are spent every year on peace and security. But we should be asking: Whose peace? Whose security?”

Inter-State conflict makes headlines, but in some of the most violent parts of the world, levels of femicide — the killing of women — are comparable to a war zone. 137 women around the world are killed by a member of their own family every day. Impunity rates are above 95 per cent in some countries.

In other words, we have men waging war on women — but no one is calling for a ceasefire or imposing sanctions. And how a society treats the female half of its population is a significant indicator of how it will treat others. Rape and sexual slavery are routinely used as a tactic of war, and misogyny is part of the ideology of almost all violent extremist groups.

Conversely, involving women leaders and decision-makers in mediation and peace processes leads to more lasting and sustainable peace.

The United Nations is committed to putting women at the centre of our conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacebuilding and mediation efforts — and to increasing the numbers of our women peacekeepers.” (United Nations, 2020)



# THE STRUGGLE

“The existential emergency we are facing is the result of decisions that were taken mainly by men but have a disproportionate impact on women and girls.

Drought and famine mean women work harder to find food and water, while heatwaves, storms and floods kill more women and girls than men and boys.

Women and girls have long been leaders and activists on the environment, from Wangari Maathai and Jane Goodall to the Fridays for Future movement. But the impact of gender inequality on climate action goes deeper.

Initiatives to reduce and recycle are overwhelmingly marketed at women, while men are more likely to put their faith in untested technological fixes. There is plenty of evidence that women are more open than men to reducing their personal environmental impact.

And recent studies show that women economists and parliamentarians are more likely to support sustainable, inclusive policies. There is a risk that safeguarding our planet is seen as “women’s work” — just another domestic chore.

I am grateful to young people, Generation Z, including many of you here in this room, who are working for climate action and gender equality, while recognizing the reality of non-binary identities and solutions.” (United Nations, 2020)

“Gender equality, including men stepping up and taking responsibility, is essential if we are to beat the climate emergency. The third area in which women’s rights and equal opportunities can create a breakthrough is in building inclusive economies.

Worldwide, women still earn just 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. The latest research by the World Economic Forum says it will take until 2255 to close the gender pay gap. How can I tell my granddaughters that their granddaughters’ granddaughters will still be paid less than a man for the same work?

The gender pay gap is one reason why 70 per cent of the world’s poor are women and girls. Another is that women and girls do some 12 billion hours of unpaid care work around the world every day — three times more than men. In some communities, women can spend 14 hours a day cooking, cleaning, fetching wood and water and caring for children and the elderly. Economic models classify these hours as “leisure time”.

Gross domestic product puts zero value on anything that happens in the home. But this flawed metric is the baseline for economic decision-making, distorting policies and denying women opportunities. Women who do have an income are more likely than men to invest in their families and communities, strengthening economies and making them more resilient.” (United Nations, 2020)

“Women also tend to take a longer view. Corporate boards that include them are more stable and profitable. The recent decision by one of the world’s biggest investment banks not to take a company public unless it has a woman board member was not made on moral grounds. It was financial good sense. Women’s equal economic rights and opportunities are a global imperative if we are to build a fair globalization that works for all.

When a couple complained last year that the man’s credit limit was 20 times higher than his wife’s, despite her higher credit score, the discrepancy was blamed on an algorithm.

But with women occupying just 26 per cent of jobs in artificial intelligence, it is no surprise that many algorithms are biased towards men.

Digital technology can be an enormous force for good. But I am deeply concerned by the male domination of technological professions in the universities, start-ups and Silicon Valleys of this world.

These tech hubs are already shaping the economies and societies of the future, with a huge impact on the evolution of power relations.

Unless women play an equal role in designing digital technologies, progress on women’s rights could be reversed.

Lack of diversity will not only expand gender inequality. It will limit the innovation and scope of new technologies, making them less useful for everyone.” (United Nations, 2020)

# WE OWE THESE YOUNG LEADERS OUR VOICES AND OUR SUPPORT.

(United Nations, 2020)

## REPRESENTATION

“Women’s participation in parliaments around the world has doubled in the last 25 years — to one quarter. Fewer than one tenth of States are led by a woman.

But women’s representation in government is not about stereotypical “women’s issues” like opposing sexual harassment or promoting childcare. Women in government drive social progress and meaningful changes to people’s lives.

Women are more likely to advocate for investment in education and health and to seek cross-party consensus and common ground.

When the numbers of women reach a critical mass, Governments are more likely to innovate and to challenge established orthodoxies. In other words, women in politics are redefining and redistributing power. It is no coincidence that the Governments that are redefining GDP to include well-being and sustainability are led by women.

It is simple math. Women’s participation improves institutions. Doubling the resources, capacity and expertise we put into decision-making benefits everyone.” (United Nations, 2020)

“One of my first priorities as Secretary-General of the United Nations was to bring more women into leadership positions. On 1 January this year, we achieved gender parity — 90 women and 90 men — in the ranks of full-time senior leadership, two years ahead of the target date I set at the start of my tenure. We have a road map in place to achieve parity at all levels in the years ahead.

This long-overdue change is an essential recognition of the equal rights and abilities of women staff. It is also about improving our efficiency and effectiveness for the people we serve.

The opportunity of man-made problems — and I choose these words deliberately — is that they have human-led solutions. Thriving matriarchal societies throughout history and around the world show that patriarchy is not inevitable. We have recently seen women, many of them young, demanding transformational change.

From Sudan to Chile to Lebanon, they are calling for freedom from violence, greater representation and urgent climate action, and questioning economic systems that fail to deliver opportunities and fulfilment for many.” (United Nations, 2020)

“Gender equality is part of the DNA of the United Nations. The equal rights of women and men are included in the Charter — our founding document. As we mark our seventy-fifth anniversary this year, along with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Conference on Women, we are redoubling our efforts to support women’s rights across the board.

Last month, the United Nations launched a Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals — the blueprint for our partnership with Governments to build peaceful, prosperous and inclusive societies on a healthy planet.

Gender equality is a goal in itself, and key to achieving the other 16 goals. The Decade of Action is aimed at transforming institutions and structures, broadening inclusion and driving sustainability.

Repealing laws that discriminate against women and girls; increasing protection against violence; closing the gap in girls’ education and digital technology; guaranteeing full access to sexual and reproductive health services and rights; and ending the gender pay gap are just some of the areas we are targeting.” (United Nations, 2020)

“That is why in the past, I always supported quotas — the most effective way to achieve a radical shift in the balance of power. Now is the time for gender parity in Governments, parliaments, corporate boards and institutions everywhere.

Over the next two years, I intend to deepen my personal commitment to highlighting and supporting gender equality in all areas of our work. I will contact Governments that have discriminatory laws on their books to advocate for change and offer our support; and urge each new Government to achieve gender parity in senior leadership.

I will explore ways to maximize the influence of the United Nations to make sure women have equal representation in peace processes and strengthen our work on the links between violence against women and international peace and security.

I will continue to meet women whose lives have been affected by violence. I will also advocate for GDP to include measures of well-being and sustainability and for unpaid domestic work to be given its true value.” (United Nations, 2020)

“I am committed to ending “default male” thinking across the United Nations. We are a data-driven organization; it is essential that our data does not make the ridiculous assumption that men are the norm and women are the exception.

We need women’s voices and contributions at the forefront in peace negotiations and trade talks; at the Oscars and the G20 (Group of 20); in board rooms and classrooms; and at the United Nations General Assembly.

Gender equality is a question of power; power that has been jealously guarded by men for millennia. It is about an abuse of power that is damaging our communities, our economies, our environment, our relationships and our health.

We must urgently transform and redistribute power, if we are to safeguard our future and our planet. That is why all men should support women’s rights and gender equality. And why I am a proud feminist.

Women have equalled and outperformed men in almost every sphere. It is time to stop trying to change women and start changing the systems that prevent them from achieving their potential.

Our power structures have evolved gradually over thousands of years. One further evolution is long overdue. The twenty-first century must be the century of women’s equality.” (United Nations, 2020)



# WOMEN AGAINST PANDEMIC

The Scientists: Katalin Karikó, Kathrin Jansen, Kizzmekia Corbett, and Sarah Gilbert

“So much remains uncertain and unsettling as the two-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic approaches, especially given an emerging and wildly infectious variant, Omicron. But amid our worries and frustrations, there is also a reason to cheer: Several women you may not yet know were working around the clock to produce safe, effective vaccines, breaking records and stubborn expectations about women in science with their ingenuity and persistence.

Indeed, the world owes a lot to the persistence of Katalin Karikó and her fixation with the potential of RNA to transform human health. Kariko overcame repeated setbacks and frustrations on a journey that took her from Hungary and a childhood without running water or a refrigerator to Pennsylvania, from barrier after barrier to breakthrough.” (MORSE, 2021)

“Kariko joined BioNTech in 2013 to head its messenger RNA (mRNA) program. When in January 2020, Chinese researchers published the genetic sequence of the new coronavirus causing COVID-19, Kariko was ready. In partnership with immunologist and physician Drew Weissman, she had already created “the perfect vehicle for targeting any virus or pathogen” — a vaccine decades in the making, ready and waiting for the right virus.” Kariko joined “ BioNTech in 2013 to head its messenger RNA (mRNA) program. When in January 2020, Chinese researchers published the genetic sequence of the new coronavirus causing COVID-19, Kariko was ready. In partnership with immunologist and physician Drew Weissman, she had already created “the perfect vehicle for targeting any virus or pathogen” — a vaccine decades in the making, ready and waiting for the right virus.

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Kathrin Jansen, Pfizer’s head of vaccine research and development known for developing vaccines for human papillomavirus (HPV) and pneumococcal disease, is described as “fearless” and unwilling to “sacrifice quality for speed.” Working with BioNTech, Jansen and her team wielded the new technology of mRNA to take on COVID-19. Jansen is also an advocate for vaccine uptake and a source of information about COVID-19 science.” (MORSE, 2021)

“Immunologist Kizzmekia Corbett of the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) collaborated with Moderna to develop its vaccine in record time. Corbett helped design the vaccine, led preclinical studies for the clinical trials, and then offered her voice and her time to communicate with her hundreds of thousands of social followers about the importance of getting vaccinated, helping her audience, and particularly people of color, overcome vaccine hesitancy.

Sarah Gilbert, a vaccinology professor at Oxford University’s Jenner Institute and one of the scientists behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, had already developed a vaccine for another coronavirus disease, MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome), when she turned her attention and her team to COVID-19, using the MERS vaccine as a blueprint.

In a field notorious for its underrepresentation of women, and particularly Black women and women of color, these leaders overcame bias in funding and advancement, along with all the other routine barriers women endure in the workplace. At the same time, their sisters in medicine and public health were dealing with personal protective equipment made to fit men, a system in which women deliver care and men make the decisions and the money, and the absence of women’s perspectives and expertise in media coverage about the pandemic.

Thus, these scientists and their colleagues in medical and global health and social workforce demonstrated persistence. We should learn from it since we benefited mightily from it.” (MORSE, 2021)

**“I THINK I WAS  
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24 TIMES, BUT I KEPT  
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AND HOW COULD  
I IMPROVE.”**



# THE HERITAGE

“It was the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history, Amanda Gorman, who harnessed language and insight to reassure a nation and ask its citizens to cast a collective gaze to a future that is better, and possible. On a crisp and clear morning dedicated to the democratic transfer of power, Gorman, a 22-year-old woman in a bright yellow coat, reminded us that our nation “isn’t broken but simply unfinished” and that “to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside.”.

Gorman, who struggled with a speech impediment as a child, turned to writing and poetry to find her voice and now uses it advance literacy, equality, and environmental action. She’s also a pathbreaker in the realm of writing and publishing, in which, again, women have often been relegated and refused. Eschewing an estimated \$17 million in endorsement deals until she found the right one, Gorman finally chose The Estée Lauder Companies. She became the brand’s first Global Changemaker as part of a three-year partnership that includes a contribution of \$3 million by the female-founded company to Writing Change, a new literacy initiative aimed at fostering opportunity and equality.

Gorman has shown her determination to act and speak with compassion. I’ll take her words with me into 2022: “Even as we grieved, we grew; that even as we hurt, we hoped.”” (MORSE, 2021)

**“WHERE A SKINNY  
BLACK GIRL DESCENDED  
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# PRICELESS EQUALITY

“The podium in the United Nations General Assembly Hall is often if not typically used to repeat polite ideas and platitudes. But Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley, speaking at the 76th UN General Assembly in September, had other plans. In remarks studded with wit and wisdom, Mottley railed against inequity and inaction in the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, the digital spread of fake news, and the risky and inadequate response to global climate change, a challenge that will disproportionately affect the people of her island nation. Mottley posed a critical question: “How many more, how many more crises and natural disasters before we see that assistance does not reach those who need it most and those who are most vulnerable?”

Mottley has been a reliable and respected voice against delaying climate action. Under her leadership as Barbados’ first female prime minister since the country’s independence in 1966, the country has promised to become the first island country to phase out fossil fuels by 2030 and to plant 1 million trees to help mitigate climate change effects. The country’s “Roofs to Reefs” national resilience program was launched to place the island on a path of sound sustainable development.

Mottley’s leadership is crucial for the world’s girls and women, who will endure greater risk and deprivation from climate change effects, including loss of water, wood for cooking, and farmable land. According to UN Women, 3.8 million people — most of them women and children — are killed by air pollution each year as a result of unclean energy used in cooking and heating. Another study shows that in the past year alone, at least 4 million girls in lower-income economies were unable to finish their education because of climate-related events.” (MORSE, 2021)

Mottley, M. (2019). Prime Minister of Barbados speaking at the 16th Raúl Prebisch Lecture in Geneva. In newspaper. Retrieved from:  
<https://globalvoices.org/2021/11/06/barbados-prime-minister-mia-mottleys-defence-of-small-island-developing-states-at-cop26-makes-her-a-regional-rock-star/>



# STRONG WORDS

“If you have recently watched the Netflix Original series *The Handmaid’s Tale*, then you have one of the most famous feminist writers of the 21st century to thank. Margaret Atwood’s science fiction dystopia was written during the 80s — but quickly turned into a cautionary tale of what could happen in the near future.

Atwood has always been an outspoken feminist and still encourages women to fight back against oppression that comes with tyrannical rule. If you want to get a better idea of what her goals were with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, you can read an interview with Margaret Atwood to learn.

Just be forewarned, you’ll start to re-evaluate your life when you get into her writing.” (UZEKI, 2017)

Atwood, M. (1977). *The Testaments* Is Margaret Atwood’s Sequel to the *Handmaid’s Tale*, out Now from Vintage Books. In Photography. Retrieved from: <https://karsh.org/margaret-atwood-the-testaments/>

“Margaret Atwood is a prolific and versatile writer. Her literary career began in 1961 with the publication of her first poetry collection, *Double Persephone*, and has grown to include sixteen poetry collections, twelve novels, eight short fiction collections, six children’s books, and five major non-fiction works. Atwood has also edited six literary anthologies including, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 1972, her most notable anthology, which has been credited with renewing interest in Canadian literature. In addition to this generic diversity, Atwood’s work offers thematic diversity: Canadian national identity, relations between Canada and the United States, relations between Canada and Europe, the Canadian wilderness, environmental issues, biotechnology, human rights issues, and feminist issues, a prominent theme throughout her career. Atwood’s representations of gender explore the social myths defining femininity, representations of women’s bodies in art, the social and economic exploitation of women, as well as women’s relations with each other and with men.

Atwood characterizes her novels in the following way: “the first trio [*The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle*] has to do with women and men, last trio [*The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *Robber Bride*] with women and women, and then [one] in between [*Life Before Man*] ha[s] to do with both: [...] pointing towards *Cat’s Eye* and *Robber Bride* and one pointing towards *Handmaid’s Tale* and *Bodily Harm*” (*Waltzing Again* 219). Atwood’s first five novels, in particular, demonstrate the range and complexity of her representations of sexual power politics, and provide a solid foundation for understanding the evolution of her feminist sympathies and how they inform *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” (Callaway, 2008)

“In *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood examines the themes of rejection of gender roles, and loss of identity. Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist, grapples with self-realization in the face of the limited options available to her as a young woman in the 1960s. She must first submit to her parents’ expectations and then to her fiancé’s plans. Marian fears that in marriage she will find herself completely overwhelmed by her husband’s strong personality, continually submerging her desires in his own. She bakes a woman-shaped cake (an “edible woman”) and offers it to her fiancé, Peter. Natalie Palumbo believes Marian “hopes to fend off her metaphorical consumption by Peter, and resolve her own ambivalence to marriage”. This exploration of the shortcomings of marriage as traditionally envisioned re-emerges as a theme in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

In *Surfacing* (1972), Atwood returns to the theme of identity, this time exploring national as well as gendered identity. This narrative is filtered through the unnamed female protagonist’s deteriorating mind, in which reality, memory, fairy tales, and mythology are fused. The protagonist perceives herself as completely isolated and disconnected from people around her. At the personal level, she feels alienated from those with whom she is intimately involved, particularly her lover and her best female friend. At the public level, she feels marginalized and politically dispossessed. Part of her alienation and dispossession stem from a lack of identity, which Atwood expresses by leaving her unnamed. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood again examines the importance of names, particularly the names of female characters. As Natalie Cooke observes, when compared to Marian MacAlpin, the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* may “find herself in a much stronger position as a woman of the 1970s”. However, the movement for women’s liberation has not freed her from male-imposed pressure to marry, nor has it absolved her of the guilt she feels as a result of her abortion.” (Callaway, 2008)

“In *Lady Oracle* (1976) Atwood explores duality and multiplicity as functions of identity. The protagonist Joan Foster constructs a series of identities. This is her mechanism to secure love and acceptance, while avoiding the consequences of her actions. Foster fails to integrate these identities and spends her life on the run, hiding her true activities from the men she is involved with. Foster is willing to stage her own death to maintain this fragmentation, thereby escaping responsibility for her actions and failed relationships. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we again see the female protagonist’s struggle to reconcile conflicting identities: her socially proscribed identity and her authentic identity.

In *Life Before Man* (1979), Atwood explores gestures of resistance and survival at the individual level. Carol Ann Howells asserts that these gestures illustrate the “moral and social evolution of human beings”. The novel focuses on domestic relationships and how events become catalysts for change by changing the relationships themselves as well as the people within the relationships. Natalie Palumbo believes this change is really evolution, expressed as the characters cease “to hide in elaborate fantasy worlds [ ... ] or in obsessive blaming of the past”.

In her fifth novel, *Bodily Harm* (1981), Atwood “scrutinizes social myths of femininity” from the point of view of a woman whose body has been “damaged by cancer and a mastectomy” (Howells 80). Rennie, the protagonist, struggles to accept her body’s betrayal, “the scar on her breast splits open like a diseased fruit and something [ ... ] crawls out” (Atwood 60). As Carol Ann Howells observes, “Rennie’s disgust at her own damaged body inevitably affects her account of her relationships with men”. The sordid details of these relationships focus the narrative on sexual power politics. Thus, “Rennie is forced to see how the personal and political cannot be separated” (Howells 80).” (Callaway, 2008)

“In *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood examines the themes of rejection of gender roles, and loss of identity. Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist, grapples with self-realization in the face of the limited options available to her as a young woman in the 1960s. She must first submit to her parents’ expectations and then to her fiancé’s plans. Marian fears that in marriage she will find herself completely overwhelmed by her husband’s strong personality, continually submerging her desires in his own. She bakes a woman-shaped cake (an “edible woman”) and offers it to her fiancé, Peter. Natalie Palumbo believes Marian “hopes to fend off her metaphorical consumption by Peter, and resolve her own ambivalence to marriage” (75). This exploration of the shortcomings of marriage as traditionally envisioned re-emerges as a theme in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

In *Surfacing* (1972), Atwood returns to the theme of identity, this time exploring national as well as gendered identity. This narrative is filtered through the unnamed female protagonist’s deteriorating mind, in which reality, memory, fairy tales, and mythology are fused. The protagonist perceives herself as completely isolated and disconnected from people around her. At the personal level, she feels alienated from those with whom she is intimately involved, particularly her lover and her best female friend. At the public level, she feels marginalized and politically dispossessed. Part of her alienation and dispossession stem from a lack of identity, which Atwood expresses by leaving her unnamed. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood again examines the importance of names, particularly the names of female characters. As Natalie Cooke observes, when compared to Marian MacAlpin, the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* may “find herself in a much stronger position as a woman of the 1970s” (68). However, the movement for women’s liberation has not freed her from male-imposed pressure to marry, nor has it absolved her of the guilt she feels as a result of her abortion.” (Callaway, 2008)

“The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood’s sixth novel, continues her explorations of gender and identity as well as domestic politics. Since its publication in 1986, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been the subject of intense critical dialog. A dystopian survival text set at the end of the twentieth century on the cusp of achieving equality between the sexes, *The Handmaid’s Tale* portrays the dissolution of the United States, resulting in what Christopher Jones rightly identifies as a “reinvigorated hatred of women and the explosive growth of religious (patriarchal) fundamentalism”. This hatred is realized in the colonizing force of the Republic of Gilead, a puritanical, reactionary, militaristic regime. Jones characterizes this cultural shift succinctly; “in this future, men have had it with uppity women and ‘put them back in their place’”. A civil war is fought in order to make women “malleable to men’s desires[ ... ]. They must submit to their socially determined roles or be seen as ‘demons’” (Goldblatt 3). These regressive social roles are determined by a caste system defining standards for behavior, dress, and social duties, thereby eliminating undesirable cultural trends and beliefs, while controlling a fearful and potentially rebellious populace.

Understandably, most criticism focuses on the “hyper-patriarchy” of Gilead (Jones 3). For example, David Coad’s “Hymens, Lips, and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” examines how the veil, worn by all women in Gilead, functions as the crucial tool of subjugation, one element of the politics of dress within the novel. Debrah Raske, in her article, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*: False Borders and Subtle Subversions,” explores the relationship between language and thought, identifying three language systems present in the novel: the Gilead system, the narrator’s system, and the academic rhetoric of the novel’s closing section. Raske examines these language systems as methods of control, and in particular, methods of controlling women. While both Coad’s and Raske’s observations are important for a complete understanding of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the true focus of Atwood’s novel lies elsewhere.” (Callaway, 2008)

“A second critical focus has been the generic aspects of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which are read in the context of a patriarchal order. In “Utopias of/£ Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias,” Ildney Cavalcanti discusses the duality of language within this genre. Cavalcanti maintains that language has liberating potential when wielded by the female characters opposing the linguistic enforcement of the masculine power structure. This is certainly an interesting and important concept; however, Cavalcanti fails to explore how women use rhetoric to enforce oppression of other women. Margaret Daniels and Heather Bowen examine four dystopic novels from a feminist perspective in “Feminist Implications of Anti-Leisure in Dystopian Fiction.” Daniels and Bowen maintain that women are denied access to leisure in these societies through the devaluation or absence of personal leisure spaces. They trace this phenomenon in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Brave New World*, *Player Piano*, and *1984*. Daniels and Bowen have astutely identified a key method of the patriarchal oppression in Gilead, though they do not examine how women deny other women access to leisure. Other examples include Lionel Shriver’s “Population in Literature” and Stephanie Barber Hammer’s “The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” Shriver focuses on the treatment of population issues in modern fiction, suggesting three categories of representation: fear of decline, fear of excess, and fear of population professionals. It is useful to understand the concept of population, particularly as it informs the establishment of mothering practices within Gilead.

According to Hammer, Atwood has broken into the formerly male-dominated genre of satire and gained critical and financial success. Hammer asserts that the themes and motifs of the novel firmly embed it in the satirical tradition. Atwood chose satire as the most effective trope for critiquing the practices of Second-Wave Feminism.” (Callaway, 2008)

“A third critical focus has been feminism. Evelyn Keller Fox examines the historical relationship between science and feminism. Keller is particularly interested in the effect feminist scholarship has had on this relationship. While her article “Feminism, Science, and Postmodernism” is more of a general discussion of science and gender, Keller touches specifically on how reproduction is controlled in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Understanding this idea is key to the influence of Science Fiction and speculative fiction on the creation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Shirley Neuman’s “‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*” discusses an interview she conducted with Atwood after the operatic adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The main focus of this article is Atwood’s feminist sympathies and tendencies.

All of these critical foci are important; however, they miss the crucial point that Gilead’s power structure is an expression of the disunity of women. While Gilead’s caste system represses men and women, it is the women in positions of power, rather than the men, who make this system unpleasant and dangerous for women. This is the focus of my thesis.

First, the influence of feminism on *The Handmaid’s Tale* is discussed. In tracing the development of feminism, a sustained discussion of Second-Wave Feminism is offered. Atwood’s evolving feminist sympathies are also examined, mainly through published interviews of Atwood conducted between 1972 and 2005.

Second, the development of the utopian tradition is traced through texts such as Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Her land*. The dystopic tradition is also outlined through the following texts: Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and George Orwell’s *1984*. These texts were chosen because they seem to have influenced Atwood’s creation of the Republic of Gilead and because they are primarily concerned with sexual power politics.” (Callaway, 2008)

“Finally, it is posited that within *The Handmaid’s Tale* the real threat in Gilead comes not from male but from female control. The ultimate result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men’s hatred of women, but as women’s hatred of women. Atwood depicts one viable backlash from our current feminist momentum: gynocentric misogyny and “traditional” misogyny combined in one militaristic social and religious order—the Republic of Gilead. In other words, the male-dominated power structure relies on women to regulate one another and enforce social standards. The philosophy informing the social structure is not unique to Gilead: “no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 308).

Grounding the social hierarchy in biblical and historical precedents, the matriarchy attempts to disguise the reality of this universally degrading women’s culture. For example, the new family structure relies on “the monthly rape ‘Ceremony’ [which] follows the scriptural ‘and she shall bear upon my knees,’ and grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead” (Cavalcanti 166). My interpretation takes this a step further. Because of the nature of household politics, and the uniquely matriarchal content informing them, it is no longer the men, but the women who should be feared.

Placing *The Handmaid’s Tale* within the contexts of feminism and dystopian literature enables me to return to the text and reinterpret Atwood’s creation of this reactionary society as a critique of Second-Wave Feminism and a prophetic call to action.” (Callaway, 2008)

# PUSSY RIOT

PART 4 - FEMINIST CONTEMPORARY STRUGLES - PUSSY RIOT

“With colorful ski masks, explicit lyrics and mosh pit–ready dance moves, the feminist collective known as Pussy Riot grew out of the protest movement that peaked in Moscow in early 2012, the first street-level challenge to the reign of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The group’s viral videos mixed punk rock and performance art into a powerful form of rebellion, and it became an icon of the anti-Putin movement when three of its members were put on trial that summer. The charges against them were “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred or hostility.” Their crime was a performance, which they called a “punk prayer,” near the altar of Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Its title was “Virgin Mary, chase Putin away!”

Two of them—Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22, and Maria Alyokhina, 24—were sentenced to three years in prison for the stunt. (Yekaterina Samutsevich received a suspended sentence.) Their public show trial forced a reckoning in Russia, an era-defining clash between Putin and a new generation of his subjects, who were rising up against his version of autocracy and demanding democratic change. That moment hasn’t arrived yet, but Pussy Riot’s message of defiance still inspires young women in Russia and far beyond. —Simon Shuster” (TIME, 2020)

# RED

PART 4 - FEMINIST CONTEMPORARY STRUGLES - RED

“Turns out the iconic bold red lipshave a surprising history of sex, power, and war.” (HISTORY, 2019)

“Suffragettes embraced bright red lipstick as a symbol of feminine resistance. They were taking decisions into their own hands, the color of their lips, and the right to vote. Red lipstick’s popularity exploded and grew even faster after the popular swivel stick design was introduced in 1923. Cosmetics became one of the largest industries in the US. But not everyone loved lipstick. Adolf Hitler hated it. He banned it because, in his eyes, lipstick made otherwise Aryan women impure, and because it was formulated from animal fat rescued from sewage. So the Allies took advantage of Hitler’s disgust and made red lipstick a symbol of feminine power in the war effort. Companies introduced brand new wartime shades, like fighting red and victory red. Montezuma red, designed by Elizabeth Arden in reference to the US Marine Corps song, became part of the official uniform of the US Marine Corps’ Women’s Reserve. American factories who employed women during the war were required to keep lipstick stocked in their dressing rooms, allowing women to retain a sense of femininity and continuity in uncertain times.” (HISTORY, 2019)

**“THERE’S SOMETHING  
SO SPECIAL ABOUT A  
WOMAN WHO DOMINATES  
IN A MAN’S WORLD. IT  
TAKES A CERTAIN GRACE,  
STRENGTH, INTELLIGENCE,  
FEARLESSNESS, AND THE  
NERVE TO NEVER TAKE NO  
FOR AN ANSWER.”**

