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## Sisterhood and Survival: An Exploration of Women's Relationships in Feminist Speculative Fiction

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SISTERHOOD AND SURVIVAL: AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S  
RELATIONSHIPS IN FEMINIST SPECULATIVE FICTION

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree With Honors  
(English)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Writers have used the genre of feminist speculative fiction as a lens through which to view modern issues which effect women. Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* each explore dystopian or transitory dystopian societies in which women are pitted against one another for the sake of their survival. In reviewing the relationships which the women in these novels have to each other we stand to gain insights into the ways in which sisterhood influences change in these societies. Each of these works, while centering around different understandings of dystopian society, also prominently feature the ways in which women's individual relationships with each other are changed or influenced by these societies. The unique ability for these authors to not only reflect patriarchal societies and values, but also the relationships which are strained or created by the exacerbation of violent patriarchal societies, creates an avenue of exploration into the ways women interact within the context of the real world. The work of this thesis centers around the analysis and understanding of these relationships, and the importance which the representation of women's relationships in dystopian fiction has in relation to the genre as a whole.

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## INTRODUCTION

The definition of the genre of “speculative fiction” is commonly attributed to Robert Heinlein who utilized the term “speculative fiction” interchangeably with “science fiction” within the context of an article written for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1947, sparking further usage of the term to specify a much broader genre of literature including fantasy and fiction. Later uses of the term to mean fiction which expressed disillusionment towards and commentary on society emerged from British-Canadian scholar and anthologist Judith Merril in the 1960s and 1970s. Merril, in the introduction to her anthology of the genre, defines it as one which encompasses a great number of other “things” including “Semantics and sociology... Psychology, Civilizations... Future and Forecast... Fate and Free Will... Fact-seeking,” (Merril, i). This wide array of issues and topics addressed through the genre of speculative fiction reveals that the work being done by these authors oftentimes speaks beyond the world of the texts, and encompasses controversial subject matter through the construction of worlds not entirely removed from the authors lived experiences.

Feminist speculative fiction writers in particular have utilized the genre to the effect of examining how society has contributed to issues surrounding women’s rights, while also addressing the interpersonal relationships which women have within the constraints of these societies. Margaret Atwood, the author of *Handmaid’s Tale*, and one of the most prominent feminist speculative fiction writers, addressed the issue of defining the genre in the preface to her 2011 novel *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. In this text she discusses her own personal relationship to the genre, the shifts which science fiction has undergone, and how speculative fiction is differentiated

from science fiction by the distinct trait of realism: “for me, “speculative fiction” means plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books... things that could actually happen,” (Atwood, 6). This understanding of the genre is something which she reiterates in the introduction to *Handmaid’s Tale* where she insists that the work is informed by her own understandings of history. The genre then, while encompassing a wide array of possible settings and subject matters which range from goblins to global fallout, still centers itself around this notion of addressing reality in some way or another. While authors may take liberty within the genre’s bounds of imagination and reality, they still utilize their work to examine the shortcomings of the world at large.

Feminist speculative fiction can be defined by the characteristics of the various decades and eras from which the texts emerge. As a genre which is so tightly connected to issues in the real world, understanding the conversations around feminism and society at the times during which they were written is important in understanding the texts themselves. The group of authors I have chosen to analyze represents a range of dystopian or transitory dystopian societies which test the strength of women, as well as their connections to each other. Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, and Naomi Alderman each reflect their individual perceptions of their societal experiences through the women in their dystopian works. Butler’s 1979 *Kindred* centers around intersectionality and black feminism, as well as generational trauma and slavery. Atwood’s 1985 *Handmaid’s Tale* centers around themes of bodily autonomy, and reproductive rights. Alderman, a mentee of Atwood writing in 2016, works to envision a world in which women are suddenly given control over men, and how violence pervades society despite a shift in power.

Each of these works, while centering around different understandings of dystopian society, also prominently feature the ways in which women's relationships with each other are changed or influenced by these societies. The unique ability for these authors to not only reflect patriarchal societies and values, but also the relationships which are strained or created by the exacerbation of violent patriarchal societies, creates an avenue of exploration into the ways women interact within the context of the real world. The work of this thesis centers around the analysis and understanding of these relationships, and the importance which the representation of women's relationships in dystopian fiction has in relation to the genre as a whole.

The timeline of works which I am examining begins with Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which was published in 1979 during the tail end of second wave feminism. Second wave feminism was largely defined by the slogan "The personal is political" a phrase which was used as the title of Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay on feminist politics. The phrase, derived from Hanisch's analysis that "personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution," garnered a great deal of criticism for its erasure of the complexities of the struggles of women of color during the time. Women writers of color felt marginalized by the feminist movement's focus on sacrificing personal problems for greater feminist movement. This resulted in a series of essays written by women of color which critiqued the shortcomings of second wave feminism for communities of color. Black writers and activists including Florynce Kennedy and Toni Cade Bambara, for example, spoke specifically to how birth control acts an extension of slavery, as a form of genocide, and white domination of black female bodies.

The issue of sisterhood under the constraints of dystopian society is also important to understanding these authors and their reflections upon their own societies. The “personal is political” movement caused a great deal of division within feminism of the era, just as much as an understanding of “feminist utopianism” had. We can come to a better understanding of the dissolution of female relationships in dystopian societies by first understanding the varying outlooks on feminist utopianism. Angelika Bammer, a scholar of feminist politics and utopianism, writes on the nature of the political atmosphere of the seventies and its impact upon literature of the era in *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s*. Bammer highlights the foundations of utopianism in Marxist theory, and underlines the similarities between feminist movements and utopianism: “The structural and conceptual similarities between feminism and utopianism made the connection almost inevitable: oriented toward the future, yet grounded in a present they were committed to changing, they were simultaneously situated in the (historical) Now and the (utopian) Not-Yet.” (Bammer, 54). The connection between the two, and the ongoing movement towards a better future for all women, erased the individual struggles of the diverse groups who were included under the umbrella of feminism. The focus upon this utopian future can help to better understand the dystopian futures presented in narratives such as *Handmaid’s Tale*, and *Kindred*. Where Butler’s work operates as a response to the “Now” as it pertains to historical and present issues plaguing black feminism, Atwood addresses the “Not Yet” of a future in which these issues remain unresolved. Utopia becomes complicated by the idea of what exactly these individual women strive towards, and what each of them must



overcome, resulting in the creation of dystopian societies which Atwood and Butler focus on.

In Butler's *Kindred* the main character's safety is tethered to the survival of her white ancestors, and to her white husband, a dynamic which exemplifies the difficulties of forming sisterhoods under oppressive societies. *Kindred* emerges from this era of "feminist utopianism" which failed to address the intersectional issues at large within society. Butler's *Kindred* follows the story of Dana, a black woman from 1970's San Francisco who becomes trapped in Antebellum Maryland on her ancestor's plantation, where she must learn to subjugate herself under the institution of slavery or face possible death. While Butler's *Kindred* does not directly address the issues of bodily autonomy in the environment of the 1970s which the character Dana emerges from, she does explore parallels between the era and the issues of slavery and sexual assault throughout the work. Dana is frequently subjected to abuse at the hands of the Weylin family, and must rely upon her white husband as a means of protection. Dana's voice and autonomy are non-existent, and her survival is entirely in the hands of white men throughout the work. Dana is also rendered incapable of helping her fellow black women due to her own limitations, and the sisterhoods which are formed are weakened by their lack of ability to fully rise from their situations. She witnesses abuse and assault and is incapable of fighting against it due to the society which she is constrained by.

Bell hooks discusses this complex relationship between women and their environment in *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women* which outlines the necessity for women to abandon the mentality of victimhood as the basis for their bonding in order to create effective relationships in the face of a patriarchal society,

hooks writes that “feminists cannot bond on the terms set by the dominant ideology of the culture,” and that the active struggle for white women to acknowledge and unlearn racism creates a stronger basis upon which to fight for equality. The field of black feminist scholarship from the era centers on the issues of victimization and its impacts upon women’s relationships. In acknowledging victimhood, hooks argues black women become less powerful. Hooks writes in *Sisterhood* that the act of bonding through a sense of victimization is “psychologically demoralizing” for black women in particular: “They cannot afford to see themselves solely as victims because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess,” (hooks, 128). To extend this analysis to a work like *Kindred*, Dana is characterized by a sense of independence and lack of acknowledgement towards the oppressive society in which she finds herself. It is only when she is forced to abandon that sense of individuality, and become a victim of slavery that the relationships she forms begin to crumble. In a sense, this issue of victimhood and its effect on women and their ability to form connections extends to works such as *Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Power*. Although hooks was writing about black women in particular, these works also display women who accept their victimization and suffer that same psychological demoralization.

The issue of women’s bodily autonomy is heavily present in Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*. The sisterhood which is formed within the dystopia Atwood presents reflects the issues of feminism which were prevalent during the time which Atwood was writing. In *Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood presents the story of Offred, a Handmaid within the dystopian society of Gilead who’s existence centers around her ability to conceive children for the state. Issues including women’s bodily autonomy, wealth inequality, and

abortion all play an important role in Atwood's Gilead. During the time in which Atwood is writing, Canada had criminalized abortion, and had not made the practice legal until 1988. *Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, before the beginnings of third wave feminism, and before the legalization of abortion in Canada. Abortion, before this time, was only legalized partially in 1969, and could only be carried out in extreme cases where the mother's life was at risk. Gilead is largely a society of white women, whose lives are policed and constrained by their various societal roles, particularly the role of childbearing for officials of the state. This dystopia plays upon the issue of abortion rights, and presents a hypothetical world in which women have no bodily autonomy, or autonomy of any kind, as a means of exemplifying the dangers of taking away those rights. Atwood herself is a Canadian author, writing about a dystopic version of the United States to the effect of commentating on the state of abortion laws in North America at the time. While not directly involved in the politics of the United States, Atwood writes on the issues as an outside observer who draws inspiration from global and historical events which fit into her understanding of "speculative fiction" as something that can happen in the real world.

Offred and Dana both rely upon white male authority figures to ensure their own survival, and the sisterhoods which they begin to form collapse quickly at the threat of their safety. Atwood and Butler both set their works in different environments. Where Butler relies upon direct historical atrocities to inform her commentary, Atwood picks and chooses various aspects of different societies to inform the creation of an entirely new reality. The speculation on what reality has been like in the past versus the speculation on how reality could be given these circumstances creates a vast tonal

difference between the authors. Butler's commentary on modern society harkens back to true lived experiences of black women in the south it carries the weight of generational trauma and intersectional criticisms, whereas Atwood's Gilead is a construct of the author's imagination, informed by societal issues she has witnessed from a distance.

Alderman's 2016 novel *The Power* occupies a niche space between Atwood's dystopian future and Butler's speculations on the past, as it considers a present reality on its way to a dystopia. This transitory state which Alderman writes on takes into consideration the oppressive patriarchal society by which its characters are constrained, while also considering the possibility of that utopian future which Bammer deconstructs in *Partial Visions*. *The Power* revolves around the rather utopian vision of women suddenly being given the power which the patriarchal society has benefitted from in the past. The damage which had been put in place by that society has not been healed or undone, and the effects of this cause fractures to form in the relationships the women form. Bammer's *Partial Visions* asks the question of what Utopia could look like given these complications: "we cannot seem to find what we are looking for, it may be not because there is nothing, but because we are either looking in the wrong place or for the wrong thing." (Bammer, 56). Bammer's question, as to what the blind pursuit of utopia, or the pursuit of that "wrong thing" can result in, is speculated by Alderman on the level of individual relationships, and the disconnects between their individual pursuits toward that freedom and equality which they sought.

Alderman highlights that in different global spheres, women are fighting different kinds of oppression by vastly different means. On an individual level the lives of the characters she presents are also marked by their unique struggles with how to reach their

own pre-conceived notions of liberation and utopia. *The Power* was published long after Atwood and Butler's works and provides a modern take and understanding on the genre of feminist speculative fiction. Alderman's writing is informed by an entirely new generation of feminist teachings, which have worked to address those nuances and complications Bammer brings up in her discussion of utopian feminism. This most recent wave of feminism is heavily influenced by the advent of the digital age, which features prominently in Alderman's work as a means of connection for women.

Alderman's work acknowledges the differences globally between the stages of feminist movements. Of particular importance to the understanding of Alderman's work is the issue of sexual harassment, which becomes a common theme when the women of her novel exhibit the same predatory behavior towards men that they were subjected to. The #MeToo movement, which trended globally as a means for women to expose their harassers, has echoes throughout issues of intersectionality, as women of color were largely ignored during the beginnings of the movement. The nuances of progressive feminism, and mass movements on social media to garner support for causes such as sexual harassment and abuse reveal the rifts which are caused by ignoring minoritized voices. These nuances are also prevalent in the western world, as scholars of fourth wave feminism and intersectionality have addressed ongoing marginalization of women of color in larger discussions of equality. The perpetuation of these issues from 1970s feminist movements can be understood through themes of lack of connectivity and understanding between women who are pursuing the "wrong" outcome of utopian society, and the ways in which their individual movements crumble beneath the weight of these complications.

Butler, Atwood and Alderman each reflect upon different aspects of feminism in their speculative societies. Issues such as the ongoing treatment of black women and intersectional feminism, and how women of color are consistently ignored or left out of discussions of feminist policy and change. The issues of bodily autonomy, or the effects of generational and cyclical trauma and oppression, are examined by these authors through the relationships which their characters form. To ask the question of why these relationships fail reflects upon greater conversations of how women are unable to listen to one another within the constraints of a dystopian society. These three texts, when analyzed alongside each other, reveal the fractures of modern society and their roots in issues of inequality that create such troublesome relationships between women. Butler's reflection upon sisterhood as it is influenced by the role of white men, and the reliance which women form upon those who have more power for the sake of individual survival, is also seen in Atwood's work. Atwood's understanding of sisterhood for the sake of subverting a violent patriarchal society, and the sacrifices of those relationships for the sake of survival and safety are prevalent in Butler's work. Alderman's work questions whether sisterhood can be sustained in a post-patriarchal society, or if the utopias which second wave feminists dreamed of can ever be accomplished due to the pre-existing fractures caused by the society which came before. In every case, sisterhood is central to the conflicts and decision making of the characters, and in every case it is sacrificed for the pursuit of some semblance of power. These works reflect a timeline of issues which have plagued the feminist movement for decades, and continue to inform speculative fiction. In looking at this body of work as a unit, the questions of sisterhood, and why it cannot be sustained in these societies is key to a deeper understanding of the worlds which these

authors were writing in and about. By looking at the presentation of these relationships between women and girls, we stand to gain insights into the ways in which sisterhood is influenced by a longstanding patriarchal society.

## CHAPTER ONE: PRACTICES OF SELF PRESERVATION IN A RACIST

### PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN *KINDRED*

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* explores a speculative fictitious universe in which a black female protagonist, Dana, is thrust back in time to antebellum era Maryland, to the plantation of her white ancestor Rufus. Dana must ensure the survival of Rufus, whose life she is sent to save throughout his adolescence and childhood, in order to secure her own life in the future. As Dana interacts with Rufus, and watches him step into the role of a slaveholder, she is powerless to prevent the atrocities of the era which she finds herself trapped in. Dana's interactions with her fellow women under this patriarchy built from racist practices reflect a sense of self-preservation which she slowly learns. Those who have been taught subjugation, who have learned that survival is only manageable if they remain subservient, will do so in order to protect their own well-being. This mindset allows for those in positions of power to continue their oppressive regimes. Women, especially, find themselves at a loss in these systems, as when given power over each other they will use it to the detriment of their fellow women. Dana must ensure that she is born in the future by allowing for her white ancestor to rape her ancestor Alice a black slave woman, and conceive her great grandmother. In order to accomplish this, Dana must allow for Rufus to commit certain atrocities against her fellow women. By reflecting upon Dana's relationships within the hierarchy of women at the Weylin Plantation, especially in that which she forms with her slave ancestor Alice, we can see these issues of power and control influence Dana's identity. Despite the constraints placed upon her relationships and sisterhoods, Dana still strives towards forming those



connections, and finds some hope in them. Butler explores the idea that sisterhood is possible, but is constrained and fractured by white patriarchal society.

The narrative hinges on Dana's ability to ensure her own survival, while trying to adhere to the social constructs of nineteenth century Maryland, Dana sacrifices the relative security she had known as a black woman living in 1976 San Francisco, and succumbs to multiple hierarchies within the world of the Weylin Plantation. The first and most jarring of these hierarchies is that of the position of slave and master, in which Dana is forced to submit to the Weylin family despite her own lived experiences as a free woman in the modern world. Dana's acceptance of this hierarchy comes in multiple forms, firstly in her relationship to Kevin, her husband from the modern era who she must pretend to be a slave to in order to maintain the façade of their relationship. The complexities of this relationship, according to Angelyn Mitchell's work *Not Enough of the Past: Feminist Revisions of Slavery in Octavia E. Butler's "Kindred"*, implicate the ease with which the two are able to conform to this society. Mitchell writes that this relationship acts as a means of pointing out the hypocrisy of the institution of slavery: "Some veneer of propriety, or rather a facade of hypocrisy, was then expected so that licentious transgressors would not offend the bearers of true womanhood: white women." (Mitchell, 58). This question of "true womanhood" and revisionist feminist theory is something which appears frequently in Mitchell's work, and is foregrounded in the conversation of a white patriarchal society which Dana finds herself trapped within. While the relationships Dana must form to the white men in this society are important aspects to her ability to preserve her own safety, the relationships she forms within the hierarchy of women on the plantation also reflect that notion of self-versus-other which is

promoted by this society. Dana's eventual betrayal of the women who she forms connections to, and her inability to help Alice despite her best efforts, reflect the toll which these regimes take on the foundations of sisterhood.

The social hierarchy which forms among the women on the Weylin Plantation defines Dana's ability to create attachments to her fellow women. Firstly, there is the nature of her relationship to Margaret Weylin, the white female head of the household. Margaret feels actively threatened by Dana's presence on the plantation, especially because she has taken on a protective role in Rufus's life. Oftentimes, Rufus prefers Dana's company to his mother's, which drives Margaret to act in an aggressive or violent manner towards Dana. For instance, in her first interactions with the woman, Margaret "began beating [Dana] "You killed my baby!" she screamed..." despite the fact that she was saving her son's life (Butler, 14). The energy which Margaret exudes is hostile, and motivated in part by the woman's own insecurity within the household. Another aspect of the social hierarchy between the women in the Weylin household is the role which Sarah, the house cook, plays in Dana's adjustment to life on the plantation. Sarah's self-preservation is very much fixed in her ability to perform her duties as the house cook, and all the actions of her fellow women including her daughter Carrie and Dana, reflect upon her abilities to perform as a slave at the Weylin plantation. Her reluctance to disrupt the status quo eventually effects the way Dana is able to form connections, and influences Dana's sense of self-preservation as the novel progresses.

The central relationship within *Kindred* comes in the form of Dana's sisterhood to her ancestor Alice, a slave and former freewoman on the Weylin plantation, whom Dana is forced to sacrifice for the sake of her own future survival. Dana first meets Alice when

she seeks refuge from her as a child, and as she continues returning to the plantation throughout the girl's lifetime the divisions between the two become more prominent. As Alice diverges from the path which leads to Dana's future conception, and as Rufus becomes more obsessed with Alice, Dana must come to terms with the notion that Alice's safety will not ensure her survival. Throughout the course of the novel Dana grapples with her own humanity and care for Alice has her fellow woman, while also addressing her own self-preservation. The divides which form in their sisterhood cannot be circumvented due to the nature of the society which they are victims to, and the rifts in this connection create permanent and irreparable damage to both Dana and Alice as individuals.

Butler's establishment of Dana's place as a black woman within the Weylin household creates dynamics that are rich for analysis in the vein of dystopian feminist relationships, as they are relationships she must uphold to ensure survival. The relationships between the women in the Weylin Household are fraught with complexities. There is the dynamic between Margaret and Dana, as well as Margaret's dynamics with the rest of the black women on the plantation, which reflect the woman's deep insecurity about her motherhood, as well as her insecurity in her relationship with Tom Weylin, her husband. The issue of these relationships, as well as the rest of the hierarchies, stems from an innate need to gain control in a situation which has been rendered uncontrollable in white patriarchal society. Even for the white women in the narrative, there is still a sense of uneasiness to their presence in the household. The question of "true womanhood" once again becomes important in this discussion. This narrative of what womanhood was hinges on the historical context of the "Cult of True Womanhood"

which developed in the early nineteenth century as a result of early industrialism, and an increased interest in the virtues to be espoused by women. According to Barbara Welter there were “four cardinal virtues- piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” attributes which Margaret Weylin strives towards, while juxtaposing Dana’s individuality and liberation (Welter, 152). Given this historical development, Mitchell’s argument about the hypocrisy of womanhood becomes all the more important in understanding the relationship between the two women. It also speaks to how the institution of slavery is a design to maintain some semblance of what “womanhood” means by othering women who were black. In utilizing this hierarchy to maintain her status above Dana, Margaret feeds into a notion of control which Butler discussed in an interview with Stephen W. Potts, in which she reveals that these characters are simply doing what they must to survive: “You do what you have to do. You make the best use of whatever power you have” (Potts, 333). This is a direct quote from Butler on the nature of the character’s behavior, it applies specifically to Dana as she must sacrifice the relationships she establishes with her fellow black women in favor of relationships to white men who are able to better protect her given her circumstances. Sarah’s protectiveness and subservience begin to influence Dana’s interactions with Alice, whom Dana must protect without betraying her own self-interests and safety.

Dana must also maintain relationships within the structural hierarchies of the slaves on the Weylin plantation, which reflects the character’s ability to balance her own safety with the safety of her fellow black women. One of the most important relationships Dana forms within this hierarchy is with Sarah, the Weylin’s cook, who is wary towards Dana’s presence disturbing the delicate balance which is being maintained between

Weylin and his servants. Sarah's wariness begins to influence the ways in which Dana interacts with the world around her, as Dana becomes more concerned with her own safety as the work progresses, and Tom Weylin becomes less hesitant about causing her personal harm. Sarah is influenced by her own losses which she has suffered at the hands of the Weylin family.

To fully understand the suppression of black femininity as it operates in *Kindred*, an understanding of the two spheres of Dana's identity must be reached through an analysis of both womanhood, and black womanhood as separate points of contention for Dana. Womanhood in this setting and era can best be reflected by Margaret Weylin and her place within the plantation household. Margaret's role as a mother and a wife are her only claims to power on the Weylin plantation, and these roles are threatened by Dana's presence. Margaret's insecurities are easily noted by Dana early on in the work, she attributes the woman's dislike towards her to jealousy: "it was his mother who wanted me downstairs now, and for possibly no more substantial reason that her son liked me." (Butler, 70). Margaret's position in the Weylin household is fragile, and dependent upon her ability to raise Rufus, therefore Dana's sudden appearance becomes a threat. Margaret's interactions with her husband categorize their relationship as one which she holds no power in. When she arrives to help Rufus after he has broken his leg, she becomes violent with Dana, and is only stopped by her husband: ""What are you doing to him?" she cried. "Leave him alone!"...she only had one reaction when Rufus was in trouble. One wrong reaction. Fortunately for both of us, Weylin reached her before I forgot myself...He caught her. Held her. Spoke to her quietly." (Butler, 69). Margaret occupies a space which is subservient to her husband, who treats her with contempt even

when she is trying to protect their son, and in return, Margaret treats those she sees as beneath her with that same contempt and violence. Dana takes on a role which is subservient to the woman in order to avoid her wrath, thus entering into the complex social hierarchy at work in the narrative. This hierarchy becomes difficult to break free from, and evidently creates a cycle which Dana finds herself trapped by. As Dana begins to replace the mother figure, she is further trapped in a cycle of becoming Rufus's guardian and protector. This dynamic puts Dana in danger of betraying her fellow black women for the sake of her own security.

Margaret is ultimately removed from the household entirely by the circumstances of a divorce, which reflects just how easily these hierarchies can turn on women who are in relatively secure positions within them. Dana learns that Margaret has disappeared back to Baltimore from Sarah, who informs her that the woman "had two more babies... They lingered awhile, then died one after the other... She went kind of crazy..." in the aftermath of that loss of her children she and her husband had a falling out, and Margaret was sent away to live with her sister (Butler, 137). Margaret, after suffering the loss of two children, and after suffering her own medical issues, was abandoned in favor of the stability of the household. Margaret's presence became a detriment to the power which Tom Weylin held at the plantation, and so she was sent away and replaced with her cousin Jake Edwards as a new overseer. Dana also notes that "In Margaret's absence, Sarah ran the house- and the house servants," and runs the house in a manner which garners her resentment from the house staff (Butler, 144). Butler's inclusion of this new dynamic, this shift of power to Sarah, reveals that the work of the house, and of the woman at the helm of the household, would have gotten done to the same degree without

her presence. In a sense, Margaret's presence in the household was unnecessary and replaceable, however the house help still maintains a fear toward Sarah due to the woman's wariness towards punishment at the hands of the Weylins. While Margaret was rendered unimportant to the hierarchy, those below her continue to suffer under the same dynamics which were created before her absence.

Dana's dynamic with the other black women on the Weylin plantation can be best explored through her relationship to Sarah. Sarah is introduced during Dana's third return to the Weylin household, in which she now has Kevin to rely upon for support, however the two become stuck there longer than they had anticipated. In order to survive here, Dana must begin working with the cookhouse staff, under Sarah, who she learns has suffered tremendous losses. Dana quickly learns that Sarah has a mute daughter, Carrie, who she reveals is her only remaining child: "'The only one Marse Tom let me keep,' her voice trailed away in a whisper... 'Sold them. First my man died... Then Marse Tom took all my children, all but Carrie...'" (Butler, 76). Butler's inclusion of this character as a separate female figure of authority, one who shares Dana's social burdens, yet has suffered losses unimaginable to her, creates a dynamic in which Dana begins to recognize what she is capable of losing herself. Dana's relationship to Sarah is also complicated by Dana's desire to teach her daughter how to read and write. Despite Sarah's fears, Dana offers to teach Carrie, who "wanted to learn" despite the fact that Sarah was "afraid that if she learn[ed] she might get caught at it, and then be whipped or sold" (Butler, 104). Dana is eventually caught teaching the younger children on the plantation, and suffers injuries which almost result in her death, validating the fears which Sarah had about the situation. The wariness which Sarah has, and the protectiveness she feels for her only

daughter, is something which Dana had not previously understood the severity of.

Following this episode, Dana becomes more cautious in her interactions with her fellow women, which weakens her connections on the plantation, but ultimately keeps her safe.

Sarah's wariness towards Dana's sudden appearance on the Weylin Plantation is well founded, given her background, and serves to represent the complexities of the relationships Dana forms under this oppressive society. Her resentment towards the Weylin family, particularly Margaret, is also revealed to be grounded in the experiences which she has suffered under this white patriarchal society. Sarah reveals that Margaret "wanted new furniture, new china dishes... So she made Marse Tom sell my three boys to get the money to buy things she didn't even need!"(Butler, 95). Dana does not respond to this, she simply goes silent, "My trouble seemed to shrink and become not worth mentioning," as the implications of the woman's loss settle into Dana's psyche, Dana must confront her own preservation and instability in the household (Butler, 95). The worth of any slave on the plantation is reduced to nothing less than fancy dishes or new furniture in the mind of Margaret Weylin, and therefore Sarah becomes grateful to have Carrie remaining in her life. Sarah only holds her power inside the cookhouse, but she advises Dana to utilize her femininity and her hold over Kevin to maintain a semblance of power which she once had over Tom. Sarah speaks to her about the way Kevin looks at her: "You can make him do just about anything you want him to... Fact... if you got any sense, you'll try to get him to free you now while you still young and pretty enough for him to listen," (Butler, 96). This advice reveals much about Sarah's life, there is a suggestion that she was once beautiful, and regrets not trying to use that to her advantage with Tom. In imparting this wisdom onto Dana, Sara also reflects Butler's understanding



of these master and slave power dynamics, and the idea that: “You do what you have to do. You make the best use of whatever power you have” (Potts, 333). To Sarah, sexuality and femininity become powerful tools, which Dana should make careful use of. However to characters like Alice, sexuality and femininity become the source of trauma and loss of control of ones circumstances. There is a delicate balance to be struck with these relationships, and understanding when to use caution becomes key to how Sarah’s personality influences Dana’s ability to respond to Rufus’s rape of Alice.

Dana and Alice first interact with one another when Dana is sent to the plantation for the second time. Rufus, after nearly setting fire to his house, informs Dana that she could seek help from Alice and her family. When Dana finds Alice and the rest of her family they are under attack by a group of white slave patrollers, she saves the life of Alice’s mother, and in return is allowed to seek refuge with them. She sees the girl in the aftermath of a violent attack, and calls out to her, the girl “stopped, peered at me through the darkness. She was Alice, then. These people were my relatives, my ancestors. And this place could be my refuge,” (Butler, 37). Dana’s immediate comfort and connection to the girl indicates a level of sisterhood which she automatically feels she has with the girl. As she reflects on their relationship she feels safety in her presence, and feels an innate sense of protectiveness toward the young Alice and her mother in return: “she seemed to be my age, slender like her child, like me in fact... she was surviving, however painfully. Maybe she would help me learn how.” (Butler, 38). Dana places a great deal of her faith in this family’s ability to help her, and despite the danger her presence poses to Alice and her family, they allow her to take refuge in their house. Dana’s reflections upon these interactions is an example of how she initially retains her ability to form connections to

these people, before she is forced to unlearn that sense of humanity by the circumstances of slavery.

Dana puts herself between Alice and a group of white slave patrollers, it is a display of that very sense of self-sacrifice for the sake of others which Dana begins to unlearn later. Despite how badly Dana wishes to protect the girl, she cannot do so without putting herself in harm's way. Dana is already familiar with the way in which Alice could possibly come to bear Rufus's children. Dana acknowledges early on the inevitability of Alice's fate, she questions "How would she marry this boy? Or would it be marriage?" despite knowing the answers to these questions were likely not ones she wanted to hear (Butler, 28). Dana's acceptance of this fate as fact does not deter her from trying to ease Alice's pain, or prevent Rufus from becoming someone capable of rape. As mentioned earlier Dana thinks on how to "help him as best I could... maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. I might even be making things easier for Alice," (Butler, 68). This mentality is one which does not last long in Dana's mind, as during this stint at the Weylin plantation, Dana's attempts to educate the slaves land her in another near death situation. By the time she returns again she is too late to save Alice from her fate.

In the immediate aftermath of Alice's rape Dana must defend Rufus's life despite the knowledge that he has violated Alice, a scenario which tests Dana's ability to maintain her relationship with Alice in the face of threats to her own safety. This moment in which she has to save him is not done out of care for the child she had raised, but rather out of self-preservation. As to Dana's knowledge the family bloodline has not been secured by this point in time. The notion that she is forced to choose her own survival

over the survival of Alice presents a complex moral dilemma that epitomizes the genre of feminist speculative fiction: when one is presented with an opportunity to save themselves from their oppressive circumstances, or to save those who they have suffered alongside, what makes them choose to save themselves? As later chapters of this thesis will reveal, women are oftentimes motivated by safety and for the relationships they are attempting to maintain within a patriarchal society. For Dana, in this moment the answer is her husband, whose existence according to Mitchell gives her a sense of liberation which Alice can never hope to experience.

Dana has, by this point in the narrative, learned that her survival is intrinsically linked to her ability to subjugate herself. Dana uses what little power she has to make that survival manageable, even at the risk of harming her fellow woman. Despite the pain which this causes her, Dana is unable to break the chains of this cycle of oppression until she is freed by the birth of her ancestor. Before this moment, Dana acknowledges that her salvation is not in her own hands. She learns that Rufus is beyond salvation as well, as he blames Alice for his actions: “‘Her own fault’ I stared at him. Heaven help Alice and Isaac. Heaven help me. If Rufus could turn so quickly on a lifelong friend, how long would it take him to turn on me?” (Butler, 123). Dana concerns herself with the concept that Rufus will inevitably reflect that monstrous behavior back upon her in Alice’s absence, and she will be powerless to stop him without the insurance of her great grandmother’s birth.

Alice’s relationship to Dana is one which makes the two virtually indistinguishable in Rufus’s mind, and that lack of distinguishment is projected onto Dana in a way which is harmful to the relationship between the two. Dana and Alice

represent two halves of the same woman, which is frequently referenced throughout the work, by both Alice and Rufus: “He likes me in bed and you out of bed... all that means we’re two halves of the same woman...” (Butler, 228). Mitchell analyzes this relationship through the lens of the emancipatory narrative as it “might be interpreted as an example of the historically monolithic way of defining black female identity, so pervasive in slavery because to acknowledge individuality or subjectivity would serve to eradicate slavery’s very foundations” (Mitchell, 60). The reduction of their individuality to the “monolith” of black feminine identity further subjugates them to the interpretations that the white patriarchal society ascribes to them. It renders them incapable of individual thought, and diminishes their worth to sexuality, or objectification. The nature of the relationship between the two ensures that suffering for either party is inescapable, both Alice and Dana will undergo some kind of loss by the narrative’s conclusion.

Alice’s decline comes when Rufus sells her husband Isaac to a plantation in Mississippi. Alice is brought back and beaten nearly to death, and Dana’s ability to care for her in the aftermath of her attempted runaway reflects the surviving threads of sisterhood present even after she has faced so much disaster. Early in the work, Dana makes it clear that her character is centered around a need to help people, whether it be in the form of saving Alice’s mother from the slave patrollers, or teaching Carrie and Nigel how to read. Her caretaking instincts are alienated from her, as she begins only to use them for the sake of Rufus’s ensured survival. Alice’s injuries require her to rekindle the connection she has always felt for the girl who she watched become a woman. Alice was brought back from her attempted escape “bloody, filthy, and barely alive” Dana helped to look after her “hurt her as little as possible, got her clean and bandaged the worst of her

injuries” while Rufus looked on (Butler, 148). Dana also warns Rufus not to do anything to hurt her, and later cannot sleep because of her worry for the girl’s safety while Rufus is around. In a conversation with Sarah about Rufus’s behavior, Sarah reminds Dana to watch her mouth: “You ain’t no field n-, but you’re still a n-. Marse Rufe can get mad and make things mighty hard for you” (Butler, 150). This is a somber reminder that despite how upset Dana is with Rufus, she can do nothing to help her fight against Rufus in this society. Dana looks after Alice as she “continued to heal and grow... Alice had been with her for three weeks. She might have been twelve or thirteen mentally now... looking like a child in one of Margaret Weylin’s old dresses...” (Butler, 154). Dana describes the woman as though she were a child, and explains that her mental state is not connected to reality.

Dana’s relationship to Alice takes on a more caring nature in the aftermath of her attempted escape, a reflection of the connection which Dana has felt to the girl since their first meeting. Dana has watched over Alice’s recovery for almost a month before she was able to return to working in the cookhouse on the day that Carrie went into labor. Alice reveals that her mental state is even worse than Dana had suspected, reflecting the deep effects of her trauma to the woman when she asks “What is it like to be a slave?” (Butler, 156). This question, one which Dana had never known the answer to until her ordeals with the Weylin household, reveals that Alice’s trauma is something she cannot confront without the help of Dana. Alice’s trust of Dana is founded in Dana’s natural caregiving tendencies, and the sisterhood which the two share through bonding in the wake of Rufus’s abuse. Dana has difficulty trying to remind Alice of what happened to her, but eventually comes to the conclusion that she must learn the truth no matter what: “I

wanted to pull her back from the edge of a cliff. It was too late though. She would have to take her fall.” (Butler, 157). Dana acknowledges this, and remains by Alice’s side when she learns what happened to Isaac, and when she remembers what happened to her, “She collapsed against me, crying. She would have fallen if I hadn’t held her... somehow it had become my job to ease troubles... as best I could.” (Butler, 159). In this moment Dana is coming to terms with the idea that she must remain here for the fallout which ensues from Alice’s returned memory. Despite Alice’s tirade against her, in which she accuses Dana of being sympathetic towards their white masters, she asks why Dana “didn’t... know enough to let [her] die?” a question which Dana accepts along with a number of other insults for she knows it was better for her “to vent her feelings on me than anyone else” (Butler, 160). Alice’s supposed hatred for Dana does not deter the woman from trying to help her, and in her lowest moments Dana remains by her side, a testament to the bond the two share, and the strength which Dana has in this connection.

Alice’s decision to try and run away results in her near-death, her husband being sold, and her own enslavement. She loses her freedom to Rufus, the one aspect of her identity which remained untouched before now was her status as a free woman, and Dana laments that she must “accept not only the loss of her husband, but her own enslavement,” (Butler, 149). Dana is characterized by her ability to maintain her resistance to Rufus, where Mitchell points out Alice is only inwardly rebellious, “often wishing she possessed the inner strength needed to murder Rufus. Butler reveals the cost to Alice’s self: Alice “adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn’t kill, but she seemed to die a little” (169). She never completely accepts her sexual enslavement” (Mitchell, 61). It is the difference in their abilities to express rebellion, and

Alice's partial submission to Rufus which becomes her downfall. Dana's strength as an individual is influenced by the connections she has to her fellow women, and her inability to completely give into the man's will becomes her salvation.

Later on in the work, Dana herself is punished for attempting to run away and find her own husband. Alice returns the favor of caretaking to her, repaying Dana's kindness in a similar act of sisterhood. Dana gets caught by Tom and Rufus and beaten badly by Tom, during which she reminds herself that "Alice had borne worse," finding strength in Alice's strength (Butler, 176). This moment reveals that Dana is inspired by the strength she sees in Alice. When she is left to recover it is Alice who remains by her side "She was there to calm me and feed me pills that I saw were my own inadequate aspirin, and to assure me that my punishment was over, that I was all right... "Carrie and me'll take care of you as good as you took care of me." (Butler, 176). Dana takes comfort in this, as Alice reflects that same care Dana had shown her. Dana begins to cry, thinking that she and Alice were similar in the sense that they "were both failures" and that she wants to try and run away again (Butler, 177). As Dana recovers, and takes her time to do so, the rest of the women on the plantation ensure that no one tells Tom about the speed of her recovery, "Alice, Tess, and Carrie concealed their few scratches and gave Liza quiet meaningful glances. Glances that Liza turned away from in anger and fear," implying that the three women had attacked Liza to prevent her from betraying Dana to the master of the house (Butler, 178). These acts of betrayal, and of protection through violence, reflect the lengths to which Alice will go to ensure Dana's recovery, and how slowly these acts of sisterhood and self-sacrifice influence the actions of the other women on the plantation. Alice and Carrie band together to prevent Dana from getting in further

trouble, even at the risk of their own harm, or causing harm to another woman. Still, despite these connections, when Dana is absent from the plantation for a length of time Alice is unable to protect herself.

When Dana returns again a number of years later, she finds that Alice has changed quite a bit in her absence, and has had three children with Rufus as his relationship is the only way to ensure her survival. Dana notes that she “looked older. She also looked harder. She was a cool, bitter older sister to the girl I had known.” (Butler, 207). Supposedly the other slaves on the plantation had begun to resent her, looking at her with contempt for staying with Rufus as long as she had in Dana’s absence. When Dana returns to work on the plantation she notices that the other slaves treat her in the same manner: “I went into the cookhouse and the young man who had his mouth open to speak closed it quickly, looking at me with open hostility. The old man simply turned his back. I’d seen slaves do that to Alice. I hadn’t noticed them doing it to me before,” (Butler, 220). Alice has also been acting hostile towards Dana because of her sudden obedience to Rufus in the aftermath of his father’s death, reflecting how quickly the woman had lost faith in Dana after her disappearance. The two have their own ways of acting to ensure their own safety, and are no longer allowed the freedom to express the same level of care toward one another that they once did. Dana only remains to ensure that Alice safely delivers her next child, Hagar, Dana’s great grandmother. Alice asks Dana for laudanum, a strong opiate she can use to cure her pain when she runs away with her child, explaining that she wants it “so [she] can leave when [she wants] to,” but Dana argues with her that the child is too young to escape, still Alice fights her “I got to go before I turn into what you are,” (Butler, 234). Dana begins to grow resentful towards



Alice for the way she is treating her, resentful towards the woman's sudden bitterness and disregard for the safety of her children. This is rooted both in Dana's own desire to ensure her survival, as well as her concern for the girl she had seen grow up into a cold woman. This episode of Dana's life at the plantation is marked by a sudden alienation from all the other women who had once sacrificed as much for her as she had for them. Especially Alice, who accuses her of being more of a slave to Rufus than she was.

When Dana once again returns to the Weylin plantation she finds that Alice has taken her life after having tried to escape. With Alice gone, Rufus is free to see Dana as the only other object of his desire. In the aftermath of her death, Dana speaks to Sarah, who accuses Rufus of being the cause: "He sold her babies... She run off... You must have known she was goin' you and her was like sisters," (Butler, 249). Dana is reminded by Sarah of the attachment she once had to the woman. Dana must face the fact that she was partially at fault for Alice's death, however she must also reconcile this with the fact that if she had not allowed for Alice to be raped, Dana would likely not exist. This reminder is unwanted, and drives Dana to confront Rufus's actions, when he tries to assault her, Dana severs her ties from Rufus by taking his life. Using the strength that Alice did not have the means to use, Dana kills Rufus in an act of self-defense. Dana was free to leave this world behind, to abandon Rufus without fear of repercussion in a way that Alice never was able to. Dana's connection to Alice throughout her lifetime, and Alice's reliance upon Dana's selflessness, became the one point of hope for both characters. Their sisterhood was damaged by Rufus's possession and obsession, and was not allowed to thrive to the level which it should have under this oppressive regime.

Butler's *Kindred* explores a paradox of gruesome and horrific proportions, trapping a black woman in the position of protecting a white slaveholder for the sake of her own survival. Only through the event of sacrificing some semblance of self is Dana able to escape the cyclical nature of the oppressive white patriarchal society she finds herself trapped within. Dana is required to abandon her morals, and the safety of her ancestors in order to ensure her own escape from the oppressive society which she finds herself in. Speculative feminist literature, especially Butler's work, asks of readers to conceptualize these troubling moral paradoxes in the constraints of these regimes. A question which is of importance to these works is why, at the risk of sisterhood, do women choose self-preservation above all else? Butler reveals that in these circumstances the value of the self is intrinsically tied to patriarchal values of power and sexual desire, and that Dana's actions were unavoidable for the sake of her survival. When she overcomes Rufus's perception of her as someone linked to Alice she is able to undermine the identity imposed upon her by that society despite the loss of relationships she had suffered.

## CHAPTER TWO: "MAYDAY": THE SURVIVAL OF SISTERHOOD IN

### ATWOOD'S *HANDMAID'S TALE*

Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* is a work of speculative fiction that takes place in a not so distant future, in a civilization which has been rebuilt following an unspecified natural disaster, on the framework of a radical religious patriarchy that exploits women for the purpose of repopulation. Atwood's narrative follows Offred, a Handmaid to a high ranking commander in Gilead, who had been re-educated to take the role of the Handmaid. Offred, formerly known as June, has been forced to abandon her independence, and the life she formerly knew, in order to ensure her survival in Gilead. Offred's story follows her through her new life, with constant reflections upon the world as it once was, as well as the process of her indoctrination into her role as a Handmaid. Throughout these moments in her life, the nature of Offred's relationships shifts depending upon her circumstances. Her idea of romance, which was once a point of liberation for her, has now been reduced to exerting her femininity for the sake of control. Her relationships with her fellow women have been poisoned by the re-education she has undergone at the Red Center. She has been taught that complacency and acceptance of her circumstances will result in her survival, therefore Offred no longer holds value in her own life or the lives of other women.

In comparing Offred's past relationships, to those transitory relationships formed at the Red Center, and to the relationships she begins to form in Gilead, a pattern of loss of control and loss of self emerges. Given her circumstances at various phases of the novel, Offred begins to value relationships under the condition that it offers her some

semblance of control. Atwood reminds readers in her introduction to the work that none of the occurrences in Gilead are fictional, that “*It can’t happen here* could not be depended on: anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances,” and that aspects of the society she has written have existed and will continue to exist (Atwood, xiii). Atwood also defines what she sees as a feminist novel, as one which presents women as “human beings- with all the variety of behavior that implies- and are also interesting and important, what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure, and plot of the book...” rather than bodies valued for reproductive ability (Atwood, xvi). These distinctions of dystopia and feminism become important to the process of understanding and analyzing Offred’s actions and behaviors throughout the narrative. Her motivations and choices are human, and her circumstances are real in the sense that they would provoke radical or irrational behavior for the sake of self-preservation. Sympathy and connection between women beyond the basis of punishment or procreation is made impossible, and therefore the foundation of relationships that do not provide a sense of security or control to Offred are dispensable.

Of particular importance to Offred’s development and attachments is the relationship she has to her friend Moira, one of the few characters who she interacts with during all three phases of her life. Her reflections upon Moira’s personality prior to Gilead and the Red Center become a point of strength for Offred’s character. Oftentimes Moira’s individuality and rebellious nature seep into Offred’s behaviors and thoughts in a way which reflects the importance of the connection the two shared. As I will explore later in this chapter, Moira and Offred’s sisterhood and shared struggles become a beacon of hope, not just for Offred, but for the other women present at the Red Center.

To understand Offred's attachments, it is important to look at the organizational structure of the society of Gilead. Atwood's Gilead is most notable for its restructuring of femininity, and the role of womanhood in its society. At its base level, women are separated between women and "unwomen", who are spoken of only in the context of "the colonies" where they are sent to die. "Unwomen" are so labeled because they are "wasting time" and "godless" according to the Aunts, women who express their individuality, and were not made to become vessels of state procreation (Atwood, 119). Society values women only for the roles which they play in bolstering state success. Peter Stillman and S. Anne Johnson discuss the nature of individuality and womanhood in Gilead in "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in the Handmaid's Tale" highlighting the way in which restrictions contribute to a lack of self: "To these restrictions Gilead adds its patriarchal religion, its desperate quest for fertile (white) wombs, its indoctrination (in "Re-education" or "Red Centers") of Hand maids, their distinctive uniforms, the extreme division of (women's) labor, the narrowness and low skill requirements of their tasks, and the extremely truncated scope for self-expression, initiative, or independent action by women" (Stillman and Johnson, 73). Stillman and Johnson express that the re-education undergone at the Red Centers reduces women to nothing more than empty husks to be used by the patriarchy established in Gilead, a point which becomes key to witnessing Offred's need to regain that sense of self and identity. The reduction of expression and individuality becomes a means of survival but not one of truly living, something which Offred had experienced prior to Gilead and will long for despite the relative safety of conformity.

Other roles taken on by women in this society are Aunts, Marthas, Wives and Econowives. Aunts are elder figures who are tasked with re-educating Handmaids, and ensuring that they are kept subjugated under their Commanders. Aunts are a perversion on the idea of motherhood, the idea that the women in these Red Centers are looked after by elders who care only for the ensured survival of the state rather than the individual wellbeing of the women they look after creates an immediate sense of disconnect and distrust between women. The Marthas are distinguished from Handmaids by their ability to maintain the household. They are not able to conceive children, but are valued for their ability to complete tasks associated with housework, including cooking and cleaning. Wives are infertile women assigned to be wed to Commanders, they rank highly within the household, and are used as figureheads of the home. The figurehead of the household Offred is assigned to is Serena Joy, a former television gospel singer who utilizes her power over the other women in the household to bolster her own security in the society she has helped to create. The Econowives are women who are wives “of the poorer men... These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can,” (Atwood, 24). They are subjugated not on the basis of becoming Handmaids, but rather they are subjugated under economic instability, this lack of economic or social mobility makes them hostage to Gilead. The women of Atwood’s dystopia are reduced to their societal functions, making a sense of individuality impossible to achieve under the conditions they are subject to.

When Atwood first introduces Offred, she is in the transitory space of the Red Center, learning that her story can only be shared in whispers at nighttime on the gymnasium floor. This act of storytelling and secrecy becomes essential for the survival

of Offred's identity, "In the semidarkness we would stretch out our arms... and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lipread, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths." (Atwood, 4). The understanding that the self could be lost under such circumstances, makes Offred's inability to reflect upon her past when Atwood depicts her as a Handmaid in the very next chapter. Much has changed, her tone remains flat, her description of her new life feels barren and the only voice which we hear besides her own is that of Aunt Lydia. Offred does not allow reflection until she is alone, when thoughts of her husband Luke enter her mind she reminds herself "Not here and now. Not where people are looking," and continues on until she is certain she can grieve her past in peace (Atwood, 27). Her past is only revealed in short moments of reflection, interspersed throughout the narrative, and triggered by a variety of events which remind her of what has been lost.

Offred's reflections upon the physical and emotional intimacy she had in her past serve to help foreground the importance of these connections to her stability as a character. She remembers her husband Luke holding her while she is pregnant, and the physical and emotional lack she has in Gilead, "It's lack of love we die from. There's nobody here I can love, all the people I love are dead or elsewhere... They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person." (Atwood, 103). During this episode of reflection, Offred hypothesizes that Luke is dead, or that Luke somehow survived and she takes comfort in this thought, in the fantasy that "Any day now there may be a message from him. It will come in the most unexpected way, from the least likely person," she believes in these stories so that she will be ready for the truth (Atwood, 106). Offred's retention of hope despite her circumstances reflects that she has

not been entirely indoctrinated into the society of Gilead, and it also reflects the notion that the lack of these sound relationships in Gilead makes life unsustainable. The idea that it is the “lack of love” which kills people, and that love is impossible in a society which reduces women to their bodies, makes Offred’s motivations in her future relationship more understandable. Offred’s lack of physical and emotional intimacy results in her need to find connections in way which endanger her within the society of Gilead.

This emotional distance was also present in Offred’s childhood relationship to her mother, which helps to reflect upon an early absence of strong female relationships in Offred’s life. The relationship she had to her mother prior to the coup reflected a severe lack of affection and support. Her mother is characterized as a sort of revolutionary who is staunchly opposed to the patriarchy, and fiercely independent. Her mother represents precisely the opposite of the image of the ideal woman constructed by Gilead, and it is later revealed that Moira had seen her in a documentary about the Unwomen living in the colonies. Despite her strength of character and opposition to the regime of Gilead, Offred’s mother represents the precise grey-morality which Atwood describes a female character should have. Offred’s recollections of her mother oftentimes center around feeling unseen or unheard by her, “...she said we were going to feed the ducks. But there were some women burning books, that’s what she was really there for. To see her friends; she’d lied to me, Saturdays were supposed to be my day... she had a way of talking about me to others as if I couldn’t hear.” (Atwood, 38). Offred’s feelings of insignificance stem from childhood, her mother tells her later that she was a “wanted child” but the narrative spins itself to center back upon her own feelings of self-importance, “a lot of them started



sending me these articles about how the birth-defect rate went zooming up after thirty five... And stuff about how hard it was to be a single parent. Fuck that shit... I've started this and I'm going to finish it." (Atwood, 120). The pride which her mother takes from motherhood does not come from an interest in her daughter, but rather her spiteful nature. Her mother "expected too much" from her "expected me to vindicate her life for her... I didn't want to live life on her terms" (Atwood, 122).

To compare this relationship which Offred has to her mother, to the relationship she has to Moira, Offred takes more inspiration from the rebellious nature of her friend, and finds herself drawn to Moira's sense of independence. Prior to Gilead, Moira was Offred's friend from college. She is similar to Offred's mother in the sense that she was independent, and rebellious, however the connection the two share is one which Offred chose to enter into because of the value she holds for Moira. The value of their friendship is reflected frequently in Offred's inner voice, which at many points is Moira's voice reminding her to keep her strength. The memories she has of Moira prior to the coup involve their relationship in college, she recalls her "siting on the edge of my bed, legs crossed... in her purple overalls, one dangly earring, gold fingernail she wore to be eccentric..." a picture of unrestricted individuality, with an air of confidence that Offred admired. Offred recalls criticizing Moira's vision of a "Utopia" created by "shutting herself up in a women-only enclave... Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them." (Atwood, 172). Moira's vision of a woman dominated society is a vision of an unachievable utopia, which does not work to address the issues of the pre-established patriarchal society whose inequalities are exacerbated by the circumstances of the dystopia Atwood presents. When the coup started, and women

began to lose their rights, Offred recalls that Moira was “gleeful, as this was what she’d been expecting for some time and now she’d been proven right. She even looked more energetic, more determined” (Atwood, 178). The recollection of these events occurs after Offred has visited Jezebel’s and seen that Moira has had to succumb to some form of complacency in order to survive. And yet, Offred remembers her as she was: a woman who was unafraid of the regime of Gilead, whose resolve inspires strength in others.

In revealing the full truth of the coup at this moment in the text, Atwood is able to exemplify precisely what has been taken from all of these women. She explores the freedom of Moira’s thoughts, and her excitement at the idea of the world changing in such a shocking way, where in the previous scene she had been lamenting her circumstances at Jezebel’s. The juxtaposition between these versions of Moira, as someone who was formerly “gleeful” but now someone who has become completely separated from what she once was, “blank, apathetic” and sucked into the “power trip” which is currently keeping her alive (Atwood, 242). Moira had always been a sort of rebellious energy in Offred’s life, and to see her brought so low invites reflections upon what they have lost, and how they went about losing it. Prior to this moment in the text, Offred had last interacted with Moira in the Red Center where they were both re-educated.

The Red Centers represent the location of Offred’s transition between her former life and her life in Gilead, and the relationships she forms during this period influence her ability to form concrete relationships in the future. During this time, Offred begins to see Moira’s rebelliousness as a threat to her safety rather than something to be amused by. At first Offred admits that “It makes me feel safer, that Moira is here,” she describes their

intricate ritual of meeting in the washroom during their few allowed breaks in the day (Atwood, 71). Still, Offred fears that they will be caught, “the only danger was from the others. Some were believers and might report us,” Offred warns Moira, acknowledging that “friendships were suspicious” and that they had to avoid each other if they wished to remain together (Atwood, 71). It is important to note that even early on in this new regime, Offred has learned that she cannot put trust in her fellow women, for fear that some truly believe in this new regime. It is likely in these circumstances that certain women would not hesitate to jeopardize the safety of others if it ensured their own. Later on, after Moira has escaped successfully, Offred’s narrative reflects a certain level of fear towards her: “Moira was out there somewhere. She was at large, or dead. What would she do... At any moment there might be a shattering explosion... Moira had power now” (Atwood, 133). Offred and the rest of the women in the Red Center conflate freedom with power, the return of control to a single woman means punishment, or fallout, for the rest. Offred also notes that despite them “losing the taste for freedom” and that without the relative safety of the Red Centers they feared falling apart, “Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us...” they cling to her freedom as they cling to their fleeting memories of their former lives (Atwood, 133). Still, the women in the Red Center remain fearful of the repercussions this might bring. This, again, is a teaching of the Red Center, an indoctrination of women into their new subservient positions in Gilead results in an exacerbation of its victims turning against one another.

Offred’s relationships to the other women in the Red Center teeter on the constant question of who she can trust. Atwood’s first chapter is dedicated to the atmosphere of this re-education camp, an introduction to the transitional period in Offred’s life offers a

glimpse at the in-between of freedom and loss, in which the women are still grappling with how to tell their stories, and ensure the survival of their memories of before. Offred reflects on the history of the old gymnasium where they slept: “I remember yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then... We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air, and it was still in the air, an afterthought as we tried to sleep...” (Atwood, 4). Offred remarks on their ability to long at this point, a representation that they have not yet lost their hope. Despite their inability to communicate their true names and stories during waking hours, the women find ways around it at first as a means of preserving their senses of self: “We learned to whisper almost without sound... We learned to lipread... In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma, Janine, Dolores, Moira, June,” (Atwood, 4). The risks taken to ensure that their truths would be known and passed along signifies the importance of self that the women retain before they are subjected to total re-education, however the bonds they attempt to form are strained and shattered the longer they are in the Red Center. This moment is the only time in which we see Offred’s true name, June, be used by the author. It is significant in the sense that it is only mentioned in the context of the sharing of stories between women. Offred is only referred to by Offred for the remainder of the novel, as June can only exist within the context of these sisterhoods.

As a tactic of indoctrination, the women are forced to confess to sexual activities, or impure behaviors, so that they may be shamed for it by their fellow women. This process actively turns these women against each other, and poisons their views of sexual activity that is not sanctioned for procreative purposes by the state. One of the women

who frequently confesses, much to Offred's dismay and annoyance, is Janine. She frequently repents for being a victim of a gang rape as a teenager, the Aunts believed that "Janine had been broken, she thought Janine was a true believer. But by that time Janine was like a puppy that's been kicked too often... she'd roll over for anyone...just for a moment of approbation" (Atwood, 129). Offred's insistence that Janine's continual repentance is only a process of saving face reveals that the indoctrination tactics only work in the foundation of the women's fears. Janine, at another point during their time at the Red Center, loses her sense of reality, and begins speaking as though she were still a waitress: "Hello, she said, but not to me. My name's Janine... Can I get you some coffee to begin with," Offred and Moira are forced to shake her out of this trance, "Moira slapped her across the face, twice, back and forth... They won't mess around with trying to cure you. They won't even ship you to the colonies. You go too far away and they just take you up to the Chemistry Lab and shoot you... So forget it." (Atwood, 216). By this time, Moira has already been planning "how she was going to get out," and instructs Offred that she must bet there to snap her out of it when she is gone (Atwood, 217). This moment in the text reflects that even Moira, who was once a rebel, and a champion of women's rights, is willing to abandon her fellow women at the Red Center to ensure her own survival. The depth of the indoctrination, and the lengths to which the system will go to ensure their obedience, cannot be fought by one woman alone, and the fear instilled in them by the Aunts ensures that they will never be successful in forming relationships in the face of Gilead. This is something which rings true in Butler's work as well, as Alice and Carrie carry out a violent attack on a fellow slave woman to prevent Dana from being betrayed by her. Women in these positions must sacrifice a certain level of morality and

humanity in order to ensure the survival of their fellow women. While these acts of violence may not seem to be humane, the women understand that in carrying out these acts they are preventing far worse things from happening. In this way, sisterhood acts as a preventative measure against loss of self.

The leaders of these Red Centers are the Aunts, as previously mentioned these are older women who are dedicated to their role of re-educating women who will become Handmaids. Aunt Lydia is the Aunt who was assigned to Offred's class of Handmaids, and she becomes a key factor in Offred's loss of self, and complacency towards her situation. Aunt Lydia is first introduced by way of a disembodied voice in Offred's subconscious, reminding her that her new way of life is "not a prison but a privilege" and that she should feel honored to be serving Gilead as a Handmaid (Atwood, 8). This thought is brought on by Offred's reflections upon the conditions she is living in, and serves to show that the teachings of the Red Center are deeply ingrained into Offred's psyche.

Despite her satirical tone, and her disdain towards Aunt Lydia, Moira's voice still plays a huge role in Offred's psyche. A major aspect of the re-education was a process of desensitization. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia saying that what the women considered "Ordinary" was simply what they were used to, "This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary," to imply that their subservience would become natural over time, and that they could never attain their old sense of ordinary desensitizes them to what is going to occur (Atwood, 33). Aunt Lydia's sense of self-importance, and instruction at the Red Center, culminates itself in the teachings of subservience and obedience. Offred's recollection of her lectures centers around the

notion that women are lesser than, and in the past those women “made mistakes, says Aunt Lydia, we don’t intend to repeat them. Her voice is pious, condescending, the voice of those whose duty it is to tell us unpleasant things for our own good,” encouraging the women to let go of their freedom, for it was wicked, and those women were “lazy... They were sluts” (Atwood, 113). Aunt Lydia demonizes sexual freedom, and in the process uses the “mistakes” of women in the past to justify the new regime. Atwood’s characterization of Lydia is one which paints the woman as pious and ludicrous in some senses, but the absurdity of her statements becomes nightmarish when they are being used as the basis of a new government.

When these pious women are given power over others, and a platform with which to spread their agenda, the consequences are devastating to other women. The control which Lydia holds over Offred’s subconscious, in spite of Offred’s satirical and dismissive tone throughout the work, is a reflection of the idea that given a certain level of power where they previously held none, women will not hesitate to utilize it for the sake of subjugating their fellow women. The irony of Aunt Lydia’s character lies in her idea that the Red Center promotes “a spirit of camaraderie among women” but that camaraderie is founded in the betterment of a society which does not value them, but rather their bodies (Atwood, 222). With no foundation upon which to build self-worth in this society, there is no foundation to build relationships. Camaraderie in Gilead is built upon subservience and control, and the ability to control these women becomes integral in the survival of their society.

With the basis of the relationships between women being founded upon the Handmaid’s ability to suppress herself, and become a vessel for procreation, Offred’s role

in Gilead becomes complicated by the connections she begins to form. To remind herself of her role in her Commander's household, Offred frequently acknowledges that the room she stays in does not belong to her, nothing belongs to her, and that the other women in the household only accept her out of necessity. Cora and Rita, the two Marthas assigned to the house, treat Offred as though she is another one of their tasks, "They're talking about me as though I can't hear. To them I'm a household chore, one among many" (Atwood, 48). This moment resembles an earlier moment in the work, in which Offred is reflecting on a memory of her mother, who treated her similarly "she had a way of talking about me to others as if I couldn't hear" (Atwood, 38). Offred was not necessarily unwanted by either the Marthas or her mother, however she still was made to feel as though she were occupying space, and could only function as a means of proving a point or fulfilling the hopes of others besides herself. This parallel in characterization raises the issue of function in relationships. Offred has been raised to feel as though she is nothing to her mother if not a testament to the woman's strength, and in Gilead she has been conditioned by older women to feel that she is nothing to society if not a vessel for the Commander's child. Offred's relationships with other women stem from her ability to perform a sort of function, these functions are based in the pride and control of Offred's superiors. Much like Butler's portrayal of Dana's relationships to Rufus and Kevin in *Kindred*, the roles which women play in society, and the relationships they hold to each other are entirely defined by men.

Offred begins to subvert these expectations and practices when she meets Ofglen, who is assigned to her as a shopping partner. Ofglen reveals that she is a part of a web that has been uncovering secrets about Gilead's superiors, and utilizing their



accumulation of knowledge in an attempt to help some women escape Gilead. Ofglen's relationship to Offred at the beginning makes Offred uneasy, she acknowledges that the woman may be "a real believer. A Handmaid in more than name," and that her constant talking is frustrating but she is "ravenous for news, any kind of news; even if its false news, it must mean something" (Atwood, 19-20). Ofglen's relationship to Offred develops after she reveals that she is a part of "Mayday," Offred is not frightened by the woman's impiety, instead she is excited: "I want to ask her if she's seen Moira, if anyone can find out what's happened, to Luke, to my child, my mother even..."(Atwood, 169). Ofglen tells her not to say anything, and Offred promises she won't, as she has no one to converse with, no one else with whom to share this secret. Offred places hope in Ofglen, and maintains her hunger for news of the outside world, of anything. The basis of this relationship comes from the potential of acquiring knowledge of those she was close with in her past, any way of re-establishing this connection becomes important to Offred. The intimacy of shared knowledge becomes the foundation for a form of relationship to her fellow woman she had all but lost after leaving the Red Center. Still, this relationship brings risk to Offred's security, as she is no longer complicit to state exploitation and suppression of communication, she is exposing herself to the wrath of Gilead.

Towards the end of the work Ofglen and Offred attend a ceremony of Salvaging, the aftermath of which involved the brutal killing of a man accused of rape, Ofglen lands a deadly blow against him and defends her actions to Offred: "He wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours. I knocked him out. Put him out of his misery..." (Atwood, 280). In this moment, Offred realizes the extent of the brutality which her fellow Handmaid's are capable of. The anger which they had all been harboring is

unleashed upon a man who was a traitor to the state, much like Offred herself, and she is sickened by the thought that she herself became violent and witnessed violence. This moment at the Salvaging also serves to reflect the notion that any of these women, given the ability to commit violence, would take that chance. Any opportunity in which they may regain some form of power or control is seized without question, and with utter disregard to the effects their actions have upon others. Ofglen disappears after the Salvaging, replaced by a new Ofglen who informs Offred that she “Hanged herself... She saw the van coming for her. It was better,” an act which Offred assumes was done for her protection as well (Atwood, 285). Ofglen’s sacrifices for the Mayday organization required an active effort to reestablish relationships amongst Handmaids that were not based completely in the act of the Ceremony or the Salvaging. These acts debase women, and reduce them to vessels of childbirth or vessels of vengeance for the state, and the other women who Offred connects to during her time in Gilead also promote these functions of herself over others.

Offred is assigned to the house of the Commander and his wife, who Offred knows to be Serena Joy, formerly a television gospel singer. Offred and Serena Joy hold an understandable hostility towards each other, as Serena is assigned as the Commander’s wife, but during their Ceremonies it is Offred who will come to bare his children. In a society which celebrates women for their ability to procreate, those women who are unable to are made to feel lesser than their Handmaids. Offred notices that the knitting that the Wives do is merely “something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose. But I envy the Commander’s Wife her knitting... What does she envy me? She doesn’t speak to me, unless she can’t avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity”

(Atwood, 13). The dynamic established here is one of mutual envy, where Offred wishes she had the freedom to do something as menial as knitting so that she may have some “small goals” to which she can aspire, it is implied that Serena Joy envies Offred for her sense of purpose in the household.

The success of the household is entirely reliant upon the Handmaid’s ability to reproduce, but that success is a reflection of the Wife who runs the household. Therefore, Offred’s inability to conceive, or her inability to perform her other duties, is a direct reflection of Serena Joy’s inability to keep the house in order. When Offred first interacted with the woman she is “disappointed... I wanted this one to be different” and says she wished to make the woman into an “older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me” (Atwood, 16). This admission of want, of longing for a feminine figure to look up to, paints Offred’s character as someone who is lost without the guidance or nurturing of another woman. As previously discussed, Offred had always linked herself to Moira, who was an independent and rebellious woman, who strengthened Offred merely by interacting with her. In the absence of this form of relationship, Offred loses that strength, and finds herself longing to return to some form of connection with another woman who she can look up to in the manner that she did Moira. Serena Joy does not allow her to hold onto those hopes for long, asserting herself as an indifferent, and at times cruel matron of the household.

By the end of the work, Offred is able to escape in part due to the relationships she had formed within the Mayday operation, however what allowed her to reach this point, and what helped ensure her survival was the relationship she had with Moira. Offred reveals that when she was seeing Nick she told him a great deal about her life: “I

tell him about Moira, about Ofglen...I want to tell him about the woman... who was there before me... I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known..."

(Atwood, 270). It is in this moment that we see what gives Offred the strength to carry on in this life, which is the relationships she has with the women who came before her, and the women who survive now who give her a sense of purpose. She tells Nick these things so that her story may be carried on, so that she can feel "known" again in the same way she had been known by her fellow women.

Offred's lack of genuine emotional connections in Gilead creates an endless void of fulfillment in her life. She reconstructs memories of her attachments to create an approximate version of the life she had once known as a mechanism for her survival. Without these reconstructions, without clinging desperately to those fleeting semblances of the past, Offred would not have survived Gilead, or at least her story would not have survived. As is seen in this work, and in Butler's *Kindred* and as I will later explore in Alderman's *The Power*, sisterhood becomes a vessel of memory, and of mutual strength which characters rely upon for survival. When characters lose that sisterhood, or that sisterhood is founded on the unstable grounds of power-seeking and control, it causes a collapse of relationships for the sake of self-preservation.

### CHAPTER THREE: “CAN YOU CALL BACK THE LIGHTNING?”: CORRUPTION

#### AND SISTERHOOD IN ALDERMAN’S *THE POWER*

The basis for much of the genre of feminist dystopian fiction comes in the form of narratives of oppression and violence towards women. Both Atwood and Butler explore societies which exist within the realm of a pre-established reality, and draw upon extreme situations in which women are forced to take upon subservient roles to men, which impacts their abilities to form relationships with their fellow women. Naomi Alderman’s 2016 novel *The Power* explores how women’s relationships form when they are allowed to take control of society. In an inversion of typical feminist speculative fiction, Alderman places power in the hands of women, and explores the ways in which they are able to overcome the circumstances of their oppression. Where *The Power* remains similar to the other works in this thesis is that these structures still fail. Alderman’s work flips the script on conventions typically associated with feminist dystopia, but continues to address the major issues of this thesis. *The Power* is important to the discussion of women’s relationships and how they affect change in these dystopian societies because it represents an equal but opposite extreme to *Handmaid’s Tale* and *Kindred*. In a society where women are allowed to live freely, and maintain complete control over structures which once benefited from their suffering, there are still fractures which form in the relationships between the characters that take on global importance. The society which sisterhood is currently struggling under informs women’s interactions and friendships. It is the power seeking behavior exhibited in men, and imitated by women, which causes them to turn against one another. When, in circumstances such as *Kindred* and

*Handmaid's Tale*, women have no power at all, they must sacrifice each other for some semblance of control. In *The Power* the control which women are given becomes the reason for the fractures which form in sisterhoods.

The world which Alderman establishes in *The Power* revolves around the emergence of an ability which only women possess to produce electricity from an organ in their body called the skein. Women are able to pass along this ability, or awaken it in each other, through touch. Alderman's narrative follows the journeys of several women, and counts down the years until a devastating nuclear fallout at the end of the novel. Throughout the course of the work we see as characters grow into their power and take on influential roles in global society. Alderman shows the formation of an entirely female run nation called Bessapara, the foundations of a new military power comprised of adolescent girls, and the beginnings of the end of the world. The juxtaposition she establishes between this intimidating countdown at the beginning of each new section of the work, and the relationships which the women are forming with each other and with this new society, calls upon readers to question what exactly will go wrong. As the fractures begin to show, and the interpersonal relationships between these characters shift, so too does the stability of the society they have worked to establish.

The central characters in this work each carry some sort of residual trauma of a patriarchal society which affects their decisions throughout the work. For instance one of the central characters to this analysis, Roxy Monke, is introduced during a scene where she watches her mother get killed by members of a gang which rival's her father's criminal empire. Roxy has been raised in a violent domestic situation, and values masculine conventions of strength and power which make her inclined towards the

perpetuation of those cycles. Roxy becomes close with Allie Montgomery-Taylor, who is better known as her religious persona, Mother Eve, the harbinger of a new religious order which values womanhood. Allie, too, has suffered abuse from patriarchal society, and seeks to create a world which is safer than the one she had grown up in by offering this new religious order. The power, as well as the characters, emerge from a volatile period of adolescence which makes for instabilities in growth.

In centering the work around these characters, and following their journeys to take control of this new world order, Alderman is able to explore precisely when their motivations become corrupted, and when they begin to lose faith in each other. The movements begin on a small scale, with the girls' individual pursuits of revenge against those who had hurt them. Then, their cooperation and sisterhood is utilized to uproot systems of local oppression, and later grows into the re-establishment of order with women at the helm of world affairs. It is only after these women have all but eliminated their common enemy when the fractures in their relationships begin to form. To track the precise moments and reasonings behind the collapse of society in this novel, I intend to examine the emotional attachments these women form to each other under the pretenses of liberation, and what happens to these relationships when a common enemy or a common goal can no longer unite these women at the same caliber which power-seeking tears them apart. When these fractures begin to show, these women cause irreparable damage to their interpersonal relationships and to the world around them which they had worked to recreate. "Can you call back the lightning?" becomes the central question of the work as the relationships crumble beneath the weight of paranoia and insecurity, and the world hurtles towards inevitable fallout.

The novel's beginnings reflect the impacts of a violent patriarchal society upon young women, as the residual trauma they endure from this society impacts their decisions and behaviors throughout the work. Allie is introduced while she sits in a graveyard, against the headstone of a woman she doesn't know, awaiting the arrival of two young men she can test her newfound powers on. Allie recollects briefly about what her home life has been like with her foster family the Montgomery-Taylors, specifically Mr. Montgomery-Taylor, who has emotionally and sexually abused Allie. She describes a tour she had taken of his meat processing plant, stating that "he liked to think of himself as a good man educating a little girl in the men's world" as she watched the livestock get killed (Alderman, 29). This moment, and the condescending diction Alderman uses to describe Allie's "education in the men's world" reflects that this relationship is not unique to Allie and Montgomery-Taylor, that many men in this society have this same outlook on learned cruelty and exposing young women to their predetermined place in the social hierarchy. Alderman also paints Allie as powerless, and resentful towards this dynamic. She fantasizes that if she were to release the chickens at the plant they would come "for Montgomery-Taylor... taking their revenge in beaks and claws" but the voice which has been her only source of companionship tells her that her time will come soon enough (Alderman, 30). This voice, which was with her before the emergence of the power, remains with Allie throughout the work, guiding her unknowingly towards the downfall of humanity.

The presence of Allie's voice is something of great importance to her character as it remains her only consistent and reliable form of "female" relationship throughout the work. The voice is introduced as having been with Allie for a long while. When it tells



her to wait to exact her revenge upon her abuser Allie trusts it, “The voice has never led her wrong yet, not in all the days of her life,” suggesting that it has been a source of guidance to her for a significant portion of her life (Alderman, 30). Allie only places faith and trust in this voice for a majority of the work. When she allows herself the freedom of connections to other women, the voice begins to impede her trust of these women, or, in other cases, the voice takes credit for the formation of these relationships, an issue which I will explore later on in this chapter. For now, however, the voice has not given her a reason to mistrust it. In fact, the voice has been her one defense against her circumstances, she even refers to it as “mom” during multiple points of the work. Allie’s connection to and trust for this voice will continue to affect her relationships throughout the course of the narrative, and establishes that her relationship to the voice, despite being unstable, outweighs all other relationships she is able to form in the text.

Roxy is introduced by Alderman through the circumstance of her mother’s violent death. Alderman is able to establish what Roxy’s motivations are, and her relationships within the Monke clan. Roxy’s power comes to her when her mother’s life is being threatened, she describes “Something happening. The blood is pounding in her ears. A prickling feeling is spreading along her back, over her shoulders, and along her collarbone It’s saying: you can do it. It’s saying: you’re strong” as it is awakened (Alderman, 9). It is this level of protectiveness in the face of fear which continues to drive her actions for the remainder of the text. Roxy is deeply influenced by her relationships to her family. We see her mother’s death push her to the awakening of her power, and later on influence her to take revenge upon the man responsible for her death. Roxy describes that her father is “a castle to her... She’s seen how he hurts people who

want to hurt her. She's always wanted to have that. It's the only thing worth having," to Roxy, strength becomes a point of connection to the rest of her family (Alderman, 51). She measures her own value in her ability to be strong for the rest of the family, which is why she ultimately decides to display her newfound strengths by joining her father's plan to kill Primrose. This plot for vengeance is paralleled in both Roxy and Allie's narratives as a key turning moment against the pre-established societies which they inhabit, and their traumatic experiences with men mirror each other's in a way which is significant to their development and friendship.

At the beginning of Allie and Roxy's character arcs, the characters use their newly awakened abilities to carry out acts of violent revenge against the patriarchal systems to which they have been victims, solidifying their initial connection and sisterhood in the foundation of violence. Allie, who has suffered sexual abuse at the hands of Mr. Montgomery-Taylor, due in part to the willful ignorance of his wife, defends herself from the man after acknowledging that "every day one grows up a little, every day something is different...suddenly a thing that was impossible has become possible. This is how a girl becomes a grown woman..." this compounding of days, this build-up to a sudden release of power is how Allie enters a new stage of her adolescence (Alderman, 34). With her newfound abilities, freeing herself from this situation becomes "the simplest thing in the world, like reaching out a hand and flicking off a light switch," and Allie consults the voice which tells her that it is time, she reaches out, and "feels the palms of her mother around her own small fingers" as she electrocutes the man (Alderman, 34). This moment evokes a number of important themes in the work which relate to the notion of female relationships, and the basis upon which this new world

order will be built. It is important to note that Allie feels a connection to an absent mother figure, which supports her physically as she takes her revenge upon her abuser. The physicality of this connection which Allie feels to the phantom of the voice in this moment reflects a sense of support which Allie had not known prior to this moment. In conjunction with the way the power is transmitted to other women, through touch, Allie's actions evoke the importance of that connectivity, and the strength of sisterhood which comes along with this newfound power. It would seem that these powers are strengthened by the presence of other women, just as much as they are strengthened by a common goal in exacting revenge upon a patriarchal society.

Roxy's act of violent revenge upon Primrose, and the men who killed her mother, reflects a similar sort of pleasure and familiarity with the act which Allie has. Instead of the metaphor of the light switch being turned on, Roxy describes the awakening of her power as a sort of "twist, the explosion outward" a descriptor which reoccurs often (Alderman, 11). This twist of power comes naturally to her, and the violence that ensues comes naturally as well. As discussed earlier, Roxy finds that her value comes from her strength, and in order to prove her worth to the rest of her family she takes it upon herself to carry out revenge on behalf of her mother. This is not simply an act of revenge, but rather a way for Roxy to enter a larger role in the Monke clan's hierarchy, and to break the cycle of oppression which caused her mother's death. When Roxy does find Primrose, he begs for her to spare his life, and Roxy ignores him: "she's back there again, clean and clear and with the crystals exploding in her brain, back in her mum's house. It was just what her mum said... She thinks of her dad with his rings on and his knuckles coming away from a man's mouth dripping blood. This is the only thing worth having.

She puts her hand to Primrose's temples. And she kills him." (Alderman, 58). Roxy's thought process in this scene is important as it highlights what is most influential to her decision making. Roxy mentions the familiarity of using the power again, which signifies the natural inclinations she and Allie both have for using it. She also mentions her mother, and references that the woman's voice is still present with her even now as she emulates her father's proclivity towards violence, in a similar way to how Allie's voice guides her physically. Roxy's evocation of her mother, after the loss of the mother had awakened her power, reflects the depth of connection the power itself has to the relationships between women in this work. However, Roxy then conflates this moment with her father's strength, and how she now possesses those abilities which she admired in him, and Alderman pauses before the killing, adding a period before "she kills him" to draw out this moment where the power finally clicks. And now that this deed has been done, now that the lightning has been released, these young women will slowly lose touch with what made them so strong in the first place: their humanity.

Alderman explores the early connections between the girls through Allie's reconstruction of her identity as Mother Eve, as she acts as a healing figure through whom the other girls discover their powers. Allie escapes the Montgomery-Taylor's boarding home, and wanders until she reaches a convent in South Carolina, where she leads a group of girls to develop a sort of cult around her new identity, Mother Eve, a glimpse into the beginnings of the new power structures that she will work to create globally later on in the work. Alderman establishes that the community of girls who seek refuge at the convent are "highly strung... cooped up together for months and in fear of their lives" a dynamic which Allie recognizes from the standpoint of bolstering her

religious alter-ego Mother Eve (Alderman, 83). Allie quickly picks out one of the weakest girls in the convent, Luanne, who suffers from frequent seizures, and cures her using her powers following one of the Sisters of the convent shoving her and triggering an episode. Alderman describes the moments leading up to the healing, there is a lightning storm gathering on the horizon, and the girls feel an excitement from it “there’s something exciting about the storm, something that makes you want to join in...” which frustrates Sister Veronica, who punishes the girls for using their abilities during the storm (Alderman, 84). Luanne steps in to defend Susanne from Sister Veronica, but triggers an episode of seizures which Allie then steps in to cure her of. Luanne’s sacrifice, and her insistence that Susanne “didn’t mean it” when she shocked Sister Veronica, reflects an understanding which the girls hold for the meaning of the power and their lack of ability to control it, an understanding which the older women of the convent do not have.

The sisterhood and bonds between these adolescents, who have suffered similar trauma, and share the same fears which Allie had, allows for Allie to step in as their leader and bring them to a new understanding of those abilities. Allie, who is now calling herself Eve, utilizes her abilities to “feel the electricity inside Luanne’s body,” and track where it has been blocked at the base of her skull, “Allie cradles Luanne’s head in her palm, puts her little finger in the notch at the base of the skull, reaches out with a fine tendril of power and flicks at it,” and to everyone’s astonishment “Luanne opens her eyes. Her body stops convulsing,” and Mother Eve is born (Alderman, 85). Allie is able to pinpoint the source of Luanne’s ailments using her powers, and is able to cure the girl by feeling the electricity within her body, a sign of the intimacy and connection which these powers allow the girls to have with each other.

On the other hand, the power at this time begins to alienate the girls from one another, and from the older women at the convent on the basis of strength and possession of power. When Allie cures Luanne, and continues to be a leading figure for the girls at the convent, they feel seen and heard, and their faith in her divinity grows. Allie continues to heal and preach as Mother Eve, and as she garners a following the fissures in her leadership of this community of girls begins to grow, when she is challenged by a girl who says that they “can’t stay here forever... what will happen when they come with the police?” Allie threatens her: “you will be damned for your doubt. God will not forget that you did not trust her in this hour of triumph... The girl is thrown out of the compound by nightfall.” (Alderman, 93). Allie, urged by the voice which tells her there will be a soldier, allows the girl to be punished for her lack of faith in their movement, and leaves no room for doubt in this new religion which she is working to establish. This is where Alderman reveals that the sisterhood they form is conditional. There are limits to Mother Eve’s message, but Allie leaves no room for doubt in her abilities, and places full faith in the appearance of her new soldier promised by the voice.

This promised soldier is Roxy, who decides to visit the convent after she kills Primrose to shake the trail of suspicion off her, and in the process she and Allie form a friendship unlike any other friendship reflected in the work, one which is based in mutual respect and understanding, and represents the purest form of connection. Even before the two had met, Roxy felt that she should see Mother Eve. When her father is sending her away to divert the trail of suspicion of Primrose’s death away from her, Roxy passes up the opportunity to stay with her family in Israel, or with “her mum’s family” and instead decides to go to America. Roxy had an instinct, and “had already decided where she

wanted to go,” Alderman utilizes this instinct as a means of connecting Allie and Roxy before they had even known each other (Alderman, 110). This connection is also mentioned when Allie senses Roxy’s arrival: “There’s a girl on the beach at high tide, lighting up the sea with her hands...” the other girls can feel her power “She must be half a mile away, but they can smell it from the clifftop.” (Alderman, 109). Roxy is introduced as a figure of salvation, as someone who Allie feels a connection to and a respect towards long before her arrival at the convent, giving more depth of purpose to the sisterhood which forms between the two. When Roxy arrives at the convent, Allie feels an immediate connection to her, admitting that “For the first time in a long while she has the urge to tell this woman her real name” (Alderman, 111). Alderman also grounds their relationship in the emergence of the Power. The two bond over a mutual understanding that the world is about to change, Roxy admires Eve for her ability to think of what it means “for the future” while Allie admires Roxy for the raw power she possesses “as limitless as the ocean” (Alderman, 113). The two initially find mutual value in the strengths which the power brings them. While Allie never reveals her true identity to Roxy, she does begin to open up to the girl about a past Alderman had not previously revealed in the work.

Roxy’s time at the convent also offers glimpses into the nature of Mother Eve’s teachings, which center around the ideas of female friendship and mutual empowerment, which Roxy initially feels left out of and alienated by. She describes that Mother Eve is “easy among these women, in a way [she] finds difficult. She’s not used to the company of girls...” implying this is the first time in which Roxy finds herself surrounded by other girls who don’t submit themselves to that same hierarchy she has become accustomed to

in her family (Alderman, 115). Roxy begins to adjust to these relationships, and feels a sense of belonging. For instance, when Allie shows her to her room, Roxy remembers a time when her stepmother Barbara turned her away from her house “She can’t stay here’... and Barbara crossing her arms across her bosom and going, ‘I told you she’s not staying here’” a scene which reveals that Roxy rarely had that kind of nurturing connection to other women or girls in her life (Alderman, 116). As Roxy begins to feel a sense of belonging among these girls, and a sense that she is needed to help Allie become financially independent enough to carry out her vision, the two share details about their lives which neither had told anyone else before.

Allie and Roxy bond through shared traumatic experiences, and a shared understanding that there will be a future in which neither of them will have to suffer those experiences again. Allie and Roxy become close in a short time, they “talk a lot... They find the things they have in common and hold them out at arm’s length to admire the details. The missing mother, the place they’re both used to holding, half in and half out of families...” Roxy remarks that she likes the way that they “all say ‘sister’ here. I never had a sister.’ ‘I didn’t either,’ Says Allie, ‘Always wanted one’... And they leave that there for a bit.” (Alderman, 120). The unspoken mutual understanding of each other’s suffering and loss becomes a binding force in their relationship. Each allows the other to grow in the areas which they need strength in. For Roxy, this is the ability to trust her fellow women, and to strengthen the abilities of her “sisters” at the convent. For Allie, her ability to place some form of trust in a being other than her voice is strengthened, as is evidenced by her sharing that she was “passed around a lot when [she] was a child,” she says, “I never knew my dad, and my mom’s just a scrap of memory... I think I’ve



had twelve homes before this one..." Roxy gives her time and space to express her story, and the depths of the losses she has suffered, realizing that this place is a "house which is a home, more than a home" for the girls who live here (Alderman, 121).

Allie's ability to open up in this scene in previously unexplored ways is a major turning point in her ability to lead. She even notes that Roxy's presence has somehow made the voice go quiet: "The voice... has been quiet these past few days. Quieter than she remembers it being in years... knowing that Roxy's being here and she could kill anyone stone dead; something about that has made it all go quiet," (Alderman, 121). Allie very clearly feels a semblance of protection and comfort which she has sought for some time, and she finds it in the form of Roxy. Her past and her emotions are validated by a girl she holds a great respect towards, which further strengthens her purpose with starting this movement at the convent.

Meanwhile, the divides between various power structures within the convent are widening, revealing that the power is creating rifts between sisterhoods. There is an especially prevalent disconnect between the women working at the convent and the girls who are living there, as the power is not a connection which the older generation of women at the convent can hope to understand. Initially, Allie takes comfort in knowing that Sister Maria Ignacia sees the good in her: "She has dark skin like Allie herself, and soft brown eyes..." (Alderman, 46). However, Allie quickly learns that she will not be able to remain at the convent forever: "They never want you to stay forever. They always say they love you but they never want you to stay," (Alderman, 46). Allie's reflection on this issue reveals that the women at the convent will pose an obstacle to her ability to find safety and permanence here, as is evidenced in characters like Sister Veronica, who takes

issue with Sister Maria Ignacia's pity and willingness to help the girls: "You would see the good in the face of Satan himself if he arrived at your door... Younger girls awaken it in older women. This is the Devil working in the world..." (Alderman, 49).

Alderman sets up a dynamic in which the older women fear that which they do not understand, and those who were supposed to offer protection towards Allie and her fellow girls are now becoming a threat to that safety. It is later mentioned that "Sister Veronica has already had one girl thrown out who would not stop fighting on the convent grounds. The other nuns have conceded this to her; she can pick and choose those in whom she detects the devil working," (Alderman, 84). Allie has a lack of agency in this scenario until she is able to display her healing powers and earn back the faith of the nuns that she is divinely influenced, thus allowing her to manipulate the bonds of sisterhood and religion to her favor and remain in safety. When Roxy arrives, she is able to utilize her connections in the criminal underworld to establish offshore banking accounts for the sake of Allie's ensured safety at the convent, thus rendering the protection of the nuns useless to her. Once the nuns have worn out their use of protection, and Allie and Roxy are secure in their financial independence, and secure in Roxy's ability to use the power, they can entirely eliminate the need for the nuns, and the threats which they pose to the safety of the girls at the convent. There is no longer any uncertainty about their safety, so long as Roxy is there. The nuns are ejected by the girls, who have grown powerful under Allie and Roxy, and a new era of control at the convent is ushered in.

The convent becomes the location of a standoff between Allie's religious order and the police, which results in the first major stand against the patriarchy in the western hemisphere. The event has resounding impacts across the globe, and helps to solidify

Mother Eve as a predominant figure in the establishment of a new world order. When the police arrive to evict them from the premises, Roxy uses her power to “send a bolt through the water, and each of the police officers starts and bucks and topples to the ground... It had to be only one woman doing it... A soldier had to come” (Alderman, 126). Alderman reiterates through Allie’s narrative lens that Roxy was divinely sent, and the events which are unfolding were always meant to happen, that Roxy is her “soldier” promised by the voice, and her faith to the cause would be unwavering. Allie then begins to preach while a fellow convent girl films her: “‘God loves all of us,’ she says, ‘and She wants us to know that She has changed Her garment merely. She is beyond female and male, She is beyond human understanding... God has returned to earth to teach you in the form of this new power,’” (Alderman, 127).

The message is carried far beyond the convent, Allie and Roxy begin to receive requests for prayers, requests for help, and their power and control grows in the strength of their sisterhood. While Allie remains adamant that she must “try to help” while Roxy reminds her that she cannot help them all, still when a girl named Mez comes to the convent to ask for help freeing her mother from prison after she’s been badly injured, the two agree. The sequence of events which follows is one in a series of global displays of this shift in power: “There are sixty women who walk down the street together toward the police station... There are more women arriving every minute. There are maybe two hundred and fifty here now,” the confrontation ends without violence (Alderman, 129). This event in the novel marks a major shift in the power dynamics of the organization, which has new chapters “springing up across the country, around the world” and Allie sees this as a sign that her work truly is divine, and that she “is here to look after the

women. God has appointed her to that role..." she begs Roxy to stay with her, to help her protect what she is building, but the two have their own paths to follow, and they part in peace (Alderman, 132). Around the world, the power structures begin to shift, and reflect this newfound strength in sisterhood that will influence change.

With the awakening of this power comes a great deal of violent upheaval, as women in societies like Delhi take back agency in patriarchal societies which had oppressed them for centuries revealing a darker side to the sisterhoods which form in the emergence of the power. Institutions of the patriarchal society in Delhi included a lack of women's rights to leave their homes without a male figure present, as well as practices of sexual slavery and abuse which were overturned violently with the emergence of the power. As forces of male resistance had begun to take action, the women adopted the goddess Kali as their patron: "Terror is her name and death is her breathing in and out. Her arrival in this world has been long expected" (Alderman, 146). For these women to adopt Kali as their symbol of revolution signifies that sisterhood is not always founded in non-violent practices, that women can reflect strength in ways that are harmful. As opposed to the convent in South Carolina, and the satellite organizations which arose from Mother Eve's peaceful demonstration at the police station, the women who are revolting in Delhi are clear in their intents to completely overturn society as they knew it: "Now they [the men] will know... that they are the ones who should not walk out of their houses alone at night. They are the ones who should be afraid," (Alderman, 148). The striking contrast between the demonstration in the United States and the demonstrations in Delhi reveal the range of feminine power which is at play in this new society. The commonality of their cause, to fight against oppressive patriarchal regimes, unites women

in their newfound powers, however as women slowly erase the threats that men once posed, the foundations of those connections dissolve.

One of the western hemisphere's responses to the development of the power is the creation of a military group called NorthStar. NorthStar began as an organization to help young women understand their powers, before it developed into a military operation. The adolescent girls pick upon the weakest in their respective orders, leaving behind those who they don't deem to be useful to the cause, and creating rifts between relationships that were once so strong. The NorthStar camps are initially designed as a means of helping young women by "teach girls how to use their powers more effectively...more safely..." including Jocelyn, a young American girl who has had difficulty with her powers before (Alderman, 97). When these camps become more developed later on down the line, we see that girls as young as fifteen are taking part in para-military operations. Jocelyn's perspective in the novel offers a glimpse into what life is like among these other adolescent girls, who "laugh at her quite often" for her lack of power and control, something which is echoed throughout the book as young girls invent new terminology to mock other women for a lack of power (Alderman, 231). When an attack occurs at one of these camps, and the young women must defend themselves from a "terrorist incursion" they still find time to mock Jocelyn for her lack of usefulness in the situation: "Goddamn pzit. You can't do it can you?" The boy is cowering on the floor. She doesn't need to do it; no one needs to do it now." (Alderman, 233). Alderman uses Jocelyn's lack of violence, and hesitation to harm the boy as a juxtaposition against the violence we see in the other girls at the camp, who have been taught that their strengths lie in their ability to utilize their powers for NorthStar, as is evidenced later when Jocelyn

remembers her trainer telling her: “She’s emotional... Her trainer’s told her to watch out for that... Hormones and electrolytes mess with everything.” (Alderman, 234). Jocelyn loses control of herself because the other girls at the camp push her to become violent, and she winds up taking the boy’s life. This scene is a reflection of the fissures which are beginning to form in the larger society, women, despite being given power, have eradicated their common threat, and now must defend their control. The sisterhoods which form at these camps crumble beneath the threat that their control will be taken away from them. Alyson Miller examines the dynamics between women as being damaged by perceived notions of imperfection in her work “Day of the Girls: Reading Gender, Power and Violence in Naomi Alderman’s *The Power*”. Miller analyzes the deviations from perceived “normality” in power levels, and the ways Jos’s treatment can translate to possible homophobia: “Jos, for example, is framed as experiencing a disjuncture of self, struggling with manic highs and lows, unable to properly control or utilize the power, and needing intervention to help control the fluctuations of the skein...” (Miller, 428). Her lack of control, combined with her description as queer-coded is something Miller states “evokes a rhetoric of biological fault, an error of neurological wiring that might be rectified via the regime of Margot’s NorthStar training camps, a “force for good” designed to train and regulate the use of the power in young girls” (Miller, 428). To extend Miller’s argument on the villainization of queer or othered characters in the text to the argument on sisterhood, the lack of acceptance for Jos’s condition, and force for her conform to an identity which does not accurately reflect her sense of self is an erasure of fundamental acts of empathy. This in turn cultivates mistrust and lack of control. This mistrust, and this notion of cutting out the weakest amongst

them carries greater weight in society, as these same fissures begin to appear in the relationships of the most powerful women in the world. Allie and Roxy are not spared from the fallout.

The women responsible for the uprisings in Moldova eventually succeed in the creation of a woman led nation called Bessapara, headed by Tatiana Moskalev, who swiftly introduces legislation which actively oppresses men living within the country. Her legislation actively echoes the same oppressive structures which the women of Delhi were protesting against. Moskalev brings Mother Eve in as a consulting religious figurehead, and utilizes NorthStar as a privately funded military to defend against their enemies in North Moldova. During the discussion about the NorthStar agreement, Jocelyn consults Mother Eve about her troubles with the power, “Allie is quite familiar with trouble that is too deep to be spoken. She knows it happens in any house, however high,” and Allie wishes to help Jocelyn (Alderman, 253). Allie’s motivation still lies with the salvation and safety of all women, her intentions are pure, and her presence in Bessapara is in pursuit of succeeding in bringing safety to the world. When she watches Moskalev force a man to lick glass up off the floor she is repulsed, but the voice reminds her that “Anything you say will diminish your power here” rendering Allie silent as she watches the man become a subject of feminine cruelty and abuse of power (Alderman, 257). Roxy, too, is in attendance at this gala, and witnesses the same event occur, prior to this moment she has tracked down and injured a group of women who assaulted her step brother, she is no stranger to the abuse of power displayed by the president of Bessapara. Roxy has been busy making herself a kingpin, smuggling a skein enhancing drug called Glitter across the borders of North Moldova has made her quite powerful in these circles,

and her friendship to Allie remains strong. Allie confides in Roxy that Moskalev “will soon have outlived her usefulness,” and the two reminisce about their time at the convent before Allie suggests that perhaps Roxy would make a better leader (Alderman, 260). When Allie and Roxy meet again at this gala the two no longer have the connection they once did. Roxy is being corrupted by the power which she seeks in her criminal empire, while Allie seeks to overthrow Moskalev to ensure her own safety. Both show signs that their powers are corrupting them, which impedes the bond of sisterhood they once had.

Allie’s voice remains as a consistent influence over her views of Roxy, and begins to sow seeds of doubt in the connection she’d had with her following the girl’s disappearance. Where Allie’s voice had once been rendered silent by Roxy’s presence, it now fuels Allie’s insecurities in her absence. Since her rise to power as an evangelical icon, the voice frequently reminds Allie that she must maintain certain connections within her spheres of global power, once, when Moskalev asked of her to bless the war they were about to start with Maldiva, the voice reminds her “I thought you wanted to be safe... I told you that you couldn’t get there from here...” thus prompting Allie to question the voice “Whose side are you on, anyway?” a question which the voice refuses to answer, as it can no longer promise her what she sought (Alderman, 211). Still the voice acts quickly to re-instill itself as Allie’s only source of truth and comfort in this world as a means of carrying out its own agenda, saying that it “can’t make any promises” to keep Roxy safe, and that Allie must “Shut off this part of herself... You do not need her. You will live... The only way to be safe is to own the place,” (Alderman, 282). If Roxy cannot help her to achieve that agenda which the voice has been drilling into Allie since day one, then she is worthless to her, just as the nuns at the convent were,



and just as Tatiana Moskalev was. Allie and Roxy both view each other as pawns in their individual plots for control and domination. When Roxy goes missing, and the source of her power is stolen, Allie and Roxy both must reassess their individual places in the world they helped to create. In this moment, Allie has given up on Roxy at the suggestion of the voice, leaving her without a semblance of humanity towards the one woman who she ever had trust in, and creating irreversible damage with this decision to abandon both Roxy and Tatiana, and to take Bessapara for herself.

Roxy, by this point in the narrative, has lost her powers after being attacked, and having her skein removed forcefully, which allows for her to form connections without the use of violence or power seeking. Roxy takes refuge with a cult surviving in the woods along the Moldovan border, these women have created a cult which involves the ritualistic sacrifice of men, a sacrifice which is witnessed by a reporter called Tunde as he has been gathering information in the region. Tunde watches the ceremony, and sees in their leader “all the women who had nearly killed him... She was Enuma and she was Nina and she was the woman on the roof in Delhi and she was his sister Temi and she was Noor and she was Tatiana Moskalev... he longed to kneel at her feet... he wanted to know who won even at his own cost, he wanted the final scene... And when she killed him it was ecstasy” (Alderman, 302). Tunde’s interpretation of this woman and her power is a reflection of what masculinity has been reduced to, he recognizes a strength that he would simply give himself over to, and to witness such a feat of strength is intoxicating to him. He conflates this ritual with the culmination of his own life, and with femininity, something cruel yet beautiful. Roxy does not share this outlook, she sees them for what they are, a cult, “I don’t bother them, they don’t bother me,” she simply takes

refuge among them so she may heal, eventually she bargain's for Tunde's life with Glitter, and he notes that the women are "respectful and a little frightened of her" which comes to his aid at the camp (Alderman, 308). The difference in perception of the cult between Roxy and Tunde reflects just how desensitized Roxy has become towards these events. Roxy does not take their sisterhood for granted, but she also does not put much stock into these relationships as she previously would have. Protection and strength, which once ruled her decision making process, do not seem to matter now that the source of her power has been taken from her. There is no longer an ulterior motive for her connections to these women as there had been with Eve or Tatiana. There is more humanity behind these interactions than Roxy has reflected in her past relationships.

We see that Roxy and Tunde form a connection which does not involve any gender binary or stereotypes: "Their bodies have been rewritten by suffering. They have no fight left. They cannot, in that moment, tell which of them is supposed to be which. They are ready to begin." (Alderman, 324). Roxy and Tunde have lost so much, that this connection becomes one that is founded in a sincere affection, one without violence or struggle. They see each other for who they are, without the power, and without the fear they had been taught to have for each other. Alderman demonstrates here what has been absent in the sisterhoods surrounding the power, which is respect and understanding, rather than fear and control. Her decision to reflect that sense of humanity in a relationship which does not conform to gender binaries or stereotypes reveals a great deal about the state of sisterhood, and relationships as a whole.

As the world descends into chaos, and as the relationships which Allie, Tatiana and Jocelyn have crumble around them due to their own paranoia and power seeking,

Roxy remains unscathed by any emotional fallout. Alderman explores through the course of *The Power* that when women are given a taste of that control, and base their relationships on the foundations of violence and power seeking, they are still set up for failure by those very same patriarchal values which they sought to destroy. There is no way to call back the lightning once it has been pent up for centuries, and then suddenly released. There is no way to avoid the culmination of that bitterness which has built up under oppressive patriarchal regimes, but there is a way to curb its release. In the formation of stable relationships founded in mutual trust and respect, characters are able to survive.

## CONCLUSION

The utilization of the genre of speculative fiction acts as a means of subverting and rewriting the societies which have oppressed women for centuries. In participating in this use of genre, female writers are engaging in an act of sisterhood through speculation. It becomes especially important to engage in this sisterhood in modern society as the issues which have haunted feminists persist in our culture.

Survival in this instance, and in many others, is dependent upon the relationships which women form within these oppressive and reductive circumstances. These circumstances are not unheard of, and have been discussed in the form of speculative fictitious universes which highlight the importance of individual relationships between oppressed groups. In drawing attention to the importance of female relationships within these works of fiction, and in analyzing the ways which interpersonal relationships allow for survival, our real world relationships and scenarios may be better understood. The body of feminist speculative fiction is expansive, and is being built upon even now as issues in feminist politics continue to arise. More works which are geared towards young adult audiences, and the emergence of online feminist cultures with the fourth wave of feminism have opened these conversations to other groups of women and adolescents.

The works which I have discussed in this thesis each harken back to this idea that sisterhood can and should be the basis for effecting change in society at large. Butler's *Kindred* sees the tragic loss of a sisterhood due to the constraints of a racist patriarchal society, and reflects the necessity of sustained relationships between women. Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* shows the lasting influence of a meaningful friendship between women, and how this friendship gives strength to a woman who has been isolated by a dystopian

regime. Alderman's *The Power* examines how the corruption of a patriarchal society continues to poison female friendships even when women are in control. Alderman seems to hint towards the notion that the divisions which we create by seeking power, or ostracizing those who we deem as other, only perpetuate cycles of oppression and violence. In forming connections based in healing and not violence, not only sisterhood, but humanity, stands a chance at surviving.

Most recently in western feminist politics the Roe V. Wade decision faces threats of being overturned, which would result in the loss of women's rights to receive abortions in many states. This decision would also have lasting impacts on future decisions in the United States, and upon the lives of individual women seeking safe abortion practices. However, in these dire circumstances it has become apparent that the importance of sisterhood is as relevant as ever. Women have banded together to protest the decision, attending rallies, and sharing information online to ensure that their fellow women will have the knowledge and resources to protect their bodily autonomy. It becomes clear at this moment in time that the connections we form in combatting these oppressive cycles are key to our survival.

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