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Feminist Utopias and Questions of Liberty: Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* as Critique of Second Wave Feminism

Published in 1985, a year after the date made infamous by George Orwell’s novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* appeared during a period of heightened interest in utopian literature, particularly feminist utopias.¹ With *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood seemingly reworks the dystopian vision of Orwell’s classic tale to fit an American Puritan ethic and, indeed, she has described the novel as ‘a cognate of *A Clockwork Orange*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’ (Atwood 1986). Each of these novels tackles its own conception of potential dystopia, and I will argue that Atwood focuses on the history of second wave feminism, addressing the limiting and prescriptive nature of its utopian beginnings and, by creating an analogy to Christian fundamentalism, pointing to unacceptable losses of intellectual liberty.

¹ For example, in 1984, vol. 7 of *Women’s Studies International Forum* was a special issue entitled ‘Oh Well, Orwell—Big Sister Is Watching Herself: Feminist Science Fiction in 1984’, and Erin McKenna provides the following list of texts.
I will support this reading of the text by demonstrating Atwood’s appropriation of the two concepts of liberty formulated by Isaiah Berlin. The juxtaposition of themes of liberalism, feminism and totalitarianism, I will argue, results in a text that consciously holds up feminism to the same lens through which Orwell viewed Soviet Russia.

Against a backdrop of postmodernist debate, the mid-1980s became a period of evaluation and reinvention for feminism, as a second generation of feminists inherited the second wave. The Handmaid’s Tale uses this moment of transition to evaluate the motives and means of what was becoming an increasingly theorized feminism. By juxtaposing flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism with current descriptions of Gilead’s totalitarianism, each informs the other so that The Handmaid’s Tale depicts a dystopian society that has unconsciously and paradoxically met certain feminist demands.

Defining Utopias

In The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood’s view of utopia is similar to that given in Jean-François Lyotard’s influential 1986 essay, ‘Defining the Postmodern’, which connects utopia to totalitarianism. Lyotard suggests that ‘one can note a sort of decay in the confidence placed by the two last centuries in the idea of progress’ and attributes this to the fact that ‘neither economic nor political liberalism, nor the various Marxisms, emerge from the sanguinary last two centuries free from the suspicion of crimes against mankind’ (Lyotard 1986:6). Krishnan Kumar follows this same reasoning when he asks: ‘how could utopia stand up in the face of Nazism, Stalinism, genocide, mass unemployment and a second world war?’ (Kumar 1987:381). Kumar, like Lyotard, views utopia negatively, arguing that ‘the very announcement of utopia has almost immediately provoked the mocking, contrary echo of anti-utopia’ (Kumar 1987:99/100). Lucy Sargisson describes Kumar’s understanding of the utopia—‘finite and perfectible and [offering] a blueprint for the ideal polity’—as too narrow, and excluding, for example, ‘contemporary feminist utopias that broaden the conception of the political to include sexual relations and child rearing’ (Sargisson 2000:8). However, following Lyotard’s and Kumar’s understanding, utopianism becomes increasingly inimical to a postmodern worldview. To a certain extent, postmodernism can be understood to have grown out of, or at least alongside, anti-utopianism: a rejection of the belief in a perfectible and ultimate society unites both projects.
Tom Moylan and Erin McKenna both qualify Lyotard’s analysis by proposing alternative models capable of overcoming utopia’s propensity to degenerate into anti-utopianism. Moylan describes what he calls a ‘critical utopia’, which envisions a better, but unsettled or ambiguous society in which the possibility of further improvement is accepted; these texts, ‘while preserving the utopian impulse and the utopian form, [destroy] both the anti-utopian rejection and the utopian compromises that had come to haunt the utopian tradition’ (Moylan 2000:83). A critical utopia offers a critique of both the socio-political situation and the utopian solution. McKenna’s reconfiguration of utopia, like Moylan’s, is based on a dynamic rather than a static utopian model, which she calls a ‘process model of utopia’ (McKenna 2001:3). McKenna argues that utopianism can incorporate pluralism and diversity, instead of universalism and absolutism; rather than seek perfection, utopia must continually move towards a more desirable future. In this way, she suggests, ‘utopia can become an ongoing task rather than a resting place’ (3), and so avoid the problems of static totalitarian visions.

Following Moylan’s understanding, *The Handmaid’s Tale* appears to be a critical utopia: Atwood criticizes liberal America, but also exposes the tyranny of Gilead’s utopianism. However, the critical utopia situates the author within the utopian vision, as an insider—Moylan states: “[critical utopias] reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (Moylan 1986:10)—whereas, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, both Atwood and the reader are situated, with the handmaid Offred, as an alien within Gilead. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, instead, can be better categorized as a critical dystopia. According to Moylan, the dystopia ‘opens in the midst’ of a terrible ‘elsewhere’—whereas Sargisson, in contrast, describes the utopian convention of ‘the visitor’ who ‘visits another world and views it from a position of critical estrangement’ (Sargisson 2000:8)—and then focuses on a single alienated protagonist. Crucially, ‘in some form, a utopian horizon, or at the very least a scrap of hope, appears within the militant dystopia’. Where the utopia (the good place that is no place) and the anti-utopia (the absolute denial and negation of utopia) are in direct political opposition, the dystopia ‘negotiates the continuum’ between the two extremes (Moylan 2000:xiii). Moylan refers to Raffaella Baccolini, who further suggests that critical dystopias ‘reject the more conservative dystopian tendency to settle for the anti-utopian closure by setting up “open endings” that resist that closure and maintain “the utopian impulse within the work”’ (Moylan 2000:189). Accordingly, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, while critical of both the extraordinary utopian project and the socio-political norm, ends ambiguously with Offred’s words, ‘whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing’
(Atwood 1985:307), and so provides a utopian element of hope for the future.

The Handmaid’s Tale, with its metafictional narrator, has postmodern leanings; in 1988 Linda Hutcheon described it as ‘perhaps Atwood’s most postmodern novel to date’ (Hutcheon 1988:156). This postmodernism, following Lyotard, should preclude utopianism, yet Atwood’s denunciation of utopia is limited: just as the feminist movement, despite its increasing postmodernism, is arguably inseparable from its utopian beginnings, so Offred survives confinement by envisioning a utopian other place to which she might escape. This ‘other place’ is her pre-Gilead past, which accords with Kumar’s view that, ‘in anti-utopia, ordinary life can itself become utopia, as remote and longed-for as utopia appears to its votaries’ (Kumar 1987:103). Offred fantasizes about family life: ‘lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly’ (Atwood 1985:154). She craves these glimpses of normality as others crave the perfect utopian society. They provide the utopian space within Atwood’s critical dystopia, and they also point to the contradictory impulse of dystopia simultaneously to expose and to desire the myth of human perfectibility: a tension that is also at the heart of the essentialism debates of second wave feminism.

Concepts of Liberty

Utopia is permeated by questions of liberty and autonomy, as is The Handmaid’s Tale. In the novel’s concluding ‘Historical Notes’, the speaker comments: ‘there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis’ (Atwood 1985:319). In this, postmodernism and utopia share common ground. According to Northrop Frye, the utopian writer uncovers the significant elements of his or her society, while ‘the utopia itself shows what society would be like if those elements were fully developed’ (Frye 1973:26). The anti-utopia also does this. Whereas the Rousseauesque utopia assumes natural virtues that would realize a perfect society if enabled, the anti-utopia mistrusts human nature and ‘presents the same kind of goal in terms of slavery, tyranny, or anarchy’ (Frye 1973:28). For the anti-utopian or dystopian, the individual has the right to protect themselves from state interference, and the utopian goal is, in itself, an encroachment on individual liberties: a universalistic discourse that encourages totalitarianism.

Liberty has always defined feminist politics, but it became increasingly important when feminist demands moved from equal rights to equal recognition. This shift came with anti-essentialist politics, and Linda
Alcoff describes an emerging argument that ‘woman is a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are “objectively identifiable”’ (de Lauretis 1986:119). When woman is a universal category, feminism can make specific demands for universal equality. Once gender division is deconstructed, an identity politics emerges in which each individual demands recognition and respect. Judith Butler argues that it is ‘impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained’ (Butler 1997:278). For postmodernists and anti-essentialists, gender categories are culturally situated, restrictive labels that do not recognize the individual. In Atwood’s novel, each of the characters is categorized in a dehumanizing and limiting manner. Social status is colour-coded, and the women of Offred’s household are easily inventoried: ‘One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green . . . ’ (Atwood 1985:97). Like the patronymic that belongs, not to the handmaid herself, but to the post she holds, the categories diminish the individuals by reducing them to the group. Offred considers the loss of her name: ‘I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter’ (94). In this, Atwood leans towards a politics of recognition, which is in contradiction to the liberal notion of blind justice.

In examining 1970s feminist utopianism, Atwood ‘shows what society would be like if those elements were fully developed’. When asked if there are some good things about Gilead, she replied: ‘Yes. Women aren’t whistled at on the street, men don’t come climbing in the window in the middle of the night. Women are “protected.”’ Sardonically speaking, in totalitarian countries the streets are much safer for the most part (Atwood 1986). In her previous novel, Bodily Harm, a number of men had climbed through women’s windows; it became a motif for the fear and vulnerability of women under patriarchy. Feminist writers responded to such fears by creating utopian spaces in which the men were physically prevented from violence. According to Marlene Barr: ‘the characters in speculative fiction’s female communities would share the following reaction: . . . “Is this world unsafe for women? If so, then declare a curfew and keep the men indoors”’ (Barr 1987:5). In The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood examines the dystopian fruition of this particularly repressive utopian ideal. At the Red Centre, where the handmaids are indoctrinated, they are shown old clips of sadistic pornography: ‘Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then’ (Atwood 1985:128). In Gilead, there is no pornography and no objectifying images
of women; the society has realized a feminist goal. Offred recalls attending a burning of pornographic books with her mother in the early 1970s: ‘Their faces were happy, ecstatic almost’ (48). Later this scene is recalled as the Commander offers her an illicit copy of *Vogue*: ‘But these were supposed to have been burned, I said. There were house-to-house searches, bonfires . . .’ (166). The repetition subtly implicates Offred’s mother and her friends in the deeds of the Gileadean society. The difference between the two acts of censorship, it is implied, is simply one of degree. At this point, Atwood questions the validity of a political or philosophical system that would limit freedom in the pursuit of its goals. Similarly, Offred remembers an argument with her lesbian friend Moira:

I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn’t just ignore them (181).

In time, Moira comes to witness the realization of her utopia, first at the all-female Red Centre, in which the supervision and indoctrination is undertaken by ‘Aunts’, and later at Jezebel’s, the government brothel patrolled by Aunts in which Moira is forced to work. In a weak attempt to comfort the distressed Offred, Moira tells her: ‘Anyway, look at it this way: it’s not so bad, there’s lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it’ (261). In fact, much of Aunt Lydia’s language ironically echoes the slogans of early utopian feminism:

For the women that come after, Aunt Lydia said, it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together . . . There can be bonds of real affection . . . Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together . . . (171–2).

With this vision, she apes the feminist project of communal living and shared labour that was propagated by Marxist feminists such as Shulamith Firestone. The anti-utopia or dystopia, Atwood demonstrates, realizes utopian ends by unexpected means.

Aunt Lydia best articulates this partial triumph of feminist demands. Although politicized women like Offred’s mother are now officially designated ‘Unwomen’, Aunt Lydia grudgingly admits: ‘We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today’ (128). The Unwomen in the film shown to the handmaids hold banners proclaiming ‘TAKE BACK THE NIGHT’ (129). This movement was particularly strong in Canada
in the 1970s and 1980s. A 1982 publication by the Women’s Press describes some of the movement’s activities:

In Toronto, Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) demonstrated at Metro and City executive committee meetings to demand that the film *Snuff* be banned . . . And all over North America similar groups have demonstrated to ‘take back the night’ from the merchants of sexual ghoulishness, repeatedly making the connection between porn and all other violence done women . . . (Kotash 1982:49–50).

Offred remembers the reality of living in this period: ‘I never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads. Women were not protected then’ (Atwood 1985:34). Gileadean society successfully takes back the night from the pornographers and abusers. Even the junior government guards are not allowed sexual relations until they achieve seniority. This repression constitutes a new liberty for the women who previously suffered the fear of sexual abuse. Offred feels the impotent looks of the guards and savours their frustration: ‘I enjoy the power’ (32), she admits. But the enjoyment is minimal because, in restricting male liberty, the women have not achieved liberation. Or, to consider an alternative perspective: ‘There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it’ (34).

With these words, Atwood’s novel coincides almost perfectly with the thesis Isaiah Berlin presents in ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, first given as a lecture in 1958. In the essay, Berlin introduces the notion of ‘freedom from and freedom to’, and describes it, rather confusingly, in terms of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ freedom. A negative notion of freedom agrees that ‘I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no human being interferes with my activity’ (Berlin 1958:7). In desiring a positive notion of freedom, however, ‘I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind’ (16). Although initially indistinct, the essential difference in these two states lies in the extent to which the desire to ‘live and let live’ becomes the ‘desire to be governed by myself, or at any rate to participate in the process by which my life is to be controlled . . .’ (15). These desires are fundamentally different:

So different is it, indeed, as to have led in the end to the great clash of ideologies that dominates our world. For it is this—the ‘positive’ concept of liberty: not freedom from but freedom to—which the
adherents of the ‘negative’ notion represent as being, at times, no
better than a specious disguise for brutal tyranny (16).

The confusion arises with the realization that Berlin uses ‘positive
freedom’ to describe the ideology that he believes to be more prone to
authoritarianism. It is the ideology of the individual who seeks to create his
or her own concept of society—or to make a space for him/herself within
an existing system—and, in doing so, necessarily interferes with the social
reality of other individuals. It is the ideology from which utopianism is
more likely to spring. Further confusion arises when applying this
distinction to The Handmaid’s Tale, because Aunt Lydia reverses Berlin’s
categorization. Her idea of ‘freedom to’ is one of ungoverned liberal
hedonism that results in immoral liberties, whereas Berlin directs this
phrase towards ‘positive freedom’: the stance taken by the political
architects of Gilead. Conversely, the ‘freedom from’ that she advocates to
the handmaids as a lesser but more secure form of liberty, is, for Berlin, the
description of liberalism: freedom from governmental interference.

In The Handmaid’s Tale, Aunt Lydia and Offred’s mother, despite
massive differences in their political convictions, both advocate a
philosophy of positive freedom. The societies that they envision—
fundamental Christian and radical feminist—both necessitate a form of
governance that prescribes for its subjects. Moira, however, is an advocate
of negative freedom. Her activities, while strictly feminist and super-
ficially close to those of Offred’s mother, involve demands for freedom of
action but are lacking the prescriptive element of the earlier feminists.
The burning of books symbolizes this shift: the attempt by Offred’s
mother to censor and destroy sexualized images of women later becomes,
with Moira, a postmodern impulse to subvert and defuse the porno-
graphic image, as she organizes ‘an underwhore party’: ‘You know, like
Tupperware, only with underwear. Tart’s stuff’ (Atwood 1985:66).

However, with her embrace of lesbianism, Moira’s feminism reverts to
positive freedom as she charges Offred with perpetuating patriarchy by
entering into a heterosexual relationship. With this, Atwood suggests that
the persistent utopianism of feminism perpetually endangers feminist
liberalism.

Feminism has always been drawn to utopia or, rather, to eutopia (the
good place). In Daphne Patai’s words, recorded in 1983: ‘Feminism, today,
is the most utopian project around. That is, it demands the most radical
and truly revolutionary transformation of society . . .’ (Patai 1983:151).

The feminist utopia is frequently a communitarian project. In novels such
as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland (written in 1915, but published in
its entirety in 1979) and Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time (1976),
matriarchal societies work out a system of politics that actively strive for a
good quality of life, rather than passively assuring individuals’ rights. Lee Cullen Khanna considers this typical of feminist utopias:

Social and political institutions necessary for the maintenance of just hierarchies and the control of the individual crumble in women’s worlds. As part of the ethic of care and the refusal of dualisms, the further concept of affinity with the natural cycle and celebration of change inform feminist utopian thinking. Thus, the worlds depicted in these novels are not static achievements of a perfect order, but dynamic societies where change is not only accepted but respected (Khanna 1984:17).

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood envisions a society in which the institutions that guarantee just hierarchies have crumbled. Women’s affinity with nature is celebrated through reproduction, and the static concept of immutable rights has been opened to change. The utopia hangs on the belief that, given such control, human beings—men *and* women—would not exploit it. The only advantage that feminist utopianists have over their male counterparts, the novel suggests, is that their claims have never been tested.

**Liberals and Communitarians**

In her 1986 book *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, Seyla Benhabib proposes an argument in favour of utopian thinking. Opposing Lyotard’s hypothesis that postmodernism precludes utopianism because it abandons the modernist belief in ‘progress within rationality and freedom’ (Lyotard 1986:6), Benhabib argues that this loss of belief in rational progress actually encourages utopianism because the individual must come to take responsibility for their own destiny. ‘At this point’, says Benhabib,

... a certain anticipatory utopia, a projection of the future as it could be, becomes necessary. Since the lines of development leading from present to future are fundamentally under-determined, the theorist can no longer speak the language of evolution and necessity, but must conceive of him or herself as a participant in the formation of the future (Benhabib 1986:331).

Drucilla Cornell makes a similar argument with reference to feminism: ‘because who we could become in a society in which women were fully recognised as free and equal persons is not yet possible for us to experience, the process of reimagining ourselves does not have an end
point’ (Cornell 1998:186). Utopianism, argues Cornell, necessitates a continual reimagining of an unknowable future state. If this basic postmodern principle of a radically indefinable future is allowed, then social theories of justice such as feminism must struggle to reconcile their utopian project with their concrete beliefs in liberty and justice. Any system that legislates for the individual needs of the ‘concrete other’ puts at risk the unregulated liberty of the ‘generalized other.’

This ‘liberal versus communitarian’ debate is, for Benhabib, at the crux of utopian critique. A liberal theory of justice, as articulated by John Rawls, is blind to difference. It posits a generalized other whose liberty must be protected at all costs. Benhabib’s outline of this view is an extrapolation of Berlin’s notion of negative liberty:

... as long as the public actions of individuals do not interfere with each other, what they need and desire is their business. To want to draw this aspect of a person’s life into public-moral discourse would interfere with their autonomy, i.e., with their right to define the good life as they please as long as this does not impinge on other’s rights to do the same (Benhabib 1986:332).

In the pre-Gileadean era recalled in The Handmaid’s Tale, this liberal doctrine—the foundation of the US Bill of Rights—is common practice. In Aunt Lydia’s understanding of the words, American citizens have ‘freedom to’. Moira’s ‘underwhore party’, which would be unthinkable in Gilead, suggests that under liberalism women were free to explore their sexuality. However, this freedom was exploited out of necessity rather than desire: ‘It’s big in the suburbs, once they start getting age spots they figure they’ve got to beat the competition. The Pornomarts and what have you’ (Atwood 1985:66). Free access to pornography created a commodified sexual environment that compelled women to pursue a liberty they did not desire, and as such was no liberty at all. Conversely, Offred’s right to experience something as mundane as a laundromat—‘my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself’ (34)—was curtailed by one of the unspoken rules known by every woman: ‘Don’t go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night’ (34). Although liberalism defends her right to enter the laundromat, it refuses to enforce her safety because to do so would require proactive measures that would impinge on the rights of her potential attacker, who has yet to commit a crime, to enter the laundromat late at night. And so, despite being theoretically free, in practical terms she is bound.

Critics of liberalism question the value of liberty without purpose or moral worth. In The Handmaid’s Tale, the scene in Jezebel’s tellingly contrasts with the rigidly secure and codified domesticity of Gilead.
Entering the brothel, Offred enters into an excessively hedonistic alternative world of consumption. ‘It’s like walking into the past’ (247), says the Commander who accompanies her. Initially, she is struck by the variety and freedom, experiencing a sense of release: ‘I can stare, here, look around me, there are no white wings to keep me from it. My head, shorn of them, feels curiously light...’ (246). The club defies the restrictions of Gilead: ‘No nicotine-and-alcohol taboos here!’ (250). The women she sees are ‘tropical’ and ‘festive’ in their costumes (246), but the club’s initial gaiety begins to disintegrate: ‘At first glance there’s a cheerfulness to this scene. It’s like a masquerade party... Is there joy in this? There could be, but have they chosen it? You can’t tell by looking’ (247). The symbols of consumerism—the clothes, prostitution, drugs—have become confused with symbols of liberty; ‘freedom of choice’ has become a consumerist slogan. In Jezebel’s, the women can do what they like: ‘it doesn’t matter what sort of vice we get up to’ (262), says Moira. But they are afforded this freedom because they are not free: ‘nobody gets out of here except in a black van’ (255).

In The Illusions of Postmodernism, Terry Eagleton exposes the sympathy between the postmodernist concept of freedom and the rhetoric of the consumer culture. ‘In thus aping the commodity form’, he argues, postmodernism has ‘succeeded in reinforcing the rather more crippling austerities generated by the marketplace’ (Eagleton 1996:28). Eagleton locates the postmodern impulse within the liberal tradition. He suggests that the ‘idea of the autonomous self can also contain ‘a negative notion of liberty as doing your own thing free of external restraint’ (87). Whereas, in traditional liberalism, the liberty of the self was always curbed by respect for the autonomy of others, once we accept the postmodern view that there are no autonomous others, suddenly the self is free to pursue its will without restraint. This results in the aggressive liberal capitalism so closely tied to postmodern consumerism.

Where liberalism guarantees justice, it refuses to legislate for quality of life. Communitarians point to this as its central flaw, and communitarian theorists such as Charles Taylor argue that the liberal principle of blind justice not only fails the minority group—the ‘concrete other”—but actively discriminates against them: ‘...our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence...Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone else in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being’ (Taylor 1994:25). It is this idea of the dialogical self—the self created through the community—that draws communitarianism to postmodernism. Despite their differences, both believe in the acculturated self. The same belief characterizes
Offred’s experience of Gilead. ‘Ordinary, says Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary’ (Atwood 1985:43). Gradually, Offred begins to accept that ‘context is all’ (154). The liberal idea of the autonomous self who works out his or her moral code in isolation and then brings it to bear on his or her society is seriously undermined.

The distance from Taylor’s advocacy of mutual recognition to Offred’s acceptance of totalitarian indoctrination may seem unbridgeable, but they are founded in common principles. The first is a willingness to abandon the refusal to legislate for difference. Taylor argues:

\[
\ldots \text{a society can be organized around a definition of the good life, without this being seen as a deprecation of those who do not personally share this definition. When the nature of the good requires that it be sought in common, this is the reason for its being a matter of public policy (Taylor 1994:59).}
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This immediately encroaches on Rawls’s liberal assertion that ‘each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override’ (Rawls 1972:3–4). Defining and implementing ‘the good life’ risks impinging the liberties of those citizens who do not share the common goal.

Communitarianism, like totalitarianism, also necessitates the loss of an external position from which to regard and critique the encompassing system. If the postmodernism implicit in communitarianism is taken to its logical conclusion, then there can be no ‘view from nowhere’, for everything is necessarily culturally situated, denying the possibility of the liberal ‘veil of ignorance’. However, if there is no way to know your society, except through your society, the individual is left defenceless against any concerted effort to manipulate their reality. Aunt Lydia recognizes this possibility, and anticipates a period when pre-Gilead will only be recalled by the state:

\[
\text{You are a transitional generation... For the ones who come after you, it will be easier.}
\text{They will accept their duties with willing hearts.}
\text{She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way.}
\text{She said: Because they won’t want things they can’t have (Atwood 1985:127).}
\]

By conceding the postmodernist view of the entirely acculturated self, intellectual resistance to the totalitarian regime is placed at risk.
Following Lyotard’s postmodern argument, feminist utopianism cannot avoid the taint of totalitarianism. Drucilla Cornell, however, counters this view of feminists as ‘bad utopians’ by arguing that the reality of liberalism’s promise remains a utopian goal for women: ‘If women were recognized as free and equal persons, our current form of social organization would clearly be shaken up’ (Cornell 1998:181). For Cornell, women must be free to define their equality, and because ‘what is possible cannot be known in advance of social transformation’ (185), principles of justice cannot be static and immutable, but must be open to a shifting and unknowable future. Similarly, Taylor argues for culturally sensitive rights legislation; in support of this, he states that women have ‘internalized a picture of their own inferiority, so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities’ (Taylor 1994:25). The solution, he suggests, requires positive discrimination of a type not allowed for by traditional liberalism.

Atwood recognizes the disadvantages facing minorities within liberalism but, in imagining a dystopia, she explores the dangers of abandoning that tradition. Cultural relativism is parodied in the novel in the figure of Professor Pieixoto, who lectures: ‘...we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific ... Our job is not to censure but to understand’ (Atwood 1985:315). This view is commended by his audience but, by juxtaposing his remote intellectualism with the immediacy of Offred’s ‘I’, Atwood undermines his position, demonstrating how it disregards her suffering. Eagleton accuses postmodernism of the same disregard: ‘It has produced in the same breath an invigorating and a paralysing scepticism, and unseated the sovereignty of Western Man, in theory at least, by means of a full-blooded cultural relativism which is powerless to defend either Western or Eastern Woman against degrading social practices’ (Eagleton 1996:27).

Although feminism was becoming increasingly postmodern in the 1980s, postmodernism required a relinquishing of metanarratives that many feminists continued to struggle with because, in Hutcheon’s words, ‘women must define their subjectivity before they can question it’ (Hutcheon 1988:6). Equally, Offred’s survival depends on her belief in a reality external to her culture, a permanent embodiment of immutable values that cannot be eradicated by a cultural consensus: ‘I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light’ (Atwood 1985:115). This is the only means by which the minority view can exist.
The Handmaid’s Tale gives no easy solutions and, indeed, ends with its protagonist stepping into an unknown fate. This irresolution reflects the position of mid-1980s feminism. In articulating the potential danger of certain directions in which the movement had been heading, the novel can only advise its readers to err on the side of caution, and defend liberty before ideology.

Works Cited

— (1986), Houghton Mifflin promotional material, relating to CBC interview: Margaret Atwood Collection, University of Toronto, Box 149:4.