



**The Conceptualization of Rape  
in Modern English Novels:  
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's  
Tale*, and Naomi Alderman's *The Power***

**By**

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**Abstract:**

With the advent of the second wave of feminism 1970s, a central theoretical debate about the origins of women's oppression, the role of the family, and women's sexual violence especially rape erupted. In modern novels, beginning in the late 1930s, until the present, the concept of rape is shown and clearly criticized. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* 1985, and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* 1962, the corporeal act of sexual violence is the technique each novelist employs to convey her themes of sexuality, race and gender. Analyzing both novels would follow three main angles: first, exploring ways in which society positions women as inherently passive rapeable and men as rapists. Second, how these novels use symbols and allegory to enhance the theme of rape. Third, how these novels change the contemporary reader's attitude towards rape; how women are turned out to be the triumphant party in this war of rape. In this paper women are no longer passive and rapeable. They are, however, the powerful side of this issue to the extent of being even rapists themselves. Since women represent a place of passivity, as the raped party; if a man is raped, he is forced then to be in the position of a woman; a passive weaker partner in society.

Keywords: rape, Modern, English, Novels

**ملخص :**

مع ظهور الموجة الثانية من الحركة النسوية في السبعينيات، اندلع نقاش نظري مركزي حول أصول اضطهاد المرأة ودور الأسرة والعنف الجنسي للمرأة وخاصة الاغتصاب. في الروايات الحديثة، بدءًا من أواخر الثلاثينيات وحتى الوقت الحاضر، يتم عرض مفهوم الاغتصاب وانتقاده بوضوح. في Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* 1985 و Naomi Alderman's *The Power* 1962، كان الفعل الجسدي للعنف الجنسي هو الأسلوب الذي تستخدمه كل روائية لنقل موضوعاتها الخاصة بالجنس والعرق والجنس. سيتبع تحليل الروايتين ثلاث زوايا رئيسية: أولاً، استكشاف الطرق التي يضع بها المجتمع النساء على أنهن سلبيات للاغتصاب بطبيعتهن والرجال كمغتصبين. ثانيًا، كيف تستخدم هذه الروايات الرموز والرموز لتعزيز موضوع الاغتصاب. ثالثًا، كيف تغير هذه الروايات موقف القارئ المعاصر من الاغتصاب؟ كيف تحولت النساء إلى الطرف المنتصر في حرب الاغتصاب هذه. في هذه الورقة، لم تعد المرأة سلبية وقابلة للاغتصاب. ومع ذلك، فإنهم يمثلون الجانب القوي من هذه القضية لدرجة أنهم حتى مغتصبون. بما أن النساء يمثلن مكانًا للسلبية، مثل الطرف المغتصب؛ إذا اغتصب الرجل، فإنه يُجبر على أن يكون في وضع المرأة؛ شريك سلبي أضعف في المجتمع.

With the advent of the second wave of feminism 1970s, a central theoretical debate about the origins of women's oppression, the role of the family, and women's sexual violence especially rape erupted. In modern novels, beginning in the late 1930s, until the present, the concept of rape is shown and clearly criticized. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* 1985, and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* 1962, the corporeal act of sexual violence is the technique each novelist employs to convey her themes of sexuality, race and gender. Analyzing both novels would follow three main angles: first, exploring ways in which society positions women as inherently passive rapeable and men as rapists. Second, how these novels use symbols and allegory to enhance the theme of rape. Third, how these novels change the contemporary reader's attitude towards rape; how women are turned out to be the triumphant party in this war of rape. In this paper women are no longer passive and rapeable. They are, however, the powerful side of this issue to the extent of being even rapists themselves. Since women represent a place of passivity, as the raped party; if a man is raped, he is forced then to be in the position of a woman; a passive weaker partner in society.

In her book *Defining Rape: Emerging obligations for States Under International Law*, Maria Eriksson refers to rape as "a crime that principally affects women and its prevalence in all states, cultures, and contexts, whether in an armed conflict or peace time, represents a prime example of this challenge." (4) This description of rape considers it a criminal act, a violent

sexual invasion resulting in sexual victimization. According to Jocelyn Catty, "the prevalence of rape in early modern literature suggests its importance for the represented power-dynamic between men and women, while its various functions show rape being exploited as both a narrative and an ideological tool." (231)

Sexual violence became a central topic in feminist writings, especially with the 1970s' second wave of the feminist movement. Unfortunately, societies placed women in the position of rapeable as an inherited fact. The feminist movement brought rape into the surface of social concerns. During the sixties, society became attentive to sexuality and gender roles. As Learning states in his book *A Study Guide for Margaret Atwood's Rape Fantasies*, "during the 1970s, Helena Gurley Brown was the editor-in-chief of a cosmopolitan magazine, the type of magazine that, as Estelle says, not only prints articles about rape, but also acts like 'it is something terrific, like a vaccine for cancer. They put it in capital letters on the front cover'" (11).

The sexual liberation of that era necessitates the exploration and close examination of sexual violence. One of the main goals of this exploration of sexual violence was uncovering the concept of rape. So, rape becomes a much more open topic in literature. Many earlier novels may have alluded to rape or sexual violence, but it was in the 1970s that rape became more public in literature.

In modern literature, scholars like Susan Brownmiller and Catharine Mackinnon gave unprecedented analyses of rape and women as rapeable. In *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Brownmiller states that rape is a crime that "women had never dared to talk openly about, so it was met with disbelief, which carried a heavy load of shame". Rape, according to Brownmiller "was something women were afraid to mention". (Preface,3)

Mackinnon, in her book *Are Women Human?*, argues that all hetro-sexual intercourse is rape. Both scholars give great feminist contribution about rape. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on the physical violations of women, with a particular emphasis on the issue of rape. The novel is full of societal criticism that is drawn from depictions of sexual gendered violence. In this novel, society is represented as positioning women as inherently rapeable, since Atwood builds her novel on the conflict of Offred who struggles to preserve her sense of being a human being under the rapeable regime of the Republic of Gilead. The novel shows male control through many scenes, starting from Offred's repressed sexual desire to anyone except the Commander, until her hands being held by Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, while having his ritualized sex with her. Symbolizing the freedom of all women, Offred's freedom is completely restricted: "the sitting room door is wide open. I go in: so far no one else in here. I don't sit, but take my place, kneeling, near the chair with the foot stool where Serena Joy will shortly enthrone herself, leaning on her cane while she lowers herself down. Possibly she'll put a hand on my shoulder, to

steady herself, as if I am a piece of furniture. She's done it before." (25).

The first angle of this paper is to explore ways in which society positions women as inherently passive and rapeable and men as rapists. To start with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, commenting on rape culture and rape myth in the novel, in her book *The Handmaid's Tale: Teaching Dystopia, Feminism, and Resistance Across Disciplines and Borders*, Karen A. Ritzenhoff describes ritualized rape in the novel saying that in the world of Gilead, the rape of Handmaid's is encouraged and justified as a biblical ritual, "drawing upon the Old Testament story of Rachel and her handmaid, Bilhah" (81). In Gilead, the rape myth is justified as commanders engage in ritualized rape of their handmaids, assisted by their wives. "these ceremonies are justified using passages from the Old Testament of the Bible in which Rachel and Jacob are unable to conceive, and as such they use her handmaid, Bilhah, to conceive a child. This passage is significant as it allows those in power in Gilead to justify the rape of handmaids by the commanders, by explaining that they are charged with bringing children into Gilead (82).

Rape in Gilead keeps women in subordination to men. This results in societal adoption of a male-controlled sexuality which upholds unjust societal perceptions about the relationship of rape culture and sexual domination over women. There is a different depiction of rape in *The Handmaid's Tale* as it shows another concept of rape without physical force; it is rape with

consent. In the novel, handmaid's are obligated to sexual activity with their commanders due to their lack of will or power to refuse. This does not mean that they are accepting rape. It is however, a reflection of society's obligation and women's subservience to men. According to Karen, "rape can be defined as any unwanted sexual activity through lack of consent or inability to give consent" (83). While rape myths claim that violence or physical force is essential for a process to be called "rape"; this is not the case in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as hidden, indirect, threatening force can lead to rape.

"Although the instances of rape displayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* do not feature overt physical violence, they are still clear instances of rape. The lack of physical force that often occurs during ceremonies does not in any way suggest that the handmaids are consenting to the sexual assault, but instead emphasizes the importance of coercion in rape" (83). Atwood's depiction of the dystopian or the anti-utopian world aims at "portraying the bad place rather than merely satirizing the failed pursuit of the good one. Then all dystopias are anti-utopias...All dystopias, moreover, aim at avoiding the horrors imminent in this present: the mission is to motivate the reader, not merely to horrify" (Sisk 6,7-11).

Creating this dystopian world, Atwood criticizes the American society which deprives women of any form of social or economic power. "The means by which they have been deprived is the law", (Ward, 132). The novel is a valuable contribution to



the essential feminist positions in relation to rape. The position of women in Gilead, totally governed by male fundamentalists; the commanders, is an indirect criticism of a gendered-based society. The removal of identity, and its placement by a formalized male-determined sexuality is one of the most powerful metaphors in the book (Ward 132). Women are positioned as inherently rapeable.

The spectacles women used to make for themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stocking the, no wonder these things used to happen. Things, the word she used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips. A successful life for her was one that avoided things, excluded things. Such things do not happen to nice women (18).

In the above mentioned passage, Offred recalls Aunt Lydia's description of how women used to do as preparations for meeting their commanders. In this scene Offred claims that women who dress provocatively, are responsible for their being raped; they are inviting men to take advantage of them. By saying that crimes would not happen to nice women who cover their bodies properly, Aunt Lydia, representing the whole society, makes women responsible for rape. This echoes the idea of women being inherently rapeable. The doctor's statement that

"there is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially, there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (20), shocks Offred.

Like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, represents society as based on the hierarchy of power and societal gender norms. The inherited concept of women as rapeable is also embodied in Naomi's novel. In her book *The Poetics of Otherness and Transition in Naomi Alderman's Fiction*, Jose M. Yebra claims that "The Power features a dystopian world where the life of the other does not matter. In reproducing the male domination model, Mother Eve and Tatiana only foster hatred and violence, and the war between genders mentioned above. They intend to reverse gender roles, and this is the problem...justice remains a reparatory technique to guarantee governmentality and the police that prevail over (Ranciere's conception of) politics and the ethics of the other" (128).

*The Power* is a science fiction about a world where women use a mysterious electric power to oppress men. The novel portrays the dystopian society with its poisonous heritage of patriarchal religion and the relationship between power and religion. Unlike Margaret Atwood, Naomi Alderman asks a crucial question: what might a world look like if women become the ones to be feared? Alderman deals with the concept of rape from a reversed perspective as she presents society with men who are raped and misused by women as

"already there are parents telling their boys not to go out alone, not to stray too far" (30).

Turning the tables, Alderman forces her readers to rethink everything and to consider the immensity of female subjugation in what is considered a normal society. In "men are no longer permitted to vote- because their years of violence and degradation have shown that they are not fit to rule or govern" (236), there is an irony. Later in the novel, "men protesting against discrimination holding banners which read 'justice for men' and performing terrorist attacks to claim for their rights make up the funny side of a dystopia that features the dangers of the police and bio-politics" (Yebara, 127).

*The Power* actually reverses the sexual roles of males and females, criticizing a society that has inherently positioned women as rapeable. In other words, the dystopia underwrites a utopia- to be. In the dystopia of *The Power*, the life of the other does not matter. Women do acquire supremacy through handmade violence law. Handmade violence is a human law that is established to avenge women in an imaginary, virtual context. This handmade violence law is what Eve and Titiana employ as they make laws. In the scene of torturing the man with long dark hair who "had been tied to the post...at his wrists and ankles...Around his neck was a sign with a single word in Russian: Slut. He had been dead for two or three days" (254), there is a reminder of Christ's crucifixion. In this scene the man's death is not important. There is a new law of violence; the female

made law. The true reason behind the novel's fantasy of putting females in power, is to give hope to readers. There is still some hope for women to be in power. This claimed power is attained through what is called speculative fiction. According to Paul Thomas' definition of speculative fiction in his book *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*, speculative fiction is "like fantasy, often builds and develops entire and seemingly new worlds (sometimes as thin disguises for our own world and often genuinely speculative or uniquely alternative existences) with characters that exist in extended narratives that readers and viewers can come to know and love (or hate)" (6). So, speculative fiction's features do not actually exist in the real world. It is the change of the laws and traditions of what is real and actual, putting or imagining a completely opposite world, and speculating in its outcome. Both Atwood and Alderman employ speculative fiction in their novels so as to portray their dystopian worlds; a world that positions women as inherently rapeable. Paul Thomas continues his analysis of speculative fiction saying that "Le Guin, a major writer of Speculative Fiction and fantasy, believes Atwood's works are speculative fiction because they blend an imaginative look at worlds that might be as well as satirizing the world that has been and is, and Le Guin also bristles as Atwood's arguments against the speculative fiction label: This arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize awarders"(7).

In "nothing that either of these men says is really of any great significance, because she could kill them in three moves before they stirred in their comfortably padded chairs" (*The Power*, 77), the themes of power, violence and supremacy of women are evident. While in the initial part of the novel, most of the violence was applied to women by men, this soon changes and women, who were rapeable, become now the powerful party in the war since the extreme power is transferred to them. Women firstly used this power to achieve justice, however, later this power corrupts their morals. Here Margot has changed her views on men, due to the absolute power in her hands. She sees whatever they say as "insignificant", worthless and nonsense. Too much power is the cause of moral corruption. The message behind this quotation is that when power is placed in the hands of men; the actual status of the world, they are morally corrupted as they position women in the rapeable position.

E. Robertson in his book *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, confirms that "in our understanding, rape must be considered in its place on a continuum of other acts concerned with the control of the sexuality and reproduction of women, including marriage. While we are nowhere claiming that only women are raped, it is generally agreed that the rapeable body - even a man's - is that one which is socially constructed as 'female' and in a position of weakness or ambiguity, able to be taken by force and objectified by those in power" (4). It is clear that the concept of rape is imposed on women even if the "rapeable body is a man". So

women are condemned and inherently posited as rapeable. Even if power is in their hands, as Alderman suggests and speculated, women are still by societies positioned as rapeable.

The second angle of this research is how both novels use symbols to enhance the theme of rape. Starting with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, H. Stevens says:

*The basic idea that writers construct literary texts to contain more than one level of meaning or that these texts are open to multiple interpretations are a cornerstone of modern literary criticism. Any good work of literature should be able to be read for its basic story, for larger symbolic or thematic significance, for moral or ethical lessons, and for larger philosophical or spiritual questions (H. Stevens 78).*

According to H. Stevens, symbolism is employed in literature to portray a different actuality from that of naturalism and realism, producing an impact on the reader by shifting the focus of narration on word connotation and images. As modern novelists both Margaret Atwood and Naomi Alderman show artistry in the usage of language and images. The impact of violence, rape, dystopian society is felt with readers' senses rather than their mere literal expression.

Actually *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel can be read as an allegory, as it tells the story of Offred, the representative of

slavery in a dystopian world. Atwood also uses names and titles symbolically in her novel, showing a broader meaning and creating a visual impact on readers. Starting with allegory, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood uses elements that have significant symbolic values. In "in front of me is a tray, and on the tray are a glass of apple juice, a vitamin pill, a spoon, a plate with three slice of brown toast on it, a small dish containing honey, and another plate with an egg on it, the kind that looks like a woman's torso, in a skirt. Under the skirt is the second egg, being kept warm. The egg cup is white china with a blue stripe" (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 33), Atwood uses an egg cup as the symbol of a woman's womb. The egg represents a potential child. The word "egg" is repeated many times in the novel, carrying the same connotation.

The handmaids who are surrogate mothers that bear children for the commanders and their wives are always dressed in red as in "we might be bundles of red cloth" (38), "she allowed her to put on her own red dress" (39), "I feel as if my feet in their flat red shoes aren't quite touching the floor" (41), "there is it in the chair, with the lights off, in my red dress, hooked and buttoned" (42), and "red all over the cupboard"(43). These examples are the symbol of women's status. The red color is always associated with these mothers; the color of blood; the symbol of violence and suppression. On the total contrary, the wives of the commanders are always portrayed dressed in blue; symbolizing the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. In describing Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, Offred says: "her dress is

crisp cool cotton. For her it's blue water color, not this red of mine that sucks in heat and blazes with it at the same time". (59)

Worth Books writes a book entitled *Summary and Analysis of the Handmaid's Tale: Based on the Book of Margaret Atwood*, where he analyses the images of the novel, shedding light on their allegorical significance. He handles "eyes" as a frequently used symbol representing the seeing eye of the State; Gilead. There are eyes everywhere in the novel. There are printed eyes even on the cars of the elite Guardians and Commanders. Offred is watched all the time; "I can't avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse". (21) She has an eye tattooed on her ankle to remind her of being watched and followed all the time. The eye on her ankle may be the symbol of her being an eye herself on other women in the novel. Offred becomes an eye where she becomes a silent observer who reveals the workings of Gilead to those who came later to rule.

"Flowers" are another allegory in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Their archetypal symbol is that of beauty and freedom as the commanders' wives spend much time in the gardens, collecting flowers. These moments of collecting flowers may be the symbol of their freedom of the oppressiveness of the household. The scene of Offred hiding a daffodil in her room may be interpreted as a symbol of her rebellion against Gilead and her aspirations for freedom one day. Again the "fading daffodils" in chapter 14, may be the symbol of Offred's fading hope of freedom.



In Gilead, religion is another allegory. Gilead is a place that is extremely far from God's instructions as it is exclaimed "why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?" (23). People in Gilead are portrayed as people with no real faith. Offred notices that Bible passages are changed to suit the needs of the State. It is always kept locked up "The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up" (27). The commanders pretend to be religious, which is an allegory of the regime of the Western government. Atwood writes a whole chapter in the novel entitled "Jezebel", where she says "let, hell, they encourage it. Know what they call this place among themselves? Jezebel's The Aunts figure we're all damned anyway"(73) Jezebel symbolizes the Biblical figure who is often referred to as a fallen woman. This allegory is about the whole society of the fallen women.

In the Bible the name Gilead means mountain or hill country. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the center of Gilead's power where the dystopia of the novel is exposed is Cambridge. Cambridge was America's first religious city; the Puritan New England of the Seventeenth century (Phillips, 15-20). Gilead has changed the most famous church of Cambridge into a museum; symbolizing the religious, sexual and political deviation of the Puritans. Offred's name is extremely symbolic. It is close in pronunciation to the word "offered" which shows the humiliation and degradation of women in Gilead.

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, Naomi Alderman's *The Power* is an allegorical novel based on women attaining electric power, through which they control the male-based society. This power develops among all women across the universe. Due to this reversal of roles, and women's supremacy and control, a social and political disorder takes place in the whole world. To naturalize the legacy of female supremacy, women needed to initiate a war to reverse time to Stone Age. Doing this would make women's newly attained control look like something natural and innate in the society all along. It is through allegory and symbols that Alderman suggests that women should not be ignored in modern society because things can easily change and women may lead the world.

*The Power* is a speculative fiction representing the dystopian world of violence towards women. Rape is not the only concept or aspect of violence in the novel. Violence is encountered everywhere in the novel. Replacing power in modern society is done through violence as women were fighting against neighboring kingdoms in order to build their new female controlled society. Allegorically, men opposing discrimination holding banners that read "justice for men" (168), and performing terrorist attacks to claim their rights, construct the sarcastic side of a dystopia that features speculative fiction.

Jose M. Yebra in her book *The Poetics of Otherness and Transition in Naomi Alderman's Fiction*, describes the dystopian world in *The Power*, as "a world where the life of the other

doesn't matter. In reproducing the male dominated model, Mother Eve and Tatiana only foster hatred and violence, and the war between genders mentioned above. They intend to reverse gender roles, and this is the problem" (128). The "Holy Mother" in the novel works as justification for women's inherent superiority of men in *The Power*, as just the predominance of a masculine God has impacted the growth of the patriarchy in our contemporary society. The imagined world run by women; the speculative fiction, is conveyed through used symbols and allegories such as the Mother Eve or the Holy Mother. Allie's use of language to describe the feminine divine in place of the masculine is exemplified in the novel as it is stated that "we have already learned to call God "Father", Jesus taught us that" (85). It is however now changed and the roles are reversed as the Mother Eve says: "so I teach a new thing. This power has been given to us to lay straight our crooked thinking. It is the Mother not the Son who is the emissary of Heaven. We are to call God 'Mother'. God the mother came to earth in the body of Mary, who gave up her child that we could live free from sin. God always said she would return to earth. And she has come back now to instruct us in her ways (85). This allegory shows that it is impossible to name the divine in human, gendered terms. Since the figure of the male in the novel is stripped of its previously claimed, sanctity and divinity, Allie's murder of her foster father Montgomery-Taylor, who has raped her for quite some time, is a symbol of women's banishment of injustice, abuse and oppression; features of dystopian world.

According to Yebra,

The Power's dystopia aims to be a catalyzer of change, the nemesis of the paradigm shift trasmodern and transcultural theorists address... When women with the skein become mere robotic agents targeted at men, the latter's lives are an exchange value between female leaders and warriors...If at the beginning of the novel, it is women who are tortured and experimented with, after Mother Eve's regime succeeds it is men who are murdered and raped, their bodies dissected for fun or experimentation (129).

*The Power* has not only ethical and political allusions, it is also a reflection of a violent dystopia where Tunde, the representative of men is portrayed as an imprisoned helpless man who is captured in a cage:

*when he wakes, he is in a cage, and something is very bad. The cage is small and made of wood. His backpack is in here with him. His knees are pulled up to his chest-there is no room to stretch them out. He can feel the throbbing ache in his muscles that he's been like for hours (261).*

The cage is the symbol of arrest, subjugation, imprisonment and retribution. This man is tortured and punished

exactly like raped women who suffer in their societies and pay for their being raped. Men also are imprisoned like this man in a "cage", paying for their sins.

"The shape of power is always the same; it is the shape of a tree. Root to tip, central trunk branching and rebranching, spreading wider in ever-thinner searching fingers" (*The Power*, 13). The tree is one of the omnipresent symbols in the novel. It symbolizes the power in society, branching from one aspect to another. In this quotation by Neil, she quotes an extract from the Book of Eve, explaining how female power expands from one branch to the other. The novel employs the tree as the symbol of the absolute power of hurting others; ironically men. Applying this symbol to women in the actual world, the tree is the symbol of their being the raped, abused parties. Then power branches and is transformed into political, social or economic power. The tree as a symbol permeates the whole narration until the end where it "grows within us, our inward trees of nerves and blood vessels" (13). Towards the end of the novel, Margot has a vision of the tree of power where she discovers that though power has started to branch in different directions, in favour of women, still, this power may go once more to men, so it is safer for women to "blast it entirely to pieces" (310). By destroying this tree of power, women are trying to eliminate the old social system completely in order to pave the way to the new one.

In the scene of the tortured man where he is described as "a man with long, dark hair hanging down over his face. He had

been tied to the post by plastic cords at his wrists and ankles... There were the marks of pain across his body... Around his neck was a sign with a single word in Russian: Slut." (254), Christ's crucifixion is symbolically portrayed. The male is now the victim who is hanged with the sign of a "slut". The death of this man symbolizes the former death of raped women before. It is an allegory of Jesus Christ and his suffering. This suffering is that of the good news that nature carries for women in *The Power* is found in a quotation in which she describes the sky

*which had seemed blue and bright, clouds over, grey to black. There will be a rainstorm. It has been long in coming, the dust is parched the soil longs for soaking, teeming dark water. For the earth is filled with violence, and every living thing has lost its way. In the north and the south and the east and the west, the water gathers in the corners of the sky (281).*

There is an allusion to a holy Biblical flood that Mother Eve repeatedly promised throughout the novel.

The third concern of this paper is the way in which both novels change contemporary readers' attitude towards rape; how women are no longer the raped weakened party in society. Starting with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, sterility is always associated with women. In Gilead, although men are the sterile party in the sexual relation, however, women are always accused of failing in producing children; it is always

women's fault. Handmaids may end up unluckily with a sterile Commander. In this case, the female is the blamed for not having a child, and declared as "unwoman". So in Gilead, the value of women is determined by their ability to produce offspring. However, at the end of the novel, truth is redefined. Society sees women differently. Women acquire permanent freedom since women's freedom is not conditioned with men's decisions. Men's freedom was actually the cause of men's violence towards women. Men used to rape women and if a woman gets pregnant, she is responsible for bearing this illegitimate child, delivering illegitimate offspring to society.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are depicted as active participants in their cultures for they were born there, lived there and consequently they had no option to leave their societies, however, they are able in this novel to change the perception of others towards them. They lead readers and guide them through societies that are completely alien to these readers. So readers feel strongly their frustration, bewilderment, and hence their victory at the end. Offred is an active participant of Gilead, narrating her life story. She is not a visitor from an alien culture. She also works as a native observer who gives her readers an account of other characters like Aunt Lydia, the Commanders, Serena Joy, and even Margaret Atwood herself.

Through Offred's eyes, The Republic of Gilead takes the form of a new nation state. It is a place of no equality; men are divided into first and second class citizens, while all women are

third class citizens. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are portrayed as threatening and cunning. So they were to be controlled and oppressed by the patriarchy of Gilead. However, Margaret Atwood succeeds in proving women's superiority and control over men. Whereas they are banned from employment and consequently forbidden to own properties, they do still have a more important fateful role; that is generating human beings. So this stratification of Gilead is turned out to be for the good of women. The patriarchy of Gilead establishes a matriarchal network responsible for generating embryos. Handmaids are the source of Gilead's survival and immortality, but ironically, the most despised.

From the very beginning of the novel, Offred mourns her lost dignity and life as, "the lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts...The guards were not allowed inside the building except when called and we weren't allowed out, except for walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire" (4). At the beginning the handmaids are seen as nothing more than potentially productive ovaries. Eventually the role of women starts to change and they acquire a new importance; they are perceived as state resources since they are "congealed around a central object"(23). Offred starts to change her perception of herself through the novel. She contrasts the way she used to think of her body in the past, to the way she thinks of herself now:



I used to think of my body as an instrument of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will...Now the flesh arrays a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping (23).

Women's wombs are a "national resource" as Offred states "I am too important... I am a national resource" (21). Women start to feel important in Gilead since they are creating generations through their wombs. Their perception of themselves change; their self-image takes another path.

Although Gilead treats women not as human beings, or individuals, but rather as "objects", still women are the most important party in this patriarchal society, since they are the factory of embryos. Women of *The Handmaid's Tale* succeed in changing the patriarchal society into a matriarchal society as "they are helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task" (47).

Like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the new world of Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, shows a demolition of the conventional notion of gender role. Women in the new world of Alderman are able to change the traditional gender role imposed by society, establishing their own identity and position.

She explores the electrostatic power in female characters to make them capable of blurring pre-existing ideas of gender roles in contemporary society. Women appear as a different category: they kill men by their newly acquired electrical power, and create their new God's identity; Mother Eve. This changed vision of women does consequently change the concept of rape as well. Women are no longer the raped party in the world. Men, however, are the powerless and objectified ones undergoing crisis of identity.

The main female characters in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, Roxy, Allie, Margot, Jocelyn and Titania, are portrayed as men-fighters, who abuse men sexually, politically and physically. *The Power* is a different society with different values and notions. Rape in the novel is no longer considered a shameful crime stuck to women. Allie, one of the main characters in *The Power*, after killing her abusive foster father, runs and ends up finding a safe place in a monastery where she is mentored and protected by nuns. She calls herself Eve, establishing a reputation of chastity and virtue. This reputation is enhanced by her incredible capacity to perform miracles:

not very many miracles are required. Not for the Vatican, not for a group of highly strung teenage girls cooped up together for months and in fear of their lives. You don't need so many miracles (81).

Society starts to perceive women as superior to men. They are now the party who has the upper-hand in taking decisions and estimating their own destiny. Allie, the killer is rewarded instead of being punished for killing her abusive foster father, by being a part of a nun's community. The monastery that she resorts to, serves as both a female world since they debate the future of the girls with their own skills, and the place that allows Allie to grow into the most important religious figure in the novel.

The patriarchal system is substituted by the matriarchal system where absolute power is now granted to women. Women are rewarded and valued in Alderman's world. They are not seen as weak raped figures. They are, however, the owners of absolute power. Allie becomes Mother Eve, a religious figure followed by millions. Margot underestimates the position of men as she proclaims:

Thus, we institute today this law, that each man in the country must have his passport and other official documents stamped with the name of his female guardian. Her written permission will be needed for any journey he undertakes. We know that men have their own tricks and we can not allow them to band together (235).

Society has changed its perspective of women. Women are not perceived as abused, raped, despised creatures. On the contrary, they are the ones who control and manipulate men's lives. Their voices are united together, determining men's fate.

The Power features a trans-human state. What starts as a reaction to patriarchal Darwinian bio-determinism ends up being a bio-police state that can only result in a war of all against all...It is the confrontation of such a dystopia and actual patriarchy that begs for an ethical response (Yebra, 134).

According to Jose M. Yebra, Alderman succeeds in changing readers' vision and perception of women through a speculative novel that is "echoing the vengeful God of the Old Testament, this is the message of atonement rather than redemption. Once again, *The Power* intends to stir consciences, pointing to relevant political issues, especially the very survivability of democracy (134).

In the actual patriarchal world, men underestimate the values and roles of women, though great their roles are, but in fictitious matriarchal world, women acquire a new identity in art, in literature, and in the whole life. It is through Alderman's novel that women's psychology challenges mainstream history by deconstructing the traditional aspects of presenting sex, war, religion, power, and politics.

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* are challenging novels since they represent a society of gender power relations turned upside down, placing women in power and men as their subjects. In both

novels women and girls discover their newly acquired physical and spiritual powers that enable them to rearrange the social order and create the new matriarchy. In *The Power*, there are examples of the reversal of gender identity and power. Women acquire a physical tactile power through the electrical powers awakened in their bodies. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women acquire a spiritual superiority through their power of conception and delivering. Women are the human resources of the State. They are superior to men in their unique divine ability of delivering embryos. Both novels problematize the power hierarchy of the sexes and its oppression of women in patriarchal societies. The relationship between gender and power is inevitably a controversial subject in both novels. Nowadays despite of feminist resistance, men still hold and acclaim most political and social power. It is difficult to imagine a world where absolute power is turned upside down, positioning women in power and men as their subjects. However, this is the case in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Naomi Alderman's *The Power*. Both novels portray a world where women discover their physical, and electrical power that can be detected in their bodies. This leads to women's new perception of themselves and consequently their new position in their worlds.

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**The Conceptualization of Rape in Modern English Novels:  
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