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Exploring Feminist Fears and Anxieties: A Study of the Ways in Which the Dystopian Novels
The Power by Naomi Alderman and *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* by Meg Ellison
Challenge Contemporary Discourses on Gender

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Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate how feminist writers are using the dystopian genre to express and explore feminist anxieties and fears in the contemporary society, and how these fears are used to challenge dominant discourses on gender. More specifically, it aims to study how the dystopian novels *The Power* by Naomi Alderman and *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* by Meg Ellison, act as political commentaries that challenge and critique contemporary discourses on gender.

The novels explore feminist fears related to losing self-autonomy, as well as societies where gender wars are imminent, because of the vilification of gender. Some might argue that the feminist movement has come to a halt or even taken a step backwards, because of social issues such as the ban of abortion in US states, daily experiences of gendered prejudice, and how gender movements often are perceived as “toxic”. The novels can therefore be considered relevant to the contemporary society, as they explore themes and social issues related to gender, gender identity, gendered power structures, and equality.

The thesis first explores the manifestation of anti-feminist anxieties and its implications, which suggests that power can corrupt regardless of gender, and thus challenge the concept of gendered power. Additionally, it investigates how gender is villainized to conceal other, more prominent factors which contribute to social issues. Secondly, the thesis illustrates how double standards and hypocrisies in the contemporary society is a result of gendered prejudice. As a result, the novels critique how we treat victims and perpetrators differently depending on their gender. Lastly, the thesis explores how the novels categorize gender, and the role gender has in social dynamics and identity.

In conclusion, *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* and *The Power* are relevant for the contemporary audience. The novels are necessary for ongoing discourses about gender and feminism because they incite a healthy and inclusive discussion about not vilifying genders, and instead working together to protect the civil liberties of everyone and live in a fairer and more equitable society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The science fiction genre has traditionally been considered a male dominated genre, written for men, by men (Roberts 72-73). Although some scholars argue that the science fiction genre began in the 1800s with feminist writer Mary Shelley and her novel *Frankenstein*, women authors were a minority until the late 1900s (Roberts 38-43). It was not until the 1960s and 1970s the number of female authors and readers rose in the science fiction genre (Roberts 73).

Critics refer to the 1930s and 1940s as the “Golden Age” of science fiction. 1926-1960 can be referred to as the magazine era of science fiction. A reason for the rise in popularity was when magazines started encouraging feedback from the readers. The readers then had the ability to help shape the genre. Eventually, readers and writers began meeting in person, and a community of science fiction-fans was created. Some consider science fiction-author Isaac Asimov to be the creator of the basis for the genre’s characteristics (Roberts 56-61) Asimov explored not only physical problems, but also fundamental questions about our society and individuals, and how technology and science could be used to solve these. The science fiction genre then became a genre which also explored social dynamics, such as politics and religion (Attebery 32-39).

It was in the 1960s the science fiction genre became a mass phenomenon. Some critics believe it was the fear of the future – the new fear of atom war, apocalypse, and totalitarianism – that contributed to its rise in popularity. It was at this time the science fiction genre moved towards novels, instead of magazines (Roberts 60-61). The “New Wave”-movement also had an impact on the genre, lasting from around the 1960s to 1980s (Broderick 48). The movement moved away from the characteristics of the genre, and instead produced more radical and fractured science fiction. Instead of focusing on content, they focused on form and style. Critics argued that by doing so, they were betraying what the science fiction genre really was (Roberts 62-63). However, other critics believe it was the “New Wave”-movement which opened the genre up to experimentation, and what it has become today (Broderick 62).

From the 1960s to present day, there has been several changes in the genre. Due to its popularity, it has also become more challenging to define. Because of disagreement between critics, there are several approaches to establishing a clear definition of science fiction (Roberts 1-4). *Merriam-Webster* defines science fiction as “fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals or having a scientific factor as an essential orienting component” (“Science Fiction, N.”). However, literary scholar Farah

Mendlesohn refers to science fiction as an ongoing discussion, rather than a genre. She claims that science fiction often borrows plot structures from other genres, and can as a result often be categorized into different genres than science fiction. Despite that, Mendlesohn argues that there is a recognizable narrative that is found in the center of science fiction: the ‘sense of wonder’. She defines it as the “appreciation of the sublime”, whether natural or technological (Mendlesohn 1-3).

Some critics consider dystopian literature to be a sub-category of science fiction, while others believe dystopia and science fiction should be separated as categories (Claeys 284-285). Literary scholar Peter Fitting argues that it is impossible to study dystopia without acknowledging science fiction as a central role of the genre (Fitting 135). He argues that modern science fiction and dystopia share the same foundational characteristics, and it is this which intersects the genres. Both genres have the ability to reflect, express and explore our hopes and fears about the future. These hopes and fears are often linked to science and technology. The element of science fiction in dystopian novels help raise awareness towards the importance and effects of science and technology (Fitting 138-139).

There is little disagreement among critics when it comes to defining the dystopian genre (Fitting 135). *Merriam-Webster* defines dystopia as “an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives” (“Dystopia, N.”). Further, literary scholar Gregory Claeys argues for three main concepts found in the genre: the political dystopia, the environmental dystopia, and the technological dystopia (5). Claeys attempts to differentiate between *dystopia* and *science fiction dystopias*. A central theme of modern dystopian novels is despotism. Oppression, isolation, fear, and abuse of power are therefore central themes. In science fiction dystopias, technology is often the reason behind the oppression and fear the individual experiences. In dystopia, authoritative groups, as well as individuals, are the cause of oppressiveness. Science fiction dystopias are also set in distant futures, with science and technology that are beyond present-day. The scenarios in these novels are therefore considered unlikely to happen. Dystopian novels, on the other hand, are often based on contemporary society. They portray societies where suffering is purely a result of human action (Claeys 290).

The first dystopian novels were published during the French revolutionary period. The genre became popular during the 1870s, and especially after the 1930s. The first dystopian novels had political themes. It was not until the 1870s that technology and science became popular themes in the genre. It continued to be a popular theme, along with despotic collectivism, into the 1900s. The themes explored fears of losing identity, free will and the

extinction of mankind (Claeys 270-271). From the 1950s, new themes emerged, such as apocalypse, environmental degeneration, and cultural degeneration (Claeys 447).

Claeys argues that from the 1990s, dystopian fictions focus less on plutocratic or collectivist regimes (Claeys 489-490). What the earlier generation considered science fiction, had become facts and likely scenarios (Claeys 447). Instead, it shifted towards “how the Apocalypse feels, and whether it brings out our better or (as commonly) our less desirable attributes, both individually, when the monsters within are released, and in the groups which increasingly dominates us” (Claeys 489). Although the dystopian genre still explores themes similar to before, it does it with the individual in the center.

Some refer to the science fiction genre as the ‘literature of change’ (Hollinger 126). In contemporary times, literary scholars Sean Seeger and David Davison-Vecchione argue that dystopian literature has moved from speculative literature to political commentaries highlighting the issues of our society (61). In fact, it can be argued that the purpose of dystopian literature, is to be used as a warning. It educates us about plausible real-life dystopias which could await in the future. Dystopian literature can then be viewed as projections (Claeys 501).

While dystopia started as a sub-genre of science fiction, it has now separated itself from the genre. However, it can be argued that there is common ground between the characteristics and purposes of the genres. The genres often intersect. As one can see from the history of the genres, the themes have continued to evolve in a way which have reflected the contemporary societies, and therefore continued to stay relevant. As mentioned, both genres have been used to explore future scenarios and fears.

Feminist theory in science fiction is concerned with changing the hegemony which has caused inequality and oppression for women in the genre (Hollinger 125-126). The increase in feminist writers in the genre, was a response to the patriarchal norms which had developed (Roberts 73-75). Traditionally, female characters were often given passive or supporting roles, rather than roles as heroic, independent characters (Merrick 241-242). The genre started moving towards feminist dystopias in the 1980s. Feminist dystopias were typically concerned with gender identities and historical oppression (Claeys 489-490).

Science and technology used to be considered masculine endeavors. Because of this, female characters were often omitted from the science fiction genre (Merrick 241-242). Hollinger argues that the genre has contributed to maintaining societal conventions and cultural beliefs of gendered behavior and gender roles (125-126). This claim is supported by gender studies scholar Judith Butler, who argues that gender is constituted through a “stylized

repetition of acts” (519). Gender is therefore not a stable identity, but instead a product of the contemporary society. As we continue to act and perform according to the constituted gender roles, the roles become further embedded into society (Butler 519).

The portrayal of women in the science fiction genre, can then be argued to have contributed to establishing and maintaining the ‘natural’ roles of men and women (Hollinger 126). Feminist literary critics argue that there are no ‘natural’ roles of the genders. In fact, there should be no gender categorization (Merrick 242). According to literary scholar Helen Merrick, “the master narrative of science fiction has always been told in sexual terms. It represents knowledge, innovation and even perception as masculine, while nature, the passive object of exploration, is described as feminine” (Merrick 241). The ‘natural’ role of women was then to act as passive objects men could engage with. Whereas men were the active agents which moved the narrative and the world forward (Merrick 242-243).

Eventually, literary critics and audiences of science fiction began a debate about the portrayal of women within the genre (Merrick 242-243). After the 1950s, the genre began engaging with sociocultural concerns, such as the portrayal of genders. Science fiction authors began challenging the conventional gender roles, and as more female authors appeared in the genre, female characters were for the first time written from a woman’s point of view. As a result, women were no longer omitted from the genre. Women finally became ‘visible’ (Merrick 242-246).

In the 1960s, women were moving away from the passive, supporting role typically portrayed in the genre. Eventually, characters’ skills and characteristics were no longer based on their biological sex. The previous ‘natural’ roles of men and women were instead combined into one sex. Ideally, the characters should no longer be limited by their biological sex (Merrick 247-248). The rise in feminist literature seemed to be a response to the women’s liberation movement, happening during the 1960s to 1980s.

It was in the 1970s the first feminist utopias arrived. These utopias continued to challenge the concept of ‘natural’ gender roles. During the 1980s the stereotypical gender conventions were also explored and critiqued through dystopian narratives. As women fought for equality, rights, and a voice in the real world, it seemed natural to also reassess the portrayal of women in literature. Merrick argues that the science fiction genre can be used to explore gender and humanity. Through literature, the readers can ‘unlearn’ the structures of cultural norms and beliefs. The science fiction genre is a space where writers can address the challenges of what it means to be a woman, and the institutionalization of gender acts (Merrick 246-251).

The science fiction genre also has a tendency to reflect on and mirror its contemporary society. Since the genre's beginning, Asimov explored fundamental questions about our society. There is a correlation between culture and literature, and there are many examples of this, such as Asimov and Margaret Atwood. Atwood published the dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, in 1985. The TV-series adaption first aired in 2017, and has since then become a powerful feminist symbol of protest. Women all over the world are dressing up as the oppressed women in the novel, with scarlet cloaks and white bonnets (Beaumont and Holpuch). In most first world countries, gender equality and equity are not only expected, but secured by law. Discrimination based on gender is illegal, and it is expected that both genders are given the same opportunities. However, feminist author Leni Zumas argues that if we are looking at the world through a feminist lens, we realize that we are already living in dystopia (Alter).

Some might argue that the feminist movement have taken steps backwards in the last years, especially considering women's reproductive health. In June 2022, the U.S Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. As a result, abortion is now illegal in 13 states in the U.S ("Tracking the States"). In 2019, the Trump administration removed federal funding from *Planned Parenthood*, a nonprofit organization which provides sexual and reproductive health care. This includes services as breast cancer screening, birth control and HIV tests. As a result, the clinics and the services they provide, would become more expensive and inaccessible for low-income women (Acevedo).

On a global level, research shows that even though many countries prefer egalitarian marriages and believe equality between men and women is both important and likely in their countries, men are generally more optimistic than women about the prospects for gender equality. Interestingly, majorities believe men have better lives than women. Generally, men are believed to have more opportunities than women when it comes to high-paying jobs and leader positions. Majority also believe that men have better opportunities to express political views than women (Horowitz and Fetterolf).

Although more and more countries either have or are working towards equality between men and women, there is still a long way ahead. Political decisions such as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, can make citizens question how far we have come in the feminist movement. If the leaders do not listen to the majority of its people, is it not abuse of power? If a woman cannot lawfully have an abortion, is that not removing her self-autonomy? If a government can disregard women's voices so easily, what will they do next? Political events such as these can raise questions, and even create anxiety, for the future. Surveys and studies

of the individuals lives and opinions can also have the same effects. For example, why do we believe men have better lives than women? Is the society we live in as equal as we portray it to be? In feminist dystopian fiction, these are the types of questions that are explored.

Journalist Alexandra Alter published an article which discusses how feminist dystopian fiction is channeling present angers and anxieties of women. She claims that the dystopian novels can be seen as cautionary tales suggesting that women's equality one day might be deprived (Alter). Literary scholar Christine Jarvis argues that fiction can encourage learning and critical thinking, and some fiction can therefore function as critical feminist pedagogy. These texts can challenge the dominant beliefs and ideologies of our society (Jarvis 118). Literary scholars Mogjan Abshavi and Zaman Kargozari argue that discourses on gender in dystopian novels can work as a counter-discourse, which can challenge the dominant discourse of the society (819).

Literary scholar Wolfgang Iser argues that one must consider the text but also the responding actions of the text. He argues that there are two poles in literary work: the artistic, which refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic, which refers to the realization accomplished by the reader. The reader brings life to the text, and the individual's realization is affected by the patterns of the text (Iser 279). Additionally, literary scholar Daniel R. Schwarz presents three principles shared among literary critics: "(1) authors write to express their ideas and emotions, (2) the way people live and the values for which they live are fundamental interests for author and readers, and (3) literature express insights about human life and response to human situations" (Schwarz 480). Schwarz argues that the scholarly book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* by Wayne C. Booth, demonstrates that one can access the author's intended meaning of the text. This can be done because of specific effects which the author has created for the reader. The author shapes the reader's response with conscious or unconscious decisions made when writing the text (Schwarz 480-481). With this theoretical framework, it is possible to argue that authors can use literature to convey messages or purposely attempt to change discourse.

This thesis aims to study how the dystopian novels *The Power* by Naomi Alderman and *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* by Meg Ellison explore and express feminist fears and anxieties. Further, it aims to investigate how the two novels can challenge dominant discourses on gender.

The narrative of *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* is set in a world where a pandemic has terminated most of earth's population. The pandemic has especially affected women and children; women either die during pregnancy or childbirth, and all babies are stillborn. As a

result, women have become a minority. Most men respond to this by capturing and retain the remaining women, treating them as objects they can take ownership over. Because of this, the unnamed midwife disguises herself as man. She travels across the US searching for a safe haven, a purpose to continue living. The novel explores the themes such as gender, gendered power structures and gender identity.

In *The Power*, women develop the ability to produce electricity through a new organ, the skein. Because of the power, most women can electrocute and kill others just by a touch. At first, the novel presents the beginning of a new utopia, a place where women gain the courage to fight for equality in all parts of the world. However, as the misuse of power and false narratives of gender wars surface, the utopia quickly falls apart. The novel shifts between four protagonists: Tunde, a male journalist from Nigeria; Allie, also referred to as Mother Eve, a young girl who becomes the leader of a new religion worshipping the power; Roxy, the daughter of a mob boss in England; and Margot, a small-town politician in the US. As the story progresses, the novel explores themes such as gender wars, anti-feminist anxieties and false narratives.

First, I will investigate how the gender discussions in the novel create arguments that could challenge dominant views on gender in the contemporary society. Then, I will aim to demonstrate how the gender discourses within the novels serve as critiques of the contemporary society, and explain why the novels can be regarded as political commentaries.

Chapter 2: The Manifestation of Anti-Feminist Anxieties and Its Implication

2.1 Introduction

In 2022, marketing research and consulting firm Ipsos, presented an international study on feminism and gender inequality. Their findings show that a third of men believe feminism does more harm than good. A third of men also believe that the traditional masculinity is under threat, while a fifth of men believe they have lost out in terms of social, economic, or political power because of feminism (Ipsos 4). This research shows that some men view feminism as a movement which only benefits women. However, there are also women against feminism. Monica Pham did a study on anti-feminist comments on Tumblr, a microblogging website. Two significant arguments that Pham presents are categorized as “equality for all” and “feminism is only for women”. Both arguments suggest that feminists put themselves above men, and that the movement can be connected to misandry, the hatred of men (Pham 11-17). These beliefs are likely the foundation of anti-feminist anxieties. It becomes a fear that feminism will harm our society rather than benefit it.

We have seen many patriarchal societies throughout history. In fact, patriarchal societies still exist today. However, we can only speculate on what a world dominated by matriarchal societies would mean for humanity. As seen above, some people consider the feminist movement as a movement towards misandry, matriarchy, and the oppression of men. The uncertainty of the future can strengthen the anti-feminist anxieties. How would the matriarchal world begin? What would be the warning signs? The beginnings of matriarchal societies are explored in both *The Power* (2016) and *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* (2014). While exploring matriarchal societies, the novels simultaneously explore the manifestation of anti-feminist anxieties. However, it is the portrayal of the implications of these anxieties that are important. Their narratives show that power can corrupt anyone regardless of gender, and that gender is often used to either conceal or justify the abuse of power. The novels can therefore challenge the concepts of gendered power.

An anti-feminist anxiety explored in the novels, is that feminism will lead to the oppression of men. Scholar of cultural studies Hannah McCann, explains that “toxic femininity” can be viewed as a response to “toxic masculinity” and as an argument against feminism (9). Carol Harrington, a scholar of social and cultural studies, explains that since 2016, the term has been commonly used by feminists as a way to characterize a culture which

encourages “violence, domination, aggression, misogyny and homophobia” (349). Harrington argues that the use of toxic masculinity will do more harm than good. Accusations of toxic masculinity can contribute to the maintenance of gender hierarchies, instead of dissolving them (Harrington 345). She criticizes how the use of term often puts the responsibility of gender inequalities on the individual, rather than on society and systemic gender oppression. She argues for less individualized approaches when discussing gender and power as social problems (Harrington 350).

Merriam-Webster defines feminism as a “belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (“Feminism, N.”). To simplify, feminism is about equality for both genders. However, according to Pham, the way feminism is perceived is often based on how it is framed in mass communications. She claims that there are too many contradicting definitions of feminism, and that the perceived definition will be the determining factor of whether someone considers themselves a feminist or not (Pham 6-7). It is therefore highly likely that some may perceive the feminist movement as a threat against equality. Because of mass communications, the original definition of the word has lost its authority.

As mentioned, Pham argues that mass communications can shape the discourses around feminism (7-8). As a result, terms such as “toxic femininity” have emerged. McCann suggests that one should consider “toxic” approaches to feminism, rather than marking feminism as toxic. She argues that exploring femininity and toxic approaches to feminism, can be used to create a better understanding of the “toxic” gender systems in society. Further, this knowledge can challenge contemporary beliefs of how these systems contribute and reinforce the gendered power structure. To do this, she researched different uses of the term “toxic femininity”. First, it can be used as a pseudo-feminist reaction to “toxic masculinity”. To put it simply, it argues that both men *and* women can be toxic, and in that case, both genders are equally bad. Another use of the term is found in Men’s Activist Discourse. Both uses of the terms, but especially the latter, distances the idea that power is gendered, or more specifically patriarchal (McCann 9-13).

Although there are laws that prohibits discrimination based on gender, that does not mean that people are not being discriminated against. Research shows that people may commonly experience microaggressions or prejudice based on gendered stereotypes. Scholars Britney G. Brinkman and Kathryn M. Rickard did a study which examined and categorized college students’ experiences with gendered prejudice. Brinkman and Rickard categorized the

experiences in three types of events: “1) traditional gender role stereotypes, 2) sexual objectification, and 3) demeaning or derogatory comments and behaviors” (461-462). In their findings, they found that both genders experience on average more than two gender prejudice every day. However, during these events, women typically experience distress on a higher level than men. The most common type of gender prejudice experienced by both genders were traditional gender role stereotypes (Brinkman & Rickard 470-471).

Living in a social system where one gender has more power than the other, is unarguably disadvantageous for the oppressed gender. It is something most people wish to avoid. In reality, not everyone is willing to sacrifice their reputation, comfort, or lives for it. Brinkman et al. did a study on college women’s experiences with gender prejudice and bystander intervention. In their study they examined four factors which were considered by the bystander: social norms, cost-effectiveness, distress, and feminist activism. Brinkman et al. argues that an assessment of cost-effectiveness is an important factor in bystander intervention. The bystanders will consider whether or not it will be effective or beneficial to intervene. If the event they witness are causing them distress, they might feel that it is appropriate to intervene. If the bystander believes that intervening will break social norms, they might not. Brinkman et al. claims that the bystander will use their own experiences of distress when determining whether or not to intervene (Brinkman et al. 485-488). In their study Brinkman et al. suggest that gender as a factor is less important than the other four factors: social norms, cost-effectiveness, distress, and feminist activism (Brinkman et al. 494).

Humans are often victims to the herd mentality, meaning that people will go as far as ignore their own core values, to conform to the behaviors or beliefs of the group. As seen above, there are a lot of factors a bystander will consider before they intervene. An important factor is whether or not they will be breaking social norms. However, as long as no one speaks up against microaggressions towards others or themselves, they will continue to be accepted within the social norms of that group. Behavior we in theory consider unacceptable, such as gender prejudice, will then continue to be accepted in practice. Nadal et al. did a study on the impact racial microaggressions may have on a person’s mental health. In their study they found that microaggressions did negatively affect mental health. They found a correlation between microaggressions and the development of depressive symptoms and negative affect (Nadal et al. 57). Accepting any form of gender prejudice as social norms can be damaging to the individual, and put them in a vulnerable state.

The Power and *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* explore extremist views of feminism, and as a result, the manifestation of anti-feminist anxieties. The novels present

societies where gendered prejudice and microaggressions are accepted as social norms, similar to the contemporary society. However, in both novels, these types of societies quickly progress to societies where gender wars, men versus women, are inevitable. The novels then explore extremists' sides of gender movements, and how they use false narratives and the vilification of gender to conceal or excuse abuse of power. Simultaneously, the novels illustrate how power can corrupt regardless of gender. I therefore argue that the novels show that the fight for equality should focus on the misuse of power and not the vilification of gender.

2.2 Beyond Gender: How *The Hives* Explore Corruption and Power Imbalances

In *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*, a new form of power structure is introduced – *The Hives*. The first hive that is introduced, is Amanda's hive. It is a matriarchal society lead by a "queen". It is a society which oppresses and uses men. It can be argued that Amanda has taken advantage of men in a vulnerable state. She uses her sexuality as a tool for her manipulation along with addiction to keep them in that state. The environment she has created is not sustainable nor considerate of its members. The story of the hive proves that power can corrupt anybody regardless of gender, and I will use examples which highlight these claims.

In the novel, the egalitarian society has fallen apart due to a pandemic, citizens are forced to either rebuild or make a new society. The hives are a result of this. Instead of rebuilding the structure of the previous society, there are instead developed different types of hierarchies or groups within different societies. The power structures of the hives are similar to beehives, hence the name. There is a queen, the woman in power, and under her are workers and drones. The workers provide food and take care of the hive, while the drones' purpose is to mate with the queen. In the hives, men commonly play the roles as both workers and drones. For most of the men, the latter role rewards and justifies the first role. However, the portrayal of the hive suggests that the men in the hive are victims of a master-manipulator.

The protagonist of the novel is referred to as the *unnamed midwife*, as she takes on different names and identities throughout the novel. As women has become a minority, the unnamed midwife mostly disguises herself as a man. In the new world, men commonly treat women as property rather than individuals with self-autonomy. While there are small communities where women are in power, such as the hives, most of the US have resorted to patriarchy and power structures that oppress women. The hive-communities are independent from each other, and its followers have arguably chosen to join them. For the rest of the world,

the standard has become patriarchy and misogyny. It also differs from the matriarchal hive-communities as people do not choose to join it as it is the standard ideology of their new society. The unnamed midwife travels across the US searching for a safe haven that is sustainable and safe for women. On her search, she attempts to free and help the women she meets. She has a diary where she collects hers and other's stories.

The unnamed midwife first learns of the hives after LSD-missionary Honus Obermeyer comes back from his journey. An LSD-missionary is a Mormon who is responsible for preaching the gospel to others and ideally recruiting people to their religion. In the *Book of the Unnamed Midwife*, the missionaries are also expected to help the people in need. The story of the *first hive* is told from the perspective of Honus. It is referred to as the first hive, only because it is the first hive the unnamed midwife learns of. Honus is part of a small community of Mormons living on an abandoned farm. He is also married to Jodi, one out of three women that live on the farm. This makes Honus different than the rest of the missionaries, simply because he has a reason to return to his Mormon community. Honus is portrayed as a naïve, sheltered young adult. His descriptions from the first hive suggest that he has no to little experience with alcohol, drugs, or sex. Unlike Honus, his companion, Elder Langdon, does not return back from the hive. Elder Langdon is a missionary from the same community as Honus. As Honus escapes the hive, he reflects on his companion's decision. He questions whether "he made the choice or the choice was made for him" (Ellison 209).

The moment Honus enters the hive, his autonomy is taken from him. He is forced to drink alcohol, do drugs, and is not allowed to leave. Honus is terrified, worried about dying, and is struggling with the fact that he has strayed from his religious rules and morals. He mentions breaking the word of wisdom, a religious "law of health" which prohibits several substances (Ellison 206-207). His biblical references suggest that his religion is important to him. It is not something he is willing to abandon. Honus also uses a biblical reference to describe his struggles with Amanda. When she attempts to officially recruit Honus to her hive, she invites him to a private room. She is naked, and at one point she is trying to unzip his pants, which he declines. Afterwards, Honus claims that he "struggled like Jacob struggled with the angel" (Ellison 207). Jacob spent a whole night wrestling with an angel, and refused to let him go before the angel blessed him. The angel even managed to dislocate Jacob's hip, and he still refused to give up. Honus is comparing himself to Jacob, suggesting that this is the hardest and most significant "battle" of his life. The reference also suggests that he would not accept a loss, but "fight" temptation until he won.

When Amanda attempts to seduce Honus to stay, he tells her that he is married (Ellison 207). If Honus had not been married, he would most likely have given in to Amanda. Throughout their missionary journey, Honus commonly thinks of how much he misses his wife (Ellison 182). Essentially, his marriage has given him a purpose in a world where there is none. Arguably, his lack of experience, religion, and wife can be considered the reasons why he manages to escape the hive. Honus left the hive because he believed he had a better life back at the farm. However, as he worries that Langdon did not choose to stay himself, it is clear that Honus is becoming aware of the manipulation in Amanda's hive. Honus claims that he can never go back to the hive to rescue him either (Ellison 209). This might suggest that he is not confident he would escape again, and that he is too traumatized to come back. Honus has not experienced the pleasurable sides of what Amanda's hive has to offer.

Amanda is an example of a person who has been corrupted by power. She is powerful because of her femininity and the pleasures she can offer. The twenty men in her hive are also proof of both her power and abuse of it. She is looking for more men to join her hive, despite not having the resources to sustain their way of living. It can be argued that Amanda is not abusing her power only in order to survive, but also because she finds joy and fulfillment in it. The novel aims to show that power can corrupt anyone regardless of gender.

Elder Langdon is the missionary companion of Honus. Although he is older than Honus, the title of *elder* mostly refers to the fact that he is a religious leader. At one point, Honus reveals that Langdon is a virgin, and one can therefore assume that he has never been married. On the journey, days before the hive, Honus and Langdon's relationship becomes more and more complicated. Langdon stops speaking to him, he stops reading scriptures, and he wakes up Honus as he cries loudly in the middle of the night. Honus once asked him what was wrong, and he told him he misses his mother. Honus prays that Langdon will find God again, assuming that it will fix him (Ellison 180-182). Langdon has lost his purpose. It is highly likely that most of the men in the hive have lost women they cared about. Their world has fallen apart. There is no electricity, no running water, barely any food, and no functioning hospitals (Ellison 7-8). They live in a world with no purpose and no hope. It can therefore be argued that Amanda is only able to manipulate the men, because they are in a vulnerable state, seeking any form of purpose they can find. The novel is challenging the concept of gendered power. It is not necessarily the gender which will determine who will be in power and who will be oppressed. There are other factors to consider, such as the individual's social situation and mental state.

Amanda, the queen of the hive, is portrayed as manipulative and powerful. Her hive lives in a strip club, and her biggest asset is her sexuality. She walks around wearing see-

through dresses or in her underwear. Honus explains that she speaks to men as if they were the only one in the room. He claims that there were twenty men and that they were either on drugs or drinking (Ellison 206-208). After Langdon's meeting with Amanda, Honus asks him if he had taken the ecstasy-pill he was offered. Honus does not know what the pill is, only that it had a dolphin on it. Langdon replies, "I am the dolphin", confirming that he did (Ellison 208). It becomes clear that Amanda also uses substance abuse and addiction as a way of manipulating the men in the hive. Amanda is not strong enough to physically hurt the men and stop them from leaving, and she is aware of the limitations to her power. She instead uses other resources, such as drugs, to ensure that they do not leave. This is another example of how Amanda abuses her power.

Throughout the novel, there are other encounters of hives. A woman describes meeting another woman with a hive, which "tried to teach me how to keep a few guys on a string, to protect me and take care of me. [...] Kacie said it was just the natural reaction to things" (Ellison 273). After a while the first woman decided that she did not like it and decided to leave. It was a decision she later regretted. She was captured by slave traders, where she was beaten and raped for days (Ellison 274). This scene suggests that even if women are opposed to hives, they are essentially left with no choice. Either they control a hive, or they become a slave. With the hives, women are offered a chance of survival and they are willing to take it no matter the cost. In the novel there are other examples of hives which promotes sustainable living with a socialistic mindset. Even though women are always the community leaders of the hives, not all abuse their power. Amanda, on the other hand, became corrupted by that power.

2.3 The Neutral Narrator: Tunde's Role in Challenging Gender Extremism

The Power explores themes such as revolution, oppression, and gender wars. The novel explores events leading up to revolution and matriarchal states, and eventually, atom war and the end of the world. In order to build and maintain the matriarchal societies, some women believe the oppression of men ensures success, an anti-feminist anxiety. While challenging old and establishing new gendered power structures, the novel also challenges the concept of gendered power itself. It instead presents other factors than gender, such as social norms, bystander intervention, and gender prejudice, when exploring power structures. With this approach, the novel illustrates how misuse of power is not a gender issue, but instead a

societal issue. I will use examples from the novel which highlight these claims, and strengthens the argument that power can corrupt regardless of gender.

Tunde is a 21-year-old male from Nigeria. He is also one of the first victims of the power of the skein, a new organ which can produce electricity. However, only women have this organ. This ability has awoken in younger women all over the world, and can be transmitted to other women, similar to a virus. Essentially, women now have the ability to kill whomever they wish by a single touch and become the stronger sex. Tunde films a girl electrocuting a man, and the video he puts online is what officially starts the *Day of the Girls*. The Day of the Girls represents a new era, where the previous gendered power structure is challenged. For some, it is the start of both revolution and war (Alderman 12-17).

After Tunde published the video online, Cable News Network (CNN) contacts Tunde and asks to buy the video. They encourage him to film more videos to sell to them. This sparks Tunde's interest in journalism. Shortly after, he books a plane ticket and travels the world to document the changes and revolutions which begun after the Day of the Girls (Alderman 54-55). Throughout his travels, there has been cases where Tunde has experienced attempted murders and rape by women (Alderman 134-138). Despite this, Tunde never expresses hate or dislike towards women. Instead, he often defends them and shares their stories. He shows an appreciation towards the women who has protected him: "there had been women, these past years, who have put their bodies between him and harm so he could take his footage out to the world" (Alderman 179).

As Pham argues, mass communications can shape the discourses around feminism (7-8). However, Tunde's perception of the feminist movement is instead shaped by his travels, experiences and interviews. Although Tunde has met many women corrupted by power, he has met more women which are not. It can be argued that Tunde does not consider gender a factor for abuse of power, but instead considers societal factors that affects the individual's beliefs and actions. As a journalist, he has continuously made an effort to learn about the person's society, motives and dreams. This is likely why Tunde remains a neutral part in the alleged gender war. It is Tunde's role as a neutral narrator which reveals the false narratives of gender extremists Tatiana and Urbadox.

2.4 Deconstructing False Narratives in Gender Wars: The Role of Tatiana and Urbadox

This section illustrates further the argument that gender can corrupt regardless of gender. It also illustrates how extremists on both sides of the gender wars use “false narratives” to support their biased claims. Gender is presented as the main cause for injustice, oppression, and abuse by powerful people, in order to achieve and conceal their hidden ulterior motives. *The Power* presents two extremists on both sides of the gender war, Tatiana and Urbadox. The power-corrupted characters paint false narratives to their followers, in order to justify abuse of power. The novel challenges the concept of gendered power and the illusion of gender wars, by presenting three narratives: Tatiana’s misandristic narrative, Urbadox’s misogynistic narrative, and Tunde’s neutral narrative.

Tunde first meets Tatiana Moskalev when he is interviewing the president of Moldova, Viktor. Tatiana plays the role as the ideal, submissive wife. Tunde travels to the country to tell the story of the women in Moldova, who have freed themselves from oppression and slavery. He learns that Viktor is prepared to bomb his own country to stop the women from taking the power. After a private conversation with Tatiana, Tunde describes Tatiana as a “political operator of skill and intelligence”, and rightfully so (Alderman 98). He learns that the role as the submissive, clueless wife is just that, a role, because Tatiana has been scheming behind Viktor’s back (Alderman 92-98). After Tatiana’s husband, Viktor, dies of a heart attack in his sleep, she is chosen as the leader of the country. Tunde implies that Viktor’s death might not have been accidental, but that it was Tatiana which stopped his heart (Alderman 95-97). Tatiana shortly after creates a new kingdom for the freed women. The state, Bessapara, is at the border of Moldova. When claiming land that does not belong to Moldova originally, she declares war on the four surrounding countries (Alderman 92-98).

When Tatiana is discussing the future of Bessapara with Margot, a Senator from the US, she explains her goals for her new state: “‘All we want,’ says Tatiana, ‘is American Dream, right here in Bessapara. We are new nation, plucky little state bordered by a terrible enemy. We want to live freely, to pursue our own way of life. We want opportunity. That’s all.’” (Alderman 221). Tatiana’s descriptions of her state paint a narrative of a small, powerless state whose biggest concern is its citizens. However, this narrative quickly shatters during a party where several important figures and leaders are invited. Tunde is one of the invitees (Alderman 217). Tunde is most likely invited because of the private conversation he had with Tatiana the first time they met. Tunde is an attractive male, so when he flirts with

Tatiana, she seems to be somewhat smitten with him. She also asks him to remember her when he is successful (Alderman 96-98). Tunde is likely the first man Tatiana has met that has treated her like an equal. It is possible that Tatiana invited Tunde because she either likes him or considers him to be an ally.

Although the event is presented as a party, Tatiana has ulterior motives. It becomes clear for Tunde that she wishes to form allies and strengthen her kingdom (Alderman 217). At the party, Tunde notices a waiter bleeding from his mouth (Alderman 239). He had been forced to lick up a broken bottle of brandy from the floor because he spoke without Tatiana's permission (Alderman 229). After speaking to him, Tunde learns that the young waiter is only seventeen, and has no way to escape Bessapara. The waiter explains that it was his fault for speaking when the President was speaking. Most interesting, no one else in the room acknowledges the injured waiter (Alderman 239-240). Instead, the surrounding people either encouraged the event or choose to remain silent. Afterwards, Tatiana even says, "can you believe he did that?", suggesting he had a choice (Alderman 229-230). By doing so, she manages to transfer the blame from her to him.

Tunde receives a paper from the waiter, which says "THEY'RE GOING TO TRY TO KILL US" (Alderman 240). The waiter is asking Tunde for help. Tunde realizes that his idea of Tatiana and her intentions were wrong: "he'd thought, because he'd met Tatiana Moskalev in the past and she'd been kind to him, that he understood what was happening here. He'd been looking forward to seeing her again. Now he's glad he didn't have the chance to reintroduce himself" (Alderman 240). There is a big contrast between the false narrative Tatiana painted and the true narrative Tunde has witnessed. For Tunde, Tatiana then becomes an unreliable narrator. Tatiana's acts of war had previously been justified to free women from oppression. Later, Tatiana justifies the oppression of and war against men, by referring to previous patriarchies: "remember what Tatiana says. We don't have to ask what they'd do if they were in control" (Alderman 230).

Tatiana is hiding her true intentions behind a false narrative. Similar to Amanda from *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*, Tatiana is no longer using her power solely to survive or escape oppression. While Tatiana's journey may have started that way, that stopped as soon as she started oppressing and abusing men. However, with her false narratives she attempts to manipulate others to see her as a survivor and savior, rather than a power-corrupted oppressor. Tatiana's narrative paints men as evil oppressors, which will do anything to regain power and build their ideal patriarchal world. In her eyes, men are the enemy. Her misandristic narrative continuously justifies her actions, and those who believe her will not see Tatiana as power

corrupted. She is instead considered a savior doing what is necessary for the greater good of all women. In reality, Tatiana have become the female version of Viktor. A false narrative is therefore used to hide the corruption of power. However, a neutral narrative will reveal that power can corrupt regardless of gender.

After the party, Tunde attempts to sell his story about the waiter from the party. However, every news outlet declines his offer. As he tries to publish it himself, he learns that several websites, such as *YouTube*, have been blocked. Tatiana has put Bessapara under Internet Censorship. Although not confirmed, it is suggested between the lines that the news outlets that are rejecting Tunde's story are either silenced, scared, or supportive of Tatiana. Over the next few weeks Bessapara establishes several laws which further ensures the oppression of men. The hotel takes Tunde's passport, so that he can no longer leave when he wishes to (Alderman 240-241). This is the beginning of an authoritarian state. As mentioned before, discourses on feminism can be affected by how it's portrayed in mass media. This may be the reason for the censorship: Tatiana wishes to control the mass media, so that she can continue to paint her false narrative.

As mentioned, Tatiana becomes an oppressive leader similar to Viktor. In Bessapara, the murder of men will no longer be investigated. Men will need a female guardian who controls their passport and official documents. Without a female guardian they will be imprisoned. Men cannot drive cars, gather without a woman present, own their own businesses, or leave the country with money or possessions. Most significantly, men cannot vote. These laws are for both residents and visitors. To enforce these rules, women are expected to discipline the men which breaks the law. If they do not, they are considered enemies of the state (Alderman 242-244). Tatiana makes it nearly impossible to leave the state for men, and for women to help them.

A false narrative can make it easy to view gender as a determining factor for abuse of power. However, gender might not be a factor to consider at all. Several of the characters commonly use gender as a cause for the novel's many tragedies. It can instead be argued that the people in power manipulated the others to believe it was a war about gender to benefit their own ulterior motives. Tatiana claimed the other gender was the reason for war, when in reality it was an excuse to abuse her power and achieve her true intentions (Alderman 221-223). Similar to Amanda with the hive in *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*, it can be argued that Tatiana manipulates a vulnerable group of people for her own benefit.

The same argument can be made about Urbadox, a misogynic online personality. Both characters paint false narratives. When constantly placing blame on the other gender,

gender eventually become the default scapegoat. Leaders such as Tatiana and Urbadox can then get away with war, murders and abuse – like hiding in plain sight. After the first meeting with Tatiana, Tunde has an interview with Urbadox, the creator of *UrbanDoxSpeaks.com*. He is the leader of a men’s rights movement. However, the movement paints a misogynistic narrative, and later becomes a terrorist organization. Tunde documents the first bombing at a mall in Arizona, where men are protesting for “justice” (Alderman 170-172).

Tunde describes Urbadox as a white male in his mid-fifties. He has had a difficult childhood filled with abuse, failures and racism. He has been producing misogynistic and racist content for years long before the Day of the Girls. At the time of the interview, his latest publication was on what he refers to as the *Coming Gender War*. Urbadox believes that a chemical substance was put into the water supply during the Second World War, and that is why the women have developed the skein. He believes the Coming Gender War was planned by the women back then (Alderman 176-178).

There are several phrases which Urbadox uses to make abuse of power a gender issue rather than an individualistic issue. He claims that women hate men, and that they wish to murder all men. However, this claim is false. When Tunde was captured by a female paramilitary group, a girl named Roxy Monke saved him, even when he had nothing to offer in return (Alderman 274-275). The captured men were put into small cages, where they stayed until they were sacrificed to *the Mother*, a religious rite from a new religion stemming from The Day of the Girls (Alderman 269-271). Roxy saved Tunde from certain death. A similar event happened in India, when a woman attempted to rape and murder Tunde. However, three unknown women rescue Tunde and instead murder the woman (Alderman 137-138).

Urbadox uses gendered prejudice to justify the war against women. As for the men supporting women, he claims they are “weak, traitors to their gender”, and that they “are being ruled by fags who worship women” (Alderman 179-180). However, for Tunde this claim is also false. When Tunde arrives in Saudi-Arabia to document the revolution there, the women first reject him, claiming that they do not wish to walk with a man. He negotiates with the women and asks them to trust him. He is well aware of the dangers he faces: “There are maybe thirty women watching this now. Any one of them could kill him with a single blow” (Alderman 56-57). Eventually, they let him walk with them. He holds the hand of the leader of the group: “She does not hurt him; not even a flicker of it leaks into him” (Alderman 58). There is mutual respect between Tunde and the women. None of Tunde’s actions aligns with what one would expect of a brainwashed, women-worshipping traitor. In fact, Tunde helps people in need regardless of their gender, as he did with the injured waiter. Tunde also

attempts to stand up to Tatiana, by revealing the true narrative of Bessapara. He has his own beliefs of right and wrong which he acts from. He does not act from the will of women nor men.

Essentially, the men can either support Urbadox and the fight against women, or they can join the women as traitors. In Urbadox's narrative, there are no non-belligerent options. Similar to Tatiana, Urbadox paints a false narrative to hide the argument that gender can corrupt regardless of power. Instead, he fronts the narrative that men need to be in power. Urbadox refers to his own religious beliefs, and argues that "this is why God meant men to be the ones with the power" (Alderman 180). In other words, Urbadox does not necessarily believe in equality. By arguing that men should be in power, he is contributing to maintaining gendered prejudice and traditional gender roles.

In our contemporary society there are similar men's activist figures that have much in common with Urbadox and his false narratives, such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson. PhD Student in Social Psychology, Bethan Iley, argue that the two men's views on masculinity and feminism can harm both men and women. Essentially, they are advocating for traditional gender roles, where the ideal man is "physically strong and seek resources and status (in today's world, money and fame)", and that women "should serve their partner and nurture their children" (Iley). Iley claims that these arguments undermine gender equality. Further, she claims that they are portraying a false narrative in which "men and women are battling for power". This belief can damage the progress for gender equality. Iley suggests that gender issues should be discussed in a way which does not make men feel threatened, and instead that show the benefits of feminism for both genders (Iley). While Urbadox is a fictional character, his narratives and beliefs have much in common with similar activists in our own society. These narratives focus solemnly on gender as a cause for certain issues in our society.

The discourses that Tatiana and Urbadox uses about gender and power have much in common. Both are painting narratives that suggest that all men or all women are evil, and that they should be restricted or stopped. Urbadox claims that women are manipulating men with kindness, and that it makes the men "weak and afraid" (Alderman 179). With this argument, Urbadox makes it impossible for a woman to prove him wrong. The argument strengthens the vilification of women, and contributes to normalizing gendered prejudice. Tatiana's arguments about men and power do the same. Both also consider an impartial person to be a traitor to their own gender.

Both Tatiana and Urbadox justifies their abuse of power by blaming the other gender. By doing so they remove the responsibility from themselves, and omit other more important factors as causes for the conflicts. It can therefore be argued that the novel uses both Tatiana and Urbadox as a way to portray two extremes of the polarized gender discourse. It can further be argued that extremism then mischaracterizes gender movements, as it makes the battle for equality mostly about gender and not power. Focusing on other factors such as social norms, bystander intervention, and gender prejudice can strengthen the argument that extremists mischaracterize gender movements on purpose to create a false narrative which encourages gender as the factor to blame for inequality.

2.5 Margot: Challenging Gendered Power

Margot is another woman who develops the power. She differs from the women above, as she is a mayor in a small state in the US. She does not live in a society which actively oppresses women, but does commonly experience gendered prejudice. She often experiences it in her workplace, and by her coworker David (Alderman 18-20). Her narrative challenges the concept of gendered power. My argument is that power does not stem solely from gender, but rather from her internal sense of empowerment, which in turn motivates her to behave and act in a powerful manner.

Margot explains how David speaks to her as if he had the ability to fire her, even though they are equals. It is not before she gets the power that she feels powerful enough to stand up to him. She fantasizes about killing the men in her office, even though she claims she never would. She claims that “the power to hurt is a kind of wealth” (Alderman 71). Margot *knows* that she is powerful, and that makes her powerful. When referring to the power to hurt as a wealth, it may suggest that that power to hurt should be considered a privilege, such as wealth is.

In their study on effects of gender and authority in the workplace, Doering and Thébaud argue that genders status beliefs can affect a woman’s ability to establish authority at her workplace (Doering and Thébaud 558). This suggests that it will be more challenging for her to influence coworkers and work tasks. The research also shows that in male-type roles, it is the men that experience strong compliance advantages compared to women. In women-types roles, both genders more or less experience the same levels of compliance (Doering and Thébaud 558).

After Margot speaks to her male coworkers in an assertive and powerful manner, “She thinks, That is how a man speaks. And that is why” (Alderman 71). Margot is referring to that speaking with power and confidence, actually works and gives her the result she wishes. The way she speaks silences Daniel (Alderman 71). Men may be more used to speaking in a powerful and determined manner. As mentioned, Margot feels powerful, and therefore acts that way. Similarly, someone who feels powerless will most likely act it. Thus, the powerful individuals and institutions continue to stay in power. This suggests that gender-based power structures are more a product of biased attitudes and prejudices towards specific genders, rather than a natural result of gender itself.

2.6 Reframing the Concept of Gendered Power: Other Factors for Corruption of Power

This section aims to investigate other factors that can cause corruption of power. By investigating these factors, it can be argued that gender is not one of the leading factors for abuse of power. It strengthens the argument that power can corrupt regardless of gender. Simultaneously, it argues that institutions and powerful figures instead manipulates other to not use their powers for good. These institutions become extended agents of the individual, and will subconsciously affect the person’s decisions and beliefs.

In the novel, Moldova is described as the “world capital of human sex-trafficking” (Alderman 93). It is the sex-trafficked women who starts the revolution in Moldova. They learn to use their new powers, and as they grow stronger, more women are freed from the traffickers. While they kill men who captured them, they are not satisfied with only punishing their captors. One of the trafficked women justifies the murder of the other male citizens by explaining how they were guilty of association: “The police knew what was happening and did nothing. The men in the town beat their wives if they tried to bring us more food. The Mayor knew what was happening, the landlords knew what was happening, *postmen* knew what was happening” (Alderman 94). The lack of bystander intervention was interpreted as silent support. Turning a blind eye to the trafficking and crimes that were happening became the norm in their society. It can however be argued that both the men and women were victims of their society. In this case, social factors can be considered the reason for female oppression, rather than gender.

As discussed above, the bystander will consider the costs of intervening. If the cost is too high, or if they do not consider the intervention to be effective, they will most likely avoid

intervention. However, as Brinkman et al. point out, the lack of intervention can often be interpreted as silent support for the perpetrators and their actions (Brinkman et al. 488). Even if most of the Moldavians may have been against the trafficking, they were perhaps too afraid to speak against it because of the inescapable consequences of doing so. Simultaneously, if no one speaks up against it, it will, in a sense, become an accepted act of that society. The social norm becomes to not intervene. Because of this, the threshold to intervene becomes higher. As a result, no one will challenge the perpetrators, and they will continue to hold the power. Men possibly allowed it to happen because of fear, not because of the hatred of women.

While some bystanders may wish to intervene, others may not believe there is reason to. Philosophy scholar Neil Levy discusses social dimensions of moral responsibility. He argues that the agent often extends further than the individual. Institutions or other individuals may be responsible for the individual's perception of moral responsibility. The institutions and individuals are then considered extended agents (Levy 1). Levy argues that way the individual is socially situated can affect the epistemic condition of moral responsibility. The individual may act in a way they believe is morally responsible, a way which they have been taught by extended agents. However, what they have been taught may be false or limited. Their agency will then be affected by their social situation. Further, Levy refers to the "merchants of doubts", an individual or organization who knowingly and purposely spreads false beliefs. He claims that the media is an important benefactor for the "merchant of doubts". He believes that the extended agents have a significant role in structuring the individual's agency (Levy 16-18).

In the Moldovan society described in the novel, the "merchants of doubts" may be the traffickers, police, and mayor. Authority figures such as police and politicians are expected to lead by example, and establish social norms and laws which are morally right. The citizens of Moldova will see that its authority figures are doing nothing against the sex-trafficking of women, and thus supporting female oppression and misogyny. They become the extended agents of the Moldovan individual. In the next sections I will give examples of how extended agents and "merchants of doubts" are manifested in the novel.

The citizens become oblivious victims of their extended agents. One can, however, assume that an environment which turns a blind eye to trafficking and abuse of women, will be an environment where women commonly experience gendered prejudice. As seen above, women attempting to help the trafficked victims are beat by their husbands (Alderman 94). The consequences of intervening may shape how the bystander decides to intervene. Bystanders worried about social norms and cost-effectiveness will most likely avoid using a

confrontational response (Brinkman et al. 488). However, as soon as the women in the novel considered it effective and beneficial to intervene, they did.

A thirteen-year-old girl delivered food to the trafficked women who were kept in a basement. The girl was the daughter of a man who kept lookout for the traffickers. They continuously asked for her help, but she refused every time: “The women think the girl may be deaf. Or she has been told to be deaf” (Alderman 93). This is an example of a young citizen being taught to turn a blind eye by an extended agent and their “merchants of doubt”. Not intervening is continuously established as a social norm. However, one night the captured women ask for her to leave them a light. It is the first and only time she helps them. The girl creates a spark with her fingers. She has developed the skein. Her spark ignites the power in the other women. They practice in the dark until they are strong enough to kill their capturers (Alderman 92-93).

The young girl’s intervention was minimal, but the impact was great. After she learned of her new ability, she most likely considered the cost and risk of her intervention to be worth it. Similar events happened for the women in India. Tunde travels to India to document their revolution. A woman he meets was at a protest three years earlier. She explains signing a petition and holding up a banner. She describes it as being part of a “wave of spray from the ocean”, which felt powerful, but quickly dried up and was forgotten (Alderman 133). The contemporary revolution involves murder, terror and war. The woman explains the new revolution as a tsunami: “the only wave that changes anything is a tsunami. You have to tear down the houses and destroy the land if you want to be sure no one will forget you” (Alderman 133). This suggests that the women see abuse of power as a necessary tool for obtaining freedom. It is similar to what Levy suggests, “correcting the widespread ignorance will require reforming the institutions” (18). They need to tear down the previous structures of society to a state where they can rebuild a new one.

The revolutions mentioned above are a result of the oppression of women. Both countries have societies that have limited the autonomy and rights of women. They have societies where the norm seems to be misogyny and inequality. The ignorance and lack of moral responsibility is continuously established in their societies because of no bystander intervention. However, their society and social norms also make the threshold for bystander intervention high. It becomes a vicious cycle. In this sense, most citizens are victims of their social situation. The trafficked women fail to see the individual and its extended agents and chooses instead to see gender – men – as cause and reason for their suffering. The men fighting the women during the revolutions do the same in return. A person’s social situation

will be a factor which can cause marginalization. People inherit their beliefs and values from their families and society they grew up in, and to avoid conflict, the individual must conform with its society's values. As a result, factors such as bystander intervention and extended agents challenge the concept of gendered power.

2.7 Conclusion

On one hand, I have argued that Tatiana and Urbadox should be held accountable for their actions as individuals. In the novel they are the prime examples of “merchants of doubts”. However, I have also argued that the individual should not be held responsible for their agency alone. One must also consider their social situation. It becomes a paradox; we should hold the individual responsible for their agency, but also consider their extended agents. Despite being novels which explore concepts such as gender wars and anti-feminist anxieties, gender does not seem to be the determining factor of how the novels portray power and the abuse of it. When focusing on other factors than gender that are found in the novels, such as social norms and bystander intervention, it challenges the narratives of gendered power and the narratives of gender wars.

The novels tell narratives of powerful people abusing their power and taking advantage of the vulnerable. Based on the narratives, it can be argued that power can corrupt anybody regardless of gender. The main takeaways from the novels are that gender is often used to either conceal or justify the intentions behind the abuse of power. While issues with gendered prejudice and oppression are very real and should be taken seriously, the solution is more complex than simply claiming one gender is more powerful than the other. Perhaps it is simply feeling powerful, like Margot or Amanda, which makes you powerful.

The novels show that the narrative of gendered power is not particularly beneficial when it comes to addressing abuse of power. Instead, we should view abuse of power as a broader societal problem that involves individuals, their extended agents, and the wider society. As discussed above, the novels explore the manifestation of anti-feminist anxieties, such as matriarchal societies which oppresses men. However, the novels are not warnings against the feminist movement. They are instead novels advocating for the discussion around gendered power and oppression. This is shown by illustrating that power can corrupt regardless of gender, and that false narratives are often used to blame gender for social issues.

Chapter 3: Double Standards and Gender Bias: The Hypocrisy of the Contemporary Society

3.1 Introduction

The Power explores female fears and anxieties in the contemporary society, by speculating on a world where these fears belong to men instead. The novel speculates on a world where men become the main victims of gendered prejudice, abuse, rape, and oppression, and it explores how the contemporary society would react to such changes. In the novel, most governments react instantly to save men from injustice and abuse. It creates a contrast to our contemporary behavior, where the same behavior, mainly happening towards women, seem to be somewhat “accepted”, simply because not much is done to prevent it (Brinkman et al. 495). The novel explores the question: would we care more if men were the main victims of the gendered prejudice and crimes women commonly endure?

As a result, the novel reveals the failed logic behind the moral arguments found in gender movements. Extremists often use gender as a cause for bad behavior, as discussed in the previous chapter. For example, Urbadox who claimed all women hate men and want them dead, and therefore all women need to be controlled (Alderman 179). Essentially, these types of moral arguments can be simplified to “women are hurting men and they need to be stopped” or vice versa. These types of moral arguments found in gender movements are challenged by the failed logic illustrated in the novel, as it portrays how some behavior is deemed “acceptable” or as a matter of course depending on the gender of the victim (York 17). This is for example illustrated in the novel when all girls and women are villainized because the rise of female perpetrators, whereas men never was, even when most perpetrators were male.

This chapter aims to examine how *The Power* critiques the double standards and hypocrisy that perpetuate gendered prejudice in our society. By exposing the false logic behind moral arguments commonly used in gender movements, the novel challenges readers to rethink their position and become more aware of gender biases. By providing the reader with new perspectives, *The Power* can reveal the ways in which gender influences our reaction to victims and perpetrators of power abuse.

3.2 The Gendered Double Standards: Society's Response to Male Victimization

As previously mentioned, men become the victims of assault and abuse of women. The novel illustrates the double standards in our society, and questions whether or not we would accept the same issues or abuse women face, if it were happening towards men. A critical reading of the novel suggests that we allow different types of behaviors depending on the gender of the victim, suggesting further it might be because of how deeply gendered prejudice is embedded into our society. In this section, I will show examples from the novel of this, and how they can be compared to contemporary society. By portraying men as the main victims of assault, while speculating on what a society would do to prevent it, the novel critiques the double standards and hypocrisies in our society.

The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) did several studies on behalf of the UK government on the “perceptions of personal safety and experiences of harassment”, referred to as “Perceptions of personal safety and experiences of harassment, Great Britain: 2 to 27 June 2021” and “Perceptions of personal safety and experiences of harassment, Great Britain: 16 February to 13 March 2022”. In their study from 2021, they found that “one in two women and one in seven men felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a quiet street near their home”, “one in two women and one in five men felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a busy public place”, and “four out of five women and two out of five men felt unsafe walking alone after dark in a park or other open spaces” (Office for National Statistics B).

It is not uncommon for women to feel unsafe when walking alone at night. On harassment, “more women (27%) than men (16%) reported they had experienced at least one form of harassment in the previous 12 months”. When comparing the 2021-study to the 2022-study, they saw that there had been an increase of people feeling unsafe “in a park or open space”, and as a result, more avoided walking in these spaces after dark. The survey also showed that “women aged 16 to 34 felt the most unsafe of any age and sex group using public transportation alone after dark” (Office for National Statistics A). In *The Power*, these statistics shift and men become the main victims of assault, leading to avoidance of activities such as walking alone at night.

In *The Power*, when the young girls develop their power, they start using it on their male classmates. On the fifth day after The Day of the Girls, the boys and girls are separated. The Day of the Girls represents a new era, where the previous gendered power structure is shifted after the power is awoken in the young girls (Alderman 12-17). First, they take different buses to their schools, then videos surface of young girls that are attacking innocent

boys, by electrocuting some of them until their eyes bleed. Then, parents start telling boys to not go out alone or walk too far away from home. The separation of boys and girls ensures the safety of the boys. However, the girls start attacking each other. As a result, many of the citizens demand that 15-year-old girls should be put in a high security prison (Alderman 21-22).

After the revolutions begins, the government face more pressure from the public. The revolutions began because oppressed women started fighting against patriarchal societies. Daniel, a government employee, suggests, “They should shoot those girls. Just shoot them. In the head. *Bam*. End of story” (Alderman 85). Some of the solutions offered are to either imprison the girls or shoot them. All the girls who use their power are categorized as evil, regardless of why they used it. As a result, all women are considered dangerous, simply because they have the power to be dangerous. Women become the majority of perpetrators, and that is used as an argument by extremists, claiming all women are evil and that a gender war is necessary to stop them.

In our contemporary society, some have recognized the issues women face regarding perceptions of safety and the risks of harassment when leaving the house. Some countries, like the UK, have created projects dedicated to protecting women. In 2021, the UK government funded a new project: The Safety of Women at Night Fund. The funds went to organizations which are working to ensure the safety of women and girls at night. The money went towards initiatives such as “drink spiking detection kits, a transport safety campaign and trained staff to support safe taxi journeys” (UK Government A). In July 2021 the UK government published a document named “Tackling violence against women and girls strategy”. This strategy was to ensure the safety of women in all aspects of their lives (UK Government B). The victims are protected, but the perpetrators are not necessarily punished.

Scholars Hohl and Stanko did a study on how and why the justice system fails to prosecute rape crimes. According to them, most rapes are not reported to the police, and when they are only a minority result in conviction (Hohl and Stanko 324-325). This creates a contrast to how a similar issue was solved in the novel, where instead all possible perpetrators, the women, were punished. The novel critiques the gendered prejudice found in the contemporary society, by suggesting we would treat female perpetrators different than male perpetrators. It also illustrates the failed logics of our society, as one can assume the societies portrayed in *The Power* are based on contemporary societies. If young girls had been at risk for experiencing assault and harassment before *The Day of the Girls*, there had been no similar precautions taken to avoid this. Essentially, although men used to be the prosecutors

of abusive or violent behavior, that was not acknowledged as an issue when women were the victims.

As the government learns that young girls can awake the power in older women, they are discussing how to keep it under control. Margot is a government employee, working as a mayor in a small US city. Margot's coworker, David demands that they test all government employees state-wide. They test with an electrical device which can measure if the women have electricity in them. As for why that is necessary, Daniel claims, "You can't have someone employed in government buildings who can do that. It's like walking around with a loaded gun" (Alderman 62-63). If Margot tests positive for the skein, she risks losing her position in the government, because "certain positions involving contact with children and the public have been mandated as unsuitable by the Governor's office" (Alderman 66).

When comparing this scene from the novel to the contemporary society, the failed logic becomes clear. Women as a gender have become generalized as villains, feeding into the moral argument of the extremists' gender movements, suggesting all women are bad and must be stopped. This creates a double standard, because once again, other issues where men are the main perpetrators, have been ignored. For example, in the novel, no actions were taken to prevent the sex trafficking and oppression of women that was happening in Moldova, but when women are doing similar actions to the Moldovan men, the world reacts (Alderman 92-94).

By establishing mandatory testing of the skein, the government are strengthening the extremists' argument which villainizes women. Normally, one would be considered unsuitable to work with children because of crimes one has committed, not because of one's gender. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 97% of sexual assault offenders between 2010-2020 were male (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Although the majority of sex offenders are male, that does not mean all men are banned from certain jobs or places as a precaution, because that would be considered gender discrimination. However, gender discrimination does not seem to be a concern for Margot and her co-workers in the government.

The same argument about male perpetrators can be made towards gun owners. According to Pew Research Center, in 2020 nearly eight-in-ten (79%) US murders involved the use of a firearm (Gramlich). Research also shows that gun ownership in the US, is highest among white men. 48% of white men claim the own a gun, compared to 24% of nonwhite men, 24% of white women, and 16% of nonwhite women (Parker et al.). In summary, men are then the primary sex offenders and gun owners. In the novel, these statistics are ignored. Once

again, the novel hints at the gendered prejudice in our society, questioning whether or not we would treat male victims differently than female victims. It also illustrates the hypocrisies in our society, where we choose to ignore some factors, and magnify others, depending on our motives.

3.3 From Self-Interests to Action: How Personal Investment Shapes Beliefs

We expect the people who are in power to act towards our best interests. There are several examples of politicians changing their opinions for the better, because they were provided new perspectives. New perspectives can make a person rethink their position. However, the change of heart is not necessarily because they are acting towards the peoples' best interests. For some, it is because of their personal investment in the matter. The change is made in order to protect themselves or their loved ones. One example from the novel is how Margot uses her political powers to help her daughter learn how to use her skein. To her citizens, she claims it is to help all young girls, although she previously thought girls who could not control it should be considered dangerous (Alderman 69-70). *The Power* illustrates further the hypocrisies and double standards, and as a result, the gendered prejudice embedded into our society, by using Margot and her conflicting roles as both mother and politician.

In the novel, the government decides that all government employees have to be tested to see if they have the skein. Margot manages not to not trigger the test. In fact, she finds it easy to withhold her power. Although she is against the state-wide testing, she signs a paper "saying that this testing equipment will help save lives" (Alderman 69). However, she only does this after she learns it's possible to cheat the test, and justifies it to herself with "any women who can't stop herself from discharging under this mild pressure is a danger to herself, a danger, yes, to society" (Alderman 69-70). Because Margot herself can control her power easily, she does not have sympathy towards those who cannot. However, later Margot learns that her daughter, Jocelyn, is struggling to control her power. On some days she can use it, on other days it is like it is gone (Alderman 149). Because of her daughter, Margot contradicts her previous statement and now wishes to protect women who struggle with their power. It illustrates Margot's hypocrisy, as her previous opinions do not apply to her daughter. Margot is only changing her beliefs because she is personally affected, and not because of her morals. This is problematic because as a politician, she should not protect the rights of the citizens only when she is personally affected.

Margot's situation can be compared to our society, where there are several examples of politicians' double morals. American politician and businessman Dick Cheney was the 46th vice president of the US. He served under George Bush and the Republican Party from 2001-2009. Cheney was a conservative politician, who did not support gay marriage. Surprisingly, as Bush attempted to endorse a constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage, Cheney spoke up against it. The reason he did that, was because he had a gay daughter, Mary Cheney. He instead argued that he believed that that decision should be made by the states themselves (Rao). Politician Rob Portman, also part of the Republican Party, changed his stance against gay marriage. Similar to Cheney, he was also previously against gay marriage. He was campaigning for Mitt Romney in 2012. Portman released a statement in support of same sex marriage, and that "the joy and stability of marriage" was something he wished for all his children, including his gay son. Prior to this, Portman even sought advice from Cheney, as he related to his experience with his daughter (Bash).

However, not all of the Cheney-family was supportive of Mary. Her sister, Liz Cheney, spoke up against same-sex marriage, which led to a public feud between the sisters. Eight years later, in 2021, Liz Cheney expressed regret for her previous stance, claiming that she was wrong and that "I love my sister very much. I love her family very much" (Sprunt). However, despite claiming that it was time to work against the discrimination happening in the US, especially for the LGBTQ community, she voted against the *Equality Act*, a legislation "that would have amended the 1964 Civil Rights Act to explicitly prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity" (Sprunt). This can be compared to Margot, which was willing to do everything to help her Jocelyn. However, she was not willing to sacrifice her political reputation to help Tatiana in her fight against oppression. Tatiana became the leader of the revolution happening in Moldova, and eventually the leader of a new country (Alderman 221).

As mentioned, Margot desperately wants to help her daughter learn how to control the power, and to do this, she wants to open government funded training camps for the young girls. To do this, she brings her daughter to a talk show. Unfortunately, Jocelyn previously sent a boy to the hospital by using her powers on him, but this event is something they use to their advantage. When confronted with it by the talk show hosts, she paints herself as the victim, telling how scary it was and how she wishes someone had shown her how to control it (Alderman 86-87). The scene is "perfect. She's so young and fresh and beautiful and sad" (Alderman 87).

Margot argues for the camps as the only way to help the girls. After the show, Margot receives over one and a half million dollars in donations in total from citizens (Alderman 86-90). Margot manipulates the situation to her advantage, painting the girls as victims of their power. Essentially, she argues that they did not choose to develop the power, and that the best solution will be to learn the girls how to control it and to not cause harm. This goes against her previous actions as mayor, where she decided upon precautions which villainized the girls. Margot receives donations from “worried parents” and other investors. She claims it will be a “model of how government and business can work hand in glove” (Alderman 90). Although Margot wishes to help her daughter, she and others also see it as a business opportunity, which can benefit her political career.

Margot changed her opinion on the girls and the power, because of her daughter. Before she learned that her daughter struggled to use her power, she believed girls who could not control it was a danger to society. However, after her daughter’s struggles, she used her political powers to develop training camps for the young girls. With this, the novel illustrates the hypocrisy and double standards of our society, and how people will not rethink their position before they are personally invested. Although it may seem like they are acting for other’s best interests, they are acting as a result of self-interest.

3.4 Rethinking Victims: A Male Perspective

As previously discussed, new perspectives can make a person rethink their position. In *The Power*, the perspective of a male rape victim Ricky, can challenge the gendered prejudice female rape victims experience. With a new perspective, the novel attempts to create awareness towards the gendered prejudice in our society. Female rape victims face victim blaming and rape myth acceptance because of gendered prejudice, and the novel invites the reader to rethink their position by portraying men that experience these prejudices. The portrayal of male victim, Ricky, challenges this gendered prejudice.

Roxy, the daughter of a mob boss located in the UK, is given a leading role in the ‘family business’ after she develops the skein. She suddenly became more powerful than her brothers, and it does not take long before she is involved with the revolutions, providing a new power-enhancing drug for the women, called *Glitter*. However, when she learns that her brother Ricky has been violently assaulted and raped by three women, her other brothers expect her bring her brother justice (Alderman 193-194).

The narrative of male rape victim Ricky becomes an example of how *The Power* illustrates and critiques the double standards of our society. With the narrative of a male rape victim, the novel offers a new perspective which can challenge the discourses on rape myths and victim blaming. The novel is narrating a male rape victim's experience through the eyes of Roxy, a female perspective. With regards to Ricky's assault and rape, Roxy thinks, "this is not what happens to a man" (Alderman 195). However, the novel raises important questions: what if this *was* primarily happening to men? What if men were the main victims of sexual assault? What would that mean with regards to rape myth acceptance and victim-blaming?

The Power paints a perspective where the characters watch the rape statistics change, as the number of male rape victims rises, and the number of female victims lowers. In the novel, female rape myths, which encourages victim blaming, are instead discussed surrounding the rape of Ricky. The 'typical' male and female perspectives are switched. By doing so, the readers are encouraged to put aside their gendered prejudice, which they might have had if the victim was female. Roxy's perspective of Ricky and his rape to show how *The Power* challenges the discourse surrounding female rape victims.

After the rape, Roxy thinks that "Ricky doesn't seem that bad", and "he'll probably be fine". She continues, "This kind of thing heals. She's heard that things can be difficult afterwards though. It can be hard to get over" (Alderman 194). Roxy learns that Ricky asked them to stop, but that he did not fight or resist. He had been drinking and that he was the one who followed them outside the club. They are hiding the assault from their father, because Roxy believes he would hate Ricky for it, because "this is not what happens to a man. Except now it is" (Alderman 194-195). These are typical examples of victim-blaming.

Roxy suggests that he might have deserved it because of the way he was acting (Alderman 197). Roxy acknowledged the stigma and shame surrounding rape, but as she has not been in that situation herself, she struggles to sympathize with him. By stating several times that he will be fine, Roxy also treats the rape as a trivial event. However, after the event, when they discuss Ricky's role in the family business, they hint at the physical and mental injuries Ricky suffered, acknowledging the impact it has on the victim. Roxy states that, "Ricky's not coming back to the life, not for years, maybe not ever, and not how he was" (Alderman 198-200). Roxy is characterizing as someone who has a high rape myth acceptance and who blames the victim. Although she does not condone that behavior, and decides to seek justice for Ricky, her character illustrates how gendered prejudice is embedded into the subconsciousness of the individual.

Scholars of psychological science Amy Rose Grubb and Emily Turner did a study on the attribution of blame in rape cases. Their findings indicate that men demonstrate higher rape myth acceptance and attribute higher levels of blame to victims than woman (Grubb and Tuner 443). They explain rape myths as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists”, and further claim that they are considered as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that they serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Grubb and Turner 445). More specifically, it is a pattern where they “blame the victim for their rape, express a disbelief in claims of rape, exonerate the perpetrator and allude that only certain types of women are raped” (Grubb and Turner 445). According to Grubb & Turner, rape victims do not report the crime for reasons such as “fear of degradation and being disbelieved by those in the Criminal Justice System” (444). They state that rape and sexual assault are believed to be the most under-reported crimes in the UK, and that this is likely because of “the stigma attached to victims and the way the crime has been socially constructed in our society” (Grubb and Turner 443).

Grubb and Turner categorize female rape myth: “1) ‘she asked for it’; 2) ‘it wasn’t really rape’; 3) ‘he didn’t mean to’; 4) ‘she wanted it’; 5) ‘she liked it’; 6) ‘rape is a trivial event’; 7) ‘rape is a deviant event’” (445). Some of these rape myths are used when Roxy confronts the rapists. one of the girls claims that they did not know it was her brother, because “he never said nothing” (Alderman 196). Roxy has a reputation as a powerful and respected woman, and others either fear or follow her. One of the other girls claim that “he bloody loved it” and “he was *asking* for it” (Alderman 196- 197). These rape myths are commonly used on female victims, but when using them on a male victim it removes the gendered prejudice typically associated with them, and instead provides a new perspective. Consequently, the novel encourages readers to rethink victims and the experiences of victims, as well as the gender biases and prejudices they encounter.

3.5 Conclusion

The Power illustrates the double standards and hypocrisy in the contemporary society. It speculates on a world where men are the main victims of oppression, assault and violence. The novel portrays societies where the government goes to great lengths to protect its male victims. Simultaneously, it villainizes all women, and brands them as dangerous perpetrators. The novel demonstrates that the double standards are rooted in gendered prejudice. The novel also illustrates the prevalence of hypocrisy in our society, and how individuals often refuse to

rethink their position or make exceptions unless they are directly affected. The novel also depicts how those in positions of power may exploit their authority to serve their own interests. Although it may seem like a politician like Margot have the girls' best interests in mind, her biggest priority is helping her daughter. Her actions were mainly self-serving.

While the novel is purely speculative, it raises thought-provoking questions that can increase the reader's awareness of the impact gender bias have on the individuals and society. Essentially, it can make the individual become more aware of how gendered prejudice can lead to hypocrisy and double standards in the contemporary society. It encourages discussions about gendered issues, which can affect discourses surrounding systemic gender inequality and discrimination. By using male victims, it removes the gendered prejudice we may have towards female victims, creating a new perspective on victims and perpetrators. *The Power* then reveals and critiques the contemporary society's double standards, that are stemming from gendered prejudice.

Chapter 4: Gender Performances and Stereotypes: Rewarded Conformity and Punished Deviance

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will explore how *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* challenge contemporary gender categorization. The novel aims to show how gender roles and expectations are social constructs. It suggests that the ideal gender performance is built on gender stereotypes. It also illustrates how you are rewarded for performing your gender well and punished when failing to conform to society's gender roles. The unnamed midwife is forced to perform according to male stereotypes for her survival, and as a result, she experiences the consequences of performing a gender which does not match with her previous gender identity. In *The Power*, the consequences of conforming to or rejecting gender norms are examined, exposing how gender is constructed on stereotypes. The novel delves into the complex interplay between gender and identity, as well as the ways in which gender affects social dynamics and relationships.

In order to illustrate the negative consequences of gender performance, it is imperative to explain and contextualize how gender is taught and how society is socialized into performing gender. Gender has a significant impact on people's lives in the contemporary society, especially with regards to status and role expectations. According to sociology scholar Linda L. Lindsay, the *achieved* statuses and the *ascribed* statuses, referred to as a status set, will determine an individual's place in the social stratifications. The place will be affected by the status set and the rank of the statuses. Gender is an example of an ascribed status. Lindsay argues that at the time of her writing, there was no known society where the status of female was consistently ranked higher the status of male. Further, she explains a role as expected behavior that is associated with status, and that it is the social norms of a society which determines the role expectations. Lindsay refers a state of normlessness, *anomie*, which one can experience when the traditional role expectations have changed, and new expectations have not been developed yet. She uses women in the workplace as an example and refers to the colliding roles of mother and employee (Lindsay 2-3).

Lindsay distinguishes between sex and gender. Sex is the biological characteristics one is born with, an ascribed status. Gender, on the other hand, is an achieved status. Gender is something that is learned: we associate certain social, cultural and psychological traits with a gender (Lindsay 4). According to Lindsay, we are taught gender by agents of socialization.

Lindsay defines agents of socialization as “the people, groups, and social institutions that provide the critical information needed for children to become fully functioning members of society” (Lindsay 77). She argues that the family is the most significant agent of socialization. Lindsay further argues that gender-typing begins as early as the womb, stereotyping the fetus, attributing certain traits or behaviors to it. As the child is born and grows older, the stereotyping continues: boys play with blue cars, and girls play with pink dolls. From a young age the girls’ toys encourage “domesticity, interpersonal closeness, and a social orientation”. The young boys on the other hand, play with toys that are designed for action or building, which encourages self-reliance and problem-solving (Lindsay 77-81). As a consequence, children will from a young age learn what society deems gender appropriate or not.

Stereotypes are often learned from a young age. Lindsay defines stereotypes as “oversimplified conceptions that people who occupy the same status group share certain traits they have in common” (3). Further, she argues that the stereotypes most often include negative traits. According to Lindsay, women are stereotyped as “flight and unreliable because they possess uncontrollable raging hormones that fuel unpredictable emotional outburst” (3). When it comes to the norms of masculinity, Lindsay argues that the antifeminine norm is the most significant norm. Men are expected to reject all that can be considered feminine, such as revealing insecurities or vulnerabilities. Interpersonal relations are therefore encouraged. Men are also expected to be successful in all aspects of their lives, especially in their careers. They are expected to be aggressive, tough, and prestigious, and are often expected to be superior to women in terms of payment, job and intellect (Lindsay 286-292).

Lindsay explains that women’s status sets often are considered lower in rank than men’s status sets. Patriarchal societies often exhibit androcentrism, which Lindsay defines as “male-centered norms operating throughout all social institutions that become the standard to which all persons adhere” (Lindsay 3). As a result, women may be at a disadvantage with regards to education and work, compared to men. Lindsay argues that girls often are rewarded for masculine activities, and that compared to boys they can be more gender atypical in their activities. Peer harassment can lead to withdrawal from the gender atypical activities (Lindsay 85). Acting according to the expected gender role is rewarded, while breaking from it may lead to punishment.

Gender studies scholar Judith Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity, but an identity which instead is instituted through a repetition of acts. Butler argues that when you separate sex and gender, it is possible to have an open discussion on how sex is used as an

explanation on certain social meanings of women's experiences, when it should not be (519-520). She argues that "gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises and interior 'self', whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act', broadly constructed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Butler 528). Gender is then a concept which is created and continuously constituted by society and its citizens. Butler argues that gender is fluid, and gender can therefore be neither true nor false. She also critiques how society punishes those who cannot perform their gender well, and who break from the traditional gender categorization. Simultaneously, it benefits those who do perform their gender well (Butler 528). Butler ultimately argues that gender is a social phenomenon, which was created because of political interests (Butler 529).

Scholars Halie Wenhold and Kristen Harrison did a study on gender norms and expectations. They interviewed emerging adults' views and experiences on contemporary and future gender norms, as well as media gender norm perceptions. Essentially, they wished to learn if their experiences with gender norms fit their media gender norm perceptions. Findings show that the young adults used their own experiences to either challenge or support media gender norm perceptions. However, most of them referred to childhood everyday life experiences when discussing future gender norm expectations. The majority also believed there had been a "shift" in the media, where they are trying to portray more accurate descriptions of everyday life gender norm experiences (Wenhold and Harrison 207).

Most of the women expected or wished to succeed in "all" the roles, and manage household, childcare and career. Men on the other hand, expected a 50/50 split, but expected less workload when it came to childcare. Essentially women expected themselves to balance more roles than men did (Wenhold and Harrison 217). It can be argued that younger people are becoming more aware of typical gender roles and the issues they may create. For example, women are now expected to work, but traditionally they were expected to take care of their children and manage the household. Now that families commonly have two breadwinners, the natural conclusion is to divide household management and childcare equally between them. However, the study above suggests how deeply gender is ingrained into our society and everyday life.

As mentioned, there are consequences of breaking from the traditional gender roles and categorization. Scholars Vasileia Papadaki and Andreas Ntiken did a study on the discrimination experiences in the daily life of trans individuals in Greece. They define transgenders as "persons who have a gender identity which is different from the gender

assigned to them at birth and those people who wish to portray their gender identity in a different way from the gender assigned to them at birth” (Papadaki and Ntiken 1) The Report from the National Transgender Discrimination shows that in the US., “transgenders and gender non-conforming people are discriminated against, ridiculed, and abused within institutions such as the family, schools, the workplace and health care settings” (Papadaki and Ntiken 2). As a result, trans people can experience social and economic exclusion. According to previous studies, “a disproportionately high number” of trans people have experienced systemic discrimination. It should also be noted that in the European Union, the top three cases of discrimination are because of ethnic origin (64%), sexual orientation (58%) and gender identity (56%) (Papadaki and Ntiken 2-4).

In their findings, Papadaki and Ntiken learned that the participants were excluded in four dimensions of the Social Exclusion Network Model. They were excluded in the cultural, economic, political and social dimensions. According to Papadaki and Ntiken, “transgender people cannot be accepted since they live beyond traditional social norms”. Papadaki and Ntiken argue that acknowledgment of a trans person’s gender identity will promote their social integration, which can further challenge how they are viewed by their families, government, and society in general (Papadaki and Ntiken 18-20). Commonly, social beliefs of the contemporary society are that sex and gender should correlate, and that the individual should act according to the gender roles related to their sex.

Scholars Anneliese A. Singh et al., did a study on the resilience strategies of trans youth that demonstrates the importance of aligning gender identity and expression. In their study they identified five supports to the participants’ resilience: “(a) ability to self-define and theorize one’s gender, (b) proactive agency and access to supportive educational systems, (c) connection to a trans-affirming community, (d) reframing of mental health challenges, and (e) navigation of relationships with family and friends” (Singh et al. 208). They also found six threats to participants’ resilience: “(a) experiences of adultism, (b) health care access challenges, (c) emotional and social isolation, (d) employment discrimination, (e) limited access to financial resources, and (f) gender policing” (Singh et al. 208).

For the participants, it was important “to use their own words and concepts that were inn alignment with their gender identity and expression”, and that they could do so with others (Singh et al. 211-212). However, attempting to self-define and theorize one’s gender alone, could lead to the feeling of isolation, which could harm the participants’ resilience. It was important for the participants’ resilience that they had positive relationships with family and friends, and a trans-affirming community. The participants shared that they believed most

adults considered their trans-identity to just be a phase which would eventually pass (Singh et al. 211-213). As mentioned earlier, Lindsay argues that gender is taught by agents of socialization, commonly family (Lindsay 77). The primary socialization process is important for the individual's development of values and societal expectations. If a transgender person is not accepted by their family, they may struggle to accept themselves.

In the study, the participants also expressed concerns on a societal level, where the stigma surrounding the trans community could prevent them from getting proper health care or experiencing employment discrimination. According to Singh et al., insufficient healthcare is a common problem for trans individuals. Another worry was gender policing, having strangers invalidate their gender identity. Because of gender policing, one participant described being unsure of which gendered bathroom to choose when in public. (Singh et al. 213-215).

Researchers also found that trans individuals were 4 times more likely to have an income below 10,000 dollars per year than the general population. In their study, they found that the threats towards trans youth's resilience were reinforcing one another, which could lead to great feelings of distress. For example, struggling financially because one cannot find a job due to discrimination, and not being provided sufficient healthcare, also because of discrimination, will negatively impact the trans individual. As a result, the impact of this stress "combines, folds, and reinforces overall societal oppression and internalized trans prejudice" (Singh et al. 215-216). Essentially, someone who cannot provide for themselves and that are often in need of healthcare, becomes an expense for society. From a cynical point of view, an individual who cannot contribute to society, who solely relies on government funding to survive, will be considered a burden to that society. It therefore becomes simple to negatively stereotype marginalized groups, such as transgender people, instead of acknowledging their struggles and challenges as social issues of our society.

However, there are some cases which have positive outcomes when the traditional gender roles are challenged. In 2014, two young girls from the US declared 1 October as "Wear Your Superheroes Day". This was because five-year-old Leanna had started hiding her superhero-shirts, as she was told "superheroes are for boys". As a result, #WearYourSuperheroes spread on social media, encouraging both girls and boys to dress as their favorite superhero. They wished to challenge the "stereotypes relating to clothing and the expectations placed upon children" (Criado). Another example is Kitty Wolf, a preschool assistant in the US, who started the *Boys Can Be Princesses, Too*-project. In the project she took photos of princess performers and young boys dressed as princesses. With her project,

she wished to challenge gender norms, as well as promote self-acceptance. As a teacher assistant, she had commonly heard boys being told that liking or dressing as princesses are only for girls. Wolf argues that “putting on a princess dress should not have to signify what gender a child is, only that they want to experience the ‘magic ’and ‘beauty ’of the character”, and that, “a child’s imagination should not be limited by their gender” (Zoellner).

Based on the analysis above, it can be argued that gender is taught. Often from a young age, and often based on stereotypes. As we continue to act according to the gender roles, they are further established in our society. They become part of our social norms, and as discussed before, breaking from social norms often have consequences. Research shows that transgender people, who are challenging these social norms, are at a disadvantage in the job market, healthcare, and at risk for social and economic exclusion. It appears society is becoming more aware of the issues surrounding the categorization of gender. However, while some are praised for breaking the expectations of gender, other are punished for it. In *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*, gender stereotypes, gender identity, and the harmful effects of rigid gender categories are critiqued and explored. The novel illustrates how gender expectations and behaviors can limit and punish those who do not conform to traditional gender roles.

4.2 Exploring the Unnamed Midwife’s Conformity to Masculine Stereotypes

I will analyze the portrayal and categorization of gender in the novel. The unnamed midwife disguises herself as a man to protect herself from male captors, after a pandemic has killed most of earth’s population. The unnamed midwife bases her male performance on the stereotype that males should be dominant, sexual prowess alpha males. When comparing the unnamed midwife’s perception of men versus how other male characters are portrayed, the novel challenges gendered stereotypes and the social construction of gender. The unnamed midwife convinces several characters with her male performance, suggesting that gender is taught. However, when the unnamed midwife starts to experience gender dysphoria when performing as a man, the novel also suggests that gender is an important factor in negotiating the individual’s identity. As a result, the novel invites the reader to reconsider gendered stereotypes and view gender as a social construct, while still acknowledging gender as an important factor in identity and relations.

Douglas Carpenter presents four standards of an early examination of American Masculinity, originally conducted in 1974: “(1) ‘No sissy stuff – ’distance self from

femininity and emotions, (2) 'Be a big wheel – 'strive for achievement and success, (3) 'Be a sturdy oak – 'avoid vulnerability, stay composed and be in control, be tough, and (4) 'Give 'em hell – 'act aggressively to become dominant" (130). Sociologist Dan Griffin refers to "The Man Rules", which are "expected rules offered by society that men adhere to both consciously and unconsciously" (Carpenter 132). Carpenter claims that both men and female are victims of society's gender roles and expectations. In other words, men are pressured to act according to The Man Rules, not only by men, but by women as well (Carpenter 137). Griffin explains that when boys or men do not follow these rules, they might be viewed or view themselves as "less than *real* boys or men" (Carpenter 132). Some of the most common Man Rules are listed as, "don't be weak; don't show emotion; don't ask for help; don't cry; and don't care about relationships" (Carpenter 132). According to Griffin, the rules lead to "disconnection, violence, homophobia, objectification of women, and extreme competition, as well as isolation, loneliness, self-hatred, and misery" (Carpenter 60).

In this section, I will show examples of how the unnamed midwife uses her perceptions of masculinity for her male performance and how this is significant in gender and trans discourses. In the novel, the pandemic has especially affected women and children. Pregnant women either die during pregnancy or childbirth, and every child is stillborn. As a result, women have become rare and valuable. When disguising as a man, the unnamed midwife visually passes as a man. However, acting like a man appears to be more challenging: "Walk tall, keep hips straight. Don't sway. Feet flat. Hunch a little, arms straight down. Don't gesture. Stare down. Make fists while talking. Sit with knees apart. Adjust. Don't tilt your head. Don't bite your lip. Interrupt. Laugh low" (Ellison 30-31). The unnamed midwife is trying to copy the way she has seen men walk, suggesting there is a masculine and a feminine way to walk. By telling herself what *not* to do, she is attempting to 'unlearn' her feminine behavior. Further, it can be argued that she associates confident behavior, such as interrupting someone or maintaining eye contact, with masculine behavior.

In fact, she often practices in front of mirrors to maintain that masculine confidence. She attempts to think like a man: "Rub jawline. Don't look down. Stand in front of the mirror. Have a dick. A big great dick. Fear me. Always right. Kick your ass. No right to stand in my way. Who's gonna stop me? Like that bitch? Yeah" (Ellison 42). On another occasion, she practices again: "bitch, I am a man. Females. Talk too much. Quit crying. So emotional. Be a man. Man up. Nut up. Jump shot, gunshot, cum shot, money shot. Posing but not to be sexy. Scare me. Lean a little forward. Invade my space. Quit crying. Give you something to cry about" (Ellison 54). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an alpha male can be defined as

“the most successful and powerful male in any group” or “a strong and successful man who likes to be in charge of others” (“Alpha Male, N.”). The unnamed midwife is imitating the contemporary mindset of an alpha male, or The Man Rules. This suggests that gender is performative, and that gendered stereotypes act as a guidance for how to perform gender. This can also be destructive for women, as they are stereotyped as “weak” regardless of their accomplishments.

Lindsay refers to another role expectation of males as the “sexual prowess norm”. Men are judged based on their sexual conquest and ability. She claims that because men’s sexual identity is believed to be biological instead of socially constructed, they are often excused for behavior which can be considered sexual harassment, as it is presumed to be part of their nature (Lindsay 291). As a result, the unnamed midwife has a perception of men as misogynistic. However, as seen above, objectification of women is a consequence of The Man Rules, suggesting that behavior is expected from men (Carpenter 60).

The unnamed midwife also attempts to change her physique by gaining the weight she has lost because of lack of food, and by working out: “put on all the weight I can, and my biceps look so developed = wish I could go sleeveless to show everyone how manly I am. Remember the first lady used to have those incredible arms. Past that. Too big, too round for a sleeveless dress. Mannish. Perfect” (Ellison 58). The unnamed midwife also stereotypes the appearance of men, that they should be strong and muscular. Her perception suggests that visible muscles are masculine. She goes as far as to claim that a woman which has too developed biceps cannot wear a sleeveless dress, implying that she needs to hide them in order to appear more feminine. This once again strengthens the argument that gender is performed. Gender is not only expressed through behavior but also through physical appearance. For instance, if the unnamed midwife’s physical appearance is feminine but her behavior is masculine, she may not be able to effectively perform gender according to societal norms.

The unnamed midwife does not only act like a man to avoid being captured by them, but also to help the women she meets. She wishes to help them by providing birth control, as pregnancy has become a death sentence, or ideally, help them by freeing them. The first time the unnamed midwife meets a group who has captured a woman, she, disguised as a man, trades for a half hour with the woman. The group believes the unnamed midwife wants her for sex, but in reality, it is to offer the woman birth control. The unnamed midwife tells herself “to stay relaxed, not to tense her shoulders or let her voice gets high. *A young man is used to getting his way*” (Ellison 35-37). The unnamed midwife uses the sexual prowess norm to her

advantage. The women are mainly kept to fulfill the men's sexual needs, but also confirms the stereotypes surrounding the alpha male. The man took what he wanted, the woman, and he conquered her. As he holds something of value, he is perceived as strong and on top of the social hierarchy. The unnamed midwife perceives men in a certain way, as most of the powerful men she has encountered fit the criteria of the sexually dominant alpha male. It suggests that the unnamed midwife acts this way, because she wishes to be perceived as powerful in order to protect herself from potential harm and violence, and to gain agency and autonomy in a society which constantly seeks to diminish her worth and limit her choices.

As the story progresses, the unnamed midwife becomes more confident in her act as a man. After many months, the unnamed midwife finds a group of six men, as well as two women, who are chained and help captive. She attempts to trade for the women the same way she did previously. She lies to the group and says she is with another group herself. She offers medical services for time with the women. However, as she runs back to her base, the men secretly follow her and learns that she is all by herself. She thinks, "breathe slow, talk low. Don't look around, stare straight at Aaron" (Ellison 61-64). As previously mentioned, women are often stereotyped as unreliable with uncontrollable emotional outbursts (Lindsay 3). Based on the unnamed midwife's perception of men, men are calm and show fewer emotions. Acting calm and assertive may make someone appear more confident. She is trying to embody this stereotype. If the unnamed midwife was not disguised as a man, she might not have been perceived as powerful in that situation, because of gendered prejudice. The power dynamics would be skewed against her, as she would not be seen as a threat or a challenge to the male-dominated hierarchy, despite acting in a similar manner.

She knows that if they get too close to her, they will see that she is a woman and capture her too. To prevent this, she starts shooting some of the men. One of the men tries to escape with the women, but the unnamed midwife will not allow it, and says "I'm holding the gun, asshole. Drop it" (Ellison 65). Afterwards, she cocked back the hammer on her gun with shaking hands. She thinks, "It was a punk line. She didn't know why she said that, why she cocked it" (Ellison 65). After she had killed the men, she felt nothing (Ellison 65). It appears that the unnamed midwife became surprised by the confidence she was portraying earlier. The behavior the unnamed midwife was trying to mimic earlier, came naturally to her in that situation. This suggests that what she deemed to be masculine behavior, may not be masculine behavior after all. Behavior is not based on gender, but instead on the individual. It can be a reminder that our skills are determined by our individual talents, and not by our gender.

Therefore, both boys and girls should be encouraged to challenge these stereotypes and pursue their interests.

Eventually, Honus, Jodi's husband, arrives at the cabin. Jodi is one of three women who lived at the Mormon farm, until she became pregnant and escaped to the unnamed midwife's cabin close by. Jodi tells Honus that the unnamed midwife is not really a man: "Honus looked over, top to bottom. She saw a mixture of confusion and disbelief cross his face. She thought she saw a little disgust as well" (Ellison 172). The unnamed midwife thinks, "Damned if I need to explain myself to you. Be glad I'm not fucking your wife. Asshole" (Ellison 173). In this scene, the unnamed midwife illustrates the same "masculine" confidence she was practicing earlier, only that is instead has become a natural and genuine reaction. Simultaneously, the scene also suggests the stigma and consequences associated with not conforming to traditional gender roles.

To conclude, the unnamed midwife is behaving according to The Man Rules or the ideal stereotypical man in order to be perceived as powerful, to protect her self-autonomy. These alpha males she is performing as, are perceived as strong because they do not show emotions or vulnerability. In the novel, the people who perform that role well do well in the new social hierarchy. As the unnamed midwife continues to perform according to that stereotype, she also suffers the consequences. This suggests that adhering to gender stereotypes can have negative consequences on a person's mental and emotional well-being, as well as their ability to form and maintain relationships with others. It also implies that strict gender roles can lead to a toxic and hostile environment.

4.3 Challenging Masculinity: Male Characters Defying Gender Stereotypes

As seen above, the unnamed midwife perception of men is based on the stereotypical sexual prowess alpha male. She plays a role as a misogynistic male who takes what he wants without hesitation. However, most of the male characters the unnamed midwife meets, does not fit into this stereotype. The unnamed midwife continues to base her male character on stereotypes, rather than the men she meets on her journey, which suggests that society has preferred gender performances. The novel explores how ingrained stereotypes are in the individual and society, and how we tend to seek confirmation that aligns with their preconceived notions, while ignoring what contradicts them. As a result, stereotypes and gendered prejudice is further ingrained into society, as they are not challenged.

Most of the male characters that the unnamed midwife meets in the novels differs from her performance as a man. She performs according to the stereotypes surrounding alpha males

and toxic masculinity. However, when the Mormons ask about her previous journey, she claims that most of the people out there are monsters, despite meeting several people who have wished to help her (Ellison 113). At times, the unnamed midwife's perception of men can be perceived as misandrist. The unnamed midwife's preconceived notions of men are so deeply ingrained that she often overlooks or dismisses evidence that contradicts them, demonstrating her unwillingness to see gender in a new light.

According to Papadaki and Ntiken, people who live beyond traditional social norms will struggle to be accepted by society (Papadaki and Ntiken 18-20). One other reason the unnamed midwife is attempting to act according to predominant male stereotypes is likely to avoid suspicion or harassment from other men. This is because she risks being perceived as "less than a *real* boy", if she breaks The Man Rules (Carpenter 132). Additionally, it can be argued that it is beneficial to act according to certain stereotypical male characteristics, as leadership and agentic qualities are stereotypically associated with men (Derks et al. 457).

The variety of male characters acts as proof that the unnamed midwife's perception of men is based on stereotypes and not reality. Moreover, the novel suggests that there is no "correct" way to perform gender. It serves as a critique of gender as a social construct, by illustrating the restrictions and limitations that individual may face because of society's expectations. Additionally, the novel humanizes the male characters that breaks from the traditional gender stereotypes, by creating characters with stories and characteristics the reader can relate and sympathize towards, regardless of gender. The novel invites men to be part of the feminism discourse, and acts as a way to engage a male audience and make them see how restrictive gender performances also negatively affect men. Also, by having male characters who do not fit the stereotype, the story creates a more inclusive nonjudgmental dialogue, because men are also portrayed as sympathetic and not just villains.

Ironically, the men that best fit the unnamed midwife's stereotypical male gender performance, are the bad men that rape, murder, and capture others. The unnamed midwife describes one of the men, "Aaron looked at her like the devil with a soul to collect" (Alderman 64). When the unnamed midwife is attempting to trade for a half hour with one of the captured women, the men in the group confidently haggle, knowing they have something of higher value than what the unnamed midwife can offer (Alderman 36-38). They have the confident, threatening energy the unnamed midwife has been practicing. The fact that "the girl was not fazed by the discussion of her as an object", suggests that the men had prostituted her to other men before (Alderman 37).

When the unnamed midwife's trading finally goes through, the men tell her, "Ok, but

do it where we can see you” (Alderman 37). The men are acting according to the sexual prowess norm, the women being their prized possession which they have conquered. The men want to watch while the unnamed midwife has sex with the woman, playing on the belief that men’s sexual behavior is biological and an important aspect of their gender.

These male characters are performing gender well according to The Man Rules, focusing on “acting aggressively to become dominant” (Carpenter 130). Unfortunately, in the novel, these types of men are successful in achieving the dominance and social power they aim for. When meeting the unnamed midwife, performing as a man, these male characters are mostly concerned with performing as aggressive, dominant males. Compared to the other male characters in the novel, these characters are built up as stereotypes, rather than nuanced, complex individuals. As a result, the novel aims to show how adhering to strict gender stereotypes can limit the individuals, and instead de-humanize them.

Chicken and Joe are two of the first people the unnamed midwife meets, before she disguises as a man. They offer her some food, and companionship. When she meets Joe, she thinks “she knew he was gay. It was in everything, the way he stood in a long curve with his hips forward at the stove, the way he held his mouth when he called her girl” (Ellison 14). In this scene, the unnamed midwife uses stereotypes to identify Joe’s sexuality. This scene creates a contrast to the later scene, when the unnamed midwife was practicing how to walk as a man: “Walk tall, keep hips straight. Don’t sway. Feet flat. Hunch a little, arms straight down” (Ellison 30-31) Carpenter mentions a common stereotype about gay people, that feminine men “must” be homosexual, and homosexual “must” be less masculine (Carpenter 145).

When the unnamed midwife learns that Joe is gay, she relaxes (Ellison 14). The unnamed midwife also uses the lack of inappropriate sexual behavior as a clue of his sexuality: “It was in the way he didn’t look her up and down or linger anywhere but her face” (Ellison 14). The unnamed midwife meets several men which captures women on her journey, however, she meets Chicken and Joe before she meets those men. This means that the unnamed midwife’s experiences with involuntarily sexual attention from men started before the pandemic. This suggests that these issues were not solely caused by societal changes that occurred after the pandemic, but instead implies that the pandemic only intensified an already existing problem.

The unnamed midwife decides to join Joe and Chicken, but is aware of the dangers they face in the new, broken society. When looting in a mall, a group of men runs after the unnamed midwife, Chicken and Joe. They learn that it is because they want to capture the

unnamed midwife. Chicken and Joe are not willing to risk their lives for her, and decides to leave her. The unnamed midwife learns that she is one of few women left: “they saw you a girl, and they decided they want to take you with them, so they run you down. [...] You too rare” (Ellison 26). After that, the unnamed midwife is hurt that they left her, even though she tried to tell them that she did not need protecting. She decides to disguise herself as a man to avoid a similar situation again (Ellison 26-27).

Although Chicken and Joe left the unnamed midwife behind, the reader can sympathize with the two men. After all, one can assume not many people would risk their lives for a stranger. The two men do not conform to the stereotypical dominant, aggressive alpha male that the midwife is attempting to perform. In fact, they go against The Man Rules that encourage men to reject emotions, femininity and relationships (Carpenter 132). However, the unnamed midwife quickly creates a connection with them: “Only just met them, so how can they break my heart?” (Ellison 26).

The unnamed midwife also meets Curtis, an emotional, vulnerable, and kind man. When she meets him, she is disguised as a man. Similarly to Chicken and Joe, he breaks The Man Rules. Curtis offers to help the unnamed midwife cross the bay with his sailboat. Even when she tells him she has nothing to trade, he is still happy to help because he misses people, and she is the first interaction he had had in a while. He asks to join her on her journey (Alderman 31-34). “She had been perfectly and calmly ready to ditch this guy, and yet this question hurt her heart” (Alderman 33). Although she rejects him, she struggles with the fact that she did afterwards. “She thought again of his long, slender hands and his innocent face. He was harmless” (Alderman 34). She keeps describing Curtis as harmless, “Curtis smiled that needy smile. *Harmless.*” (Alderman 32). She also describes his vulnerability, as “she couldn’t look at him. Sideways, he looked like a little boy trying not to cry” (Alderman 33).

As mentioned earlier, men are expected to not show signs of vulnerability or weakness, but it is this vulnerability which makes the unnamed midwife sympathize with him. The unnamed midwife focuses less on performing gender when she is on the boat with Curtis. Although she is distant, she is not as hostile as she is with the “bad” men. The characters focus less on performing gender, and more on creating a human connection. Once again, the novel illustrates how gender performance can limit the individuals and the dynamic between them.

Jack was the partner of the unnamed midwife. Although she never meets him again on his journey, she misses and reminisces about him often. Together, the unnamed midwife and Jack used to go out to museums, restaurants and bars (Ellison 195). They talked about

literature and hospital politics She lived with Jack, who was a clinical pathologist. At first, the unnamed midwife is not sure what happened to him, as she got sick, and when she woke up from a coma he was gone (Ellison 197). She later learns that Jack ended up in a lab trying to develop a vaccine to stop the pandemic. However, after several attempts he instead chose to take his own life with morphine (Ellison 204-205). Before Jack dies, he thinks, “that to die in such peace in a world like this was the most privileged and selfish act he had ever committed” (Ellison 205).

Jack was a successful and driven pathologist. His characteristics fit into the masculine belief that men should “strive for achievement and success” (Carpenter 130). However, despite being so valued that his life was prioritized in order to develop a vaccine, Jack is miserable. He does not ask for help, does not show emotion nor any sign of weakness. As a result, he suffers with feelings of loneliness and depression, and instead takes his own life. According to Doctor of Medicine Leo Sher, gender differences is likely the cause of the high male suicide rates. Traditional male gender roles are typically “described as characteristics such as independence, aggressiveness, risk-taking behavior, pursuit of power and dominance, competitiveness, success and control” (Sher 1). As a result, mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety in men are not acknowledged. The men rarely ask for help, and this may lead to suicide (Sher 1). Jack’s suicide illustrates the negative consequences of adhering to strict gender roles.

When reminiscing about him she remembers how she “missed conversation. That moment of connection, of being understood that passed equally between equals” (Ellison 195). Later, the unnamed midwife enters an affair with Honus, who is married to Jodi. In her diary, the unnamed midwife writes “not Jack, not Jack, no one is. Hope you’re out there, hope you made it. Somewhere. Never find you, never find me, find me. This is not that” (Ellison 204). With the last sentence the unnamed midwife implies that her affair with Honus is not love, but instead a human need that has to be fulfilled. She suggests that Jack was part of what made her complete.

In the novel, Duke is described as strong and handsome man by the unnamed midwife. After spending a few days with him she describes him as “probably a good guy” that will “probably die” for Roxanne (Ellison 101). Duke tells his story about the first days after the pandemic hit, and he described feeling scared and confused. Although the unnamed midwife acts hostile towards Duke, he never does it in return. He is still insistent that the unnamed midwife come with him and Roxanne (Ellison 91-101). Duke fills the male stereotype as the calm, composed man who is in control.

As seen above, the unnamed midwife encounters a variety of different male characters, that both challenge and conform to society's construction of gender. Many of the men are portrayed as sympathetic, but because the unnamed midwife sees the men through a lens of gender prejudice, she struggles to create connections with most of the male characters, such as Duke. When the unnamed midwife judges an individual based on negative gender stereotypes, she often ignores the characteristics and skills which shape them as individuals. However, her description of Jack suggests that her misandristic view on men could be a result of the hostile environment created after the pandemic. The unnamed midwife has villainized men, and as a result, both her and the male characters she encounters suffer the consequences.

The unnamed midwife's perception of gender roles and stereotypes is limiting her ability to form connections with others. However, whenever she meets male characters that portray genuine emotions and willingness to form relationships, she begins to break down her own barriers and connect with them on a deeper level, such as with Honus. This highlights the importance of breaking free from rigid gender roles and allowing oneself to form meaningful connections regardless of societal expectations.

4.4 Negotiating Identity through Gender: Exploring the Limitations and Consequences of Gender as a Social Construct

The unnamed midwife also reflects on the role gender plays in self-identity. As the unnamed midwife has to embrace a masculine appearance, she struggles to feel at home in her body. She experiences a form of gender dysphoria. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, gender dysphoria can be defined as "the very deep feeling of extreme anxiety and unhappiness that some people have when their body or other people's treatment of them does not match their gender identity and they wish it did" ("Gender Dysphoria, N."). As her body and looks change, she believes her appearance is more masculine than feminine, and feels distant from her body. Gender dysphoria can be a consequence of gender performance. It can make people feel uncomfortable and alienated in their body, resulting in consequences such as isolation, depression or loss of identity. The novel also reflects on gender identity, and explores how gender can both build and break an identity. The novel illustrates the limitations of gender as a social construct, while simultaneously exploring the negative consequences of conforming to gender expectations at all costs.

After the hospital, before the unnamed midwife disguises herself as a man, she searches for women's clothing. She notes that all the female mannequins had "exposed stretches of belly and thigh" (Ellison 23). She leaves the store and goes to a store for young

men instead, as “none of the women’s clothes she looked at seemed durable enough” (Ellison 23). When she views herself in the mirror, “she hadn’t had makeup on in a long time, and she was shocked at how unfeminine she appeared” (Ellison 24). As winter is coming and it becomes colder, the unnamed midwife has to find new clothes. She finds a pink parka, however, “pink = girl. Any kindergartner knows that” (Ellison 53). In the novel, men’s clothing are for practicality, while the female clothing are to enhance looks. It suggests that in order to appear feminine, a woman has to wear makeup, certain colors and clothes. However, that does not necessarily mean that the unnamed midwife dislikes the makeup or clothes which made her appear more feminine. It instead suggests that the unnamed midwife conformed to these gender expectations, and embraced femininity as part of her identity.

She also decides to wash her compression vest, after having worn it for several days. She stands topless while washing it in a sink: “standing there, topless and scrubbing this thing felt so strange. Me = not me. My breasts for the first time in ages” (Ellison 53). After staring at herself for a while, she reflects on her current situation. “Can’t feel like myself. Finally put it back on when it dried. Felt better dressed. Not me = me. Me not now. Me then. Me new” (Ellison 53). The unnamed midwife does not feel at home in her body. In fact, she is trying not to acknowledge her female body, as she is playing the role as a man. Acknowledging her female body, while mentally playing the role as a man, creates the feeling of gender dysphoria for the unnamed midwife. The unnamed midwife’s feelings can be compared to the experiences of transgender people, who often experience gender dysphoria. The unnamed midwife has lost her sense of identity, and is struggling with negotiating a new identity. The novel illustrates the limitations gender may have on an individual’s ability to develop a healthy sense of self-identification.

When she cleans herself up in a bathroom at the Mormon community, she is shocked by the amount of body hair that has grown on her body since the pandemic began. She had been shaving since she was 13 years old. “It felt so alien to be naked, she could not quite own or inhabit her body. It was becoming a stranger to her. *I used to live here*” (Ellison 119). One of the Mormons told her that without a beard she looks like a “little boy” or a “grown-up tomboy” (Ellison 125). Although others may recognize her as a more feminine man, she does not experience herself as a feminine person anymore. The scene indicates that she used to, and that her identity as a woman as an identity she felt comfortable in. As a result, she started separating her mind and her body. Once again it is suggested that femininity was a part of the unnamed midwife’s identity.

Jodi, a young, pregnant Mormon girl, comes to the unnamed midwife’s door seeking

help. The unnamed midwife thinks, “I am dumb around beautiful women. Seen the same thing happen to men. It’s the kind of stupid that makes us pay attention to what a beautiful woman says, whether or not it’s true or useful or sane” (Ellison 143). The unnamed midwife draws similarities between straight men and gay women, and their experiences with beautiful women. In the novel, that is one of few examples where the unnamed midwife finds common ground between the genders.

The unnamed midwife is unsure whether or not to tell Jodi that she is a woman. She begins slowly to see if Jodi will notice, she “hadn’t tried at all this morning to sound like a man” (Ellison 151). Eventually, she tells Jodi, who does not believe her until she takes off her binder. She decides to keep it off at the cabin, and wear a sports bra instead (Ellison 151). When she has a choice, she goes back to performing her gender, a woman. However, even if she makes little effort to appear as a man, Jodi still believes that she is one. Regardless, as mentioned, the unnamed midwife documents her journey in a diary, where she also shares her inner thoughts. Honus knows this, but promises not to read it, but he does wonder what he might find in there. The unnamed midwife thinks, “Find me. You might find me” (Ellison 231). This suggests that to her, her true identity still remains. However, she cannot live her true identity, as her main priority is survival. The only place she can express her true self and identity, is in her diary. After all, a diary is the only place the unnamed midwife does not have to conform to social norms.

The limitations of gender can have negative consequences to the individual and their feelings of identity. However, as seen with the unnamed midwife, gender should also be recognized as a factor in negotiation identity. For the unnamed midwife, femininity used to be a part of her identity. She has to build a new identity which rejects femininity and which is instead built on masculinity. Her previous gender performance was once a fundamental part of her identity, but her current gender performance contradicts her “original” identity. Therefore, she must construct a new identity centered around her new gender performance. Thus, “me = not me” and “not me = me” (Ellison 53). The novel acknowledges that gender is part of identity. It encourages reflection on the limitations and stereotypes that come with gender, rather than dismissing it entirely as a social construct which should not exist.

4.5 Challenging Gendered Prejudice: The Performance of Gender Dynamics

The Book of the Unnamed Midwife also critiques gender dynamics that are based on stereotypes. In the scenes with Roxanne and Duke, the unnamed midwife observes the two characters act according to gender stereotypes and the other person’s expectation. It reveals

how our thinking may become irrational when we strictly adhere to defined gender roles, and by doing so we may limit a person's opportunities. For example, when the character Roxanne believes only a "muscular" man can offer her protection, despite the unnamed midwife being the one who previously saved her from her captors.

One of the captured women, Roxanne, joins the unnamed midwife on her journey after she saved her. The unnamed midwife enjoys Roxanne's company, and quickly becomes attached to her. When she leaves her for a man, Duke, she is hurt (Ellison 89). Duke is traveling on a motorcycle. He sought the girls out because he was lonely, not because he intended to capture them. The unnamed midwife can tell that Roxanne likes him, and she becomes jealous. The man offers them to join him on his motorcycle. The unnamed midwife rejects him, and says that they are traveling alone. However, Roxanne responds that "it might be nice to have a man around. Just in case. [...] Rapists and murderers. I was thinking we could use some muscle, just in case we run into that kind of trouble again" (Ellison 92-93). Roxanne ignores the fact that it was the unnamed midwife who saved her from her capturers. To encourage the male stereotype of strong, alpha males, Roxanne plays the role as a weak, fragile woman who needs a man's protection. Roxanne is relying on gender as a biological concept, where a male's instinct to protect is prominent.

The unnamed midwife becomes frustrated with Roxanne: "she's looking at him like she is a princess in a fucking tower" (Ellison 93). Duke on the other hand, says that he "would be happy to defend you ladies" (Ellison 94). Later Duke teaches Roxanne to use a gun, just as the unnamed midwife previously did. However, Roxanne is pretending to not know how anymore, to continue the illusion of damsel in distress (Ellison 94). She continues to play that role, "Roxanne smiled at him in that helpless way" (Ellison 95). As both characters continue to encourage the gendered stereotypes, where male are strong protectors and women are weak and need protection, they stereotypes are continuously established in our society. As a result, those who are not conforming to the gender dynamics based on stereotypes are punished, as with the unnamed midwife.

Before Roxanne leaves, she tells the unnamed midwife, that "you just can't stand the idea that you might not always be in charge" (Ellison 100). This implies that the unnamed midwife's behavior is not consistent with Roxanne's expectations of how a woman should act, in this case, as a maiden in distress. This reinforces the idea that gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in society, and can be used to punish those who do not conform to them. By leaving the unnamed midwife behind, Roxanne punishes her for not adhering to the traditional gender roles that Roxanne believes women should fulfill. Additionally, this scene illustrates

how the unnamed midwife desire to maintain control and power, which aligns with traditional male gender roles, conflicts with the reality of her situation – the need for interdependence and support. As a result, her unwillingness to accept help or embrace her vulnerability leads to her isolation and abandonment.

Derks et al., did a study on what they refer to as “the queen bee phenomenon”, where female leaders distance themselves from women in junior positions in male-dominated organizations. As a result, gender inequality is continuously legitimized in their organization (Derks et al. 456). Derks et al., explain the ways of the “queen bee”: “(1) presenting themselves more like men, (2) psychically and psychologically distancing themselves from other women, and (3) endorsing and legitimizing the current gender hierarchy” (457).

They explain that women may emphasize male characteristics, because those characteristics are often associated with characteristics needed to succeed in their career. Although the queen bee phenomenon contributes to the gender inequality in organizations, Derks et al. claim that the phenomenon foremost is a consequence of gender inequality. The phenomenon is triggered when women feel that their gender is a liability to succeed in their career, commonly because of negative stereotypes associated with their gender (Derks et al. 457-459). However, Derks et al. argue that the phenomenon is not specific to women, but also among other marginalized groups who are subjected to the same liability as women. Examples of these groups are elder people, gay people, or minority ethnic groups (Derks et al. 461-462).

The study above suggests that the individual’s behavior will change depending on the situation they are in. When Roxanne is with the unnamed midwife, she is assertive and dominant. Roxanne insists there is a gun hidden somewhere in a house they found. The unnamed midwife wishes to leave, but Roxanne refuses until she has found it. They stay for three days, despite the unnamed midwife begging to leave (Ellison 83-88). The unnamed midwife teaches Roxanne how to use the gun, and afterwards Roxanne “walked taller, seemed happier. Just having it made her feel better”, as if she feels empowered because she can finally defend herself (Ellison 88). When they discuss Roxanne’s captors, she claims that “guy’s think they’re always in charge, but you can manipulate the shit out of them. We hold all the cards” (Ellison 72). Before Duke, Roxanne never acts as a damsel in distress. Instead, Roxanne acts dominant, avoid vulnerability and emotions, and distances herself from relationships, similar to *The Man Rules*.

Roxanne compares herself to the other captured girl, Melissa. She can tell that the unnamed midwife is a man, claiming it is because she worked in Vegas, and that “you’re

good. I'm not surprised the guys bought it. But you don't fool me" (Ellison 68). When Roxanne is first raped by the men, she claims that she did not make a sound or move. She compares herself to Melissa, who she said cried for weeks. She continues to tell the midwife how she manages to manipulate the men to give them baths and food, and that she tried to teach Melissa to do the same. Melissa could not do it, as "she had never turned a trick in her life", and Roxanne says, "some things about her I could just tell" (Ellison 76-77). Although it seems as though Roxanne sympathizes with Melissa, she is portraying Melissa as a victim, and herself as a survivor. By doing so, she is distancing herself from Melissa, similar to what a queen bee does. As illustrated in the novel, the queen bee phenomenon can lead to loss of empathy for female victims, as the victims may be held responsible for their victimization.

The novel illustrates how we strictly adhering to defined gender roles can cause irrational thinking. Roxanne does not question Duke's ability to protect her, because he is a muscular, strong man. The story of Roxanne and Duke ends in what the unnamed midwife worried about: Duke was murdered, and Roxanne was captured and died as a prisoner (Ellison 191). The novel critiques the irrational thinking related to gender, which attributes certain fixed characteristics or skills to men and women. Simultaneously, it strengthens the argument that gender is performative.

4.6 Conclusion

The unnamed midwife bases her male gender performance on the alpha male stereotype, despite the fact that most of the male characters she meets does not fit into this categorization. Her forced performance of masculinity, conflicts with her original gender identity, illustrating the consequences gender performance at all costs may have on the individual. Simultaneously, she often villainizes men, which limits her ability to establish relationships with other male characters. As a result, the unnamed midwife struggles with an identity crisis, as well as social isolation and loneliness. This suggests that the unnamed midwife's rigid adherence to gender performance based on stereotypes, not only affects her relationships with herself, but also limits her ability to form connections with others.

The Book of the Unnamed Midwife illustrates how gender is a social construct, which benefits those who perform gender well, and punishes those who do not fit into the preferred gender stereotypes. However, the novel still acknowledges gender as an important factor in identity, as well as in social dynamics and relationships. The novel illustrates how stereotypes are deeply rooted in individuals and society, and how people tend to seek confirmation that supports their preconceived ideas, while ignoring that which contradicts them. This reinforces

stereotypes and gender biases, as they are not questioned or challenged. Overall, the novel presents a complex and nuanced view of gender and its impact on individuals and society.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have investigated how the dystopian genre can be used to explore and express contemporary feminist fears and anxieties, and thus how dystopian fictions can challenge contemporary discourses. According to Seeger and Davison-Vecchione, dystopian literature has moved from speculative literature to political commentaries highlighting the issues of our society (61). Further, Jarvis argues that fiction can function as critical feminist pedagogy, as it can challenge dominant beliefs and ideologies in the contemporary society (118). The discourses from dystopian novels can thus challenge dominant discourses in the contemporary society (Abshavi and Kargozari 819).

According to feminist journalist Alter, dystopian novels can be seen as cautionary tales that suggest women's equality might be deprived one day (Alter). Although feminism is a movement meant to promote equality between both sexes, that is not necessarily how it is perceived among everyone. For some, feminism is considered a misandrist movement which will only benefit women (Pham 11-17). Interestingly, a global survey reveals that majorities believe men have more opportunities than women when it comes to jobs and politics, and that they in general have better lives (Horowitz and Fetterolf). Despite this, a third of men believe that feminism does more harm than good, and that they have lost out in terms of social, economic, or political power because of feminism (Ipsos 4).

I argue that *The Power* and *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* can be considered political commentaries which challenge contemporary discourses on gender and gendered power dynamics. Simultaneously, the novels critique the double standards and false narratives surrounding gender in the contemporary society. They explore female anxieties such as loss of self-autonomy, vilification of gender, and the limitations of gender roles and expectations. *The Power* and *The Unnamed Midwife* explore the manifestation of anti-feminist anxieties, worlds or societies where women in power oppress men. The novels illustrate how power can corrupt regardless of gender. *The Power* explores extremist views of gender movements, where the opposite gender is villainized and blamed for misery, war and destruction. Gender is villainized by powerful individuals, in order to achieve ulterior motives and as an excuse for abuse of power. Therefore, the novels show that the fight for equality should focus on the misuse of power and not the vilification of gender.

The Power explores the failed logic behind the moral arguments found in gender movements. The novel illustrates this by examining how a society may react differently to injustice, discrimination and abuse, depending on the genders of the victim and prosecutor.

The Power also explores a world where men suddenly become the main victims of discrimination, abuse and rape, and how society would react to such a shift. As a result, the novel also critiques the hypocrisy of how people often do not rethink their position until they or the people close to them are personally affected by gender abuse or discrimination.

The Book of the Unnamed Midwife challenges gender categorization and explores gender as a social construct. The novel illustrates how society has conditioned certain behavior, appearances and relationships to specific genders. The novel suggests that the ideal gender performance is built on gender stereotypes, and illustrates how gendered social norms can limit the individual. Essentially, the novel illustrates how certain gender performances are favored, and how those who perform gender well are rewarded. On the other hand, those who break from the stereotypes, meaning they fail to perform their gender well, are punished. Further, the novel explores gender identity and expression as significant parts of an individual's identity. Therefore, the novel does not necessarily critique gender as a concept, but instead the limitations that are being forced on the individual by society, as a result of strict gender categorization and social norms.

Earlier in the thesis, it has been established that dystopian novels can act as political commentaries. The arguments presented in *The Power* and *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* are relevant to current societal issues. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how the arguments in the thesis relate to the contemporary society, and how the gender discourses in these novels can challenge dominant views on gender, as well as address feminist anxieties and fears.

As mentioned earlier, some might argue that the feminist movement have taken steps backwards when several states banned abortion in the US. Texas is one of the states that have banned abortion, except for in medical emergencies. However, when five women, who in fact were experiencing life-threatening health risks because of their pregnancy, needed an abortion, they were denied it. Because of this, the five women are suing the state of Texas. One of the women could not get an abortion until her body entered sepsis. As a result, it has become harder for her to become pregnant again. Additionally, doctors who perform an abortion risk "losing their medical license, fines of hundreds and thousands of dollars, and up to 99 years in prison" (Honderich). These were not women who wanted to have an abortion, but women who *had* to have an abortion because the fetuses would not survive. In these cases, the standard medical procedure would be to have an abortion. However, an abortion would not be considered until the fetus's heart had stopped beating or until the ethics board at the hospitals considered the women's life to be at risk (Honderich).

In the debate against abortion, moral arguments such as “abortion is murder” and “it creates a culture where life is disposable” are commonly used. However, similarly to *The Power*, the failed logic behind these moral arguments reveals the hypocrisy and gender prejudice in the contemporary society. Women have restricted health care because of the ban of abortion, whereas men do not. For example, if a man travels to the hospital with a gunshot wound with the bullet still inside, will the doctors wait until he has developed sepsis before they treat him? If an elderly person has pneumonia, how sick do they have to become before they are offered medication? Is preventative care not part of medical care? In contrast to the pregnant women’s cases, these medical cases will likely be treated instantly, in order to avoid life-threatening situations. By this standard, it can be argued that a pregnant woman’s life is worth less than the lives of men and fetuses. In theory, a father who murders his own child is not denied medical health care, but a pregnant woman is.

A society where abortion is banned, is a society where women have less rights than men – it is a society where women do not have full autonomy over their own bodies, whereas men do. As a result, it becomes a society where equality cannot exist. Such societies are at the root of contemporary female anxieties and fears. These fears and societies are explored in *The Power* and *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*. It can be speculated upon if these restrictions would exist if the roles were reversed. Would the states enact laws to control men’s bodies? Would the states limit men’s access to medical help? As there currently are no laws that comparatively limit men’s autonomy in the US, one can assume that these restrictions would not exist if the roles were reversed.

The Power also illustrates how people often do not rethink their position before they or the people close to them are personally affected. In 2023, the Texas Legislature mostly consists of older men. There is twice the number of men than women, and the average age of the lawmakers is 57 years old (Torres). It is very likely that most of the legislators cannot relate to the consequences of banning abortion, yet they get to make that decision on behalf of those who will be affected. As seen with Margot from *The Power*, she changed her beliefs because she was personally affected, not because her morals changed. Her male co-workers openly disagreed with the proposition of training camps, and it eventually progressed to false narratives on gender wars, suggesting all gender issues are battles of women versus men, implying that there are no solutions which can benefit both genders. However, this alleged gender war was something the people in power could benefit from. Female citizens supported and were less critical towards Margot, because they believed she had women’s best interests in mind. Simultaneously, female citizens felt distrust against male leaders, assuming they only

fought for men's best interests.

The Power also illustrates how false narratives are used to villainize gender and gender movements, to achieve ulterior motives and to conceal the most significant cause of the issue. In the US, this is especially seen in the discourse surrounding transgender people and drag performers. They are villainized and accused of spreading harmful information and beliefs to children. According to Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, drag performers are indoctrinating children, they “try to turn boys into girls” (Goodman and Graham). Republicans and conservatives are accusing drag performers of targeting children, and worrying “not just about sexuality, but also about introducing children to different ways of thinking about gender” (Goodman and Graham).

As illustrated in *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*, the ideal gender performance is built on gender stereotypes, and the individual will either be punished or rewarded depending on their gender performance. Drag-performance is a form of self-expression, and a way of performing gender. However, lawmakers in states such as Tennessee, Idaho and Texas are attempting to ban drag shows in public or at least prohibit minors from seeing the shows (Goodman and Graham). By creating false narratives that drag performers are the reason why some children and adolescents are experiencing gender dysphoria, republicans and conservatives can continue to villainize and punish those who do not conform to stereotypical gender expectations.

In the contemporary society, gender expectations are not only established through social norms, but perhaps soon also by law. Republican state lawmakers have proposed bills that will restrict the lives of transgender youths. To mention a few, “more than 150 [bills] in at least 25 states – include bans on transition care into young adulthood; restrictions on drag shows using definitions that could broadly encompass performances by transgender people; measures that would prevent teachers in many cases from using names or pronouns matching students' gender identities; and requirements that schools out transgender students to their parents” (Astor). Some states, such as Mississippi and West Virginia, have issued bills that would deny “transgender identities under state law” or define “transgender exposure, performances or display’ as obscene, potentially outlawing transgender people’s presence around children” (Astor).

By spreading false narratives about transgender people, lawmakers are able to convince the citizens that these laws are necessary and for the greater good. An example of false narratives is that transgender people are dangerous. In March 2023, a six people were killed at a Nashville Christian school. However, although the shooter was first identified as a

28-year-old woman, the police learned that the shooter used masculine pronouns on social media. Although the shooter's gender identity was unconfirmed, and there was no evidence of hormone therapy or transitioning, the right-wing used the shooting to “escalate anti-trans rhetoric” (Nirappil).

It was claimed that the shooter was angry because of the testosterone in hormone therapy and that it was a hate crime towards Christians. Conservative commentator Matt Walsh claimed that the “gender ideology movement” was the “most hateful and violent in America” (Nirappil). According to The Washington Post, Donald Trump tweeted that “there’s a clear epidemic of trans/non-binary mass shooters”. That statement is wrong, as ironically, “since 2006, 96 percent of 340 mass killings involving a single shooter were committed by men”, referred to as a “cisgender male phenomenon” (Nirappil). However, by creating a false narrative, the right-wing can avoid acknowledging gun control as a solution to school shootings, and instead blame transgenders.

As seen above, the government is actively seeking to punish those who do not conform to society’s construction of gender. Essentially, by restricting transgenders, drag performers, and gender expression, the government wishes to control how their citizens can wear their clothes, hair or makeup. They also wish to control how their citizens can spend their free time or which hobbies they can engage in. Further, they wish to control how individuals can interact with one another, as seen with the bill involving teachers and transgender students. All these measures would be taken, simply because they fear the concept of gender dysphoria and a society which does not fit their desired construct of gender.

One thing is certain, such a society cannot progress. A society which cannot move forward or evolve is also at the root of female fears and anxieties. As illustrated in the novels, social issues related to gender, such as female rights or restrictive laws and social norms, have a tendency to have a snowball effect. For example, in Tatiana’s new country, where men’s rights were limited until they a few weeks later did not exist at all, or how the unnamed midwife fell into a coma in an egalitarian society, and woke up days or weeks later to a society where women have no rights and are considered the property of men. Likewise, contemporary laws that restrict gender expression and full body autonomy can be the beginning of a snowball-effect in our contemporary society. It makes us question, what is next? Where will it end? The failed logic behind the moral arguments and false narratives, reveals that some measures are not about protecting its citizens, but instead it is about controlling its citizens to conform to a certain ideology, hidden under the pretense that everything that is deviant of that ideology is dangerous and damaging.

The Book of the Unnamed Midwife and *The Power* are relevant for the contemporary audience, as they act as political commentaries of the contemporary society. The novels are necessary for ongoing discourses about gender and feminism because they incite a healthy and inclusive discussion about not vilifying genders, and instead about working together to protect the civil liberties of everyone, to live in a fairer and more equitable society.

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