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“On That Day We Will Be Free”: Reflecting Women’s Real Experiences in Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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ABSTRACT: The feminist speculative fiction novels *The Female Man* (1975) by Joanna Russ and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) by Margaret Atwood mirror the real world by reflecting women’s experiences. Speculative fiction, an umbrella genre that includes science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism, explores our world by discussing other worlds. Themes and events in each novel’s fictional world reveal aspects of today’s world, and the depictions and conditions of women in the novels illuminate heterosexist norms. Specific and clear parallels can be drawn between reality and these science fiction stories, showing that the novels critique and comment on our world’s treatment of women by distancing themselves through the genre of speculative fiction. In addition to examining the realist truths of our world, the authors raise awareness about these patriarchal issues and spur change in our society.

KEYWORDS: feminism, realism, speculative fiction, science fiction, Margaret Atwood, Joanna Russ, dystopia

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“Science fiction turns out to be the realism of our time.”
- Kim Stanley Robinson (quoted in Flood)

INTRODUCTION

The best way to read fictional texts, Debra Benita Shaw says, is to see “the very real conditions for which they are metaphors” (179). Realism gives fiction its importance by drawing parallels between fictional worlds and reality, allowing readers to view the world differently after identifying these parallels (MacKay 14). Current scholarship comprehensively examines how speculative fiction reflects reality and the truths of our world, including issues often analyzed and discussed in feminist discourse. Investigating two speculative fiction novels through a feminist lens reveals relevant critical commentary about women’s experiences in our world. These worlds reflect the reality of women’s lives by showing the negative effects of gender roles and gender inequality.

Speculative fiction provides feminist writers a means for discussing and analyzing the ideology surrounding a woman’s life by applying general themes and experiences faced by all women to a fictional world. As an umbrella term, speculative fiction includes a variety of other well-known subgenres like fantasy, science fiction, and magical realism. On a basic level, speculative fiction investigates topics and encourages the reader to question these topics in response, but researchers widely debate the definition of speculative fiction (Canavan and Ward 238). Speculative fiction describes other worlds, making it unrealistic by definition, but many believe that it actually discusses reality because its “new” worlds reimagine our world while retaining fundamental human values and problems. In her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula LeGuin echoes Debra Benita Shaw when she explains that “all fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor” (xviii). Speculative fiction uses elaborate, fantastical stories to tell truths that writers cannot say clearly and accurately without metaphor.

Although these stories differ from the reality around us, they allow readers to step back from and “offer a critical perspective on” their world (Shaw 2). This critical perspective “can have a social or political” purpose that the incorporation of feminism strengthens and clarifies (2). Merja Makinen attributes speculative fiction’s “revolutionary potential” to “its structural premise to question things-as-they-are,” which makes it an appropriate vehicle for feminists to show the inequalities

women face (139). Women write speculative fiction because it offers freedom and a “language [that] enables the expression of radical and feminist ideas” (145). Through speculative fiction, writers question the norms of patriarchal society and provide critical commentary on the ways that women have to live. Feminist truths need the distance that fantastical metaphors and stories provide to present themselves to readers. Readers must ask themselves what they can learn from reading feminist speculative fiction novels in relation to our world, its truths, and its possibilities.

CASE STUDIES

Two texts analyzed as case studies show how feminist speculative fiction reflects our world. Although thirty to forty years separate the publication of these novels and the present day, their examinations of societal structures and norms surrounding gender reflect reality. By examining the here and now, imagining “future consequences,” and projecting seemingly unconnected future realities that could logically follow if our world continues on its path (Cranny-Francis 68), these texts comment on and criticize the patriarchal structures of our world and its inequalities.

Joanna Russ’s The Female Man

The Female Man, as Merja Makinen explains, derives from Joanna Russ’s desire to “engage the reader in a consideration of patriarchy and the damage it does on women” more than a desire simply to tell a story (155). Russ pairs many passages and events with “textual aggression towards patriarchy” as a way to develop the storyline and “uses caricature and invective to delineate the normal mid-Western relationships between men and women” in the 1970s, which readers can recognize in today’s society (154). The novel follows four women. Jeannine and Joanna live in various versions of 1975. Janet lives in a world without men, and Jael lives in a world where the split between genders led to warfare and gendered separation across continents. Their lives converge and overlap, leading to interactions that highlight gender inequality. Each character embodies different aspects of women’s lives and draws readers’ attention to Russ’s critiques.

Jeannine symbolizes the ideal woman in the eyes of the patriarchy. She focuses on finding a man, settling down with him, starting a family, and living as a dutiful wife. Jeannine becomes depressed from her inability to fulfill

this typical female role; instead, she pines away for men. Through Jeannine's character, readers can see the effect of patriarchal expectations on women. When Jeannine visits her family, Joanna tells her, "You don't want to be a dried-up old spinster at forty but that's what you will be if you go on like this. You're twenty-nine. You're getting old. You ought to marry someone who can take care of you, Jeannine...It's all right to do that; you're a girl" (Russ 114). Jeannine should marry and rely on her husband because a "girl" needs a man to take care of her. Alternately, Jeannine's brother is "a firm, steady man who makes a good living for his wife and children," and his wife "wants nothing more in the world than her husband and her little boy and girl" (113). This couple demonstrates the power of gender roles and the way Jeannine should conform to them. The narrator uses these descriptions to scold Jeannine, who laments her failure to fulfill her role in society. She spends much of her time lying around and complaining about her lonely fate.

Jeannine's behavior also reflects how a woman should act: "She...pauses, catching sight of herself in the wall mirror: flushed, eyes sparkling, her hair swept back as if by some tumultuous storm, her whole face glowing. The lines of her figure are perfect, but who is to use all this loveliness, who is to recognize it...?" (109). Jeannine tries to achieve the ideal of feminine beauty and look the way men want her to look. She obsesses over her appearance in her fervor to attract a man. With this goal, she centers her life on men and eventual marriage. Joanna, previously ensnared in the same patriarchal trap as Jeannine, recalls: "I spent my whole day combing my hair and putting on make-up...all I did was dress for The Man, smile for The Man, talk wittily to The Man, sympathize with The Man, flatter The Man, understand The Man, defer to The Man, entertain The Man, keep The Man, live for The Man" (29). Jeannine, for the majority of the novel, spends her time doing exactly these things.

When with her boyfriend, Jeannine cannot discuss her problems because "he'll say she's nattering again; worse still, it would sound pretty silly; you can't expect a man to listen to everything (as everybody's Mother said)" (108). She degrades her voice and elevates a man's attention above the topics and ideas she wishes to share, and attributes this knowledge to her mother, showing that women learn about the superiority of men from childhood. Another character, Laura, also discusses the construction of gender roles and gender superiority from childhood, venting her frustration about society denying her goals and dreams because they were not feminine

enough. She sarcastically explains: "*Everyone knows* that much as women want to be scientists and engineers, they want foremost to be womanly companions to men (what?) and caretakers of childhood" (60, emphasis in original). The desire to embrace feminine roles supposedly lies at the very core of each woman. As Laura's says, "Men make the decisions and women make the dinners" (67), delegating each person to his or her specific, "inherent" gender role. No woman can deviate without punishment, yet Laura and Jeannine want to be more than just "woman."

Joanna remedies this by seeking to achieve the transcendence of "woman," becoming what she calls "the female man." She aims to do exactly what society taught Laura not to do: inhabit male roles and achieve the successes that only men can achieve. Makinen notes that Joanna's choice of identifying as a "female man" allows her to "assum[e] the nominal title of 'man' [and]... inhabit all the positive binary constructions within the culture" (155). In her description of her transformation, Joanna explains that she became a man by first learning what it means to live completely as a female. She explains a man's idea of femininity that places female completely opposite to male: "You really are sweet and responsive after all. You've kept your femininity. You're not one of those hysterical feminist bitches who wants to be a man and have a penis. *You're a woman*" (Russ 94, emphasis in original). To merge the two, Joanna embraces traditionally non-female roles to become a female man and inhabit the world of men as a woman.

Existing as a woman in the workplace meant that Joanna had "been neuter, not a woman at all but One Of The Boys," yet still objectified by her body. Joanna explains that "[i]f you get good at being One Of The Boys [the objectification] goes away...I suppose they decided that my tits were not of the best kind, or not real, or that they were someone else's, so they split me from the neck up" (133). Joanna found it impossible to exist as a woman in a professional space; either she did not fit, or had to dissociate parts of herself for men to accept her. Makinen agrees, saying that women are "trying to ignore their sex in order to be treated equally, but...they are turned into a negative construction of femininity by male denigration" (155). Once women fit in the workplace, they lose their femininity, which the patriarchy views as undesirable. After Joanna reworked herself to remain female yet occupy male roles, she viewed men and the world differently: "For years I have been saying *Let me in, Love me, Approve me, Define me, Regulate me, Validate me,*

Support me. Now I say *Move over*" (Russ 140, emphasis in original). Instead of tailoring her needs and decisions around the opinions of men, she creates the necessary space to achieve success by her own definitions. Using the label "female man" puts her in a unique place neither traditionally male nor female and allows her to move among the ranks of men.

While Joanna achieves success through this strategy, the gender binary does not allow two-way movement. Jeannine describes her boyfriend as "such a baby" and finds it pathetic that "when he does it [sex], you know, sometimes he cries. I never heard of a man doing that" (83). When he crosses the gender line by crying, Jeannine feels disgust and concern. If he does not behave like a man, then something must be wrong with him. She even notes that "sometimes he likes to get dressed up...Is that what they call transvestism?" (83). Society decrees that men should not behave like or want to look like a woman; a man trying to move across the gender binary is unacceptable. This double standard of gender fluidity paints women as weak and pathetic, and when a supposedly strong man demonstrates those qualities, society ridicules him. A woman like Joanna who moves into a more man-like state can find success in the sense that she can still function in the workplace and achieve recognition, while Jeannine's boyfriend would never receive respect for his womanly behavior.

Jael, Russ's fourth major character, lives among men and sometimes acts as a man, but in an entirely different way than Joanna. In her world, men and women occupy separate sides of the planet, the culmination of unequal gender roles and expectations turned into warfare. The Manlanders and Womanlanders, as they call themselves, hardly see each other due to their separation. The Manlanders, without women, cannot have children. Instead, they "buy infants from the Womanlanders and bring them up in batches, save for the rich few who can order children made from their very own semen" (167). All of the purchased infants are male, and if they grow up deciding that they do not want to be a man, they can become "changed" by body modifications or "half-changed" if they decide too late in life for modifications. These "changed" and "half-changed" function as women in the society, used for sex and domestic activities. The narrator notes sarcastically "that the half-changed are weak and can't protect themselves; what do you think femininity is all about?" (172), reminding both readers and characters that the patriarchy places women and non-men in specific roles and that being like a woman

is undesirable. Without women around them, the Manlanders degrade women even further.

Jael, an assassin, targets high-ranking Manlanders, and specializes in portraying men and occupying their roles as a spy or infiltrator. She holds a high status within the Womanlanders and can move freely among enemy troops and higher-ups, none of whom know that she usually walks among them as an assassin. Jael describes her situation: "I come and go as I please. I do only what I want. I have wrestled myself through to an independence of mind... In short, I am a grown woman" (187). Her freedom equals the freedom that men possess in our world. Jael inhabits a traditionally male role, showing the gap between men and women's typical achievements.

Jael also revels in her ability to destroy men and maintain her power over them, reversing patriarchal standards by placing herself as the oppressor in her extreme hatred of men. After another character questions the necessity of killing a male leader, she says, "I don't give a damn whether it was necessary or not...I liked it" (184), and as a narrator explains that "there's no doing business with [men]; you have to kill them anyway, might as well have fun" (182). Her attitude toward Manlanders exaggeratedly mirrors the disdain and disrespect men have for women. Russ presents this as a poor alternative to the patriarchy: it is still dangerous and unequal, and Jael's all-consuming rage and justifications for her actions are neither healthy nor productive. Instead, her situation proves the need for equality rather than a reversal of the patriarchy that would place women at the top. Makinen addresses the reversal in her analysis: "The narrative [of Jael's role reversal of the male world leader], aided by [Jeannine, Janet, and Joanna's] horror, problematizes the issues of role reversal as an effective feminist strategy, whilst bitterly explaining the attraction of such a course" (153).

While the other worlds place men and women at odds to show gender inequality, Janet's world, *Whileaway*, has no men at all. With advanced technology, women do not need men to reproduce, and their society continues smoothly: "there have been no men on *Whileaway* for at least eight centuries – I don't mean no human beings, of course, but no men" (Russ 9). History says a disease killed the planet's men, although Jael argues that Janet's people eliminated all men themselves, possibly as a conclusion to the warfare in her own world. Janet's world brings up a new view of patriarchy and other problems with gender and sexuality. Janet can do all of the things that men

traditionally do because no men exist to occupy those roles or tell her that she cannot do them. Women have choices and freedom, which brings the reader to realize that there are not as many choices and freedoms in our world. Janet can be both masculine and feminine and both are expected and normal; in our world, society still divides gender roles, even as that boundary shifts with time.

On *Whileaway*, even without men, love still exists. Women love women and form relationships and families, which brings up the issue of lesbianism and its implications. When Janet meets with a reporter on the 1975 version of our planet, he asks how women on *Whileaway* cope with the lack of sexual love, even though he has no doubts that “mothers of *Whileaway* love their children” (11). Confused, Janet asks, “you say we don’t have that?...How foolish of you. Of course we do” (11). In our heteronormative world, where people should love the opposite sex, some find same-sex love impossible and wrong. Laura, discussing our world’s standards, says, “I’ve never slept with a girl. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t want to. That’s abnormal and I’m not, although you can’t be normal unless you do what you want and you can’t be normal unless you love men” (68). *Whileaway* normalizes same-sex love and shows the reader how the heteronormative, patriarchal state of our society harms those who do not fit because they love the same sex.

Upon her entry into our world in 1975, Janet adjusts to the rules and regulations that women face. Interacting with men and assuming the role of a “woman” do not come naturally to her. Her voice and agency on her planet do not belong to her here. When a man grabs her and she tells him to let her go, Joanna encourages her to speak louder so that someone will come save her from the situation. Annoyed, Janet replies, “Can’t I rescue myself?” to which Joanna replies “No,” ignoring Janet’s confusion about our gendered social rules (45). On our planet, as a woman, Janet does not have the authority and power to save herself. She must rely on a man to save her, unlike her ability to do what she wants and stand up for herself on her planet. Our world strips away her freedoms, and by seeing her inability to fit into our box of “woman,” the reader can identify the limitations and see the inequality that still affects women today.

Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

Written in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* describes the life of a woman named Offred who lives as a Handmaid,

valued for her reproductive capabilities in a world where pollution has contaminated people’s bodies and caused a shortage of healthy babies and mothers. Each Handmaid belongs to a high-status man, a Commander, whose Wife cannot reproduce. She acts as a surrogate mother, and the Wife owns the child. This world, called Gilead, is a projected future of our world: Offred’s generation witnessed the transformation from the world as we know it to a world where people receive roles based on their status and reproductive capabilities. Women have no freedom; everyone performs a specific role to keep the country functioning, and every deviance from the desired order of society results in punishment.

In Gilead, a woman’s value comes from her body and reproductive capabilities. Men, and even other women, view Offred as useful and worthwhile because she can produce a healthy child for her Commander. They do not see her personality and mind as the most important parts of her existence. Offred explains that the Handmaids “are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (124). In Handmaid training, punishments for deviance result in bodily harm to the hands and feet, justified because the Handmaids’ “feet and hands are not essential” for their job (118). As long as they remain capable of reproduction, society can use and abuse the Handmaids. Other aspects of their existence do not matter.

Because society emphasizes bodies, Offred frequently talks about how she wants to be more than just a body; she wants to exist for herself. Her value of her soul defies society’s value on the body her soul inhabits. Our world puts a slightly larger importance on the soul, although society clearly still objectifies women and often sees them as bodies instead of people. Gilead, however, does not focus on her soul; the new world only wants her body, its capabilities, and its biological destiny. Offred talks about becoming empty and feeling empty: “what we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies” (251). In a literal way, their bodies will become filled with a child, but they must eradicate their personalities, values, goals, and dreams for their purpose as a Handmaid.

On the surface, Gilead appears woman-centered because it places so much value and importance on women, since a world without the Handmaids significantly reduces humanity’s potential to reproduce. Yet Gilead’s idea of “woman-centered” means that everything revolves around the worth of a woman’s body, not a woman’s

potential as a person and as an equal to men. Feminism wants to level the playing field and see men and women as equals; Gilead desires quite the opposite, placing men in positions of power and giving them the sole decision-making capabilities while women simply conceive, bear children, and eventually die. Gilead's woman-centered structure collapses when the reader realizes that only healthy and childbearing women matter. Gilead sends unimportant women, unfit for birthing children or for belonging to prominent men as trophy wives, into designated places called the Colonies, where they must do hard manual labor, sometimes cleaning up dead bodies or radioactive spills, with an increased chance of death. The Colonies function as the dumpster for useless women. As a reward for bearing a healthy child, a Handmaid will "never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman" (163). Gilead only values reproduction, not women, and provides a terrifying vision of oppression.

The Commanders further objectify and devalue the Handmaids when they take them to an underground secret club called Jezebel. Here, the men parade women around as trophies to prove their masculinity and power. One of the women at Jezebel, not a Handmaid but a prostitute, explains that the men "like to see [the Handmaids] all painted up. Just another crummy power trip" (316). When Offred walks around in a promiscuous, ridiculous pin-up outfit under the guiding hand of her Commander at Jezebel, she realizes that "he is showing me off, to them, and they understand that, they are decorous enough, they keep their hands to themselves, but they review my breasts, my legs, as if there's no reason why they shouldn't" (307). Atwood underscores the Commander's ownership of Offred through naming: her Commander's name, Fred, led to her name *Offred* – "Of Fred" – while she acts as his Handmaid. The other men at the club approve of each Commander bringing his Handmaid to prove his manhood, his control of his women, and his possession of his Handmaid. The men objectify and evaluate women based on their bodies because Gilead's women already fit this role in their rigid society.

Gilead teaches women that they deserve these injustices from men. During Handmaid training, the Aunts and the Handmaids engage in victim-blaming, convincing victims of rape that they deserved it and led on their rapist. At first, the victims defend their innocence and say they do not deserve blame, but the Aunts teach the Handmaids to chant, "*Her fault, her fault, her fault*" to victims (92, emphasis in original). This might sound like

an event far removed from our reality, but victim blaming occurs often in our society. Some individuals believe the victim "asked for it" due to her (or his) clothing or behavior, even though people do not want to be sexually violated against their will. This passage reminds readers that our reality shares traits with the Handmaids' society; cruelty and injustice toward women exist in both Gilead and our world.

In addition to blaming women for rape, Gilead does not allow Handmaids agency over their sexual activity. In their role as surrogate mothers, they perform a Ceremony with the Commander and his Wife in which the Commander has sex with the Handmaid, who lies on the Wife. These strict, required positions mean that extra physical contact prompts punishment. As Offred explains, "It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire" (122). Sex functions only as a ritual for the Commander to impregnate the Handmaid. If the Handmaids try to make their own sexual choices, law enforcement takes them away. Offred, in her desperation to have some choices in her life and live for herself instead of for others, visits the Commander's chauffeur, Nick, for sex. She explains herself: "I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without [the Wife] knowing. It wasn't called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely" (344). She makes these choices to have control and agency, but she also feels shame for behaving in this way. Gilead's women are not alone in feeling shame for sex; women in our society often feel shameful for having sexual freedom, or others around them shame them. In both Gilead and our world, some people believe that a woman who has sex for her own reasons, or even is raped, deserves shame as for acting promiscuously. Men do not face this stigma; society encourages sexual promiscuity to increase masculinity. These double standards, like those advanced in *The Female Man*, enforce the inequality between the sexes.

Gilead adheres strictly to gender roles, as evident through the existence of Handmaids as baby carriers. Women perform household duties like cleaning and cooking, each Commander has a Wife, and the Commander controls the house and contributes directly to society. Atwood reestablishes the "traditional" roles of women as homemakers, mothers, and trophies to develop their oppression in this society. Instead of allowing them to act outside of their gender roles, enforcing these traditional gender roles puts women more firmly in their

boxes. They must play the part of a true woman; they cannot risk acting outside of their gender roles. This rigidity constrains men too, and readers must remember that the oppression of women affects men as well. The Commanders must act respectfully, follow the rules, and run the household perfectly. Yet Fred breaks rules by changing some scripted roles, engaging in extra emotional and sexual contact with his Handmaid in the Ceremony, in an attempt to control his situation.

Fred's decision to bring Offred to Jezebel shows more of his attempts to fight against society. However, Jezebel just enforces the performance of gender roles; although visitors and employees feel like they gain agency by breaking rules and flaunting their sexuality, they just move into different assigned roles. The women who work there perform their role of prostitutes. The Commanders perform their roles as powerful, masculine, in-control figures. The Handmaids perform their roles as objects paraded around the club. Gilead's tolerance of Jezebel indicates the hidden problems with the "freedom" present in these new roles. The society's emphasis on performance and roles continues to separate genders and encourage the oppression of both men and women, even when people try to break free.

Like the Commanders, the Handmaids try to fight Gilead's oppression, using language to challenge society. Gilead does not allow women to read or write, and bans certain words and phrases while requiring others in scripted situations. Language, in both Gilead and our world, controls thought and shapes perceptions about the world. Makinen observes that "feminist [speculative fiction] has tried to challenge patriarchal language structures" that exist in our world (147), and Atwood also points out the power of language. Offred often considers words and their implications. When in her bedroom, Offred explains that "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still. The difference between *lie* and *lay*. Lay is always passive....I lie, then, inside the room" (49, emphasis in original). Choosing the active verb gives her agency over her actions instead of falling under society's control. She obsesses over language because she controls it – she can control her knowledge, thoughts, meaning, and uses of language, even though Gilead wields language as a weapon.

When Offred visits town, she sees that "In front of us, to the right, is the store where we order dresses. Some people call them *habits*, a good word for them" (33).

The word "habits," referencing the garb of nuns, also reflects the structured nature of the society and how the Handmaids function in habitual ways. When she remembers the past, she says, "They [the people before Gilead] wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose" (33, emphasis in original). Offred realizes that clothing reflects choice and that women in Gilead can no longer make choices. When she says goodbye to her shopping partner Handmaid, the Handmaid replies, "Under His Eye," which Offred acknowledges as "The right farewell" (59). Their rigid conversations and required phrases block any real communication between women and force them to adhere to their roles. The Handmaids must respond with what Gilead deems appropriate and correct. Control of language controls people. As Rita Felski notes, language has "constraining, legislative, and socializing aspects" (34), which lends credibility to Atwood's manipulation of language and its effects on the inhabitants of Gilead. The Handmaids create a code within the "closed system" of language in Gilead as a "women's language" (Makinen 143), using phrases like "Mayday," already acceptable to indicate the first day of spring, to signal distress. Handmaids risk imprisonment or death if law enforcement catches them maneuvering within the patriarchal and oppressive language structure, but they do it anyway to have agency, freedom, and communication.

As a component of language, writing holds power too. Gilead bans women from writing, and when Offred offers to spell a word for the Commander by writing it, "[H]e hesitates at this novel idea. Possibly he doesn't remember I can" (240). Writing, as an indicator of power and knowledge, no longer belongs to women, thus demoting them to a lower and less respectable position. When she holds the pen, she says, "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains" (241). She realizes the power and control that the pen gives her over language, communication, and meaning. Women cannot read either; the entirety of literacy is not theirs to claim. The barriers on spoken language, writing, and reading prohibit women from learning through words at all. When Offred reads with the Commander, she says, "I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation" (239). The chance to read comes so rarely that she has to take advantage of it.

The Commander also lets her play Scrabble with him, which Offred enjoys because it gives her power over language. She uses Scrabble to retain her hold over her language and demonstrate her proficiency in it even though everything she says otherwise must follow strict, controlled guidelines. As she plays, she says, “I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth” (180). Because she normally cannot use and mold language as a Handmaid, she savors the times she regains some semblance of power and agency. Offred’s attempts to gain power and live for herself point to her lack of freedom in Gilead and the parallels in our world. Readers can draw connections, see trajectories of our society even as we move forward in time from the publication of this novel, and understand Atwood’s critiques about patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

These two texts demonstrate how feminist speculative fiction criticizes and raises awareness about the conditions of women in our world. Even though speculative fiction, on the surface, primarily concerns itself with worlds and situations far removed from our present reality, it connects to and comments on our own world and the conditions in which we live. Speculative fiction’s distance from our reality highlights gender inequality by exaggerating seemingly normal elements of women’s lives to show their unfair and oppressive nature. Through the experiences of the female characters in these speculative fiction worlds, readers can see the importance of feminism. These texts, although dated, still resonate with readers who can recognize their experiences in the stories of these women and see how far we have come—or not—these few decades. The messages of *The Female Man* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are even more crucial because they reflect conditions of women today.

But feminist speculative fiction is more than just a commentary. As we might expect, these texts have another purpose: to “inspire real-world change” (Barr 8). Feminist speculative fiction writers are not writing into a vacuum; readers can take what they learn from these texts and apply it to the real world, instigating change. As Marina MacKay explains, these texts “act upon us all” and “potentially change the world in the act of describing it” (14). By changing our perspective of our world, feminist speculative fiction can change the

way we act in our world: “when we ‘feel right,’ we act rightly” (14). Once readers understand the underlying messages in feminist speculative fiction, they can work to change the world around them and act rightly for the inhabitants of our planet. Speculative fiction can inspire social change simply because it contains information about the conditions around us and criticizes aspects that need improvement. With this information, readers can investigate and discuss, potentially even fix, the persistent problems in the world around them. These feminist speculative fiction texts can ultimately cause awareness, action, and change. As Russ says while addressing her own novel, “Do not complain when at last you become quaint and old-fashioned...Do not get glum when you are no longer understood, little book. Do not curse your fate...Rejoice, little book! For on that day, we will be free” (214). When we can say that these depictions of reality no longer talk about our reality, and that feminist writings do not resonate deep within readers, we can celebrate the progress our society has made and know that these inequalities in the lives of people around us are dated and gone.

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