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Unveiling Power Dynamics: The Role of Knowledge and Ignorance in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Blindness*

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Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.

(Foucault)

Dystopian literature often explores the interplay between knowledge and power, revealing how information control can shape societal structures and power dynamics. Whether through the deliberate suppression of knowledge or the collapse of reliable information, uncertainty frequently creates anxiety among characters and reinforces imbalances of power between different social groups. In particular, two dystopian novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood and *Blindness* (1995) by José Saramago, depict contrasting manifestations of the relationship between knowledge and power in dystopian societies. While *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a structured system of government where knowledge is tightly regulated to maintain control of the remaining fertile women, *Blindness* presents a chaotic world in which the absence of reliable knowledge about the epidemic generates power disparities among different groups. Through contrasting narrative approaches, the novels show the dynamics of knowledge and power, and the role of memories in preserving identity under oppression, highlighting shifts in how this relationship is represented over time in dystopian literature.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopian society known as the Republic of Gilead, where totalitarian control is exercised over every aspect of fertile women's lives, whereas men have more freedom. In this society, women are subjugated, stripped of their rights, and categorised based on their fertility. The hierarchical structure of Gilead is built upon strict religious and patriarchal principles, where knowledge is weaponised to maintain dominance. In Chapter 5, Atwood writes, 'This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television [...] This is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you' (23). This quote encapsulates the oppressive nature of Gilead, where the government tightly controls knowledge to maintain its power. Aunt Lydia's assertion that 'Gilead is within you' underscores the regime's indoctrination tactics, where individuals are conditioned to

internalise the state's ideology. Additionally, by controlling information and restricting access to external influences, the government ensures its citizens remain obedient and compliant. In particular, the state controls access to information through censorship and propaganda. In Chapter 6, Offred reveals, 'These men, we've been told, are like war criminals. It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities, and must be made into examples, for the rest,' underscoring the government's manipulation of information and its use of propaganda to maintain control over the population (33). By framing the actions of certain individuals as criminal, regardless of their legality at the time, the government seeks to justify its use of violence and repression. The passive phrase 'we've been told' further suggests that the information is disseminated by the state itself, indicating a deliberate effort to shape public perception.

Offred's narration also exposes how Gilead manipulates information and controls perception, often referring to the government through the pronoun 'they' to emphasise its pervasive and impersonal authority. For instance, in Chapter 14, she says, 'They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news?' (83). By using the plural and gender-neutral pronoun 'they,' the protagonist emphasises the faceless and authoritative entity behind the state control. The rhetorical question, 'Who wants bad news?', reflects the government's assumption that people prefer ignorance over confronting uncomfortable truths. In Chapter 20, Offred also states that '[t]hey want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once, but they don't want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying' (119). The choice of expressions like 'extreme pain' and 'extreme pleasure' is an intriguing juxtaposition of two opposite superlatives. It is striking how the government permits women to witness these extreme contrasts but prohibits their experience, creating a sense of numbness within handmaids. Conversely, listening to

what the Unwomen say would raise awareness among women, enabling them to acquire the knowledge they lack.

This structured control of knowledge serves to indoctrinate the handmaids, perpetuate societal norms, and maintain the power of the ruling elite of the commanders and their wives. Specifically, in Chapter 9, Offred first describes knowledge as dangerous, ‘I am like a child here, there are some things I must not be told. What you don’t know won’t hurt you’ (53). The protagonist’s comparison of herself to a child highlights the infantilisation of women within the regime, reducing them to a state of dependency and vulnerability. The notion that ‘there are some things I must not be told’ speaks to the deliberate withholding of information by those in power, reinforcing the regime’s control over the narrative and limiting the agency of individuals like Offred. This ideology perpetuates a cycle of repression, where women are conditioned to accept their lack of knowledge as a form of protection. In Chapter 30, towards the end of the novel, knowledge is even interpreted as a temptation, like the Tree of Knowledge was for Adam and Eve, “‘Knowing was a temptation. What you don’t know won’t tempt you,” Aunt Lydia used to say. Maybe I don’t really want to know’ (195). In this reflection, Offred grapples with the concept of knowledge as both a source of power and a burden. Her acknowledgment of this sentiment reveals the internal conflict she faces: the desire for enlightenment conflicting with the consequences of knowing. Her ambivalence is represented by the concluding statement, ‘Maybe I don’t really want to know,’ highlighting the psychological toll of living under a regime that suppresses truth and manipulates perception. Hence, the power dynamics resulting from the structured control of knowledge in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are stark and pervasive. The ruling regime exerts absolute authority over women by manipulating their access to information, thereby shaping their perceptions and behaviours.

Contrastingly, in Saramago's *Blindness*, the dystopian society depicted is one engulfed in chaos and disorder due to the sudden onset of a mysterious blindness epidemic. The breakdown of societal norms and institutions leads to a state of anarchy where individuals are left to survive for themselves without guidance or support from authorities. The lack of information about the cause and the spread of blindness creates a vacuum of power, where those who can see initially manipulate and exploit blind people for their own gain. For instance, at the beginning of Chapter 2, the man who helps the first blind man takes advantage of the situation and steals his car while he can still see: 'The skeptics, who are many and stubborn, claim that, when it comes to human nature, if it is true that the opportunity does not always make the thief, it is also true that it helps a lot' (17). Within this chaotic environment, power disparities emerge based on physical capabilities rather than knowledge or authority, as those who retain their sight would be helped by 'opportunity,' as the thief suggests, and wield control over those who are blind.

The novel then progresses by vividly portraying the consequences of this chaotic lack of information in multiple instances. An example is the government's response to the blindness epidemic:

The Government is fully aware of its responsibilities and hopes that those to whom this message is directed will, as the upright citizens they doubtlessly are, also assume their responsibilities, bearing in mind that the isolation in which they find themselves will represent, above any personal considerations, an act of solidarity with the rest of the nation's community. (41)

It is interesting to notice how the word *government* is capitalised in the novel, highlighting that it is an entity with power. Similarly to Atwood's novel, it remains anonymous as it is not specified who is making decisions. Moreover, the choice of the word 'upright' is interesting

because, by appealing to citizens' sense of honesty, the government seems to manipulate them into viewing themselves as heroes who sacrifice themselves for 'the rest of the nation's community.' However, the decision the government makes is to isolate all the infected individuals without taking care of their conditions.

Characters within the novel also resort to violence and exploitation in their struggle for survival, further illustrating the consequences of power imbalances resulting from the lack of information. In Chapter 11, Saramago writes, 'The reply was curt and intransigent, Unless you bring us women, you don't eat' (159). By exploiting their control over food distribution, the thugs weaponise access to a basic necessity in order to sexually exploit the women and reinforce their dominance over the other group. Their demand demonstrates how unequal access to resources creates opportunities for those in power to impose their will on the vulnerable, reducing women to objects exchanged for survival. This dynamic parallels Gilead's patriarchal structure, where control over women's bodies similarly becomes a means of maintaining social power. The passage also highlights the precariousness of power built on knowledge alone. While the thugs may wield authority in the short term, their power is ultimately fragile, as exemplified by the wife's act of killing the leader of the group: 'Yes, I killed him, [...] Someone had to do it, and there was no one else, [...] Now we're free, they know what awaits them if they ever try to abuse us again' (184). This element underscores that, in this world, knowledge is tightly associated with both the physical and metaphorical notion of seeing. Not only is the wife not blind, but she also possesses a moral code that allows her to perceive other people's needs and offer help. Thus, the power dynamics resulting from this lack of information are multifaceted. While those who can see initially hold an advantage, their power is not absolute, as they too are vulnerable to blindness. The novel explores the fragility of societal structures in the face of uncertainty and the ways in

which individuals navigate power dynamics in a world where information is scarce and unreliable.

When contrasting *The Handmaid's Tale* with *Blindness*, a parallel emerges in the struggle against the deprivation of knowledge: both narratives depict characters who use memories as tools to preserve their sense of humanity and compensate for the knowledge withheld from them. While reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, readers get the impression that the Republic of Gilead is established not many years before Offred begins her narration. This aspect explains why memories of life before Gilead persist as a form of resistance for Offred, reminding her of the freedoms she once enjoyed and the atrocities she now has to endure. Speaking about the relevance of memories for Offred, Asami Nakamura notes, 'She continues to be haunted by her profound doubt concerning the possibility of a value judgement and the selective nature of memory [...] The melancholic aspect of nostalgia seems thus overemphasised in *The Handmaid's Tale*' (7). Offred's persistent doubts about the reliability of her memories underscore the complexity of living in a world where truth is elusive and information is tightly controlled. In Chapter 10, she wonders, 'Is that how we lived, then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring' (Atwood 56). Although her memories are fragmented and cannot provide a means of escaping the society in which she lives, they nevertheless preserve her awareness of a world that existed before Gilead. As a result, the protagonist's memories constitute a form of individual resistance, allowing her to maintain her sense of self and humanity in a dehumanising environment where the knowledge of her past life challenges the regime's attempt to redefine reality.

In contrast, *Blindness* presents a chaotic and disordered society where blind characters rely on memories as their source of knowledge, lacking comprehension of their surroundings. In 'The Original Position in José Saramago's *Blindness*,' Michael Keren notices, 'The

residents in the asylum not only fail to recognize each other but all their former affiliations are blurred [...] These individuals have memories but lack knowledge about themselves and about others' (451). This passage underscores the profound impact of blindness on the characters in the asylum, highlighting how their lack of knowledge extends beyond just their understanding of the situation to encompass their perception of themselves and others. In Chapter 16, the doctor comments, 'The difficult thing isn't living with other people, it's understanding them' (Saramago 284). This quote suggests that, in this context, knowledge goes beyond mere fragmented recollection of past events, as it was for Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Knowledge in *Blindness* encompasses a comprehensive understanding of one's own identity and relationships with others. Additionally, in the absence of visual cues, the characters must rely on other senses and forms of knowledge to navigate their world and make sense of their experiences.

The different portrayals of the absence of knowledge within the narrative are significant in both texts as they reflect the dystopian societies in which the characters live. According to Stephanie Barbé Hammer, in Atwood's novel, 'despite her seeming fitness to give a true, woman-in-the-street report of a nightmare situation, Offred surreptitiously offers the reader a very different kind of narrative' (41). More specifically, Offred's fragmented narration does not provide readers with all the details necessary to understand her story and the government of Gilead, as much of the information is implicit. Jeanne Campbell Reesman, in 'Dark Knowledge in *The Handmaid's Tale*,' even adds that '[readers] are asked to *address* rather than *know* [sic] the text' (8). This narrative style mirrors the lack of knowledge prevalent in dystopian societies, where citizens are not entitled to full transparency but are instead expected to adhere to strict rules. Offred does not provide readers with the information they need, likely because she does not have access to it either. This aspect reflects the atmosphere of curiosity and frustration, as the government restricts access to

knowledge. Similarly, in *Blindness*, the confusion resulting from the absence of information is depicted within the narration through dialogue that is not indicated by quotation marks. In ‘*Blindness and the Critique of Society*,’ Hanan Abbas Hussein notices, ‘He [Saramago] has a unique writing style represented by the rare uses of full stops, commas, or capital letters. Such a peculiar usage serves the purpose of enhancing the continuous conversational style and assures the similarity of all men’ (34). This idea explains why readers experience a sense of blindness themselves as they struggle to understand who is speaking, echoing the characters’ confusion stemming from their lack of information about the mysterious blindness that afflicts them. Hence, in both novels, narration not only mirrors the situation characters are living through but also specifically illustrates their inability to access information and how they cope with it.

Therefore, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Blindness* offer contrasting perspectives on the relationship between knowledge and power in dystopian societies. Atwood’s narrative portrays a structured system where knowledge is weaponised to maintain control, perpetuating power imbalances among handmaids and other social groups. Contrastingly, Saramago presents a chaotic world where the lack of information generates power disparities, leading to a struggle for survival amid anarchy. Both novels underscore the significance of memories in preserving identity and humanity despite the deprivation of knowledge, offering a limited form of individual resistance amidst bleak environments. Moreover, Atwood’s fragmented narration in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Saramago’s omission of quotation marks in *Blindness* reflect the characters’ limited access to information and their confusion about their experiences. Ultimately, through their exploration of knowledge and power dynamics, Atwood and Saramago contribute valuable insights into the complexities of dystopian societies, urging readers to remain vigilant against threats to truth and freedom.

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