# The Problem of Substituting Differences in Sisterhood with Shared Victimization in Motherhood

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***Abstract:*** *Common oppression became the base for sisterhood in women writing during Second-wave feminism despite huge discrepancies. Written at a similar time, Top Girls (1982) and The Handmaid's Tale (1985) both present the problems of universal female solidarity. This essay will first explain how the differences sabotage sisterhood in both stories and how women's reactions to them further entrench those differences. And then, it further discusses the seemly unity both authors create by focusing on the pain in motherhood and finally concluding that the approach of reaching sisterhood with shared victimization in maternity is just another implication of patriarchy and that we should adopt a brighter and more diverse way of building solidarity.*

***Keywords:*** *Top Girls, The Handmaid's Tale, Sisterhood, Motherhood/ Maternity, Shared Victimization, Human Differences, Female Solidarity/Unity, Common Oppression, Second-Wave Feminism, Women Writing*

As Carol Ann Howells suggests, "the greatest challenge for a woman writer is how to position herself in response to changing cultural definitions of 'woman' and its 'constellations' like 'feminine' and 'feminist'" (8). Second-wave feminism focused more on women's differences than on their commonalities. It intensively discussed women's place in the world, such as sisterhood and motherhood. Gloria Jean Watkins, or bell hooks, argues in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (1984) that "although contemporary feminist movement should have provided a training ground for women to learn about political solidarity, Sisterhood was not viewed as a revolutionary accomplishment women would work and struggle to obtain" (43). In the same year, Audre Lorde gives a similar account in Sister Outsider (1984) that "there is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not, in fact, exist" (116). Unlike first-wave feminist when women were apparently united in their shared fight for suffragette campaign, second-wave feminism was more divisive and "feminists rarely saw eye to eye on women's issues from birth control to welfare" (Gilmore, 10). Therefore, differences among women jeopardized sisterhood. This bleak disunity among women was a common theme for women writing during second-wave feminism.

## 1. Sisterhood Falling Apart

Top Girls is a play about how women are always different in terms of professions, classes, nationalities, and historical period regardless of the sisterhood they profess due to similar experiences of oppression. The play "places emphasis on the failures of sisterhood which foregrounds women's relations through its all-woman cast" (Cameron, 163). Churchill questions sisterhood by creating disputes and disrespect at the dinner party, even though the guests should have more in common because of their similar backgrounds, let it be suffering or achievement. Nevertheless, they fail to understand each other.

We can use Lorde's discussion of human difference to understand the division. In response to the differences, instead of "relating across our human differences as equals," "we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate." As a result, those differences have been "misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion" (Lorde, 115). These reactions to differences among women are exhibited separately in Top Girls. In the first act, the fact that all the guests invited are "top girls" in history suggests that Marlene tries to ignore the differences. In Cameron's words, "Marlene's

attempts to establish common ground with the other women seem dubious at best" (163). For example, all the other guests fail to understand Griselda's extreme, masochistic sense of duty and forgiveness, and Marlene herself "cannot bear it" (78). When Lady Nijo talks about a cultural suffering Marlene knows nothing about, Marlene refuses to sympathize and just says, "I'm sure you would" (80). Later the dinner party ends in confusion and chaos (Cameron, 163). There is no harmony among these seemingly connected women and certainly no willingness to reconstruct the commonality.

In Act II, Angie's admiration for Marlene and her aspiration to be like her demonstrates the second kind of response to differences: copying. She openly asserts that "I think I'm my aunt's child" (95) and finally leaves her home to find Marlene because she believes her aunt's achievement is more glorious. However, her fantasy of becoming Marlene's child is just wishful thinking as she would never know Marlene has made up her mind about abandoning her as what she did once. This makes the "copying" ironic since it often fails to serve as a genuine connection between two unequal parties. From another perspective, the play also projects the ridicule of women trying hard to be equal with men by copying masculinity. Marlene, who is often referred to as a Thatcher figure, is emulating the behaviour of men to establish her prestige as a leader. Ironically, it does not specify the authority she wanted, indicated by the argument she has with her colleague's wife about the legit of a woman taking a leading position away from a man. Both examples suggest that copying does not only not close differences but is also unhelpful in narrowing the gap between the unbalanced.

The third attitude, destruction towards differences, occurs between two blood-related sisters, who happen to share the most considerable discrepancy in values and ideology. Act three offers a glimpse of the affectionate relation between Marlene and Joyce before their political differences drive a wedge between them once and for all. They fail to reconcile after quarrelling from political belief to personal choice, as Joyce responds to Marlene's request for friendship: "we're friends anyway" with "I don't think so, no." The failure to reconcile presents an honest picture of irresolution between sisters. Three kinds of failure of female unity pose challenges to sisterhood and lead to separation and confusion.

In The Handmaid's Tale, the failure of the coalition of women is more acute and more painful to acknowledge. Even though the power structure is male-dominated in Gilead, it relies on women to regulate and enforce. Patricia Goldblatt explains that the patriarchy of Gilead establishes a matriarchal network responsible for regulating women through implementing the division of domestic labour. The female togetherness is not a safe place for women to be united and find solidarity, but rather an example of "control of the indigenous by members of their own group" (308). The matriarchal network ensures that "women conspire to maintain the subjection of their own kind" (4). The culture of Gilead is based on fear and suspicion; women are rewarded for spying on and betraying other women. Offred and her companion are painfully aware that they meet as neither friends nor equals but potential informants. They travel in pairs under the guise of safety but, "the truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (19). The wives of Gilead benefit from the handmaids' distress of separation from their children. The Aunts are the most faithful guardians of the social standards of Gilead and use force and intimidation to regulate handmaids' behaviour. Gilead, then, is indeed a culture of female treachery.

Given the insurmountable division and hopeless responses that lead to further disunity, as well as women's internal repression against each other, liberationists' vision of a united sisterhood can only be "based on the idea of common oppression" (hooks, 43). Furthermore, hooks believes that "women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression," which is "perpetuated by institutional and social structures" and "by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo" (43). The women characters in The Handmaid's Tale and Top Girls are fully aware of themselves as victims of the patriarchal system, even though there are few male characters in the former and no men in the latter. So powerful is the entrenched oppression that the characters uphold the oppression even when men are often absent. Mayday, the rebellion organization, established to resist the tyranny of Gilead, shows that alliances can only be built on mutual suffering. The assertion of shared experience in Marlene's toast to "our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements" is replaced by her later articulation of a more convincing common ground: "Oh God, why are we all so miserable?" (72). According to Cameron, the rare moments in the first act when the women's dissonant voices harmonize are bleak: one after another, the women repeat that they felt their lives were "over," and yet they went on, and three of them repeat the phrase "there was nothing in my life" (61, 65-66). Hence, it seems like Churchill only brings together these women because of their mutual oppression; success is just a disguise.

## 2. Motherhood as Suffering

The universality of oppression is distinctly manifested in maternity in both stories, on which sisterhood relies. Women are victimized due to their prescribed identity as mothers. In Cameron's words, motherhood is associated with female martyrdom in Top Girls, "characterized less by greatness than by oppression or acquiescence" (160). Most women in the dinner party, plus Marlene herself and Joyce, have sorrowful experiences regarding motherhood. Pope Joan is stoned to death because of her childbirth; Lady Nijo has every child of hers cruelly removed. Patient Griselda is forced to give up her children on her husband's strange and obscure whims to indicate her obedience. For Marlene herself, motherhood is described as a burden imposed upon her because she is bound to be affected by the intricacy for a woman to navigate the world of motherhood in a way that does not discredit her voice in the workplace. Thus, Marlene gives up her child to compete with men in society; Joyce adds that Marlene would be "getting a few less thousand a year" and "stuck here" (133) if she had not abandoned her child, which suggests women's dilemma between a successful career and the wish to be a mother.

Maternity continues to be a problematic identity Marlene hesitates to adopt, which is exemplified by the last scene in Top Girls. When Angie mistakes/correctly recognizes Marlene for her mother after a bad dream, Marlene is allowed to reclaim her daughter and her maternity. The fact that the play ends here without a further reaction from Marlene provokes the audience into thinking about women's internal struggle being a mother and the sacrifices they must make. Unlike Marlene's victimized image of involuntary motherhood, the character Joyce poses another attitude towards it. In her case, the situation is reversed: she is not given the opportunity to look after her own children, which she craves. Hence, she must be grateful for her sister's negligence; as Marlene painfully points out: "you couldn't have one, so you took mine" (133). Compulsory motherhood is another kind of oppression of women who cannot have children, as infertility in women is socially categorized as a "failure" of femaleness. However, just as Sophie Lewis indicates, "the yearning for motherhood that women experience appears to be far less metaphysical than legend would have it" (111). Joyce has a complicated relationship with Angie, the adopted daughter, who dislikes her and wants to kill her. Not a single woman's maternity experience in the play is blissful. In contrast, Isabella Bird does not have children, and she can travel extensively and enjoy her freedom from the prescribed oppression of motherhood. The play seems to put off women from having children.

The idea that women are made weaker due to their fertility is a recurring theme in The Handmaid's Tale. Lewis points out that "Atwood's narrative centres on what is often framed as "universal" agony: the separation of a mother from her daughter, on the one hand, and a human being's coerced uses as a breeder, on the other" (11). Handmaids in the story are valuable properties owned by the Gilead regime and are seen as walking uterus and embryos containers instead of a human with rights. They are forced to conceive the ruling class's children, and once the child is born, they are separated. The life purpose for fertile women in Gilead is solely attributed to their "bestowed" capability to carry a human inside. The innate responsibility to be a caring mother is rendered the normality for women. In this sense, the story is less utopian and somehow reflects women's real-life predicament. As a result of their immobility with children at home, women are further regarded as inferior to men who dominate the outside world. This hierarchy is magnified in Gilead but somehow similar in the real world. The notion of maternity, albeit not militarily forced upon women as in Gilead, is imposed on women by gender norms of patriarchal society even today.

Almost four decades from being produced Top Girls and The Handmaid's Tale continue to be retold/restaged/adapted, suggesting the ongoing topicality of their discussion of women's constructed identity in society.

## 3. The Problems of Focusing on Shared Victimization of Women

Churchill's play emphasizes the failed sisterhood and pathetic motherhood in herstory, which is history viewed from a female or specifically feminist perspective; Atwood carefully crafts the totalitarian regime to demonstrate the oppression of women and the strength they could gain from the suppression of their independence and free will. Those struggles present a mirror of women's suffering in society and remind us that there is nothing glorious about women's lived experience. However, this focus on women's common oppression can be questionable. Lewis criticizes The Handmaid's Tale's assumption that universal feminist solidarity would "automatically flourish in the worst of all possible worlds…a vision of the vast majority of women finally seeing the light and counting themselves as feminists because society has started systematically treating them all – not just black women – like

chattel" (13). This notion of sisterhood, as well as the concept of bonding, according to hooks, directly reflects male supremacist thinking: "Sexist ideology teaches women that to be female is to be a victim" (45). Hence, rather than repudiate this equation - that most women are passive, helpless, or powerless victims - women's liberationists embrace it, making shared victimization the basis for woman bonding. However, this thinking means that women have to conceive of themselves as "victims" to feel that the feminist movement is relevant to their lives, leading to self-victimization that has nothing to do with empowerment or emancipation.

Although sometimes the only common ground women can use to build alliances is mutual suffering, it does not mean that there is no hope for sisterhood beyond life's downsides. Whilst sympathy for each other is somewhat helpful, the "victims together" image still includes the shared enemy, patriarchy, in the picture. Liberating ourselves from the invisible oppressor takes strength that we could only find in our differences and our recognition of them. As hooks suggests, the difference must be seen as "a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (43), and that "women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression…we can be sisters united…in our appreciation for diversity" (67). Respecting differences by generating mutual ground as an alternative to common oppression is to reject male chauvinistic pressure. It is a way of developing tools for "using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives" (hooks, 43). Marlene and Joyce can be each other's support despite their ideological differences; looking at the choices and outcomes they each get from making those choices in the first place, I suggest that Marlene and Joyce have got what they want from the notion of motherhood. They have already cooperated regarding the caretaking of Angie though wanting the participation of men. The pain of handmaids in Gilead shows the power of women standing together to face common oppression, not as victims, but as survivors. Focusing on torture has a limited effect on change in real life. It can even become gruesome entertainment, implied in the recent remake of the television series The Handmaid's Tale. There is another way to demonstrate women's similarity and commonality other than their suffering from patriarchy.

## 4. Conclusion

Indeed, how to position oneself in response to changing cultural definitions of womanhood is a challenge, especially for a woman during second-wave feminism when differences among women are conspicuous. Navigating one's identity as a sister or a mother requires more than recognition as the victim. We should start to view sisterhood and motherhood in both stories in a new light. We have been seeing the world from the bottom for too long; it is time that we celebrate what used to make our life miserable and make it something that truly unites us.

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