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**THE TURN OF THE “BAD FEMINIST”:
PROBING MONSTROSITY IN THE SHARED
UNIVERSE OF *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*¹**

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Abstract: This essay aims at tentatively probing the figure of the “bad feminist” in the shared universe of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, composed as it is by Hulu’s adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s homonymous 1985 novel and the Canadian author’s 2019 sequel, *The Testaments*. After briefly examining the figure of the “bad feminist” in the context of the fourth wave of feminism, we offer notes on how the characters of June Osborne in Hulu’s series and Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments* may have been rendered monstrous bad feminists for their rejection of norms of solidarity, a constitutive and dominant tenet of fourth-wave feminism, seeing how the monster could be described

1 Título do artigo em língua estrangeira: “A hora e a vez/a virada da “bad feminist”: explorando a monstruosidade no universo compartilhado de *The Handmaid’s Tale*”.

as the embodiment of the anti-norm which renders normative social configurations visible and stable.

Keywords: Monster. Bad feminist. The Handmaid's Tale. The Testaments. Margaret Atwood.

Resumo: Este ensaio examina provisoriamente a figura da “bad feminist” no universo compartilhado de *The Handmaid's Tale*, ao qual integram-se a adaptação do romance homônimo de Margaret Atwood para uma série de sucesso de Hulu, bem como o romance *The Testaments*, de Atwood, que dá sequência ao anterior. Após examinarmos brevemente a figura da “bad feminist” no contexto da quarta onda do feminismo, oferecemos notas sobre o modo como as personagens June Osborne, da adaptação feita por Hulu, e Aunt Lydia de *The Testaments* podem ter se tornado monstros por rejeitarem normas de solidariedade que constituem uma versão dominante da quarta onda feminista, considerando-se para tanto a descrição do monstro como ser que dá corpo à antinorma, assim oportunizando a normatividade e visibilidade de configurações sociais normativas.

Palavras-chave: Monstro. Bad feminist. The Handmaid's Tale. The Testaments. Margaret Atwood.

DISCLAIMER

The upcoming comments² might be but tangentially related to the scope of interest of *Abusões*, yet they must be tried and probed, if nothing else at least for the sake of the controversial figure upon whom they intend to shed light: the *bad feminist*, that most reviled, most feared persona in a number of fourth-wave feminist circles. It is not our intention, mind, to decry fourth-wave feminism, nor any other wave of feminism for that matter;

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indeed, it may have become apparent by now that feminisms, not to say most configurations of identity politics struggling to come to light at any given place and time, are always ever short of hands-on membership. Notwithstanding our ostensible support to the political agendas of the several feminisms available, the bad feminist has arguably been portrayed as a monstrous other in the shared universe of *The Handmaid's Tale* by reason of that universe's apparent problematization of the ideology of the fourth wave, hence the need to spare a moment to reflect on her trials and tribulations. We would also like to steer clear of mansplaining feminism to a reading audience of women, men, and anyone who does not see themselves as part of the binary, all of whom are more than certainly aware of the multiple nuances, successes and shortcomings of successive waves of feminist deconstruction that have developed in the West at least since the eighteenth century. If we choose to dive into the plight of the bad feminist here, it is mostly because a) the rendition of the bad feminist in recent popular culture is arguably a twenty-first century configuration of the gothic monster or castaway; b) the monster or castaway has more often than not embodied controversy and social dilemmas; and c) Margaret Atwood — she who has been dubbed “the prophet of dystopia” in a *New Yorker* op-ed (MEAD, 2017) precisely for her oracular abilities in predicting several of the qualms women have been subjected to in the second decade of the twenty-first century — has recently found herself at the unfortunate position of having to juggle the complex expectations and squabbles of fourth-wave feminism, her own complex beliefs on the matter, and her need as a highly praised, heavily prized novelist to write

compelling, often contradictory (at least by several fourth-wave parameters) fictional characters. Much as a result of that, the prophet of dystopia has herself been vested in the eyes of some with bad feminist interests — a conundrum lying at the heart of the writing and reception of *The Testaments*, the long-awaited sequel to both *The Handmaid's Tale* (2003) and Hulu's recent adaptation of Atwood's material into a successful streaming series (2017-). Finally, when discussing the quandaries of the monstrous bad feminist, we aim purely at pursuing glimpses of how, why, and with which meanings has this figure emerged as a site of debate in the shared universe of *The Handmaid's Tale*, while reflecting on whether the person of the bad feminist is really off-character in the context of Atwood's larger *oeuvre*. Give and take, it is not our intention in the course of the following discussion to produce definitive and unquestionable answers, but rather to probe the material, to open up lines of thought, and perhaps stimulate others to pick up on the discussion and either polish or wholeheartedly reject these positions. This is an open-ended and incomplete analysis, and as such it should be read.

BAD FEMINIST

Whoever qualifies as a bad feminist? In which ways is one a bad feminist — or a wholesome one by default? How has the (perhaps inglorious) title come about? Surprisingly for a phrase that has been on the cover of books and the title of essays by major feminist prophets, the epithet of “bad feminist” is considerably short of functional definitions. Roxane Gay, whose collection of essays *Bad Feminist* (2014) has first presented the figure to public scrutiny, thus writes in the introduction to said work:

I openly embrace the label of bad feminist. I do so because I am flawed and human. I am not terribly well versed in feminist history. I am not as well read in key feminist texts as I would like to be. I have certain... interests and personality traits and opinions that may not fall in line with mainstream feminism, but I am still a feminist. [...] I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I'm not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers. I am not trying to say I'm right. [...] I am a bad feminist because I never want to be placed on a Feminist Pedestal. People who are placed on pedestals are expected to pose, perfectly. Then they get knocked off when they fuck it up. I regularly fuck it up. Consider me already knocked off. (GAY, 2014, s. p.)

This passage comes off as a rather down-to-earth admission of the contradictions and shortcomings of one's standing in the context of a political movement that has spanned many centuries and several cultures, though one evidently not bent on dismissing the importance of the movement itself. Feminisms, Gay argues, still count among the best ways to beacon one's reading and understanding of the political implications of being a gendered, sexualized individual in cultures in which political power is unevenly distributed in terms of one's gender and/or sexual identity. Being a bad feminist, however, means exercising one's awareness of their flaws and imperfections. One does not have to hold academic knowledge of the movement to be a feminist; one does not have to abide by any particular configuration of feminism to be a feminist, however popular that configuration might be; one does not have to display thoughts and behavior that always betray one's allegiance

with any strand of feminism to be a feminist, and one may at times actively counteract said thoughts and behavior. If that entails one is a bad feminist, so be it. In fact, it seems that being a bad feminist for Gay verges on two main *foci* of awareness: a) of how feminism is plural, tentative, multiplicitous, and often quite opposed to what it is said to be in mainstream narratives and stereotypes; and b) of how feminist icons, those placed on pedestals by way of popularity or personal branding, are at greater peril of disappointing their peers when they fall out of line, precisely for the fact that they advocate, perhaps in spite of themselves, for mainstream narratives and stereotypes of what a wholesome feminist must present themselves as. Both traits, if not absolutely coordinate, truly converge into a single one: being a bad feminist is refusing to abide by essentialisms of whatever sort. A bad feminist seems to be, by principle, an anti-dogmatic, anti-mainstream, iconoclastic individual, one who refuses by default to turn what Gay terms “Capital-F Feminism” into “Capital-D Dogmatism”.

What qualifies as Capital-F Feminism, however, has changed considerably along with the progress of feminism over centuries. The main tenets of feminism may have remained more or less the same in spite of the passing of time — progress, the pursuit of gender equality, emancipation (from patriarchy, from social expectations forged on biology, from stereotypification, from gender imperatives and compulsory heteronormativity) — as may have remained so its main problems and shortcomings — per Gay, the exclusion of women of color, queer women, and transgender women, just to mention a few. Even so, the mainstream, not to say dogmatic configuration these tenets have taken at each particular

moment in time may have changed, which has given rise to a common perception of how feminism has developed historically in waves. Writing in her book *F'em!: Goo Goo, Gaga and Some Thoughts on Balls*, in which there is an interesting article on the emergence of a fourth wave of feminism, Jennifer Baumgardner (2011, p. 247-250) suggests that there have been four larger organized waves of mainstream feminism in the West so far. In overly general lines, the argument goes as follows: the first wave, born out of the antislavery movement in late nineteenth-century America, has roughly extended from 1840 to 1920; it marked women's organized concern with the right to citizenship, including the right to hold property and the right to vote. The second wave, arising on the heels of the civil rights movement in the historical period of the long 1960s, marked the emergence of women's organized concern, one of heavily Marxist overtones, with their shared status as an oppressed class of individuals. Patriarchy, a structure of enforced oppression and illegitimate power, was singled out for being a sibling of Capital in subjecting women to domestic life, by forcing them to assume as mandatory such imperatives as marriage, motherhood, reproduction, and heterosexuality. Equality — and, to those who considered themselves radical, revolution — became the main goal, as women fought to liberate themselves from patriarchy while shedding light on how sexual relations are in fact political relations. The third wave rose in the late 1980s in response to the perceived elitism of the second wave; as the argument went, second-wave feminism had ostensibly prioritized the frame of references and experiences of white heterosexual middle-class women, while failing to account

for the specificities of other cohorts, such as working-class, queer, and non-white women. Amongst the main contributions of the third wave were the proposition of an intersectional approach to the understanding of oppression, and the theorization of gender as a performative ideological construct made natural and stable by way of ritualization and repetition, which has marked the rise of queer feminism. Finally, as Baumgardner suggests, there may have emerged in the past fifteen years a fourth wave of feminism — a wave for which the tag of “bad feminist” has arguably risen as a particularly compelling measure of political allegiance.

A number of critical observations contend that speaking of a fourth wave of feminism entails a recognition of the embryonic nature of this particular development of feminist politics, which is reflected in an alleged lack of systematic academic study of the fourth wave in comparison to previous waves (ANDERSEN, 2018; BAUMGARDNER, 2011; GHEORGHIU; PRAISLER, 2020; MUNRO, 2013; PHILLIPS; CREE, 2014; RIVERS, 2017; ZIMMERMAN, 2017). Jennifer Baumgardner (2011, p. 250) suggests that the fourth wave may be in part unspecific, in light of its repetition of the demands of the third wave and its focus on intersectionality, whereas comments by Tegan Zimmerman (2017, p. 56) endorse the specificity of the fourth wave, if not for its particular set of concerns, at least for its particular *modus operandi*: its provenance being the work of activists that came of age after the millennium, fourth-wave feminism may be best characterized, according to Zimmerman, as the fusion of digital culture activism (DIXON, 2014) and a revitalized practice of street protest (ZIMMERMAN, 2017). Fourth-wave feminism is usually devised by commentators

as a democratic form of activism, unmediated as it is by the constrictive rituals of academic philosophy; if it answers to any academic perspective at all, it is to Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's (1989, 1991, 2013) game-changing notion of intersectionality, which suggests that disadvantage and privilege are experienced in specific ways at particular intersections of multiple identity axes, including race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, class, and physical (dis)ability. Filtered through the recognition of how intersectionality plays out in real-life dynamics of oppression, fourth-wave politics centers on the discernment of ongoing instances of women's objectification betrayed in cases of sexual harassment and abuse (GHEORGHIU; PRAISLER, 2020, p. 89), alongside a renewed interest in the material conditions that may impact a woman's life, in particular concerning purchasing power, health, education, (un)employment, and sexual and reproductive rights (ZIMMERMAN, 2017, p. 57). The ostensible goals of the movement are to overthrow patriarchy and atone for the complex instances of marginalization experienced at multiple intersectional junctions, while rendering privilege visible and nurturing a sense of "non-totalizing solidarity" (ZIMMERMAN, 2018, p. 65) among women from different backgrounds.

Although the "wave narrative" has been famously criticized before, and while it is similarly criticized now for misrepresenting generational gaps among activists that translate poorly into their overlapping concerns (BAUMGARDNER, 2011; EVANS; CHAMBERLAIN, 2015), fourth-wave feminism has been increasingly described as a "rebirth of second-wave feminism, rebranded as the fourth wave" (GHEORGHIU; PRAISLER, 2020, p. 91). Such reignited

interest in second-wave criticism of patriarchal oppression and sexual politics results from a discernible extenuation of the third wave — often named postfeminism or postmodern feminism — and ensuing repoliticization of traditional activism, a goal that the third wave may have ultimately rejected in the eyes of some (ZIMMERMAN, 2018, p. 57). As the argument goes, the emphasis of postfeminism on gender as a performative construct, its reclaiming of femininity and beauty, its focus on individual rather than collective liberation, and its enshrining of queer identities have contributed to the creation of a marginalizing form of feminism that perpetuates the oppression of women despite being sustained by a fantasy of accomplishment of the second wave's emancipatory agenda. By means of its attention to intersectionality and its questioning of the exclusionary nature of academic and mainstream activism, the fourth wave would aim at reclaiming the emancipatory goals of the second wave against what is often perceived as the mystifying conceptual frame of postmodernism. It is in the context of the fourth wave's rejection of academicism and mainstream versions of feminism that Gay's celebratory description of the bad feminist has made its first appearance; it is also in the context of the rise of fourth-wave activism that *The Handmaid's Tale* — both the novel and the series — and *The Testaments* have been recently received and discussed. Most importantly, it is in the context of the rise of a somewhat dogmatic configuration of the fourth wave of feminism that a change in the notion of who counts as a bad feminist has taken place — a change that has pushed the bad feminist closer to a possible configuration of the gothic monster or castaway. Yet how so?

JUNE OSBORNE IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Hulu's rendition of the dilemmas of the Handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale* has recently proven fertile in examining the tensions underscoring the ideology of the fourth wave and the shadow of the bad feminist in the context of what has been growingly seen as a mainstream configuration of feminism. It is important to linger a moment on the partial fall of the bad feminist in *The Handmaid's Tale* for three reasons: a) *The Testaments* largely builds on the extended mythology of the series, to the point where we might correctly refer to the existence of a *Handmaid's Tale* shared universe; b) the series protagonist, June, has verged on bad feminism in ways that surprisingly oppose Gay's positive characterization; and c) the bad feminist's fall from grace in the show echoes that of Atwood's, another feminist icon, in a way that has arguably shaped the plot and character development of the protagonists of *The Testaments*, in particular Aunt Lydia. Hulu's series has been considered a paragon of fourth-wave feminism by way of its echoes of the #MeToo movement in recent academic research (MOEGGENBERG; SOLOMON, 2018); indeed, its refurbishing of Atwood's passive and somewhat cowardly protagonist, Offred, into the feminist warrior June Osborne we have watched for four years now, has been tinged with the colors of fourth-wave feminism, by way of its emphasis on *solidarity* in the face of patriarchal oppression. In the series' first season alone, which covers the ground of Atwood's novel and the inception of Gilead's patriarchal regime, June manages to face off against Aunt Lydia in defense of /her "gender traitor" friend Emily/Ofglen, join her friend Moira in an attempted escape from the Red

Center, encourage Emily to run over an armed Angel guard with a stolen car, privately appeal for compassion to a visiting Mexican ambassador, smuggle a written letter to her refugee husband Luke over the border into Canada, scribble a message on the wall for a possible upcoming Offred — “You are not alone”, a token of her solidarity —, prevent Janine/Ofwarren from running off with Baby Angela in her arms — and later refuse to stone Janine for the “crime”, thus initiating a small rebellion against Aunt Lydia —, join the Mayday resistance, secure a package of bombastic Handmaids’ letters to be transported into Canada, and direct the most outrageous cursing at the Wife of her household, Serena Joy³. Needless to say, Atwood’s Offred puts on no such shows of solidarity or heroic fight against illegitimate patriarchy: she mostly sits, waits, and obeys.

It is undoubtful that June’s characterization in the show has allowed her to become a more assertive feminist icon, attuned to the hands-on approach to resistance that has grown out of fourth-wave feminism’s pursuit of female empowerment through solidarity. Yet her narrative arc in the series doesn’t always support her status as a fourth-wave shero — as a matter of fact, as her story progresses, it increasingly withstands it. Cracks on the surface begin to show during the second season of the series, which sees an unfocused and emotionally broken June give in to the powers that be, but it is in the course of the third season that June’s actions become highly incongruent with her initial status as a fourth-wave icon. By the end of the show’s sophomore season, June has snapped out of her inaction and managed to smuggle

3 cf. *The Handmaid’s Tale* [Series]. 2017.

Baby Nicole, her newborn daughter (by law a property of the regime), over the border into Canada, with the help of Emily and the enigmatic Commander Joseph Lawrence⁴. The third series picks the narrative up right after Emily's extraordinary escape over the border. After the scandal of Nicole's kidnapping, which Commander Fred and Serena Joy have helped cover up to avoid the gallows, June joins Commander Lawrence's household as Ofjoseph. The new Commander is married to an emotionally unstable, Bertha-Mason-like Wife, Eleanor, who is kept to herself in the master bedroom. Eleanor is burdened by the knowledge of her husband's disgusting war crimes: he has devised the project of the Colonies, the concentration camps where Unwomen are sent to collect radiative dust until they rot to death. And yet, the Marthas of the household somehow run a Mayday headquarters from the basement with Lawrence's consent, from whence they articulate such tasks as the escape of Handmaids and the assassination of Commanders. Upon realizing what unfolds in the house, June joins the resistance to learn the whereabouts of Hannah, her other daughter, with hopes that she can save the child from Gilead before finally escaping the regime herself. By this point, however, she has become someone else altogether: hardened, reckless, self-centered, and perhaps a bit deranged. She insists that Mayday should move a Martha out of Gilead, when that would clearly put the whole operation at risk if they got caught. The Martha ends up executed by Angels. She then persuades Eleanor to walk her to Hannah's school, knowing very well that the reclusive Wife could have a breakdown at

4 cf. *The Handmaid's Tale* [Series]. 2018.

any moment — which she eventually does, in plain sight of the Angels. She later tracks down the Martha in charge of Hannah and begs her to arrange for a private meeting with her daughter, but her plans are frustrated when her shopping partner Natalie/Ofmatthew, a true believer, tells on her to the Aunts. She is then brought in to conduct the execution of the Martha — which she does without so much as batting an eye. In the second half of the season, she is determined to smuggle about a hundred kids out of Gilead by airplane, which a plan is put in motion to accomplish. But when the good-natured Eleanor threatens to unwittingly risk the plan, June purposely lets her die of an attempted suicide, even though she could have saved the Wife in time. Later on, while a bunch of kids crouch in Commander Joseph's basement waiting to leave, she points a gun to a recalcitrant child's head in order to shush her. She eventually manages to carry on with the plan and save the kids, but we might be asking by now: at what cost has the deed been accomplished?⁵

One particular sequence of events underlines the most problematic change in June's behavior *vis-à-vis* her outward refusal of what might be considered a tenet of fourth-wave activism: solidarity. After she is denounced to the Aunts by Ofmatthew, June testifies to Aunt Lydia that her shopping partner is harboring doubts as to whether she should terminate her current pregnancy. This revengeful revelation leads Aunt Lydia to single out Ofmatthew to testify to her sins before the other Handmaids, who, seeing June as a leader, take to ostracizing the denouncer. The passive-aggressive treatment of Ofmatthew

5 cf. The Handmaid's Tale [Series]. 2019.

extends for a number of episodes, until the distraught Handmaid snaps at the supermarket, and goes on a violent rampage. She is shot unconscious by an Angel and brought into a hospital, where she is declared brain-dead, but placed in life support until her baby is born. By way of atonement, June is forced to stick with her now unconscious partner, kneeling down by her bedside until the birth occurs. But week after week of silent kneeling drives her to devise a terrible plan: she manages to purloin a scalpel so she can finish off both Natalie and the baby. At the crucial murderous moment, Janine, who had been admitted to get treatment for an open wound, walks in on her. “Don’t do that”, Janine begs — “She is one of us”. June, a deranged smile on her face, agrees, but refuses to let Janine take the scalpel off her hands. “When did you get to be so selfish?”, Janine asks; “Everything’s always about you now, your problems”. “Get the fuck outta here”, June replies, keeping the scalpel out of Janine’s reach, to which a flabbergasted Janine murmurs: “You’re different. I don’t like it”⁶.

So much for solidarity. Granted, June has been crushed under extreme, unimaginable pressure. She has tried again and again to save her daughter, and has failed. She has tried again and again to escape Gilead, and has failed. She has been subjected again and again to torture, pain, disrespect, institutional rape, and has had to harden herself in response to the absurdity of it all. It is only understandable that there must have come a point where she would have relinquished her selfless, solidary persona, even if for only moments at a time, to put herself and her own private interests first. By doing just that, however, June has challenged the political

6 HEROIC (Season 3, ep. 9). *The Handmaid’s Tale* [Series]. 2019.

symbolism she was conceived to be. She has relinquished her role as a symbolic warrior against a system of female subjection by way of solidarity, one extremely attuned to a fourth-wave reading of solidarity as a successful strategy of resistance to oppression. June has, in this particular sense, become a bad feminist — a feminist against the grain, fallen from a fourth-wave pedestal, one who has fucked up, has messed up with expectations, has flipped off the norm. The consequences, both for her character and for her standing in protest culture, have been multiple.

The most striking consequence of June's verging on bad feminism is the reversal of values entrenched in the process. She has become a bad feminist all right; yet in the context of Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, particularly from the second season of the series onwards, her transformation into a contradictory and bewildering feminist has never been embraced, nor has it ever been celebrated. As character after character in the show will tell you at least once every two episodes — Marthas or former Marthas, Handmaids or former Handmaids, escapees and those still inside, and all possible members of the resistance, male and female alike — June has become an egotistical Juggernaut, a threat to the success of the resistance, a danger to herself and others, a deranged and confrontational individual, someone untrustworthy and unpredictable, someone who turns against her peers, someone who puts herself and only herself first, someone to be avoided at all costs if one truly wishes to stay alive, someone different and unlikeable by the Janines of life's standards. Janine's assessment haunts precisely for the conclusion it imparts: the show's leading Handmaid and strongest fourth-

wave symbol has changed considerably by trading off solidarity, however non-totalizing, non-essentialist it is supposed to be, for the accomplishment of her own private agendas. Her endgame no longer seems to be informed by an “us” grounded in an experience of non-essentialist sisterhood, and the intersectional narrative of different but shared oppression no longer fits her motivations. She is now willing to sacrifice one of “them” the moment that one proves an encumbrance for the fulfillment of her personal agendas. Such episodes suggest that June’s politically symbolic endurance has been replaced with moral ambiguity. The change may be refreshing from the viewpoint of character progression, but it is ultimately problematic in the context of a Handmaid’s standing in a fourth-wave feminist reading. A number of questions arise from the conundrum: How to account, in a fourth-wave feminist reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, for those who exchange sisterhood for either ideology or personal gain? How to account for those for whom liberation may only be accomplished *at the price of solidarity* — of turning their backs on their peers, or even helping to enforce their oppression? How to account for the woman who willingly sacrifices another woman’s wellbeing in the name of a selfish cause? What sort of feminist is that person, after all — if feminist she may be called?

The change in June echoes a change in the perception of what it means to be a bad feminist. Ambiguous behavior such as hers, though it may be tackled differently by different trends of feminism, has encountered hostile responses by an arguably dominant configuration of the fourth wave that has been on the rise, one whose internal coherence depends on one’s full adherence to the

group's sanctioned form of being a feminist. According to Ensalaid Munro and Tegan Zimmerman, expressing divergence to the doxa — i.e., blinding oneself to intersectional peculiarities, thus acting in ways that defy solidarity — leads one to be called on to “check their privilege” (MUNRO, 2013, p. 25) or else be termed a “bad feminist” (ZIMMERMAN, 2017, p. 62). The brand of bad feminist has thus grown to be used as a “disciplinary mechanism for re-establishing and maintaining power and control” (KABA; SMITH, 2014 apud ZIMMERMAN, 2018, p. 62) in the face of counter-normative attitudes. It uncovers, then, the emergence of a relatively normative configuration of fourth-wave politics, one grounded on intersectionality and solidarity as norms or imperatives to be acknowledged and pursued. The bad feminist has, in this context, become her own political opposite: rather than the celebrated non-mainstream individual, she has grown into the dissident feminist who must be checked for overseeing the respect to dominant contentions; rather than the radically non-essentialist feminist, she has become the one who defies the stability of essentialism — which is surprising in a movement for which intersectionality, thus radical difference, is a must — , and thus puts the success of the movement at peril. She has been subjected to a turn — from a celebration of marginality and inconclusiveness to a disciplinary mechanism directed towards the checking of those individuals questioning the rising normative configuration of the fourth-wave movement. That turn delimits a dangerous point where bad feminism loses its ground on the politics of pluralism to become a mode of political control by way of the institutionalization of monstrous otherness.

Whenever one refers to non-essentialist, non-totalizing feminisms, as Roxane Gay has made sure to do when discussing her own self-proclaimed status as bad feminist, one necessarily operates under the idea of a radical decentering; being a bad feminist is, most of all, being averse to dogmatism, rather than simply a byproduct of a powerful dogmatic position. Yet when a certain normative configuration begins to take shape, to take *center* stage, as has apparently accrued the nascent fourth wave of feminism, it pushes other, non-canonical, non-dogmatic, non-wholesome configurations to the margins. Arguably, when radical decentering crushes under the weight of an emerging centralizing force, it beckons the emergence of monsters. For, as studies by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996, p. 3-25) and J. Jack Halberstam (1995) have suggested, monsters are the others, the outcasts, the marginal individuals who contradict a socially sanctioned norm. Indeed, as Fred Botting (2008, p. 8) has argued, monsters are *the upkeepers* of the norm, given how they are “the exceptions [allowing] structures to be identified and instituted, difference providing the prior condition for identity to emerge”. As that, they police the boundaries of identity, of internal coherence, of dominance. Monsters embody difference on the basis of their refusal of hegemonic values — but only, it might be added, to the extent where the non-essential, non-totalizing, ex-centric radicalism of postmodern difference is made understandable as a form of graspable, controllable, and perhaps destroyable alterity.

For that, monsters are hailed as sites of terror. Traditionally, as Botting (2008, p. 8) suggests, monsters are “objects of fear, exclusion or repugnance”. Historically, those exceptional

creatures policing the boundaries of the normal have included “workers, women, deviants, criminals, “orientals” etc., [all of whom] are produced as the antitheses fantasmatically and ideologically establishing modern norms of bourgeois rationality, heteronormative sexuality, racial integrity, [and] social and cultural cohesion” (BOTTING, 2008, p. 8). The bad feminist, as she has been presented in Hulu’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, has arguably joined those other others in that much decried marginal position. In the acts of her spiraling out of symbolic value — of her becoming bewildering, unlikeable, threatening, and fear-inducing — she has become the antithesis fantasmatically establishing norms of fourth-wave allegiance grounded on solidarity. It is precisely in the capacity of ideologically antithetical monstrous outcast that she has also made an appearance in Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments*, a novel that has arguably been written to take the cultural problematic of bad feminism expressed in Hulu’s *Handmaid’s Tale* a few steps further.

In order to examine how Atwood has approached the figure of the bad feminist in *The Testaments*, we must first understand how the writer herself may have become embroiled in the turn of the bad feminist. She has been entangled in this particular reversal of values — which she has discussed in an op-ed for *The Globe and Mail* (2018), in which she asked: “Am I a Bad Feminist?”⁷ — by way of her participation in the Steven Galloway controversy, which has allegedly led fourth wavers to decry her untouchable status of feminist oracle after what they may have deemed an

7 Available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/am-i-a-bad-feminist/article/37591823/>. Access: 06th Oct. 2020.

uncharacteristic gesture towards the maintenance of patriarchy. In 2016, Atwood and a number of other prominent Canadian authors signed an open letter⁸ calling for the University of British Columbia to be held accountable for what they believed was a mishandling of a sexual abuse accusation against its then Professor Galloway, one of many such accusations that have befallen the heads of powerful men in the wake of the #MeToo movement in the late 2010s. After UBC had commissioned an independent report which dismissed the claims of sexual harassment as unsubstantiated, but still went on to fire Galloway amid a much-publicized vilification of his character, the signatories of the letter claimed that “the University’s willingness to allow the suspicions it has created to continue to circulate is surprising and appears to be contrary to the principles of fairness and justice that should guide any distinguished academic institution” (ATWOOD *et. al.*, 2016, s.p.). In her essay, Atwood reflects on how her endorsement of a missive in support of liberal values has been “distorted by its attackers and vilified as a War on Women” (ATWOOD, 2018, s.p.), which has in turn led her to be backlashed by social media users and fourth-wave activists as a bad feminist, apparently for her lack of expressed solidarity with a fellow woman in trouble.

Those who may have met Atwood through Hulu’s reading of her celebrated novel were naturally shocked by what they must have seen as a base betrayal of feminist ideals. Yet those who have studied her work long enough to realize its complexities would hardly be that fazed. Atwood’s complicated tackling of

8 ATWOOD *et. al.*, 2016. Available at: <http://www.ubccaccountable.com/open-letter/steven-galloway-ubc>. Access: 06th Oct. 2020.

tensions between feminism and individual characterization has long been a problem of academic investigation, and her structural stance on feminist politics often lies far from fourth-wave notions of solidarity. “My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They’re not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. [...] Nor do I believe that women are children, incapable of agency or of making moral decisions” (ATWOOD, 2018, s.p.), her op-ed reads; that is a stance she has translated into her extensive body of fiction time and again, *vis-à-vis* the lives of numerous female characters whose allegiances often fall outside the limits of solidarity to other women — and that at the very heart of narratives that may be said to reinforce the argument that female oppression continues to be a structural element of patriarchal power relations. To Atwood, a problem arises when moral complexity of the sort she is interested in examining as a writer is limited by presumed notions of guilt and innocence anchored on a perception of systemic oppression and the need to erase individuality to tend to collective claims. She argues in her op-ed that her position is a matter of fairness and transparency before solidarity, one that does not, in her opinion, invalidate the defense of women’s rights. She is certainly aware of the fact that women have historically been forced to keep their silence in cases of sexual abuse, knowing that they could hardly tackle the powerful structural systems that have a man’s back at all times — proof of that is the occurrence of countless such episodes in her extensive *oeuvre*, including, besides Offred in her version of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, such characters as Elaine Risley in *Cat’s Eye*

(1989), Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* (1997), and Laura Chase in *The Blind Assassin* (2001), only to name a few. What she argues, however, is that, if taken to the extremes of declaring guilt and innocence on the basis of default solidarity, an “understandable and temporary vigilante justice [such as #MeToo] can morph into a culturally solidified lynch-mob habit” (ATWOOD, 2018, s.p.) often directed at those women who might dare to defy the norm. That, to Atwood, may be a lot of things, but feminism it is not.

These conflicting positions and their several shortcomings constitute to a certain degree the substratum of *The Testaments*. The novel has been deemed “Atwood’s contribution, overtly militant, to a women’s ‘march against patriarchal abuse’” in the context of fourth-wave activism (GHEORGHIU; PRAISLER, 2020, p. 91). This description, though in line with the political standing of *The Handmaid’s Tale* universe in fourth-wave activism, fails to account for the distinct and persistent specter of the monstrous bad feminist inhabiting the heart of the novel. Atwood’s sequel, which focuses on the perspectives of three women narrators from in and out of Gilead — Baby Nicole; Hannah, or Agnes Jemima in the novel; and the fearful Aunt Lydia — foregrounds problems of complicity, moral choice, and the limits of solidarity, which can only be accounted for in light of its ostensible critique of overt militant policies. In *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia, the leading figure in the enforcement of the oppression of Handmaids, takes on a prominent role as she looks back on her participation in the rise and fall of the patriarchal regime of Gilead. Through Aunt Lydia’s morally ambiguous perspective, the novel examines the downside of the normative configuration of the fourth wave of feminism that

has turned the bad feminist into a discursive mechanism of control, hence an expected figure of monstrous otherness. In the following section, we will piece together instances of the complex character of the bad feminist, as we dabble on the mechanisms activated by Atwood to both render Aunt Lydia a monstrous character and reclaim the reader's sympathy for her very human plight.

AUNT LYDIA IN *THE TESTAMENTS*

“Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster”, reads the epigraph to *The Testaments*, taken from George Elliot's *Daniel Deronda*. The matter of motivation is expressed in this short quote in terms of either/or, which means the subject of the dilemma embodied in these words — every woman — is always eventually positioned in the face of two mutually exclusionary possibilities. One of those choices is to adhere to a dominant configuration of the motivation at stake: every woman is, at some point, invited to share in the glory of abiding by the same motives of other women. The fact that this option comes first proves that adhering to a norm is in itself a normative force: it is, in a certain sense, a call to conformity, and as such a prison camouflaged as a choice. The nature of motivation implicit in the apparent choice is thus invested with ideological power, in particular when examined in light of the other option: to become a monster. Motivation, then, is in fact a proxy for identity; indeed, if one chooses to reject conformity, to refuse normative modes of being a woman in the world, one immediately ceases to be a woman to become someone fully othered, for whom there is no name but that of a *monstrum*, a harbinger of the consequences of

deviation. Monsters, in such scenarios, establish by opposition a certain dominant identitary configuration, while crystallizing into fear the opposing constitutive parameter; they petrify the norm in the act of petrifying themselves, in spite of their ever-changing form, as a constant, powerful and terrifying anti-norm. It is precisely the petrified status of the monster, and as such of normativity established by default, that the elusive Aunt Lydia wishes to undo: “Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 3), she claims in the beginning of “The Ardua Hall Holograph”, her portion of *The Testaments*. Ambiguous from the outset, her petrified state invites multiple questions. Is Aunt Lydia merely shaped in stone, and thus immutable — a monument to history and to the destruction of its nuances? Is she the constitutive parameter that petrifies a norm, or else a petrified rendition of a canonical, imperative norm? Is she terrified in retrospect of the monster she has become? As the leading woman figure around which the other castes of the petrified “female sphere” of Gilead are gathered, Aunt Lydia is thought to have risen to power on a legacy of violence, fear, and what is surely an alternative even worse than bad feminism: a complete antifeminist betrayal. “The Ardua Hall Holograph” is her attempt at setting her life’s record straight — at grinding down her petrified stat(u)e, so to speak, and offering an explanation of how and why she has become an apotheosis of antifeminist controversy.

In Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Aunt Lydia makes brief appearances through the memories of Offred. She is mostly characterized as an ideologue, blinded by faith (whether in God or in the regime, it is never clear — though in Gilead both are often the

same), and given over to the regime as an instrument of enforcement of the role of Handmaid. In *The Testaments*, however, Aunt Lydia takes on a less programmatic, less expected role: she comes off as Atwood's fictionalized response to the conundrum of bad feminism at the center of which she has found herself due to the Steven Galloway controversy and its reading in light of the shifting perception of what it means to be a bad feminist. As such, Lydia reads as the most unpredictable character in *The Testaments*, the one who most strongly troubles the novel's undertaking of bad feminism as a regulatory strategy: she is presented as a monstrous bad feminist, only so that her monstrosity may be questioned, and with that the entire mechanism in operation to effect the transformation of antinormativity into monstrous bad feminism. Indeed, Aunt Lydia is, by the end of the narrative, unmasked as the mole assisting Mayday in the escape of Handmaids and the contrivance of a plan to topple the regime. Does that a feminist make? — the novel seems to be asking us; — And, if it does, how truly wholesome, or else how truly bad, is that feminist supposed to be? How does a peer *finally* take Lydia in: on the basis of her ostensible tackling of women's rights, which has contributed to the subjection of countless Handmaids, or on that of her undercover tackling of the regime, which has helped save a few necks from the gallows, her own neck included? Could it be that Aunt Lydia is less than the monster — less than the monstrous bad feminist — she has been positioned to be? Is that what a bad feminist is, after all: one who finally has a change of heart, one who finally decides to implode the regime — and with it her own history of crime against sisterhood?

It is impossible to answer any of these questions definitively; perhaps that is why, in contrast with Agnes and Nicole, the two young and idealistic representatives of activism in the novel, Aunt Lydia's transformation into a fourth-wave luminary remains questionable and unsettling till the end of her holograph. Interestingly enough, Oana Celia Gheorghiu and Michaela Praisler (2020, p. 93), though admitting to the risks of equating Aunt Lydia with any form of feminism, still argue that a Derridean reading of the Aunt through *differánce* "may help to 'excuse' her ruthless behaviour: she suspends her femininity and defers feminine solidarity until she feels that she can truly upset the status quo and overthrow male domination through feminine power". Their argument is certainly in line with their reading of *The Testaments* as Margaret Atwood's pamphlet in support of the fourth wave of feminism, though it is one that we may wish to look into with some precaution. Their interpretation communicates an underlying perception that Aunt Lydia always ever harbored a noble feminist agenda in her bosom, only waiting for the suitable moment to strike her attack against a patriarchal norm that had forced her into committing horrible acts against other women. Transparency of that sort is not only uncharacteristic of Atwood's approach to storytelling and character development; it is also at odds with her publicized qualms with the fourth wave. Such an interpretation also reduces Aunt Lydia to one particular side of her character, hence failing to ask the hardest question that looms over the account of her life and times: could Lydia's final liberatory acts ever atone for a life of dedication to a regime intended to dehumanize women so thoroughly they begin to see themselves as merely two-legged

wombs, so as to make her into a characteristic fourth waver? Though some might say that it is better to grow into a crooked feminist than to remain an antifeminist — which it is —, that is an assertion that both misrepresents Aunt Lydia's mysterious and often contradictory motivations, and reduces *The Testaments* to its latent political content in spite of its many observable nuances in terms of character development.

Gheorghiu and Praisler's Derridean reading of Aunt Lydia imparts yet another germane underlying reasoning: in adopting the postmodern standpoint of deconstruction, they are willing to sympathize with the monster, and thus advance a reading of the Aunt's monstrosity in terms that will vindicate other readers' sympathies. That common strategy of the postmodern gothic, which is meant to celebrate monstrosity as a representation of disenfranchised identity, is thus pinpointed at work in *The Testaments*, a novel in which monstrosity ignites one central problem regarding feminism, best exemplified by Nicole's assessment: "What sort of people could be on the side of Gilead and not be some kind of monsters? Especially female people" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 46). Nicole's understanding does not cover positive possibilities of bad feminism, such as those exemplified by Roxane Gay's description; for Nicole, being against a normative configuration of how to be pro-women equals being against women, *ergo* being monsters. It is through the eyes of Nicole that we are led to read Aunt Lydia as the particular sort of bad feminist who discharges the ideological byproduct of the fourth wave in the shape and form of monstrous otherness. Therefore, what lies at the vortex of *The Testaments* is arguably not quite

a defense of the fourth wave, but rather a gothicized rendition of some of its potentially polarizing dynamics, according to which either one advocates for wholesome (or normative) forms of feminism and embraces its set of motives, or else one risks becoming a monstrous bad feminist. That dynamic is far from celebratory; if anything, it signals a problem of normativity lodged at the heart of a growingly dominant configuration of the fourth wave. As a result, although Aunt Lydia's story is posed from the outset to pattern the postmodern undoing of the monster, the extent to which this endgame can ever be fulfilled through the sieve of the fourth wave is rendered problematic. As a narratorial strategy and celebratory stance on *differánce*, the postmodern gothic demands that polarized definitions of identity be replaced by the more complex model of fragmentation, multiplicity and difference (HALL, 1995), the humanization of monstrosity coming as a result of how that complexity adds up to the deconstruction of power positions inherent in binary divisions of culture. However, the prospective undoing of the monster in *The Testaments* plays out against the expectations of a cultural background that does not seem to credit postmodern positions, abiding instead by a reinvestment in hierarchical power dynamics. Hence, the monster's rectification of her life under a fourth-wave lens is set up to fail from the outset, seeing how the complex presentation of a character who refuses to inhabit any place of normativity conflicts with the larger political backdrop against which it comes to pass.

Given the inherent patterning of normativity at play at the heart of the novel, the undoing of the monster is only conceivable

as a crossing of hierarchical borders towards an acceptance of the norm. If one must either embrace the norm or else be a monster, it shall not be enough that Aunt Lydia grows from antifeminism into bad feminism to display a fragmentary and multiplicitous character: the undoing of Monster Lydia must entail having her cross the divide into the side of wholesome feminism, and thus fully espouse the cause and ideology of the fourth wave. What we must expect from Aunt Lydia's account then is that she will prove herself to have always been a wholesome feminist in disguise, which can only be achieved if she is persuasive enough to prove that she has been pressed to condone horror, forced to commit every single crime at gunpoint; that the power of systemic oppression, of which she, too, was a hopeless victim, had left her with no other choice but to continue to side with patriarchy; that she has been perpetually motivated by her selfless and attentive solidarity for other disempowered women, which she has had to conceal in order to best devise how to implode the regime. She must prove herself to have always professed "the same set of motives" — to have always been motivated by solidarity in the face of shared oppression. Only thus can she prove herself deserving of mercy — and most importantly, of solidarity — and only thus can the impropriety of her position be made proper, integrated into the norm, finally vindicated through sympathy. It is, thus, to Lydia's motives we must turn in order to assess the matter of the relativization and possible undoing of her monstrous bad feminism.

When motivation comes into play, however, it becomes obvious that Aunt Lydia's actions are never made to fully match the alternative to being a monster. Her own narrative undercuts her

ends: instead of pursuing our sympathies, she produces a rather straightforward and often shocking account that never shies away from including the dirt, crime, deceit and evil in which she has dealt to become Gilead's grandest political powerhouse. Such sordid details, and the extent to which they negatively affect the lives of other women, may put her role in Gilead in perspective, yet they hardly manage to dispel the shades of monstrosity attributed to her. After reading "The Ardua Hall Holograph", we might surrender to a more condescending understanding of her motivations, but we will nonetheless remain unable to equate her with the side of wholesome feminism. Our inability is a revenue of a fourth-wave matrix of analysis embedded, for instance, in Nicole's appreciation, which frames Aunt Lydia's crimes in terms of her failure in standing up for other women. Had Aunt Lydia been targeting the patriarchs, and the patriarchs alone, we might have been willing to forgive her actions; but since she has no scruples in sacrificing Handmaids, Wives, Daughters, and other Aunts to secure her goals — even when those goals may benefit other Handmaids, Wives, Daughters, and Aunts —, then she must always remain at best a bad feminist, at least in relation to one particular group at a time.

That is not to say Aunt Lydia must never be counted amongst the victims of Gilead. Her career of horrors arguably begins with her captivity at the hands of the Sons of Jacob, where she, along with other liberal professionals, is stripped of her humanity, forced into "starvation, solitary confinement, lack of hygiene, [and] the obligation to witness and participate in public executions on either end of the barrel of a gun" (GHEORGHUI; PRAISLER, 2020, p. 93).

That, for Gheorghiu and Praisler (2020, p. 92), is why she “chooses life over femininity”: when the alternatives are either to “monster up” or to die, some will inevitably choose the first. Aunt Lydia’s contention, however, is of a different sort: “I made choices, and then, having made them, I had fewer choices” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 66). In her own appreciation, though her role in the regime may have been the consequence of choosing life over femininity, most, if not all, of her subsequent actions were ultimately her choice, and the horrific consequences of her decisions are now hers to live with. And yet Aunt Lydia’s narrative also begins at the time right before her captivity: when she was still a rightful and virtuous citizen, a family court judge, a position she gained “through decades of hardscrabble work and arduous professional climbing” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 36). Or perhaps it starts further back into the past: when she “was a girl and, worse, a smarty-pants girl” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 112), living with a family of “trailer-park dwellers, sneers at the police, consorts with the flip side of the criminal justice system” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 112), under the custody of a father who disliked her intellectual pretensions and tried to wallop them “with fists or boots or whatever else was to hand” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 112). “He got his throat cut before the triumph of Gilead”, she says of that father figure, “or I would have arranged to have it done for him” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 112). Those glimpses of a past life, that Aunt Lydia distributes sparsely in the course of her holograph, harbor seeds of the Lydia she would later become in Gilead: studious, but also ruthless; disenfranchised, but power-hungry; intellectual, but also street smart; fair, but only to the limit of her vengefulness; both a victim and a perpetrator of violence; working hard and

smart to prevail the odds. Her subjection to the system may have precipitated her making into a monster — but the monster had always been there, on the lookout for a chance to escape.

When confronted with the violence of the system, Aunt Lydia's first choice is simple: "I did not intend to be eliminated if I could help it" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 116). That is the frame of mind of neither an angel nor a monster, but a survivor. Survival, according to Margaret Atwood's celebrated appreciation (2004), is an organizing theme in Canadian literature. CanLit, in Atwood's words (2004, p. 42), has generated plenty of stories "not of those who made it but of those who made it back from the awful experience". As a trope, survival problematizes stereotypes of characterization: a survivor is neither a victim nor a hero, neither a monster nor its opposite, but merely one who, pushed into extreme circumstances, has been able to "work the angles, once [they] could find out what the angles were" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 117), in order to stay alive. For Aunt Lydia, there is nothing new about that: as a child, she had survived patriarchal violence and adverse circumstances through a mixture of wit, hard work, and ruthlessness. She had prevailed the odds once, and hoped to do it once more. Now, to accomplish the deed yet another time, she feels she must fall back into the old ways: she exchanges the equitable and virtuous judge, the polished and successful liberal professional who had grown beyond the constrictions of a troubled childhood, for "the mulish underclass child, the determined drudge, the brainy overachiever, the strategic ladder-climber who'd got [her] to the social perch from which [she]'d just been deposed" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 117). If she is serious about

surviving, she ponders, she must climb her way up to the echelons of the new regime, for the alternative is to go down. Those are the angles she works out.

When in extreme circumstances, survival becomes a stronger imperative, one that may upend solidarity for others in distress. But Aunt Lydia's story is not simply one of survival: it is also one of self-made success. If anything, it is an account of the survival of the fittest — both the most capable, and the one who *fits in* the best. In order to overcome her predicament, then, she realizes she will have to fit into the new system, to comply with the new angles allowed to her. She must overcome the eternal verities of republican life — “all that claptrap about life, liberty, democracy, and the rights of the individual [she]’d soaked up at law school” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 116) — whereas all the time swearing revenge on her nemesis, the Commander Judd:

Did I weep? Yes: tears came out of my two visible eyes, my moist weeping human eyes. But I had a third eye, in the middle of my forehead. I could feel it: it was cold, like a stone. It did not weep: it saw. And behind it someone was thinking: *I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it.* (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 149, emphasis original)

Revenge, then, cannot be counted out of Aunt Lydia's motivations. And yet her outrage, though perceptible, doesn't seem to be triggered by her despise of the regime's antics, which she has begun to work out and internalize already; nor by her moral rectitude, which she has already replaced by her selfish improbity; nor still by the harm done to women in general: right now, her

heart is harboring a personal vendetta against Commander Judd, for the torture done to her in particular. Revenge is a dish best served cold, goes the saying; which means: the more carefully it is planned, the more vicious it will turn out — but also: that one must secure a seat at the table if vengeance is to be exacted at all. Without power, revenge is nothing but wish fulfillment. Power, then, is what Aunt Lydia must gather if she ever means to exact her revenge. And yet where does power to dole out retribution end, and sheer ambition begins?

In her first encounter with the Founder Aunts and Commander Judd, after she has said “yes” to the regime, Aunt Lydia sees an opportunity to secure her power: “If it is to be a separate female sphere [...], it must be truly separate. Within it, women must command. Except in extreme need, men must not pass the threshold of our allotted premises, nor shall our methods be questioned. We shall be judged solely by our results” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 176), she demands. From the other Founding Mothers of Gilead, what she gets is ambiguous reactions: a grudging admiration from Helena and Elizabeth, for having purchased more power than they would have been able to secure; hatred from Vidala, the true believer who sees herself as a natural leader. “One by one I could handle them, but if they combined into a mob of three I would have trouble. Divide and conquer would be my motto” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 177), she concludes. That is the language of a politician, or better, a war strategist: it is clear to her that, to secure her designs — survive the regime? Get back at Commander Judd? Become the most powerful she can? —, she will have to crush those of other women, in particular the ones who

might have access to some power to strike back. In her present situation, gender loyalties can only produce a faster downfall, so she must fully step into the role of absolute ruler of the Aunts if she is serious about surviving:

If you are familiar with school playgrounds of the rougher sort, or with henyards, or indeed with any situation in which the rewards are small but the competition for them is fierce, you will understand the forces at work. Despite our pretense of amity, indeed of collegiality, the underlying currents of hostility were already building. If it's a henyard, I thought, I intend to be the alpha hen. To do that, I need to establish pecking rights over the others. (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 176-177)

And thus Aunt Lydia begins to solidify her status as a bad feminist: by revealing how superficial pretenses of solidarity are always limited by underlying personal interests, internal power struggles, and the ultimately stronger imperative of survival. Progressively, the use the regime intends for the Aunts allows Lydia to overrule the influence of the remaining Founders and forge an impressive structure of power revolving around herself alone. She becomes something larger than herself, “a legend, alive but more than alive, dead but more than dead” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 32). She changes into “a bugaboo used by the Marthas to frighten small children [...], a model of moral perfection to be emulated [...], a judge and arbiter in the misty inquisition of the imagination” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 32). Her influence has made her into Gilead's collective superego, its parameter of discipline, its Thought Police, a disembodied and shapeless form vested with the godly authority of omnipresence. She is “everywhere and nowhere, even in the

minds of the Commanders [she] cast[s] an unsettling shadow” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 32). As such, she has become the unsanctioned source of power pulling the strings behind the official male ranks. Not deluded by ideas of divine authority, nor rest assured that her gender will ever keep her safe, she gets her power to overhaul that of the Commanders themselves, even if her workings might take place backstage.

Aunt Lydia’s is power of a Foucauldian kind: while the Sons of Jacob are busy reinstating a deployment of alliance at national level, based on the exchange of Handmaids and the maintenance of control through bloodlines, she has devised a more successful way of exercising hers — through surveillance and knowledge (FOUCAULT, 1978, 1980, 1995). Aunt Lydia has become Gilead’s Big Sister: nothing ever escapes her, everything unfolds under her eye. At the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives nested within Ardua Hall, she keeps a classified set of files, the carefully hoarded “secret histories of Gilead” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 35): stacks of documented dirt, from minor peccadillos to horrendous crimes, patiently collected throughout the years by means of eavesdropping, blackmail, and hidden cameras everywhere. She thus manages to do more competently and with fewer resources the work of the Eyes, the terribly innocuous secret police of Gilead operating under Judd’s control, except she puts the information she collects to use in accomplishing her own ends. Because she knows that “[k]nowledge is power, especially discreditable knowledge” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 35), and also knows how to use that knowledge to secure a privileged position from whence she can exert control, her recording of

Gilead's history of transgressions allows her to step into the role of *de facto* ruler of the regime.

However, Aunt Lydia knows well enough that power of the sort she holds comes at the price of great danger to her integrity: once she has become a nuisance to the Commanders, knowing too many of their secrets and affecting too many of their decisions, it is a matter of time until she is eliminated in a purge. "Right now, I still have some choice in the matter. Not whether to die, but when and how. Isn't that freedom of a sort? Oh, and who to take down with me. I have made my list" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 32). Is that why she plans to topple the regime in the end — not out of her carefully concealed feminist agenda, but merely out of spite for her upcoming purge? Perhaps her endgame has never been the noble overthrow of patriarchy, out of her sense of solidarity to other women, but simply the refusal to go down alone.

Be as it may, her initial victimhood has so far failed to vindicate the monster she has become. The only possible way out of Aunt Lydia's monstrosity is focusing on how she acts for the betterment of the lives of women towards the destruction of Gilead. Only thus could we cast our sympathies with her, if only for a moment. But even that way out might lead to a dead end: as *de facto* ruler of Gilead, her decisions often benefit a woman at the expense of another woman's safety. Nowhere in "The Ardua Hall Holograph" is this more evident than in Aunt Lydia's involvement in the case of Agnes and her friend Becka. Both girls, among multiple other nubile preys, have been sexually abused by Dr. Grove for years. The trauma of abuse has led most of them to pursue membership with the Aunts, or worse, to attempt suicide. Dr. Grove, a respected

dentist, has so far escaped punishment, women being considered unreliable sources of denunciation in Gilead. After Agnes and Becka have become Supplicants, Aunt Lydia's Foucauldian tricks lead her to learn the truth about Grove, and to devise her revenge against him — which consists of manipulating, deceiving, and lying to other women until they may be persuaded to do as she wants. Thus it is that she leads Aunt Elizabeth to believe she has been targeted by Aunt Vidala in a scheme to tarnish her reputation, and, in exchange for the information, asks her to bear false witness against Dr. Grove.

“This was not a trivial request: Elizabeth would be risking much. Gilead takes a stern view of bearing false witness, though it is nonetheless done frequently” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 255). Thankful Aunt Elizabeth does risk it all, perhaps moved by a chance of doing good by innocent girls, but more certainly unable to refuse to do as Aunt Lydia asks. “The person of an Aunt is supposed to be sacrosanct” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 278), which is why, unlike other women, their testimonial is never questioned. So when Aunt Elizabeth “scrambled out of the dentist's chair, ripped her clothing, and shrieked that Grove had tried to rape her” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 278), no one disbelieves her. The rapist doctor is executed, and, unbeknownst to herself, Aunt Elizabeth is now one of Aunt Lydia's hostages: “I'd obtained a photographic sequence secured through the minicamera I had positioned within an attractive diagram of a full set of teeth. Should Elizabeth ever attempt to slip the leash, I could threaten to produce it as proof that she had lied” (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 278).

In Gilead, solidarity can hardly ever be solidarity to all: performing a selfless service to benefit some women means to

potentially disgrace other women's reputation in turn. Therefore, not even Aunt Lydia's attempts at the betterment of women's lives are able to vindicate her monstrosity, since any way she acts will prove her a bad feminist to some. In the end, she may just have acted out of her need to secure Agnes and Becca alive at Ardua Hall, so she may later enlist them in her plan to get back at Commander Judd — and, in the course of her revenge, strike out the destruction of Gilead. Not even the selflessness of that ultimate goal must be taken for granted, for even after Aunt Lydia has finally secured Baby Nicole back in Gilead, she ponders in which choice to make:

My reader, I am now poised on the razor's edge. I have two choices: I can proceed with my risky and even reckless plan, attempt to transfer my packet of explosives by means of young Nicole, and, if successful, give both Judd and Gilead the first shove over the cliff. If I am unsuccessful, I will naturally be branded a traitor and will live in infamy; or rather die in it.

Or I could choose the safer course. I could hand Baby Nicole over to Commander Judd, where she would shine brilliantly for a moment before being snuffed out like a candle due to insubordination, as the chances of her meekly accepting her position here would be zero. I would then reap my reward in Gilead, which would potentially be great. Aunt Vidala would be nullified; I might even have her assigned to a mental institution. My control over Ardua Hall would be complete and my honoured old age secure.

I would have to give up the idea of retributive vengeance against Judd, as we would then be joined at the hip forever. Judd's Wife, Shunammite, would be a collateral casualty. I have placed Jade

in the same dormitory space as Aunt Immortelle and Aunt Victoria, so once she was eliminated, their own fates would hang in the balance: guilt by association applies in Gilead, as it does elsewhere.

Am I capable of such duplicity? Could I betray so completely? Having tunneled this far under the foundations of Gilead with my stash of cordite, might I falter? As I am human, it is entirely possible. (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 317)

Because she is human before anything else, she is susceptible to the limitations of the human character. She may give up her plans in order to secure her utmost power in Gilead, regardless of the consequences her decisions might have for other women. Presented with the choice of how to handle Baby Nicole's arrival, Aunt Lydia measures her options equally, regardless of high moral purposes, and unencumbered by either sentimentality or a sense of solidarity towards others. There is not a single absolute answer to what she must do, nor, for all that matters, to who Aunt Lydia is — not when her selfless gesture of heroic defeat of patriarchy may be in fact harboring a grandiose act of personal revenge, least still when that gesture has been preceded by a lifetime of horrible crimes committed against other women.

In light of her lifetime of vice, Aunt Lydia's potential status as a wholesome feminist remains ultimately unachievable. Her actions may have contributed to benefiting other women, but they are never transparently reducible to her sanctioning of fourth-wave feminism: her selective and well thought out tackling of patriarchy may be a side effect of her position in Gilead rather than her endgame, or else it may have been motivated by her will to

rise to power. She may have grown from the sheer antifeminist imperative of survival into the relatively better bad feminist position of doing good to at least some other women; yet her presentation as a multifaceted character, whose actions are seen through a whirlpool of conflicting and harrowing motivations, and whose behavior towards other women may never come as a result of solidarity, reinforces the monstrous quality of her bad feminism rather than dispelling it. Through Aunt Lydia, the bad feminist in *The Testaments* is regimented as a monster that establishes coherent norms of wholesome feminism by opposition. As a result, the postmodern effort to validate the monster as a fractured and humane character is rendered dangerous in its implied celebratory stance of a counter-normative ideological formation that can ultimately prove destructive to the coherence of fourth-wave norms. In fact, the strategies deployed in the novel to humanize, and perhaps excuse the monster's relativization of solidarity risk damaging the normative configuration of fourth-wave feminism, which relies on the denegation of a bad feminist other to uphold its powerful ideology. The monster's interruption of the norm is thereby rendered improper, and expressed as a failure of the system that must be corrected to ensure the recuperation of stability; indeed, the dangerous monster must be denied its overtaking of culture, it must be vanquished at all costs to ensure the system will continue to work properly. That is why Aunt Lydia, who may have provided the means for the realization of the fourth-wave aims of the narrative, must ultimately be rejected in order for those aims to materialize into political emancipation. That the monster inevitably goes down by the end of *The Testaments*, with Aunt Lydia sacrificing

herself before the Eyes get to her, is perhaps the only expected outcome in light of her unrelenting monstrosity: the bad feminist — a newly developed positions of alterity certifying and validating the configuration of cultural norms — must perish in order for the fourth-wave liberatory ends embodied in the remaining characters in the narrative to remain wholesome, untarnished, coherent, and untouched in its ends.

CODA

June Osborne and Aunt Lydia could both be said to embody the problematic turn of the bad feminist in the context of fictional renditions of the contradictions of the fourth wave of feminism that supply the background against which the shared universe of *The Handmaid's Tale* has recently developed beyond its initial symbolic value. Such an outcome leaves to be addressed one final aspect of the monster's function in *The Handmaid's Tale* shared universe. Monsters have been traditionally considered signs or warnings of a given cultural problem, oftentimes one of normativity. The arrival of the monster signals a confrontation with that problem, which would otherwise remain unaddressed. In both Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, the monster in a bad feminist's habit establishes the limits of solidarity in terms of survival as a stronger imperative. It asks us what choices we, too, might have made had we been confronted with either the destruction of our loved ones or our own death. As Aunt Lydia asks: "How can I have behaved so badly, so cruelly, so stupidly? you will ask. You yourself would never have done such things! But you yourself would never have had to" (ATWOOD, 2019, p. 403). The

monstrous bad feminist, both in Hulu's series and Atwood's sequel novel, thus leads us to examine how truly strong we would stand behind the normative position from whence we judge her apparent refusal of solidarity, had we been forced to live under exceptional conditions as she has. It forces us to confront the distances we are truly willing to go in the name of solidarity when our very life, not to say the lives of the ones we love the most, is hanging in the balance. It makes us acknowledge that monstrosity is never alien to ourselves: there is a potential tyrant, a potential bad feminist lurking within our very liberal selves, a monster who may always be triggered into existence given the right circumstances. Aunt Lydia, who seems to know all there is to know, knows, too, that the monster is never too far from breaking loose.

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