

Food as a Means of Control and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* (emagplus)

Thomas Church explores one of the key ways in which Atwood uses food in the novel, exploiting its figurative, biblical associations, as well as revealing how the simple processes of eating, being provided with food and shopping for it are caught up in issues of power and repression.

'And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?
Genesis 30:2

From the very beginning of the text, *The Handmaid's Tale* is replete with imagery of food. Even in the opening epigraphs, the biblical symbolism of fruit, representing fertility, is used by Atwood as a means of establishing the theme of control in her novel. The value of women is equated to their fruitfulness and patriarchal dominance is established. The use of Biblical symbolism also prepares the reader for Gilead's theocratic ideology that places its citizens, and women in particular, into clearly defined roles. Additionally, the Biblical symbolism of the epigraphs and the shop names such as Milk and Honey could point towards a romanticised view of a plentiful, wholesome past world. However, it may also cloak a more sinister fundamentalist set of concepts regarding what it means to be male and female, and how everything (including eating) has to fulfil a higher, even religious, purpose.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, control of the individual by the state is of paramount importance. Offred is fed 'good enough food, though bland. Healthy food.' The state is not interested in Offred's enjoyment of the meal, but as one of the few remaining fertile female citizens, it cares only that she can breed and become 'a worthy vessel' for the children of the Commanders. In this way, Gilead exerts literal control over the choices of its citizens and reduces its women to their biology; Gilead feeds them well so that they can produce healthy offspring. The very banality of this form of coercion may highlight to the reader just how ingrained the exertion of state power has become. Atwood emphasises the restriction of Offred's diet as a form of domination by having her character remember the hotel rooms, used for her transgressive affair with Luke, where she could 'lift the telephone and food would appear on a tray, food I had chosen. Food that was bad for me'. The fact that Offred remembers ordering this food herself, knowing it was bad for her, but doing it anyway highlights to the reader the stark difference between the two times. In Gilead, Offred is protected from an unhealthy diet, but she lacks the freedom to make her choices for herself. The connection between the two meals and the state-sanctioned, but non-consensual sex and Offred's freely chosen love affair is abundantly clear here.

While Gilead clearly exercises control through the food that is offered or withheld, the contemplation and external use of foodstuffs also provides, for Offred, a means of covert resistance and even

defiance. In lieu of moisturiser, Offred and her predecessor use butter to keep their skin soft. Like the names of the shops and the decoration of Offred's room, all harking back to 'traditional values', this could be a similar return to more traditional methods of skincare. However, due to the fact that this is in contravention of 'a decree of the Wives', it also carries symbolic value. While 'they' (the state and its representatives) only see the handmaids as 'containers' and only have an interest in 'the insides' of the handmaids' bodies, by buttering their skin, the handmaids keep alive the hope that Gilead will fall and that 'we [the handmaids] can believe that we will get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire.' Here there is a clearly delineated divide between 'we' and 'they' and the handmaid's internal desires and external appearances. Through the simple act of buttering her flesh, Offred seeks to maintain not only her external beauty in defiance of the Wives' decree but also her internal hope for a better future. There is also the sense that Atwood could be suggesting that through these small acts of defiance a unity can be forged between the oppressed women of the novel against their oppressors.

In one of the most compelling sections of the text, Offred contemplates her breakfast eggs:

'The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon.'

Symbolically, eggs and the moon are uniquely feminine objects and relate to fertility, menstruation and change through growth. This is perhaps why eggs are the most often referenced consumable in the text. Offred reflects on how the egg perfectly equates to the minimalist life she is forced to lead and thinks that 'If I have an egg, what more can I want?' Offred's egg here may not merely be her breakfast, but rather her *raison d'être* in Gilead. She has viable eggs and so is allowed to survive. The regime in Gilead wants the handmaids to believe that this is all they should want and that to desire more would be sinful. Through Atwood's treatment of an otherwise mundane moment, the reader is granted access to Offred's consciousness as she considers how 'The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside.' Offred and the other handmaids live under strict control where their external lives are kept under constant scrutiny. However, here as with the butter, food allows Offred a chance to regain control of her inner world; it allows her a moment to 'compose' herself, to consciously construct or reconstruct her-self inside her own mind, away from the strictures of Gilead.

In sharp contrast to the increasingly abstract meditations on the moon, the breakfast passage ends with stark simplicity. Offred's contemplation over, she slices 'the top of the egg off with a spoon, and eat[s] the contents.' While Offred does eat what she is given, she does so only after careful consideration. Gilead provides its citizens with rations and the connection between food and ideas is made clear: 'Like other things now, thought must be rationed'. Gilead provides food and propaganda to its citizens, most notably its handmaids. For the handmaids, the choice is distinct: contemplate the state's offer and swallow it with a pinch of salt, or, like Janine, internalise it fully.

Janine is one of the most tragic characters in the text. Her experiences at the Red Centre where she was systematically blamed for being gang-raped lead to her declaring that it was her own fault; she internalises the State's abusive propaganda and blame. Janine's internalisation of the State's ideals is not only due to its punishments; she also swallows its rewards. When she becomes pregnant, she is paraded in front of the other wives and, like a well-behaved child, is asked 'Would you, like a cookie, dear?' Her performance complete, she is sent back to her room where she:

Sits with the taste of sugar still in her mouth, licking her lips...[and] Thinks of nothing.

Unlike Offred, Janine does not carefully examine the state's offerings before consuming them, she simply swallows them and 'thinks of nothing.' Atwood here may be presenting the different methods of state control, an almost literal carrot and stick. Janine has been so abused by life (before and during Gilead's control) that any modicum of perceived kindness is gratefully swallowed whole. For these women in such 'reduced circumstances' any small kindness or privilege could be incredibly meaningful. Janine's cookie or Offred's Scrabble and magazines carry a disproportionate amount of value to these deprived characters. This could, however, only increase their efficacy as means of control. The Commander certainly wants more from Offred than the state prescribes and may be, consciously or not, attempting to control or coerce her through the small presents and privileges he grants her.

Atwood, does, however, show her readers that anything the state provides can be reclaimed and used as a symbol of defiance by its unwilling citizens. At the Red Centre, the handmaids are provided with breakfasts of 'porridge with cream and brown sugar.' A sweetened reminder that even though there's 'A war on' and that 'things are rationed', the handmaids are 'getting the best'. However, after Moira's attempted escape and punishment by torture, when her feet are too swollen to walk, the handmaids

stole extra paper packets of sugar for her...smuggled them to her, at night, handing them from bed to bed. Probably she didn't need the sugar but it was the only thing we could find to steal. To give.

Here, Atwood's downtrodden characters find defiance in the only way they can. They steal the state's literal and symbolic sweetener and give it to Moira, their symbol of resistance. At this point, Atwood might be presenting her readers with one of her most persistent ideas: in a totalitarian society where the state seeks to control its citizens to the level of their minds and biological functions, any form of resistance, internal or external, becomes significant and may nourish further rebellion.

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