

Sculpting Resistance: Nike of Samothrace Reimagined

By Amritha Purohit

Both *The Handmaid's Tale*, written by Margaret Atwood and adapted to screen by Volker Schlöndorff, and *Women Talking*, by Miriam Toews, depict dystopias in which women's bodies are controlled and violated. To demonstrate these topics in physical form, I created a sculpture inspired by the ancient Greek statue Nike of Samothrace and modified into a smaller, battered version. The original statue represents the epitome of feminine capability: athletes and warriors would pray to her for victory, drawing their power from her grace. She is flying off the prow of a ship, something she did after crowning a victory. Her legs emphasize power, perfectly balanced, with her wings tall and straight against the breeze. My version reflects women who must beg for borrowed strength, like the women of Gilead. By reimagining Nike of Samothrace as a wounded but enduring female figure, the statue depicts the politicized female body—commodified and stripped of agency in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Women Talking*—as still a site of resistance and identity, even after trauma.

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Women Talking* depict women's bodies as sites of commodification and control, reducing them to reproductive and sexual functions. My sculpture exposes this dehumanization through exaggerated features and a partially dismembered form, emphasizing their fragmented identities under objectification. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the women are reduced to their ability to please authority and to reproduce. Moira, a friend of the main character, is a lesbian. Having committed “gender treachery” (Schlöndorff, 07:31) but still fertile, she is forced into becoming a Handmaid and later a prostitute, punished with the amputation of a hand. She tells Kate, the main character, to

“remember, hands and feet we don't need in our business.” (Schlöndorff, 1:27:17) Women in Gilead are only useful for their reproductive organs. I pay homage to this in my sculpture, including purposefully feminized features: broad hips, a small waist, and noticeable breasts. Three missing limbs draw focus to the torso, the site of reproductive control and violence in Gilead.

A similar exploitation of the body occurs in *Women Talking*. One of the characters, Salome, says, “We are commodities. . . . When our men have used us up so that . . .our wombs have literally dropped out of our bodies onto our spotless kitchen floors, finished, they turn to our daughters.” (Toews, 291) Their daughters are destined to inherit this inequality, their womanhood defined by violation. Though some men disapproved privately, they still bailed out the women's rapists, expecting them to coexist with their attackers. To the men, the rapes were routine—simply another use of women for self-gratification. While *The Handmaid's Tale* constructs bodily oppression through the lens of dystopian speculative fiction, using exaggerated political control to make the stakes of reproductive injustice visible, *Women Talking* renders it through realist dialogue and conversation, allowing the horror to emerge in the matter-of-fact recounting of sexual assault by those who endured it. In Atwood's world, bodily control is systemic, organized into law, and reinforced by ritual and spectacle; in Toews's, it is normalized through silence, complicity, and the absence of formal language to describe the violence. My sculpture distills these differences into a single form: the rigid, partially immobilized body reflects the state-enforced immobility of Gilead, while the wind-swept, ripping fabric gestures to the unspoken but ever-present violence in Molotschna.

This usage of women leads to an erasure of personal identity and creates a larger social identity for these women. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the stripping of autonomy is not only

physical but linguistic. Atwood's renaming of women — Kate becomes "Offred," literally "Of-Fred" — enacts linguistic violence that erases identity while codifying ownership. This is yet another mechanism of control: by altering language, the regime rewrites reality, laying the groundwork for the physical domination and dispossession that follows. In *Women Talking*, when the men decide to attack and rape the women in their sleep, they stripped away more than just their consent; they removed their identity. Their bodies became passive terrain for male violence. Generations of women became defined by this loss of identity. My sculpture's blank face mirrors this erasure, denying the viewer the individuality of a portrait while forcing them to confront the absence. The anonymity becomes both a symbol of what is taken and, paradoxically, a refusal to be visually claimed.

My sculpture reflects this collective identity and lack of control, but also emphasizes the possibility for resistance. Aunt Lydia, the Handmaid trainer, says, "In the days of evil and anarchy you had freedom to, now you are granted freedom from." (Schlöndorff, 11:54) There is no choice *to*, just a protection *from*. They are not allowed to read or write. In *Women Talking*, Ona, one of the women, says, "We are women without a voice... we are women ... without even the language of the country we reside in." They both are undereducated, forcibly servile, and geographically isolated. In my sculpture one leg remains partially cut off, leaning backwards as a demonstration of her ties to her past. The other, fully formed leg steps forward, draped and wind-swept, as she moves into the future, gaining agency and control. Despite her condition, she persists. She continues to walk with only one limb, to bare her wings despite their state. Like the women in Molotschna and Kate who choose escape over submission, her resistance is empowering. Women, as Miriam Toews highlights, are much more than their body, their trauma. The wings in my sculpture design represent the women of Gilead's restricted actions and

movement. They are forced to walk together, being watched and controlled by themselves and the administration. The wings have not been completely destroyed, however, indicating a possibility for hope and escape.

Resistance, for my sculpture and the women in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Women Talking*, isn't always victorious — it's slow, damaged, ongoing. Although the female body is physically and metaphorically dismembered, as it is in Gilead and Molotschna, it can also be a site of reclamation and transformation. Though both stories depict women brutalized into silence, their eventual rebellion—whether Kate's escape or the women's collective departure—reclaims not just their physical freedom but their narrative agency. I chose clay for its physicality—like the women's trauma, it is tangible. Ideally, my sculpture would be placed in a large observation room, echoing how the women of these narratives are forced to perform. Resistance becomes a legacy, carried in the body and its survival.

Works Cited

The Handmaid's Tale. Directed by Volker Schlöndorff, screenplay by Margaret Atwood, 1990.

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