

Throughout Atwood's dystopian novel, 'The Handmaid's Tale', and Duffy's poems 'Beautiful' and 'Anon', individual feminine power is subjectively important; the antithesis between internal and external power is what defines this power. The more societally acceptable displays of submission and passivity are deviated from internally through displays of feminine sexual prowess. This juxtaposition between appearance and reality demonstrates an innate direction of female power within a patriarchal society.

In Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale', Offred begins to list the names of the Handmaid's with her at the 'Rachel and Leah centre', also known as the 'red centre'. Immediately the reader is introduced to the almost robotic and clinical indoctrination of Gilead. The asyndetic listing of 'Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.' demonstrates how the individual autonomy and power received from having a name has been reduced, leaving the Handmaid's without a sense of identity. This idea is reinforced through the full stops in between each name. The harsh pause between each name heightens the feeling of disconnect and distortion within Gilead, causing the narrative to become fragmented. Alternatively, the use of full stops could instead be used to re-implement a small sense of individuality within the Handmaid's. Despite their status as a homogenous group, they are given a small sense of individual power. This concept is also seen in the poem 'Anon', where Duffy uses the line 'a nurse, a nanny, maybe a nun' to highlight the lack of individuality and power that women feel. In particular, the use of archetypally feminine roles in Anon further reduces women, implying they are only valuable when they are fulfilling their generative function, rather than valuing their own Handmaid's – their collective power as a group of fertile women is valued far more in Gilead than their individual sense of power. On the other hand, it could be said that Duffy presents women with a sense of individual and feminine sense of power, as 'a nun' – unlike other women – would have been educated, giving them intellectual power and individuality. However, both women in 'The Handmaid's Tale' and 'Anon' are stripped away of their individual power, as they are forced into this communal identity of an archetypally female homogenous group.

Female sexual power is used throughout modern literature to demonstrate the restrictive nature of a patriarchal society. In 'The Handmaid's Tale', we are introduced to Offred's display of female sexual power in Gilead, a society that demonises desire and sexual deviance. The line 'I move my hips a little' reflects the desperation of both men and women to receive sexual gratification. For Offred, this heightened sense of danger highlights how encapsulated she has become into the state of id. Whilst in the case of the Guardians, Offred is teasing, this id will be the almost animalistic sexual desires that they have to repress in Gilead. However, for Offred, her primal desire is for power, something that she has had a lack of in Gilead. Therefore, Offred's identity is built on the sexual power that she possesses. Similarly, in the poem 'Beautiful' the female figures have their identities and legacies built upon their beauty and their sexuality. In particular, Cleopatra was known for the lovers that she took and the sexuality she possessed. Cleopatra is a classic example of a femme fatale figure, someone who is self-aware of their own prowess. She is said to have 'let her shawl slip down' actively exposing her 'shoulder' and 'breasts' to 'every man that night'. The use of the verb 'let' implies she has given the men permission and consent. This places her in a position of power as – just like Offred – she demonstrates the ability to control the sexual gratification that men receive. Therefore, in the oppressive and patriarchal societies that both women reside in, their sexuality is all that can truly give them power. This implies that their identities are formed from this sexual power. However, the power that the women hold could be described as ephemeral, due to the restrictive nature of the patriarchy. For Cleopatra, her display of sexuality is soon followed by her dressing in 'boy's clothes'. The noun 'boy' both forces her into this masculine position, as well as infantilises her. Offred's ephemeral power is restricted by the demonization of desire in Gilead – eventually sexual power is stripped away.