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RAPE: THE BREAKING OR STRENGTHENING OF WOMEN? AS EXPLORED
THROUGH LITERARY HEROINES

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ABSTRACT

Throughout countless literary works, rape has been used as a means of gaining control and power over a woman. Men have raped women as a means of eliminating their voices, their sense of self-worth, and their perceived power and equality in society and within relationships. Because rape is such a traumatic experience, many people view raped women as completely defeated or broken. While many raped women unfortunately do exhibit these traits, I argue that for a select few literary characters, women gain strength as a result of surviving and healing. Instead of becoming broken and passive, these women are able to regain a sense of self and use their voices to share their story and reveal injustices in their respective regimes as part of their healing process. The act of rape and a subsequent healing process is possible in many different types of regimes, which is why I chose three extremely different works to explore. Each of these works is reflective of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Philomela instigates her healing process through her method of storytelling. As early as in late 16th century writing, it is possible to see women surviving and healing from rape; William Shakespeare's tragic play, *Titus Andronicus*, features Lavinia using her rape to learn to speak for herself and to co-author her own demise to escape the corrupt regime allowing for her abuse. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the role of rape in a dystopic, futuristic society. Offred shares her story to reevaluate how a dominating rape culture and monthly rape has changed her and to emphasize the importance of holding on to a fulfilling past. And in an alternate universe with advanced information technology, Nalo Hopkinson shows the importance of releasing guilt to become a stronger version of oneself and using this strength to help others in exposing injustices in *Midnight Robber*. Literary female characters should not always be viewed as powerless after being raped. Many of them have the capacity to heal from their trauma and grow to become stronger individuals as a result of surviving their damaging abuse.

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Introduction

Rape is one of the most traumatizing, life-changing experiences a woman can go through. This horrifying act can take away her personality and well-being for the remainder of her life. Typically, victims feel powerless, broken, scared, and never fully able to go back to the way they were before this experience. However, some victims are able to heal and come out as stronger individuals. Though they are changed, these women are stronger, more agential individuals. As part of being agential, they are able to proactively share their stories with others to attempt healing from this abuse. While each woman follows her own individual path after being abused, many victims suffer from the same initial loss of power rape involves.

Rape is not a mysterious crime. While each specific deed is unique, there are patterns of rapists' motivation that make this crime so distinct and traumatic for its victims. Rape is not about wanting sex; it is about taking power. It usually comes unexpectedly and brings a sense of shock possibly resulting in the victim not feeling the full effects until later (Schick 1840). Anger and aggression fuel the rape, and a rapist's need for domination ignites the act. A rapist and victim are rarely strangers and the crime is specifically executed to defeat a certain individual so a rapist can gain power (Allison and Wrightsman 4). Because the motivation and actions of the crime are similar across so many cases, the after effects tend to be similar from one victim to another "involving a total loss of control over one's life, one's body, and the course of events" (Katz 253). Victims typically suffer a constant sense of vulnerability, fear, self-blame, and low self-esteem. Sometimes they develop acute to severe psychological problems. Their perspectives and routines may change and sometimes the effects can be permanent. While there can be similar healing processes for victims, promptly after the initial act it can be difficult to decipher how a person will change and heal after suffering from a rape (Allison and Wrightsman 149-160).

Traumatic events like rape prove extremely difficult to recover from. Psychology professors Julie A. Allison and Lawrence S. Wrightsman acknowledge that some people suffer for years with achieving little to no emotional progress; instead these people consistently deal with phobias, fear, anxiety, behavioral changes, sexual changes, and changes in overall lifestyle (155-158). However, there are others who go through positive practices and experiences in order to achieve healing. Scholar Kate Schick identifies the importance of “working through” traumatic experiences in order to heal. She emphasizes the need for proactive efforts from a victim involving, “mourning for past and present suffering whilst also insisting on a struggle to understand and challenge the social and political arrangements that facilitated that suffering” (1838). Schick suggests using a common healing method of giving a voice to the traumatic events is one way to work through them. In order to do so, individuals need to go through a mourning process that gives them an outlet to express their grief of what has happened and how they are working towards overcoming their traumatic experience. These outlets help reestablish a victim’s voice in order to talk about the experience as a part of healing: “Telling the story of trauma is central to the mourning process...described as a ‘work of reconstruction’ that transforms the traumatic memory and enables it to be incorporated into the traumatized individual’s life story” (Schick 1849).

Victims are encouraged to share their stories as well. While this may be the most challenging part of the healing process, it is essential for the victim. By telling the story, the victim gains strength to discuss it and regain the power that was taken from them by exposing an injustice. Listeners gain information about society. Schick points to Holocaust survivor Mark Nutkiewicz on the benefits listeners gained from hearing his story: “Listening to trauma survivors has much to teach society; their stories point to the fragility or accepted social arrangements and global insecurity, reminding us of our own vulnerability as well as the vulnerability of others” (1849). Stories help identify why some people are more vulnerable to a traumatic event over

others, based on certain traits or social circumstances such as their family life, past experiences, and inherent fears. Storytelling is an essential part of working through trauma and provides victims with the support and strength they need to heal (Schick 1850). Working through trauma is the key to healing; it can be a life process that may never be fully achieved, however it is progress nonetheless that allows a victim a better chance at re-engaging with life.

Regaining power of speech and a sense of self shows the strength of characters, which enables them to survive their experience. As far back as 8 AD, Ovid's, *Metamorphoses* offered a paradigm for narrating the path to resiliency. Book VI presents the first instance of healing and refusing defeat from rape. In this story, Philomela, the sister of Procne, is lusted after and then raped by Procne's husband, Tereus. In doing so, Tereus takes power over Philomela. Further, he cuts out her tongue to take away her power of speech, and imprisons her to break her. But Philomela uses the practice of storytelling, weaving a tapestry to inform Procne of her husband's offense. This storytelling empowers Philomela by allowing her to regain a voice despite her literal speech being taken away and gives her and Procne the agency to appeal to the female gods for help. In doing this, Philomela shows she cannot be silenced despite her abuse (Hunter). Within this myth, Philomela refuses to be broken, despite her handicap of not having a literal voice. She takes a stand against her injustice and becomes the first character in literature to tell of her violation. This storytelling, as first seen in *Metamorphoses*, proves to have a role in characters gaining strength and is used as a form of agency in healing from their abuse. It also gives both themselves and their listeners a way to recognize and challenge the unjust regimes that have allowed for abuse to occur. Philomela does just this and successfully escapes the domination she has suffered from.

Philomela's story is one of resiliency and agency. Ovid sets the tone for the possibility of female strength after abuse, in literature, through his use of storytelling in healing and agency. While rape is certainly capable of permanently breaking a woman, some women are able to

survive and come out of the healing process as stronger women and can empower themselves to expose the regimes that have enabled their abuse. This can be seen in three very different texts including William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*. Each of these texts presents a literary heroine surviving rape, sharing her story, regaining a sense of self, and having a role in her own ultimate destiny through a process of healing.

Chapter 1

Redefining the Role as a Victim

In the traditional rape narrative, when women are stripped of their power, many feel helpless and scared. Because of this, many do not reveal the crime or the trauma they have suffered, creating a barrier to the healing process. However, by revealing the rape, victims regain power of speech. By revealing their injustices, a reevaluation of the regime that has allowed for such abuse is possible. Telling of rape is a step towards putting the victim back in control of their own lives. Lavinia Andronicus of William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* takes on this healing task of telling of her rape in a time period where patriarchal society dominates and already limits her power. In doing so, she is able to have an influence on the system that has allowed for her injustice. Additionally, Lavinia acts as a co-author for her ultimate fate, taking back control in her life. By fulfilling her own destiny in choosing to die Lavinia empowers herself to submit to death to escape a corrupt regime that allows for abuse.

The repercussions Lavinia initially suffers from rape are greatly emphasized when analyzing her previous highly desired role. Her role as an honorable daughter and woman left her desirable not only her lover Bassianus, but also his brother Saturninus, and her rapists Chiron and Demetrius. As a woman in this time period, Lavinia is seen as desirable, both erotically and politically because of her virtue:

the play illustrates both the eroticism of political power and the political power of erotic attractions, and demonstrates how both the political power and the erotic attraction are held in place by Lavinia's purported virtue. As a virgin maid or a chaste wife she is valuable and desired property and politically very useful. (Harris 391)

However, because she lives in a patriarchal society in the Elizabethan time period, her father, Titus, controls sexual access to her. This control enables him to maintain his own power (Harris 390). This explains why he has such a great role in Lavinia's ultimate fate. Upon initial greetings, it is evident that Titus himself views Lavinia as reflective of her virtue: "Lavinia, live; outlive thy father's days/ And fame's eternal date, for virtue's praise!" (Shakespeare I.i.170-171). Additionally, he aligns Lavinia with the state of Rome: "Titus is heavily invested in Rome's genealogy, repeatedly referencing Virgil's *Aeneid* and therefore the original Lavinia, mother of the Romans. He envisions his daughter not only as the perpetuator of Rome but also as its embodiment, her chastity representing the unbroken descent from Troy" (Packard 283). When Titus returns from battle, Rome is meant to be pure and immortal, just as Lavinia's honorable virtue. However, foreshadowing occurs as Saturninus is given the role as the emperor and attempts to seize Lavinia as his wife, despite her engagement to his brother. This first action as emperor demonstrates the corruptness of his regime, which is further polluted as he instead takes Tamora as a wife, she being queen of the Goths and enemy of Titus (Harris 389). This action also emphasizes the political power Lavinia holds because of her role as a virtuous woman and from being in a powerful family (Harris 391). Because Lavinia's virtue proves to be her greatest quality and concern for Titus, they are both set up to lose power and stability in the republic of Rome when her virtue is taken from her.

The raping, mutilation, and perceived loss of virtue of Lavinia seems to be the turning point of the play as the innocent, honorable daughter of Titus is desecrated. As stated by literary critic Bernice Harris, "One of the most gruesome images of a woman on the Elizabethan stage occurs when Lavinia... enters the stage, according to stage directions, with 'her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished' (II.iv.)" (Harris 383). This horrifying mental or visual image presented in the beginning of the scene demonstrates just how violated and ruined Lavinia has become and gives reason for many people to view Lavinia as broken and defeated. Once a

woman viewed with honor and desire, Lavinia has been humiliated and diminished to a powerless, speechless, tarnished woman with a mutilated body. This scene demonstrates Lavinia's lowest point in terms of power, as she loses the power associated with her desirability, as well as her speech, and ability to use her hands; "she has no recognizable value" (Harris 393). All of these major losses are emphasized by the mocking of rapists Chiron and Demetrius. They mock her inabilities to reveal them, do basic activities, or even escape her shame through suicide, alluding to her as a useless human being: "So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,/ Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee" (II.iv.1-2). This scene significantly underscores the great fall of Lavinia. Additionally, this quotation demonstrates and foreshadows how vital it is that Lavinia regains a voice in order to reveal who has defiled her in her storytelling; thus regaining figurative power of speech which is taken from her (Detmer-Goebel 76). The disturbing image of Lavinia as a mutilated, "ravished" woman proves to be an instigator for the necessity of eliminating the regime that has caused her downfall.

While Lavinia initially suffers a great loss of power from her rape, she proves to attempt to gain it back by revealing her rapists and those in the regime that allowed for this abuse. This in itself is significant as Lavinia's existence in a patriarchal society disapproves of her speaking her crime, as she reveals when begging Tamora for mercy from rape: "That womanhood denies my tongue to tell:/ O, keep me from their worse than killing lust" (II.ii. 914-915). However, her greatest sense of agency shines through in her determination to use the connection between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and what has happened to her, as her form of storytelling. As she shows her family the shared violations between herself and Philomela, Lavinia parallels Philomela in her use of her voice to expose the corrupt regime that has allowed for her abuse. However, Lavinia makes a great distinction from Philomela by using the Latin word "stuprum" in her storytelling to describe her plight. This diction meaning "sexual intercourse between a man and an unmarried woman, unchastity of a woman", with origins of "defilement and dishonor" ("Stuprum") is quite

revealing as it stresses the dishonor one feels from rape. Literary scholar Bethany Packard stresses how Lavinia's usage of this word emphasizes the effects of this traumatic event on Lavinia and her need to take agency to heal from it: "the personal connotations of "stuprum" stress the rape as something that happened to and changed Lavinia, necessitating her own response, as opposed to that of her father" (293). Her telling defies the traditional patriarchy society in which traditional law only allowed male relations to accuse of rape (Detmer-Goebel 78). Her connection and use of *Metamorphoses* is her best tool in starting the healing process by regaining a figurative voice through storytelling while challenging the standards of society. Though Lavinia is unable to speak, she proves to be the most important character in revealing the corruptness of the Roman regime under Saturninus and Tamora, while sharing her story to help in her healing process.

After learning of Lavinia's rapists, Titus engages in revenge to attempt to undermine the regime that has allowed for the loss of power from his daughter, and respectively for himself. However, shortly after these actions, Titus suddenly kills Lavinia. Because of the situation and its occurrence right after Titus's successful revenge efforts, many critics question this action. However, it can be argued that Lavinia submits to her own death as a means of escaping the corrupt regime thus bringing Rome back to its purified state. While there is no clear indication by the text, of how the death occurs, Lavinia's death has been acted as consensual in the way Lavinia walks to Titus right as he offers his explanation for killing her to his audience (*Titus*). This death comes after Lavinia has shared her story and revealed the evils of the regime. She has already begun her healing process and regained a figurative voice to defy traditional standards of the patriarchal society. Her death seems to come as the fulfillment of using her voice: "Lavinia uses *The Metamorphoses* to revise others' interpretations of her wounded body, but her intervention is a gamble that finds fruition in her death" (Packard 293). In doing so she establishes her influence on the state of Rome: "She is meant to be an ending, capping off the hybrid infestation and

initiating a new, pure beginning... Lavinia's coauthorial function is to write herself and the play out of endings" (Packard 285). As this literary critic suggests, it is reasonable to believe that Lavinia as a "co-author" makes this choice as her final step in healing and in doing so exposes the injustice of the regime she lives in. She is killed after her father asks Saturninus why a raped woman should be killed to which he replies, "Because the girl should not survive her shame,/ And by her presence still renew his sorrows" (V.iii. 2573-2574). After the corrupt ruler, Saturninus, witnesses this death he appears horrified and shocked at what has just been done: "What hast thou done, unnatural and unkind?" (V.iii. 2581). He tries to summon her rapists, only to find they have already been killed by Titus. Thus follows a bloodbath of characters, purging Rome of the corruption it has suffered. While the play does not reveal the future state of Rome, it is reasonable to assume this conclusion as following Lavinia's murder, the numerous deaths of almost all involved in vengeance occur, leaving Lucius and a generally uninvolved Marcus and young Lucius to recover Rome. While Lavinia's death is necessary for her to escape a corrupt regime including violence and submission of women, it is a death nonetheless fulfilling the play's genre as a tragedy. While Lavinia proves to regain her voice and have her own agency in her death, she is dead and unable to enjoy the new peaceful regime following corruption.

When examining the play as a whole, Lavinia is consistently shifting in terms of power because of her rape and her process of healing. From her strongest point as a highly desired, virtuous daughter of the respectable Titus Andronicus, her rape and mutilation shame her to her lowest, most powerless point. However, rather than staying defeated, with the aid of *Metamorphoses*, Lavinia becomes a storyteller to start the healing process to expose the injustices she suffered and whom is at fault for them. Though tragic, Lavinia submits to her own death to rid herself of the corruption of the regime, which acts as a catalyst resulting in the cleansing of the republic of Rome. When Lavinia becomes mutilated and violated, it is easy to believe her to be powerless. However, Lavinia proves to regain a sense of self and new found strength in her

shift from patriarchal standards to reveal her injustices and by acting as a co-author to her own destiny, ridding herself of the corrupt regime.

Chapter 2

Maintaining a Sense of Self

A rape culture presents a philosophy in a society that allows for domination and power over other people just as the act of rape does. People in these cultures endure trauma on a regular basis because rape and overpowering others is so commonplace. This rape culture is demonstrated in the society described in Margret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The narrator, Offred, lives in this rape culture, Gilead, and is forced to engage in strict, passionless sex solely as a means of conceiving for her Commander and his wife. Given the option of doing this duty or giving in to a very premature death, Offred is basically left with no choice but to essentially be raped monthly, participating in this sexual experience against her inherent desires. Her narration describes how the rape culture of Gilead is a corrupt regime, encouraging this abuse. Between being sexually overpowered, losing free will in her life, and being subjected to forms of propaganda and experiences trying to strip her individuality, Offred has her own trauma narrative and proves to struggle to overcome its effects of fear and defeat. However, Offred is able to survive her trauma with a sense of self intact, even with her new perspectives. Her attachment to her memories of life before Gilead reminds her of her former thoughts and actions and prevents her genuine persona from becoming completely lost as a result of the rape culture. Additionally, Offred uses her own voice to share her story of abuse and by doing so, begins the healing process following trauma. In her story, Offred tells of the power of a rape culture, her use of memories, her necessary performances to survive, and the power of regaining sexual pleasure. Offred uses all of these things as a means of keeping her individuality and refusing to lose herself in a society that is determined to keep women down.

In the republic of Gilead, the defeat of women is encouraged. Though not technically considered rapes by Gilead, handmaids are forced to engage in strict vaginal sex that is completely for biological reproduction without any form of love, affection, or passion for either party. Although Gilead does not consider these sexual acts rape, it can be argued that these acts are indeed rapes and the entire republic advocates a rape culture; in viewing rape as a power struggle, Gilead ensures that the Commanders, the rapists, have the greatest amount of power, and handmaids, the victims, are left powerless, which is true of any rape situation (Allison and Wrightsman 4). Handmaids are forbidden from basic functions in order to keep them powerless and uneducated about regaining power. They are not allowed to read. They cannot wear makeup or use lotion. They cannot have or use money. They are unable to smoke cigarettes. They cannot even use their real names and instead are referred to as property of their commanders; Offred is called so because she is of Fred, her Commander. By changing their names the handmaids are stripped of their identity: "I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like a telephone number, only useful to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter" (Atwood 84). Offred knows that this erasing of an individual identifier is an attempt to erase individual personalities. Further, this name change identifies handmaids as property, taking away their power as their own entity. This renaming of handmaids demonstrates the strength of Gilead and the power their rape culture holds.

Every rule Gilead has for the handmaids is so specific in order to reduce any individual thinking outside of Gilead's beliefs, which could potentially instigate rebellion: "Gileadians without feelings become people without conscience, numb to their shared humanity and without the spirit to resist their own repression" (Armbruster 148). Handmaids cannot escape Gilead's omnipresent power as the government makes it known that they are constantly under surveillance by the Eyes, Gilead's secret police. Scholar Elisabeth Hansot explains how they execute power to prevent the potential formation of collusions against Gilead:

They flatten the humanity of their subjects. Their powers of surveillance are used to constrict the background sites where fuller humanities might be enacted. And because ordinary life is allowed so little purchase in dystopias, no common acts of friendship and love remain just that—they become transgressions, potential sites of rebellion. (67)

Gilead knows the inherent power of women who act, especially when working together. Individualized and collective agency are exactly what this regime intends to prevent. Everything about Gilead is designed to ensure the republic's power and for many handmaids to fall victim to its policies to lose a sense of individuality, which makes Offred's story so unique, as she maintains individuality in her thoughts and memories throughout her experiences.

Offred maintains her sense of self by resisting one of Gilead's forms of power by keeping an attachment to those she cares about. This is demonstrated when Offred resists participating in punishing another member of society. Although the Gilead government does not consider the sexual interaction between the handmaids and the Commanders rape when having sex during the Ceremony, they consider any other sexual experiences with handmaids a rape and take it extremely seriously. Though sex outside of the Ceremony may be consensual, because it is sex without purpose for conceiving, Gilead deems it as rape. The punishment for a rape is death. However, in order to do so, the Aunts, the older women who work for the government to educate the handmaids, release the alleged rapist for the handmaids to literally tear apart, which is called a "participation" (Atwood 278). While some refrain, many of the handmaids instantly become violent and abuse this man in all forms, as a way of releasing their frustrations with society. This practice has been identified as a means of allowing the handmaids to release anger without actually rebelling against Gilead. In the Historical Notes given after Offred's story, Professor Pieixoto states: "it would also act as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead. Scapegoats have been notoriously useful throughout history, and it must have been most gratifying for these Handmaids, so rigidly controlled at other times, to be able to tear a man apart with their bare

hands every once in a while” (Atwood 307). As the professor identifies the alleged rapist as the “scapegoat” it is evident that Gilead is corrupt in using this man to take the agency of handmaids’ frustration, performing these particutions “every once in a while” so the handmaids do not build up frustration for too long and try to rebel.

However, Offred demonstrates both the effects of trauma and her maintaining of self by refraining from taking part in the particution. Originally, as a result of her own trauma, she feels rage at the thought of this man committing an unsanctioned rape, causing even greater amounts of trauma than what the handmaids already regularly endure: “Despite myself, I feel my hands clench. It is too much this violation...I want to tear, gouge, rend” (Atwood 279). In this moment, Offred falls under Gilead’s power, believing what she is told and reacting as they want her to, demonstrating her struggle to evade Gilead’s influence. However, upon further examination of the man, she thinks of the people she knows who easily could be wrongly convicted and is able to regain her sense of self that understands the unjust regime of Gilead: “It isn’t Luke. But it could have been. I know that. It could be Nick. I know that whatever he’s done I can’t touch him” (Atwood 279). In this admission, Offred reveals that she cannot play into a society that defeats people who may not even be guilty. Though her action is paradoxically inaction, this refusal to take part in the particution is a type of rebellion for Offred as she does not adhere to what Gilead wants of her in that moment. It is soon revealed that the person abused was part of the rebellion, Mayday, which further affects Offred. She feels sick from watching the event with so many handmaids acting out with such violence against someone trying to help them. This sickness feeling again proves her sense of self as she recognizes the animalistic and corrupt nature of this practice. By refraining from attacking this man as Gilead encourages, Offred is able to hold on to her sense of self to maintain her original thoughts and values.

In order to survive in Gilead, Offred must perform in her actions and expressions so that she does not seem to be challenging those in power; however underneath her outward actions it is

apparent that she is still able to maintain her opinions about being subjected to power. Her performances are most prevalent in her experiences with the Commander. This first time she is told the Commander wants to see her, she knows she must oblige because of his power. Though she knows that if she is caught by Serena she could be sent away to the Colonies, she knows that more importantly, the Commander holds the most power in the household and she should give in to his desires to stay alive: "If I'm caught...I could become an Unwoman. But to refuse him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power" (Atwood 136). Offred gives in to his desires and engages in a game of Scrabble. Upon leaving, the Commander asks Offred for a kiss, which she obliges as part of her performance, though it is apparent the Commander senses this as Offred says he admits he wishes she had meaning in the kiss (Atwood 140). The Commander's statement reveals that Offred may be submissive to his desires, but she is able to retain her own feelings, which clearly do not equate in passion for the Commander. Offred continues to give in to the Commander's desires, spending time with him and taking what he offers her. Hansot states, "The continuous task of Offred's present is to know how to enact just such an impoverished self as she fantasizes for the Commander without being captured by it" (62).

The culmination of Offred's performances with the Commander occurs when the Commander desires to have sex with her privately, outside of the Ceremony. This occurs during her trip with him to the whorehouse, Jezebel's: "The Commander has a room key. He got it from the front desk, while I waited on the flowered sofa. He shows it to me, slyly. I am to understand" (Atwood 251). In this narration, one can see that the Commander has expectations of her and she must continue her performance to oblige him. As Offred enters this bedroom, the scene builds as she reveals her actions submitting to his desires, yet her internal disdain to have sex with him is prevalent: "When I come out he's lying on the king-size bed, with, I note, his shoes off. I lie down beside him, I don't have to be told. I would rather not" (Atwood 254). However, Offred is reminded of the power structure in Gilead and her necessity of following it to survive: "He stops

at the foot, his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership” (Atwood 254). With this motion, the Commander reestablishes the power structure set out by Gilead and Offred soon submits to him. She does continue her performance and tries to satisfy the Commander ordering herself to fake it, yet it is evident to him that she again cannot share in passion with him: “He pulls down one of my straps, slides his other hand in among the feathers, but it’s no good, I lie there like a dead bird... ‘Maybe I should turn the lights out,’ says the Commander, dismayed and no doubt disappointed. I see him for a moment before he does this. Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried” (Atwood 255). These final moments of reflection demonstrate the difficulty for Offred to perform a voluntary act of passion. Underneath the Commander’s power she can will herself to engage in activities, yet it is difficult for her to fake a sense of desire for someone using his power to get what he wants.

This is again reflective of her memories. Earlier, Offred recounts Luke wanting to have sex the night she lost her job, but it did not feel right to her:

We still have...he said. But he didn’t go on to say what we still had. It occurred to me that he shouldn’t be saying *we* since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him...something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me. He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his. (182)

Her situation with the Commander is similar; the Commander does not belong to her but she belongs to him, performing to meet his desires. Yet, a true connection and desire for a person cannot effectively be faked as the Commander realizes and Offred attempts. Even though Offred’s performances are effective in submitting to power, her true feelings about doing such are maintained.

Offred engages in her own personal form of power by taking advantage of the small opportunities that she is inadvertently given. This begins with her sexual relationship with Nick. All throughout the novel, Offred expresses her desire for passionate sex, “to commit the act of touch” (Atwood 11). Her desire for sexual relations with Nick intensely grows throughout the novel, even after they begin having sex. While admittedly, the Commander’s wife instigates their first sexual act which is done solely for purpose of reproduction, Offred continues to see Nick secretly and illegally has sex with him in order to regain missing passion and feeling in her life, “I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn’t called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely” (Atwood 268). While continually gaining back sexual pleasure with Nick, Offred is still engaging in private visits with the Commander gaining forbidden knowledge and items, so essentially she is using the two men to her best possible advantage and somewhat regaining what the rapes and Gilead have taken from her.

In her visits with Nick, Offred strengthens parts of her true identity by sharing herself with him. She tells him all about herself and her former life, even going so far as to reveal her true name: “I tell him my real name, and feel therefore that I am known” (Atwood 270). Though Nick does not talk as much it does not matter, as Offred states she does all this for herself. Her revelations reestablish who she was and is now as a person with her changed perspectives, though preventing her from becoming broken from the ceremonial sexual abuse and rape culture corrupt society. Scholar Jane Armbruster explains how Offred’s sexual freedom with Nick brings back the feelings of being a wife, a mother, a daughter, and a friend: “When she remembers, she knows who she is” (150). Though often critiqued as frivolous and dangerous, it is necessary that Offred takes these risks to remind herself of who she was when previously engaging in sexual pleasure. Just as many scholars critique, Offred is initially embarrassed by her actions and great desires to be with Nick, yet concedes that this sexual relationship fulfilled her, allowing her to reclaim

herself, “Even now, I can recognize this admission as a kind of boasting. There's pride in it, because it demonstrates how extreme and therefore justified it was, for me. How well worth it. It's like stories of illness and near-death, from which you have recovered; like stories of war. They demonstrate seriousness” (Atwood 271). In this statement, Offred reveals that for herself, personally, these interactions with Nick were necessary. Though in her diction “for me” it seems that Offred knows the intensity of her desire for sexual pleasure is not universally justified, it demonstrates the desperation of her situation and her need to regain sexual pleasure in order to evoke her true identity to share herself with another.

While Offred's main forms of resistance and defiance lie more in maintaining her sense of self than in proactive acts, she does take agency in empowering others about the dangers and repercussions of rape culture in her sharing of her story by recording it on tapes for others to hear. While it is unclear how or specifically why she does this, she presents a story demonstrating the struggles and strengths of a rape victim. This storytelling again is used as working through trauma and Offred even states her necessity to tell the story: “I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending” (Atwood 39). This last line is reflective of the trauma narrative, demonstrating that by sharing what has happened to her, Offred is taking steps towards healing. She controls her ending by storytelling and sharing the abuse with listeners just as Philomela and Lavinia control their healing by choosing to tell their stories to their listeners. Throughout the novel, she speaks to her audience about her actions. While there is some ambiguity about her reliability as the tapes were found and she herself is unknown, she does reveal moments she is not proud of and necessitates the need for sharing them in her own healing:

I wish this story were different. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier then at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia...I'm sorry there is so much

pain in this story...Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn't once enough for me at this time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it...By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there. (Atwood 267-268)

As Offred shares her story of her efforts of resisting the rape culture, she proves that she has gone through her experience with some sense of self intact. Again, while there is always a remaining question of reliability, her admittances of certain regrets and specific illegal actions give hope that her story is true. Either way, she gives a story of a woman capable of living through trauma using her attachment to memories to keep a sense of self in a society determined to eliminate the self.

There have been various criticisms against Offred for being a passive, defeated character who starts her experience in Gilead strong but ultimately becomes broken by its rape culture. While it is true she is not actively rebellious, Offred rebels in her sense of withstanding Gilead's efforts to eliminate her individual persona. Though Offred does get frustrated with her own lack of agency, she is able to stay true to herself by heavily depending on memories of her past, especially when reflecting on them with her perspectives from the present. She performs to stay alive, yet does not lose her sense of her opinions and feelings even while submitting to power. She takes back pleasure in sexual acts and uses this renewed pleasure to once again share herself with another. Offred embodies the literary heroine in her attempts to resist rape culture and especially, by sharing her story for future generations to hear. In doing so, she empowers her listeners in how badly rape can defeat its victims, how power is spread through rape and rape culture, and most importantly how to maintain a sense of self to avoid the self breaking from a rape culture. Offred embodies the victim, struggling to survive in a world where she is powerless, yet uses her memories and feelings to maintain her persona and educate others about surviving.

Chapter 3

Exposing Injustices from the Strength of Survival

It is true that there are typical patterns of rape. The usual circumstances are that a rapist knows his victim, he performs a rape as a means of displaying power, and the victim is left powerless and defeated, completely broken from this experience. Yet some victims become heroes by breaking the role of the defeated woman. Many go on to not only survive, but to help others in their struggles with abuse as well. This kind of success story is demonstrated by the main character Tan-Tan in Nalo Hopkinson's science fiction, futuristic novel *Midnight Robber*. In an unjust society, Tan-Tan defies the stereotypes of rape victims by overpowering her rapist to free herself from the abuse, confronting those who have wronged her, accepting results she cannot change, and most uniquely, using her guilt to empower herself to help others. She also shares her story as a healing method for herself, freeing herself from guilt, and teaching others of the importance of justice. Tan-Tan fully embodies the trauma narrative suffering from guilt and fear yet taking on the healing process proactively, helping herself and her listeners.

While Tan-Tan's story is unique in her use of the Robber Queen figure as part of the healing process, the actual rape proves to have many of the same qualities as most other rapes. Similar to *Metamorphoses*, the rape is incestuous and is done to exhibit power; Tan-Tan is raped by her father, Antonio, as he felt he was losing power, moving from a position of power as mayor in Toussaint to a convict in New Halfway Tree. In an interview, author Nalo Hopkinson explains Antonio: "He never quite recovers from the loss of access of power and he's now in a place where it's easier for him to give himself some sense of mastery by abusing others" (Soyka 5). Further, by impregnating Tan-Tan, he "colonizes her body" (Fehskens 146) taking it over for

himself, demonstrating his existing power over her. Tan-Tan's confrontation with rape comes unexpectedly and initially carries the confusion and shame and self-blame that most victims feel: "Why was Daddy doing this to her? Tan-Tan couldn't get away, couldn't understand. She must be very bad for Daddy to do her so" (Hopkinson 140). Previously believing she had a close, loving relationship with her father, this abuse is difficult for Tan-Tan to process. She embodies the rape narrative feeling helpless and powerless. In this struggle, she identifies herself as two separate entities, good Tan-Tan and bad Tan-Tan to try and match the two sides she sees of her father. Typical of the rape narrative Tan-Tan struggles with the shock of the occurrence and takes on the self-blame perspective. It is in attempting to free herself from her bad sense of self that the Robber Queen persona emerges.

The Robber Queen figure is Tan-Tan's adaptation of the traditionally male Midnight Robber figure. He is celebrated in Carib carnival culture for being one of the most loved figures. Traditionally he wears an extravagant costume and is able to command full attention of audiences by blowing a whistle and articulate speech. He is seen as heroic by his good deeds and power of speech ("Midnight Robber"). Tan-Tan is enamored with the Robber Queen persona before she fully embodies her later in life. As a young child Tan-Tan frequently pretends that she is the Robber Queen and wears her Robber Queen costume for several days on end. The whole nature of the Robber Queen enralls and amazes Tan-Tan. It is especially interesting that this role is originally the Midnight Robber King, and Tan-Tan changes this role into a queen to fit herself. Her initial reaction to learning this role is originally strictly for men is very telling, as she cannot understand why only a man would be able to hold this magical role and she then desires to see pictures of the only Robber Queen (Hopkinson 27-29). Her confusion of this role being originally only a man's role reveals her ability to surpass traditional power structures. It demonstrates that even as an innocent child she holds the capability of empowerment and needs the Robber Queen strength to execute her own strength. Essayist Marlene D. Allen explains that the nature of the

Midnight Robber figure as a masked carnival figure is what makes it so empowering, as the carnival setting allows for a shift in traditional power structures: “using carnival masquerades is a method by which they gain empowerment, allowing them to upset or deconstruct power relations as they actually existed in the real world” (83). It is evident that the Robber Queen persona is one of strength and holds an admiration for Tan-Tan from a young age. By choosing this entity to embody, she too proves her strength and ability to empower others.

Tan-Tan first uses this Robber Queen role to harness strength while being violated by her father during her first rape:

She wasn't Tan-Tan, the bad Tan-Tan. She was Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, the terror of all Junjuh, the one who born on a far-away planet, who travel to this place to rob the rich in their idleness and help the poor in their humility. She name Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, and strong men does tremble in their boots when she pass by. Nothing bad does ever happen to Tan-Tan the Robber Queen. Nothing can hurt she. Not Blackheart Man, not nothing. (Hopkinson 140)

In this association, Tan-Tan disassociates herself as someone who can be blamed and instead sees herself as someone capable of being in power. Tan-Tan further takes on this persona in a more active role when fighting the abuse from her father. After enduring physical violent abuse followed by strong sexual abuse, she finally fights back against his raping she has tolerated for countless years and acts in self-defense, which even surprises herself: “It must have been the Robber Queen who pulled out the knife...It must have been the Robber Queen, the outlaw woman, who quick like a snake got the knife braced at her breastbone just as Antonio slammed his heavy body right onto the blade” (Hopkinson 168). This entire series of events is traumatizing for Tan-Tan, instilling the guilt she carries with her until confronting the rape. She tells Chichibud what her father had done to her, stating why she did what she did, though initially too scared to admit to the rape: “She found the words. ‘He did beating me...Beating me bad, with he

leather belt. Then he...I never mean to use the knife, Chichibud. I did only want he to stop hurting me” (Hopkinson 169). However, the unjust society of New Halfway Tree, the land of convicts where Tan-Tan lives would undoubtedly unfairly punish her with a hanging or being locked in the box, which further fosters her fear and guilt. This justice system is “bent on carrying out their ‘eye for an eye’ justice” (Shaw) and this is what causes her to run away and find a need to challenge it by exposing injustices of others. While dealing with the guilt of killing her own father becomes a very prominent theme for the remainder of the novel, her doing so is necessary to allow her to live on and empower others as she does through her role of the Robber Queen. This embodiment of the Robber Queen figure acting out in defense continues to allow Tan-Tan to grow past her abusive life and remain a strong woman, rather than a broken, scared woman.

Before fully embodying the Robber Queen persona as a permanent part of herself, Tan-Tan switches in and out of acting as the role as the Robber Queen, performing in order to fend for others and expose injustices that victims are suffering. Tan-Tan takes on this role to use her power of speech to make a difference by exposing injustices. By acting out these good deeds, Tan-Tan not only empowers and helps herself but helps others as well:

For Tan-Tan, her metamorphosis into the Robber Queen allows her to merge two halves of her personality, what she thinks of as the docile ‘good Tan-Tan’ and the rebellious ‘bad Tan-Tan,’ into the powerful figure of the Robber Queen , who, starting with her own self, takes up the causes of the oppressed and powerless on New Halfway Tree. (Allen 84)

The first instance of her performing as the Robber Queen after killing her father occurs with mixed reactions. Tan-Tan sets out to defend a stranger she inquires about directions from, who suddenly suffers verbal and physical abuse from his mother right in front of Tan-Tan; yet this act of initial aid comes as a form of abuse as Tan-Tan struggles to control her familiar rage at the situation. While initially uneasy about this man, Tan-Tan immediately deeply sympathizes with

the parent child abuse situation, having flashbacks to her own abuse, and cannot restrain herself from fighting for the man: “Something in Tan-Tan broke loose, howling. Her skin felt hot. She pushed Alyosius to one side, grabbed the switch from his surprised mother and fetched her one slice *swips* on her leg. ‘You like how that feel? (*Swips*) Eh? You think he like it any better? (*Swips*) Eh?’” (Hopkinson 244). Tan-Tan then goes on to abuse the mother until she explicitly says, “‘Please, don’t hit me no more!’” (Hopkinson 244), which is what Tan-Tan had asked of her father and was denied.

This intervention with Alyosius and his mother at first cause Tan-Tan to be abusive and no better than Antonio or Alyosius’ mother, and is not beneficial for anyone involved. However, her reaction to the plea to stop separates Tan-Tan from these abusers and causes her to act proactively as the Robber Queen in her future endeavors, using her power of speech instead of violence. Her true intention comes through as she speaks as the Robber Queen for the first time and begins to feel confused as this powerful, confident voice overcomes her:

“How you could...” She was, *somebody* was speaking out loud. Words welled up in the somebody’s mouth like water. Somebody spoke her words the way the Carnival Robber Kings wove their tales, talking as much nonsense as sense, fancy words spinning out from their mouths like thread from a spider’s behind...Somebody’s words uttered forth from Tan-Tan’s tongue. (Hopkinson 245)

She then goes on to reprimand his mother for her abusive injustice, emphasizing she should appreciate her son and never hurt him, “‘You treat he worse then dog, yet he love you like hog love mud...Me tell you, don’t hurt your son no more’” (Hopkinson 245-246). Following this event, Tan-Tan seeks to right many wrongs, using her strength in speech as a means of relieving her guilt by giving back. Though she always acts out while under the Robber Queen guise, Tan-Tan makes the Robber Queen figure her own, moving beyond the carnival figure for the better: “rather than submitting her spontaneously gathered audiences to nothing but a string of

sufferings, prettied up with parataxis and puns, she commits genuine acts of generosity and justice” (Fehsken 148). Though Tan-Tan spends much of her time since killing her father feeling great amounts of guilt, this uncontrollable switch to unquestionably expose injustices demonstrates that in her subconscious Tan-Tan knows she did not do something wrong, which is why she tries to prevent others from suffering from injustices. This subconscious knowledge is what allows her to hold on to her sense of self and survive. Her proactive speeches both aid in her healing process, empowering herself while helping others to also defeat injustices.

The guilt Tan-Tan feels regarding killing her father haunts her all throughout her journey while fleeing from Janisette. Tan-Tan continues to struggle with her identity associating herself as good Tan-Tan or bad Tan-Tan depending on her actions or thoughts. As she begins to fully immerse herself as the Robber Queen, fully taking on this heroic persona, she begins to eliminate the identity of bad Tan-Tan and accepts herself as she really is, as one identity. In doing so, Tan-Tan becomes empowered to give up her shame and guilt and face Janisette. Tan-Tan fully comes to acknowledge that the Robber Queen is a part of herself and has caused her to become a stronger, more empowered woman as a whole:

*Is me, I tell you! Tan-Tan the Robber Queen! The one and the same...Lying under he
pounding body she see the knife. And for she grab it and perform an execution. She kill
she daddy dead. The guilt come down 'pon she head, The Robber Queen get born that
day, out of excruciation. (Hopkinson 322-325)*

This moment is critical for Tan-Tan as she knows that her traumatic experience with her father is what summoned the inner strength and made the Robber Queen a part of her. Scholar Erin Fehsken acknowledges this moment as essential in merging her own persona with the Robber Queen persona: “Rather than the Robber Queen speaking while Tan-Tan’s body provides a resonating chamber for its words, both parts of the subject speak at once and tell of the defining moment in which the Robber Queen erupted into Tan-Tan’s consciousness, the moment that she

murdered Antonio” (150). Further, in this admission Tan-Tan has the agency to say confidently what happened with her father and is unashamed to tell the entire village the truth. She admits to her guilt since the event, unable to justify the occurrence yet proactively blaming Janisette for her ignorance and her allowance of Tan-Tan’s abuse, putting her just as much at fault as Antonio. She also implies that her murder was manipulated by Janisette’s jealousy, as Janisette gave Tan-Tan the murder tool: ““Is you give me the knife to do it with. Don’t tell me you never used to hear what Antonio was doing to me. Is you see my trial and never have courage to speak up’... Then Tan-Tan knew her body to be hers again, felt her mouth stretching, stretching open in amazement at the words that had come out of it” (Hopkinson 325-326).

This moment of confession and confrontation with Janisette fully demonstrates the empowerment Tan-Tan needs in order to fully heal. Her admittance of the rape and murder free her from all possible guilt and allow her to reclaim her life and find joy once again: “She’d said them, spoke the words. Admitted to the murder...Daddy was dead, her baby was alive. Now was the time to put away the guilt” (Hopkinson 326). Her power of speech reveals her own injustice, acknowledging she was manipulated into her action of killing Antonio, which finally allows her to release her guilt. This confrontation and revelation also operates as Tan-Tan’s way of storytelling to work through her traumatic experience. Sharing her story is a much needed step in the healing process, allowing her to feel significantly stronger and freer from her trauma. These final moments give the scene a tone of fulfillment as Tan-Tan finally becomes free from her rape. After this point, Tan-Tan feels ready to face anything, including the birth of her son conceived from rape. When Tan-Tan finally acknowledges herself to be the Robber Queen, she can let go of embodying her, because she knows that this persona is forever a part of her. This persona summoned strength and made her a survivor.

The close of the book truly summarizes the empowerment and strength Tan-Tan achieves with her confrontation of Janisette, her admittance of her abuse, her acceptance of the Robber

Queen as a part of her persona, and the freedom from her guilt. In gaining all of this, she is able to embrace her life and move on from this experience. One way she does this is by choosing to keep and nurture her new baby despite it being conceived from rape. Ever since discovering her pregnancy, Tan-Tan is disgusted by the baby and decides to have it aborted, just as she did with her first pregnancy with Antonio (Hopkinson 145). She expresses her contempt for the child upon stating its existence to Abitefa, her companion in fleeing from Janisette: ““ And what do I go call it, eh? Son or brother?’ She looked at her friend. ‘I can’t give birth to this thing, Abitefa. Is a monster. I rip one of the brutes out of me once, I could do it twice’” (Hopkinson 233). Tan-Tan only sees her rape when she thinks of this pregnancy and is not yet strong enough to accept him as an innocent baby she can grow to love: “She sees her pregnancy as not only a war between parasite and host but also between her predator father and her preyed-upon self, and as the reincarnated baby ghost of her father who will haunt her forever” (Anatol 119). Tan-Tan takes to calling the baby “monster baby” (Hopkinson 233) and resents it for slowing her down and changing her tastes, and prays for its death (Hopkinson 257).

However, a shift occurs after reuniting with Melonhead, during a time when Tan-Tan is getting a new Robber Queen outfit; she refers to the fetus as a “soon to be baby” (Hopkinson 313) rather than a “monster baby” as she had thus far. When Tan-Tan is finally confronted and severely threatened by Janisette, Tan-Tan immediately thinks of her baby and remembers Chichibud’s words spoken after killing Antonio, “When you take one life, you must give back two” (Hopkinson 174). This notion that is recalled right when the baby is threatened, in conjunction with the power of the Robber Queen persona, cause the change in Tan-Tan to desire to protect and to keep her baby. When confronted with whose baby it is, Tan-Tan reclaims her baby: “The damned pickney was hers” (Hopkinson 321). Scholar Giselle Liza Anatol realizes the importance of possessing the baby as a means of reclaiming her sense of self: “She reclaims her life from her father’s intrusive presence” (Anatola 119). In addition to Tan-Tan’s regaining of

self, her choice to keep the baby can be viewed as a social statement of possibility. While originally Tan-Tan views the baby as a sign of defeat, in choosing to keep it, it “converts embodiment from an obstacle into an act of resistance and possibility that brings about a subtle transformation of the fabric on the mirror planet” (Flehsken 146). Finally, Tan-Tan fully embraces her empowerment and strength in the name of her son, Tubman, which is interpreted as “the human bridge from slavery to freedom” (Hopkinson 329). This says so much about Tan-Tan acknowledging the power of her traumatic journey. She went from a defeated woman trapped by the guilt over killing her father and the constant reminder by the baby she carries, to a strong, empowered woman, releasing her guilt and helping others against injustices while embracing her child as a new beginning and a sign of strength. Keeping the baby and giving him such a powerful name demonstrates Tan-Tan’s growth and journey to heal from the act of rape.

Midnight Robber presents an empowering picture of survival. It demonstrates an optimistic method of the steps a victim goes through as part of the healing process after trauma and the importance of sharing stories. Further, it shows that victims are capable of not only surviving, but being able to regain a sense of life and giving to help others who may be suffering from injustices. Tan-Tan grows to realize the power she has and inhabits the persona of someone strong, powerful, respected, and defiant in the face of abuse. She is a survivor and will not let rape keep her down.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

It is difficult to predict how abused women will react after suffering a traumatic experience. Devastatingly, some women never quite heal from the effects of abuse. Some become permanently powerless and defeated, unable to find the self that once was. However, there are many unbreakable women who gather their inner strength to attempt a healing process, refusing to be defeated by abuse. As part of this process, these women take on storytelling to tell of their traumatic experience. By sharing stories, women help themselves by regaining power in taking back a voice. Some women discuss the performances they must engage in to escape their true selves, until reaching a point of healing and being able to regain their sense of self, with newer perspectives from surviving a traumatic experience. Survivors empower their listeners in storytelling with knowledge of gaining strength, surviving, and revealing injustices that allow such abuse. These women are truly heroines and come out of their traumatic experiences as changed women, but stronger women.

In many literary works, readers see rape as a means of taking a character's entire persona as well as their power and security within a society. Rape often breaks female characters, placing them into the all too familiar category of powerless, passive women. However, some authors have chosen to attempt to heal their abuse victims, allowing them to reclaim their voice, take agency in their lives, and to pass their strength on to others. This sense of strength from the healing process of storytelling was first portrayed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and many literary works sharing the character of the strong, defiant victim follow these similar themes first explored in this myth. Even across extremely different genres and backstories, raped women have been able to survive

and grow from the experience, as seen by the very different literary works of William Shakespeare's Elizabethan tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, Margaret Atwood's dystopic novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Nalo Hopkinson's Internet technology based futuristic novel, *Midnight Robber*. In examining such different stories with very different plotlines, settings, and politics, one can see the similarities between motives and nature of rape, as similar to those explored by Ovid. Further, these three different stories present three different methods of survival and regaining of self, while still stressing the importance of storytelling. Lavinia's journey allows her to use her method of storytelling to reveal the regime that has allowed for her abuse and causes her to be a co-author in submitting to her own death. Offred maintains her sense of self in her dedication to her former life, her acts of taking back pleasure in sexual acts, and by sharing the story of her life of rape and living in a rape culture. Tan-Tan takes on an empowered persona in order to take agency against her own abuse and then uses it to prevent the abuse of others by revealing injustices, becoming a stronger, more empowered woman than she was before her abuse. All of these women use the act of storytelling and find strength in using this method as healing. Each of these literary heroines has her own voice and clear sense of self and by surviving through abuse and rape, these women grow. These heroines prove their strength and fight against all a rapist strives to take from them.

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