

Ultimate Judgement

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When I read pages 71-73 of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a specific moment that hit me the hardest was Janine's "testimony". She is forced by Aunt Lydia to stand in front of all the other women and share one of the most horrific and traumatizing experiences of her life. Her story of being gang-raped as a teenager. Instead of receiving sympathy for her story or admiration for her courage to talk about this situation, she is attacked. Everyone is led to chant, "Her fault, her fault, her fault." (p. 72). Not only did that moment disturb me, but it also frustrated me because it stuck with me. Because I've felt that enraging feeling. In smaller but real ways. I see what it's like to be vulnerable and share something personal, and be shut down, judged, and blamed for it.

What makes this section even more emotionally critical is the way Janine gives in. Offred describes how when she's crying, "she did not resist" (p. 71.) It's like she accepts that she has no power in that moment, no right to her own story, so she lets her emotions take over. But she had some hesitation. I could relate to that, too, feeling that lump in your throat before expressing something personal. Stuck, wondering if people would actually listen or make you feel worse. Being stuck in a mindset like that could drag you down further than you could imagine. The way Janine is humiliated in front of everyone reminded me of that feeling of regret for speaking.

What also stood out to me is how the other women respond. They have no sense of compassion in their hearts. They only show cruelty, "Her fault, we chant in unison" (p. 72). Offred is admitting to joining in, even though she knows Janine isn't at fault. Which makes me think about how many women truly believe that Janine is wrong. More than the number of women who are resistant to the brainwashing, and support Janine? Offred says, "She thinks it's her fault" (p. 73). Janine actually starts to give in to it and falls into the extreme self-shame that Aunt Lydia set up for them. This shows how shame seeps so deeply into people that they start to carry the weight on themselves. Even when the situation shows that they are not to blame, this situation represents how much power people's words have on our thoughts about ourselves. This brings me to think about times when I've spoken up and felt dismissed. Making it even harder each time to share how I feel. The more self-doubt adds on to that, which leads to the destruction of your self-confidence. That self-doubt is exactly what the author captures through Janine. It's not just about the external blame. What's really critical is how blame gets planted inside of you.

A moment that brings out more emotional destruction in the women is when the Aunts justify their judgment. "This will teach her" (p.73). They use Janine's suffering as an example for the others. Almost like a warning. This is similar to the many times growing up, teachers or adults would single me out in front of everyone if I did something wrong. It wasn't about helping me learn from my mistakes or giving support to ensure I will do better. It was about making me an example so others wouldn't do the same thing. Oftentimes, it is in such a humiliating way. When others see you like that, especially when you want to be hidden, it makes you angry. Because of embarrassment, those situations you are put in make you feel less willing to admit to your mistakes. That's exactly how Janine is used. As a lesson, not a

struggling human being.

What makes this whole section so powerful is that it feels incredibly real. Not to mention such a common thing, but the author puts it in such an extreme way, some might see beyond the fact that they could relate to it. Victim-blaming, shame, silence. I see all of those things so commonly in the world now. Reflecting on Janine's scene made me think about how many people in our world don't tell their stories because they're afraid of the chant. Whether literal or the unspoken judgment.

In the end, Atwood doesn't let us off the hook. Offred's mindset in this scene forced me to ask myself, When have I joined in? When have I allowed someone else to be shamed without stepping in? And on the other side, when have I carried shame that shouldn't belong to me?

That's why this passage is so personal. It's not just about Janine. It's about our society. About how easily shame can be used as control if we let it.