

The Rise of Aries-404

Daylight broke through the open window as the sun's rays invaded my eyes. I could feel the gentle breeze of the wind, touching my skin softly and for a few seconds I felt as though there was hope, as if I am in a dream but then suddenly the orange and crimson sun gradually began fading away into the depths of space and reality loomed over me. It is now the year 2121. Five long years have passed since my once precious and beautiful land, The City of Calyx had been taken over by the new and tyrannical Head of State, Lord Supreme, who now rules this city. My freedom has been taken. Taken, like the joyful lives and souls that once existed on this land. Although the suffering and subjugation of women is evident in my hardened face; the defeatist attitude of the weakened and hapless is not.

I turned away from the window and lay in my bed in utter disbelief following last night's events. Last night was the Annual Zodiac Ceremony, in which I had to forcibly participate in as I am now 21 years of age. In this ceremony, the men get to choose which woman they want to marry. The chosen woman must have the same zodiac sign as them, however the women do not get the option to decide who they wish to be with. As I am an Aries, I was sent to the Aries section where I was surrounded by hundreds of women on one side and their suitors on the other. The men came out one by one and were given permanent markings on their hand with their new name on it and the men wore these signs with pride. The women were given their markings beforehand so the men could identify us and choose who they wanted.

As I was looking around, I heard the speakers bellow "congratulations Aries-404, you have been selected. Please come to the front and stand by your partner". It dawned on me that Aries-404 was my assigned number; my assigned position; my assigned life. Without hope, independence, or an identity- reduced to merely a label- I slunk next to my new husband. After the end of the ceremony, I entered his new and unfamiliar home and without saying a word we both fell asleep. Sleep was needed to recuperate whatever energy I may need to get through today; our first day as husband and wife.

I was taken aback by Aries-509 stomping into the bedroom. "Why is my breakfast not ready yet? I need to leave" he said as he dropped his bag on the floor. "You need to hurry up as your two hours of scheduled free time is starting soon. If you do not make breakfast on time, you will miss it and then you will have to wait until tomorrow" he said sharply.

I put my dressing gown on and dragged myself out of bed. I began to make breakfast and he sat down to eat; I could not eat at the same table as him, but he hesitantly asked me to sit beside him. However, I did not wish to eat with someone who supported this regime, it disgusted me, so I declined his factitious offer and sat on my small, allocated table. He then got up, seizing his bag and headed towards the door to leave. I was alone. Alone, the walls felt as though they were closing in and at a desperate attempt to escape, I crawled to my purse, clutching at its handles and darted out of the door as fast as my two feet could take me.

I only had two hours to myself, so I started walking towards the shopping centre. As I looked to my left, I saw something that I wish I hadn't; not because I was fearful but because it enraged me. It was a garden that differed from the familiar, homely image that the name would suppose. The beatific surroundings of the chrysanthemums and ancient trees were a distant memory. What lay ahead was the Garden of Penance; tall, ominous and gloomy - replacing the clouds that once prevailed within the bright azure sky. This gave the garden a despicable presence. The garden was besieged by bodies - bodies of people who had sinned, bodies of people who went against the Head of State and the bodies of people who brought supposed shame to civilisation.

However, I saw bodies of people who were strong; people who had the courage and determination to defy the government, so I was not disgusted or fearful of these bodies, I was proud of our martyrs. I continued to walk towards the shopping centre and even though I was alone, I was not *alone*. There were cameras everywhere. These cameras watch our every move; they are known as The Protectors. They have been appointed by the Head of State. They exist to not only *protect* the state but to *protect* the people within the state, and to make sure that we do not go against their rules and regulations as that would tarnish the reputation of The City of Calyx. I try to pretend that there are no cameras around me as I loathe the idea of my privacy being invaded by people who have no right to be observing me. I longed for normality.

The shopping centre is located right in the middle of the city. Accessibility is limited - just like the interaction that we can have with others. This is furthered within the exclusivity of the sectorised elements within the city, as the city has been split according to each zodiac sign. However, as this is the largest shopping centre within the city, it is open for all sectors. The Head of State acts as if this is a sign of benevolence but we all know it is just an opportunity to showcase the Garden of Penance. I went into the shopping centre with no intentions of purchasing anything. I simply needed space to assimilate my new life. I continued to walk around and as I was wandering, I bumped into my old friend Diana; now known as Gemini-402.

At first glance, I almost didn't recognise Diana. She had embodied her assigned role as Gemini-402; barely looking up in order to showcase her inferiority. As I grew closer, I could scarcely hear her breathing- probably as another ploy to avoid any form of retribution. I furtively gazed in her direction at first, before fixating my gaze onto her face; scrutinising her.

My disquietude could no longer contain me. I clutched at Diana's arm, taking her to the toilet where it was safe to speak. She gawked at me, standing as still and as quiet as the summer breeze. I broke the silence as I burst into a ballad, blurting the issues that I now faced.

"I'm in a constant flux of paranoia Diana, if it's not him, it's somebody else watching me! Please tell me that you're still somebody I can speak to in confidence?"

I heard her swallow the spit that had gathered in her mouth during my speech. She opened her mouth and gratingly spoke in a painful manner as though she hadn't spoken in months. "Aries-404, we should not be here. Please take me back".

I was taken aback by the direct way in which she'd spoken. "Gemini-402, don't be afraid, you can speak to me" I said, fixing my vision onto her eyes.

She slowly looked up at me. "I hate it, it's been the worst year of my life. I have no respect in his household. He does not love me; I just know he doesn't. He adorns me with jewellery and dresses me up in the most expensive clothing but that is not called love" she said with a tear in her eye.

"That is because they don't love us, they *want* us, because it makes them feel powerful. We aren't wives, we are slaves" I said.

"You aren't wrong, but there isn't much we can do. We must live with it and accept the way life is now. I would not dare to speak up. Last week my next-door neighbour tried to escape but got caught as she was seen running away by The Protectors. I'm not sure what they have done to her, but I haven't seen her since. I come here every morning to see if she's ended up in the Garden of Penance" she said anxiously.

"That's the issue. The Protectors – they see everything" I said in despondency.

Suddenly the alarm starts going off, which indicates that our free time is ending in 15 minutes. We must leave and start the unwanted journey home.

"I hope I see you again Gemini-402. I really want it to be different next time." I said, almost as a prayer.

"Yes, I hope so too Aries-404" she said as she turned away frantically.

I walked away outraged by what Gemini-402 told me. I cannot believe this injustice. A poor woman may have been killed for escaping the helpless life that we have all been given. As much as this news saddens me, it gave me more of a reason to fight. Rage flowed through me like lava, and I could feel my heart rate increasing as I tightly clenched my fists. I took a deep breath as I was approaching the formidable doors to my new home and entered patiently. Aries-509 was waiting for me.

"This house is a mess. When are you going to clean this up? What time is my dinner going to be ready?" he asked.

"I'll get to it right away" I answered promptly.

I began dusting the marbled counter tops, observing Aries-509 while he was typing away on his computer. He was permitted to have a career, but I couldn't as who would do the housework if I were working too? I continued watching him, envious of how uncomplicated his life is. He then looked up, glaring right at me. His eyes lit up and the corners of his lips rose to smile, but just briefly and then he carried on with his work. It was bizarre, almost as if he took pleasure in the fact that I was distracted by him. I then started making him dinner and we sat down to eat. It was so quiet that you could hear us chew our food.

"So, how was your day Aries-404?" he asked.

I looked up in disbelief, almost surprised that he cared to ask. "It was fine. I bumped into an old friend. It was nice to see her" I responded.

"That's great. Well, I'm glad you enjoyed your break" he said in a genuine way.

I could not comprehend why he was being so nice to me but it was not relevant, as for me he represents this unfair system. I got up from the table, cleaned the dishes and started reading a book. The time flew and just before I knew it, it was time for bed. I went to the bedroom where Aries-509 was waiting for me.

"I need to speak to you about an important matter. Come, sit down next to me" he said. I slowly approached him and sat next to him on the bed. "So, do you think maybe we should..."

"Maybe we should what?" I responded to interrupt him.

"Consume the relationship?" he stressed.

I was lost for words; I could feel my mouth drying up. I mean of course I didn't. I knew exactly why he brought it up. The new government has ordered every couple to have a child before the age of 23, and to have second child before the age of 25. If we are unable to conceive, the government funds couples to help them have children. This is all to increase the population in order to make this city stronger and indestructible. However, I don't want to have children, are women only existent in this world for this purpose? Are we only here to be mothers and serve our husbands? Is this how little the world thinks of us? Well, it's not happening.

"I-I don't feel quite ready yet" I said.

"Erm, yeah okay that's fine, I guess another night it is", he said staring deeply into my soul. I don't know if I have told you this, but your eyes are beautiful, it was one of the reasons why I chose you. I was in awe at the way they sparkle, I just knew you would be different" he told me.

He then turned the lights off and turned the other way and went to sleep, but I sat there thinking about what he just told me. Why did I feel butterflies? Why did I feel a sense of contentment in his words? I laid down, turned the opposite way and went to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up and did my scheduled chores. I glanced at the clock and realised it was time for me to go outside. I looked over at Aries-509 who was doing some work, I didn't want to distract him, so I clasped my coat and headed for the door.

"Aries-404, wait!" he shouted. I turned around immediately. "I'll come with you" he said.

"With me? But you don't have to" I said.

"Yes, but I would like to. If you are okay with that of course" he said.

I was bewildered by this thought. Why did he want to come with me? This is my free time- my time to be alone, but I wanted him to come, I wanted him to accompany me, but I couldn't quite understand why. I just could not refuse.

"Yes, of course that's fine" I responded. He rose out of his chair, picked up his jacket and pulled the front door open to let us both out.

As we continued walking, we saw the Astrologer's House. There is an Astrologer's House in every sector of the city. This is a place where astrologers are available to inform the residents of their weekly reading. It is part of the law to visit the astrologer's house at least once a week as it has been made essential for us to get our weekly reading. The residents in the city strongly believe in the astrologers and are happily participating in this due to being strongly influenced by the belief and existence of horoscopes and zodiac signs. However, 5 years on and I still do not believe in it and I do not think anything could ever convince me to believe in it.

"Should we pay a visit to the house?" he asked.

"No, no. I don't feel like it" I said.

"You don't believe in it do you?" he asked quietly.

"No, not really." I said.

"Well, our Head of State believes that astrology is a significant source of guidance and if we do not follow it mankind is at peril, so I follow the rules as it keeps us all safe. Anyways, should we head to the shopping centre instead?" he asked.

I was not surprised at what he told me, of course he would believe in it, he is part of the system after all.

"Yes, yes we can" I said.

We carried on walking past the Astrologer's House, and towards the shopping centre. We were almost there, until we bumped into a good friend of Aries-509, Aries-711.

"Aries-509! So good to see you, how have you been?" said Aries-711.

"I've been well, how about you?" asked Aries-509.

"I've been good, how is the wife? Is she doing all the chores and taking care of you well?" chuckled Aries-711, oblivious to the fact that I was positioned right beside Aries-509.

I looked over at Aries-509 as soon as Aries-711 asked this insulting question.

"Of course, she is, she doesn't have a choice. She does everything I ask her to do, like a good wife" he said without hesitation.

How could he talk about me like this? I was disgusted, and without saying a word I rushed back to the house.

"Aries-404!" he shouted, chasing after me.

I hurried inside the house and slammed the door. Tears welled up in my eyes and I felt my throat closing up, feeling almost breathless. I have never felt so embarrassed or ashamed in my life. He walked in right behind me and slowly approached me.

"Aries-404, I am so sorry, I didn't mean any of that. I panicked, I didn't know what to say" he said apologetically.

"Go away, don't you even dare come near me!" I shouted.

As we were talking, we were distracted by a woman screaming from the top of her lungs outside, so I wiped my tears and went outside to see. It was a woman being hauled away by several men that were dressed up in dark, black uniforms with black masks on that were covering their mouths, only revealing their black, beady eyes. It was them. It was The Protectors. They were taking the woman away because she was leading a group of women who were planning to escape. I wanted to help her, but I could not, I would be killed. I looked on in despair and then looked over at Aries-509 who was also watching the woman being escorted away, he had a tear streaming down his face. He then sighed heavily and went inside, I followed.

He turned around to me. "Aries-404, I love you. I love you so much, I loved you the minute I saw you, but I was afraid to say it. I will not let the same thing happen to you that happened to that woman. We will fight this corrupt city and I will do anything to keep you safe. From today, neither am I Aries-509 and neither are you Aries-404, we will be known as simply man and woman as I would rather us have no names than be identified with this world" he said.

I was astonished. I didn't think Aries-509 would love me, let alone stand by me. I didn't say anything and just wrapped my arms around him, embracing him so tight as though it was the last time.

"We will do this; we will win this fight even if it takes us a lifetime" I said.

In that moment, I knew the days of the Head of State were numbered. It was time for a change.

I am hoping one day all women will read my story, so it can give them hope, optimism and determination to stay strong. I am also hoping one day all men will read my story, to open their eyes and make them see that women are not just objects, we are important, and we deserve equality.

Commentary

The Rise of Aries-404 is a dystopian short story focusing on the protagonist's deprivation of basic human rights and how her life has changed entirely from living a normal life, to living under a totalitarian state. According to Chris Ferns in his book *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (1999); 'dystopian fiction, [is] seeking to challenge and subvert the norms of the traditional utopia' (374), which I aim to do through my society. My aim for writing this story is to portray a feminist dystopia to reveal the obscured truths of the world that we live in, to further alert people of how the persistence of gender indifferences towards feminist issues would evoke a sense of rebellion. The two texts utilised that helped me to form my own society were, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Yevgeny Zamyatin *We* (1924). Atwood aims to draw attention to female inferiority, and how they 'suffer and feel oppressed by the unjust treatment towards them' (Bratanović 2020: 349). Zamyatin aims to show an authoritarian society which 'depicts life [for both genders] under the repressive control of the One State' (Amey 2005: 23).

I chose the name, The City of Calyx because 'calyx' is referred to a part of the flower that protects petals when they develop. This is symbolic to my story as Aries-404 represents the 'petal' which gives women connotations of being pure and innocent, and that they need to be protected in this state in order to be safe. Whereas Aries-509 represents the 'calyx', as he protects his wife when he chooses to support her and resist the Head of State. I aspired to have a powerful place name like Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* and One State in *We*. However, I developed the city name into something that is meaningful and exemplifies positivity. I chose to do this because by having my dystopian city named after something that signifies purity and beauty, is ironic as it gives the story hope and optimism. The name Aries-404 itself signifies purity as the number '4' represents four angels shielding the four corners of the world. I have added this into my dystopian world to show how Aries-404 will fight against woman subjugation and be the 'angel' that they are all in need of, making her not only an important character but a future saviour.

Within my story, I have created a society that lives by the rules and regulations of the Head of State, who has created a city that strongly believes in astrology. The reason I chose astrology as being not only the premise of the story but the prime belief of my society, is because it provides my residents with something to believe in. As stated in my story, astrology gives residents a 'significant source of guidance' and if they do not go for their weekly readings, they will be severely punished as they are endangering humanity by not following horoscopes. This further highlights the society's oppression and how it demonstrates a way of controlling citizens to represent power. Atwood instead uses biblical references within her novella, demonstrating how 'the nation bases its laws and very existent upon Judea-Christian Scripture' (Gulick 1991: 25). This portrays how Christianity is used to control the thoughts and actions of the citizens of the Republic of Gilead. By doing this, Atwood has created a state where the Bible is being utilised for the state's own repressive purposes. Thus, using astrology and religion to create a totalitarian state represents a dystopian society as it entraps residents within a certain belief without the freedom to decide for themselves.

The Garden of Penance is another key dystopian element within my story. The Garden of Penance exists as a public display for the residents to not only frighten the citizens but to maintain social order. It gives the story biblical notions as it symbolises The Garden of Eden, where Eve was punished for sinning. However, the only difference is that the garden, which should supposedly represent beauty and tranquillity, has been transformed into a torturous and gruesome place. Thus, The Garden of Penance is demonstrated in a negative light to highlight the way in which the state has utilised a peaceful place to control and oppress the citizens. Atwood utilises The Wall for a similar purpose; to show the dead bodies of dissidents which hang within Harvard University to

frighten the inhabitants, as Offred states: 'It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look' (Atwood 2012: 47). Harvard, just like the garden, becomes a symbol of the upturned world that Gilead has formed by transforming a place that was once a location of knowledge into becoming a place of brutality. The Machine of the Benefactor, within *We*, also depicts physical torture as if the ciphers were to defy the state they would be punished via execution as 'public torture and the display of human remains are used to deter crime and to desensitise the population to state-inflicted terror' (Alihodžić 2017: 136). Motherhood being essential in a woman's life, is another dystopian element that I have implemented. I have shown how women are not only valued for their bodies but for their reproductive purposes. The creation of this concept highlights the issues that surround women about their 'overall purpose and function [being], to get pregnant and give birth, while all their intellectual abilities [and] career aspiration seem irrelevant' (Bratanović 2020: 356). Within *The Handmaid's Tale*, motherhood is a key concept as the handmaids are wrongly utilised for their reproductive systems. This illustrates women's oppression as they are forcibly tied down within domesticated roles. However, by showing my character's refusal of adhering to these idealised notions of femininity, I am consequently creating a strong and resistant character who is bringing these injustices to light; likened to Zamyatin's character I-330. Sona Stephan Hoisington, in her edited edition of *The Mismeasure of I-330* (1995), states 'I-330 is not the femme fatale that other critics have made her out to be' (88), so by creating this character, Zamyatin transcends and subverts gender stereotypes.

The overall aim of my story is to create a dystopian society that illustrates female subjugation from the point of view of a woman through first-person narration, to bring the severity of women oppression to light. By using inspiration from Atwood's, *The Handmaid's Tale* and Zamyatin's *We*, I was able to develop my ideas to create my own version of a totalitarian state which not only reveals social and political issues that utopia tends to conceal, but how the consequences of such a society leads to revolt.

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