

# ‘When a daughter submits to her father’s will’: Teaching Taboo Topics with Jennie Melamed’s *Gather the Daughters*

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Imagine a desolate, pre-industrial island ruled by powerful men called the wanderers, viewed as God’s vehicles on Earth. Imagine a religion that teaches obedience, that father’s rapes of their daughters are holy, and that girls must get married the summer after they get their first period. Add four adolescent girls who struggle to survive and find ways to escape from the rapes and the fate of becoming oppressed adolescent mothers and wives. Jennie Melamed’s Young Adult (YA) dystopian<sup>1</sup> debut novel *Gather the Daughters* (first published in 2017) depicts this extremely patriarchal<sup>2</sup> and aetonormative<sup>3</sup> society. It highlights taboo topics, such as rape<sup>4</sup>, incest<sup>5</sup>, patriarchal violence, suicide, mental illness, and even the murder of girls and women who question the religious teachings. Melamed is a psychiatric nurse practitioner specialised in working with traumatised children (Amazon), and sexual trauma is a central topic throughout *Gather the Daughters*. The novel clarifies how incest and patriarchal violence damage girls and women.

The religious’ teachings of the island are summarised by the male priest as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> YA dystopias portray contemporary or future societies in which democracy and human rights have failed, and young characters stand up against oppressive institutions and individuals.

For extensive discussions of defining characteristics of the genre, see Basu, Broad, and Hintz 2014 and Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Geraldine Moane defines patriarchy as a society where “almost all of the major systems of society [...] which are hierarchically organized are male dominated” (Moane 2011: 28).

<sup>3</sup> Aetonormativity refers to how children and adolescents are viewed as non-normative, whereas adults are seen as normative. This is the case both in contemporary societies and in most children’s and YA literature. Maria Nikolajeva clarifies that aetonormativity is based on a rhetoric about the need to protect children from harm and certain aspects of life (Nikolajeva 2009: 16). While there is an obvious need for this type of consideration, adults often use this rhetoric as an excuse to limit, abuse, and even oppress the young.

<sup>4</sup> Merriam Webster defines rape as “unlawful sexual activity and usually sexual intercourse carried out forcibly or under threat of injury against a person’s will or with a person who is beneath a certain age or incapable of valid consent because of mental illness, mental deficiency, intoxication, unconsciousness, or deception” (Merriam Webster 2023: “Rape”).

<sup>5</sup> Incest refers to “sexual intercourse between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law to marry” and “the statutory crime of such a relationship” (Merriam Webster 2023: “Incest”).

When a daughter submits to her father's will, when a wife submits to her husband, when a woman is a helper to a man, we are worshipping the ancestors and their vision. (Melamed 2018: 24)<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the island girls and women are used and abused for the sake of males' desire. They do not have a choice as to what kind of life they want to live. Instead, they are destined to become wives and mothers until the wanderers tell them to take the final, poisonous draft (13, 83). Whereas the society is viewed as a utopia by the male founders and the current wanderers, for the girls and women it is a dystopian, patriarchal nightmare. Consequently, the novel uses this alternative society to explore girls and women's oppression in contemporary societies via an extreme version of patriarchy. This technique is similar to, for example, Margaret Atwood's depiction of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which is an important proto-text for the YA dystopian genre (Alkestrand 2021: 22).

Melamed's novel questions the very foundations of patriarchy through four adolescent girl focalisers who are not prepared to accept the religious teachings. It illustrates different paths of resistance to gender- and age-based oppression, which intersect<sup>7</sup> with each other. Being a young girl, specifically, makes the daughters even more at risk of incestual rape and patriarchal violence than both the island boys, due to their female bodies, and the adult females, because of their status as children who are expected to obey their parents.<sup>8</sup>

YA dystopian texts have an educational potential based on their ability to first create allegorical similarities to oppression in contemporary societies, and then use hyperbolic depictions to make these oppressions stand out as clearer (Alkestrand 2021: 19–20). This distancing effect of the genre can help both students and teachers view issues in their own world from a distance, and in that way make them more distinct. *Gather the Daughters* exemplifies this, by depicting a hyperbolically patriarchal and aetnonormative society that justifies incestual rape and patriarchal violence to an extent that is uncommon in contemporary societies. Simultaneously, it is inspired by the presence of these practices in reality. Thus, it combines allegory and hyperbole to highlight these taboo topics.

The article's aim is to explore YA dystopian literature's educational potential to teach taboo topics, here incestual rape and patriarchal violence, in

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<sup>6</sup> Only the page numbers will be mentioned in the references to Melamed's novel from now on.

<sup>7</sup> I use an intersectional approach to oppression, which argues that different types of power positions and oppression are related to each other. When gender intersects with, for instance, age, this means that gender-related and age-related oppression affect each other and create a type of oppression that is more than the sum of the two. For a discussion of intersectionality, see Lykke 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Melamed's novel focuses on the consequences of rape and patriarchal violence directed at girls and women, but I want to underline that everyone can suffer from this in reality.

upper-secondary school by using *Gather the Daughters* as an example. My research questions are:

- How are incestual rape and patriarchal violence tied to the oppression of adolescent girls in *Gather the Daughters*?
- How do the four focalised girl characters rebel against the oppression?
- How can *Gather the Daughters* be used to teach these topics in upper-secondary schools?

The article starts with an introduction to the island society of the novel. Then, previous research on *Gather the Daughters* is introduced. This is followed by the theoretical framework, which focuses on taboos in YA literature, critical literacy, and narrative imagination. The theoretical framework both guides my text analysis and provides inspiration for the suggested teaching plan, which are the two main parts of the article. In the text analysis, I model a critical literacy reading that is intended as a support for teachers who want to teach the novel using the teaching plan or their own approach.

### Gather the Daughters: An introduction

The island depicted in *Gather the Daughters* has been cut off from contact with the mainland for many generations. Supposedly, the so-called ancestors foresaw that a crisis was on its way, consisting of moral downfall, fires, and diseases, and saved people by bringing them to the island. Now, their religious teachings, gathered in *Our Book*, dictate how island life is supposed to be lived (10–11, 23, 31). The male wanderers are responsible for making sure that the inhabitants follow the teachings. If they do not, the inhabitants get shamed, punished, exiled, and even killed (cf. 61, 169–170). Information about the mainland is kept secret from the population. The only exceptions are the wanderers, who visit the mainland to bring home, for instance, medicine when an epidemic starts. They also invite new people to join the island. Despite this, there is still an issue with so-called “defectives”—babies born with deformities, which are a result of inbreeding (14, 190, 194, 388).

Married couples can only have two children. Fathers' sexual desire and need for dominance are satisfied through repeated incestual rapes of their own daughters until they reach fruition, that is, get their first period. Masturbation and non-penetrative sex are not mentioned as options to vaginal intercourse in this religious society, which seems to support only the latter. Once the girls can get pregnant, they are off-limits. Summertime is a carnivalesque escape, since the children get to live wild on the island, naked and covered in mud to protect themselves from the mosquitos. The adults are cooped up inside or use netting if they are males who must work outside. They must put out food for the children (27–28, 67, 78, 81, 97, 121, 127, 180).

Once a girl menstruates for the first time, her free summers are over. Instead, she has her summer of fruition, when she is encouraged to have sex with older men; no male is younger than 17. Girls who do not want to participate are drugged and raped. The goal of the summer is for the girls to find a husband, get pregnant, and have two children. If a daughter is born on the island, everyone present at the birthing cries, since the daughter will end up getting raped by her father, while the mother is supposed to stand by. According to the religion, the rapes are good for the daughters and a way to prepare them for their future lives as married (25, 39–40, 56–57, 87–88).

The four protagonists Amanda Balthazar, Janey Solomon, Caitlin Gideon, and Vanessa Adam all rebel against the rules of society, but in distinctly different ways and with different results. Whereas Amanda is forced into the ocean and killed by a wanderer after her plan of escaping from the island with her unborn daughter were overheard, Janey starves herself to death to stop her first period and avoid being forced into motherhood. Before then, she gathers the daughters for a rebellion that eventually fails. Caitlin's mother dies in the epidemic and Caitlin is left alone with her physically violent and abusive father. She rather ends her own life in the ocean than go back to her fathers' violence and repeated incestual rapes. Vanessa is the only one who manages to escape the island thanks to her wanderer father. He flees with the whole family when he fears that the other wanderers plan to kill Vanessa. After the epidemic, many girls get new fathers instead of their old, dead ones, and this creates additional sexual trauma for these girls. The priest's sermon suggests that the religious laws will be reinforced even more rigorously in the future (26, 208, 211–218, 254–261, 358, 406, 423–425, 428–430).

The novel is narrated in the third person with the four girls as focalisers: Amanda, Janey, Caitlin, and Vanessa.

## Previous research

Previous research on *Gather the Daughters* has focused on female oppression and feminist aspects of the novel.

Almudena Machado-Jiménez clarifies that the girls' rebellion against patriarchal violence is followed by an epidemic that kills large parts of the island population. She highlights the connection the priest makes between the girls' behaviour, and the disease. Machado-Jiménez also underlines that husbands are entitled to their wives' bodies, which suggests that rapes occur within the marriages too (Machado-Jiménez 2021: 369–370).

Caren Irr argues that the novel bears similarities to Margaret Atwood's use of the walled city motif in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The motif creates "a strong opposition between a bounded and highly ordered urban space and a wilderness that lies beyond it" (Irr 2023: 43). In Melamed's novel, Irr identifies this division between the island and the unknown mainland. She argues that there are nomadic escapes from authority, such as Vanessa's, when she manages to leave the island on a boat (Irr 2023: 43, 45).

In Kohil Mouna and Bouregbi Salah's study, the focal points are rape and incest of pre-pubescent girls, as well as general dystopian aspects of the novel, such as surveillance. In addition, they describe the mothers in the island society "as passive and complicit in the sexual abuse inflicted upon their daughters" (Mouna and Sahil 2020: 80). But, since the mothers themselves are oppressed, they have limited possibilities to affect the situation (Mouna & Sahil 80–82).

Athira Unni emphasises how "[p]ropagating sexual violence requires" a legitimisation (Unni 2022: 137). Using Darko Suvin's concept cognitive estrangement, she argues that "[i]ntroducing a new set of norms in a society where incestuous child abuse is part of the reality [...] invites the reader to reflect on this strangeness" (Unni 2022: 138). She clarifies that the father who rapes his daughter is "a figure of authority responsible for protecting her", and that this makes the experience even worse (Unni 2022: 139).

In a study of a large corpus of dystopian and apocalyptic texts, Joe Trotta analyses characteristics of these types of literary fiction using a quantitative approach. He includes Melamed's novel in his corpus (Trotta 2020: 179, 199).

My article about *Gather the Daughters* and Amy Ewing's *The Lone City* trilogy (2014–2016) predominately analyses Amanda's fate as an adolescent mother who is expecting a girl child and Janey's mission to create a rebellion against the oppression of girls (see Alkestrand 2023). I investigate how the island society creates, upholds, and justifies its oppressive practices. In that publication, I do not discuss educational applications of the novel.

I have not been able to find any research on how to teach *Gather the Daughters*. Hence, this article is a first attempt to guide teachers from different countries to use this novel in their literature classes. Apart from this, its main contribution to the research field is its theoretical approach to analysing taboos in the genre of YA dystopian literature by highlighting intersecting oppressions that affect the girls' abilities to affect how they want to live their own lives.

In further research, the novel's connections to the incest motif in literature as well as feminist dystopian novels for adults and adolescents, and its reception would be valuable to analyse further. For example, on the cover of the particular paperback version I own, connections are made between *Gather the Daughters* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Also, the role of the boys and the men on the island could be the focal point of future studies.

## Teaching the Taboo: Theoretical Framework

A taboo can be defined as "something that is prohibited, sacrosanct, or so anathema that it should not even be verbally uttered" (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse 2020: 2). It is often related to certain aspects of life, for example sexual or religious taboos (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse 2020: 2). Taboos have a dual function: 1) to protect a culture's inhabitants from getting hurt, and 2) as warnings. Someone who does not heed a taboo, risks getting punished (Ibid). Some taboos are even considered so prohibited that they are defined as

crimes in contemporary societies, for example incest. The law addresses the taboo behaviour in order to punish it.

I argue that using teaching plans to highlight sexual violence is paramount, since young people need to be able to recognise that type of behaviour. For instance, in a Swedish school setting, the importance of teaching what sexual consent means has been underlined more in the new curriculum for upper-secondary school from 2022 (Skolverket 2022: 3, 6, 12). This can be viewed as a consequence of the #Me Too movement, which started in 2017 and aimed to reveal the extent of sexual harassment, abuse, and rape (Brittain 2023).

The importance of the #Me Too movement for breaking the silence about sexual taboos is reflected in the essay collection *Breaking the Taboo with Young Adult Literature* (2020). The first three essays focus on sexual violence, and the #Me Too movement is mentioned at the very start of the introduction (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse 2020: 1). The editors clarify why it is important to address taboo topics:

Most teachers know that broaching a community taboo can lead to challenges, censure, or even termination. As such, *the purpose of taboos can be argued to be to maintain and reinforce the status quo* [My italics]. This may be an attractive outcome if one is in the dominant or privileged class; however, for those who are marginalized or oppressed, the status quo is not desirable. (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse 2020: 3)

Here, the power tied to taboos is thus clarified. The one who already has power can use taboos to keep their own power intact.

For instance, if it is a taboo to talk about getting sexually harassed at work or by your partner, it is harder for the victims to a) speak up, and b) be heard. For school pupils, there is an intersecting oppression based on age and the status as pupils, which makes them more at risk if someone who is older, or even working at the school, sexually harasses them. If parents are responsible, the relationship of power involved in being someone's child is at play plus the taboo surrounding incest. Additionally, other power categories, such as gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, religion, nationality, etcetera, can make the victim even more at risk. Thus, teaching the taboos and dismantling their status as taboo topics in schools can help counteract rape and incest.

Some advantages of using YA literature to teach the taboos are mentioned by Malo-Juvera and Greathouse. First, "the most distinct value of YA literature is that it addresses compelling topics that are still simply not found elsewhere. In many cases and places, these topics are considered taboo" (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse 2020: ix). Second, "it is often easier to have potentially controversial discussions about fictive characters and situations rather than about real people" (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse 2020: 2). Third, this literature can connect with adolescents' experiences. Fourth, it is "a medium through which to foster motivation, engagement, and positive

personal growth [...], as well as social activism and citizenship” (Malo-Juvera & Greathouse 2020: 3). Fifth, it helps adolescents understand taboo topics via the complexity of this type of literature, and thereby supports “adolescent learners [to] better understand themselves and those around them” (Ibid).

I share this view of adolescent literature, but I would like to expand on the benefits of using literary fiction by introducing critical literacy and Martha C. Nussbaum’s concept of literary imagination.

According to Gunilla Molloy,

critical literacy is not a method or a model, but an approach that illustrates *the connection between language and power*. Basically, it is a different way of thinking, to be able to *see more than one perspective* and to be allowed to *critically investigate the values that are present in different texts (and within ourselves)*. It can be understood as an ability to *both read and write own texts in a deeper and more reflective sense*, a critical sense that is not negative, but explorative [My translation. My italics]<sup>9</sup>. (Molloy 2017: 53)

This definition highlights how critical literacy seeks to unveil power relationships found in texts—for instance literary fiction—and how it aims to support a development of both reading and writing texts in a more problematising way. By analysing taboo topics in Melamed’s novel in an educational setting, intersecting oppressions based on age and gender can be illuminated for the students, as well as the four protagonists’ attempts to resist the oppressive religion. In my character analysis, I model a critical literacy reading focused on these aspects. Aetonnormativity, patriarchy, and intersectionality, which I introduced in the introduction, are central concepts for this interrogation of power dimensions.

Specific strategies for this critical approach to texts are suggested by Thomas W. Bean and Karen Moni, such as analysing which characters are allowed to speak and have a voice in a work of literary fiction (Bean & Moni 2003: 645). Thereby, relationships of power tied to specific individuals or to groups can be revealed. In *Gather the Daughters*, speaking up about the patriarchal and sexual violence provides a crucial tool for rebellion.

How can teachers apply critical literacy in their own teaching?

[T]he teacher’s role is not only to *demonstrate ways to interrogate beliefs and ideologies associated with institutions portrayed in texts*, but also to link that interrogation to *addressing and acting on injustices inherent in these institutions*

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<sup>9</sup> Original quotation: “Kritisk literacy är inte en metod eller en modell utan ett förhållningssätt som visar på sambandet mellan språk och makt. I grunden handlar det om ett annat sätt att tänka, att kunna se mer än ett perspektiv och att kritiskt få undersöka de värderingar som finns i olika texter (och inom oss själva). Det kan förstås som en förmåga både att läsa och att skriva egna texter på ett djupare och mer reflekterande sätt, ett kritiskt sätt som inte är negativt, utan undersökande.”

*as well [sic!] in students' own lives and communities* [My italics]. (Beach et al., 13)

The goal for the teaching plan is therefore both to question institutional beliefs and ideologies *within* the literary work, and to transfer this analysis to equivalents *outside* of the literary work, and in this way inspire social justice awareness and actions.

A focal point both in the text analysis and the teaching plan is to take on the perspective of the four adolescent girl focalisers. Martha C. Nussbaum argues that novels can explore ethical issues in a more nuanced way than theoretical texts, since they can help readers walk in the shoes of someone else (Nussbaum 1990: 5). When readers use their narrative imagination, it

both inspires intense concern with the fate of characters and defines those characters as containing a rich inner life, not all of which is open to view; in the process, the reader learns to have respect for the hidden contents of that inner world, seeing its importance in defining a creature as fully human [My italics]. (Nussbaum 2008: 148)

If a reader can follow a character's journey in a novel for an extended period of time, they get to know the characters and get invested in them. This may be especially true in a novel like *Gather the Daughters*, in which the focalisers go through severe trauma—and in three cases also die—due to their oppression. The intimate depiction of their tough lives can be used as an entry point for an analysis of both the characters and how they are affected by incestual rape and patriarchal violence.

There are several benefits of using a YA dystopia when teaching taboos. Apart from the inclusion of these taboo topics in Melamed's novel, the taboos in the island society are different from contemporary societies. It is not a taboo on the island for a father to repeatedly rape his daughter. New families being invited to join the island are aware of the incestual traditions. At least one of fathers of the new families came to the island *because* of them (25, 153, 369, 420). However, a distinction is made on the island between the incestual acts themselves and talking about the acts openly. The sermons endorse the rapes, and all inhabitants know that the rapes are not only allowed—but expected—from the fathers. Thus, the actual rapes are not a taboo. Yet, the language used to talk about them is implicit and coded. Therefore, talking about them is a taboo topic. Vanessa thinks: "Every girl lies down under her father, even if nobody talks about it. [...] [I]t's not something to be discussed in public, but you know everyone else does it in darkness, when nobody else is looking" (370).

When the abovementioned newcomer attempts to rape Vanessa, this becomes even more clear. His actions are seen as a crime and her use of a piece of glass to defend herself is viewed as a legitimate response (369–372). Rape as such is thus not endorsed—just the incestual rapes. Vanessa discusses



this with her father, arguing that if the man had been her father, his actions would have been seen as righteous, and she would have committed a crime (418–419). It becomes abundantly clear that the society is justifying the fathers' rapes. To encourage silence about the incestual practices can be seen as a tool to silence critical thought. If people are not supposed to talk about the practice, they are much less likely to question it.

*Gather the Daughters* clearly illuminates the suffering the rapes create for the daughters, but also for the mothers who have to watch their husbands become child molesters. It breaches the taboo topic of incestual rapes in contemporary societies by illustrating what happens in a society where this practice is justified. The importance to counteract this is underlined through the literary technique of defamiliarisation. Defamiliarisation occurs when something that is viewed as natural or taken for granted is questioned by creating a distance to it in a work of literary fiction. For instance, Viktor Shklovsky shows how Lev Tolstoj problematises the concept of animal ownership when he lets a horse be the focaliser, underlining how strange this concept is to the horse (Shklovsky 1990: 7, 9–10). An example from Melamed's novel is when Vanessa gets scared when the ferry man turns on the boat engine (429). Since she has lived her whole life on the pre-industrial island, she is not familiar with engines, contrary to readers who live in contemporary societies. The boat engine is defamiliarised when the novel highlights how not everyone is used to engines.

Yet, in *Gather the Daughters*, defamiliarisation also occurs when taboos from contemporary societies are justified by the island society's religion. Hence, the novel clarifies that what is considered a taboo is different in different societies. It uses the shock created by an imaginary society where incest is justified via religion to show that things that are viewed as taboos in contemporary societies may not always be viewed that way. *Gather the Daughters* also compares the incestual practice to the newcomers' taboos. The wife of the abovementioned father-to-be seems to want Vanessa "to pardon a crime" by telling her that the incestual rapes are legitimate (205). Her husband asks Vanessa "Do you know how sick that is?", referring to the incestual tradition, but Vanessa does not understand why he thinks it is strange. To her, it is as natural as "picking your nose" (370).

The novel makes a strong case for why incest should indeed be forbidden, but it simultaneously illuminates how treating it as a taboo subject is not efficient. It is not until the rapes and other acts of patriarchal violence are discussed explicitly that the young protagonists start working towards a better world for both them and their future daughters. A comparable practice of breaking the taboos in a school setting holds the potential to achieve a similar rebellion of thought in contemporary societies.

## The oppression and resistance of Amanda, Janey, Caitlin, and Vanessa

In this section I clarify in what ways the four focalised girl characters are oppressed and how they attempt to resist the oppression. The analysis models a critical literacy reading, which is also inspired by the concept narrative imagination and how it underlines literary fiction's ability to make readers walk in the shoes of someone else.

### **Amanda Balthazar**

When the novel starts, Amanda is a 14-year-old expecting mother. Through flashbacks, parts of her earlier life are introduced, for example her summer of fruition, how she met her husband Andrew, and her worries when it took "several anxious months" to get pregnant (95). Additionally, the relationship to her father and mother is described. The first time her father raped her, she "hurt so badly [she] thought [she] was going to die" (135), which is an abundantly clear example of patriarchal and aetonormative power abuse committed by an adult towards his child. Also, it illustrates how the incestual practices risk making the girls infertile.

Amanda's oppression is centered around her status as 1) the daughter of a rapist father and a mother who hates her, 2) a young girl in a society where girls do not have any other option than to become wives and mothers, 3) the wife of a man who will turn into a child molester, 4) an adolescent mother who attempts to escape from the island and thereby protect her daughter. Thus, intersecting oppressions tied to her female body, gender, age, parents, marital status, and motherhood are highlighted.

Getting her first period means that Amanda can leave her home and escape her fathers' rapes permanently. She used to hide away from her father, for example by sleeping on the roof or on desolate parts of the island. Amanda experiences long periods of time when she does not remember where she is or what she is doing (45, 47–48, 79). This illustrates the post-traumatic stress disorder the rapes lead to. Mouna and Sahil highlight how incestual rape can result in shame, guilt, and depression, and they use Amanda's mental disassociation as their main example (Mouna & Sahil 2020: 79). Amanda finds it hard to enjoy marital sex (Melamed 2018: 104), which can also be explained by sexual trauma and the unequal relationship of power between husband and wife.

The oppression of getting raped by her father is based on an intersection between Amanda's age, female body, bodily status as someone who has not yet menstruated for the first time, and being her fathers' daughter. Combined, these aspects position her as someone who is forced to be raped. Since the rapes of the girls are legitimised by the religion, the law does not view them as a crime nor as rapes. Amanda cannot escape while she remains on the island. Sadly, almost all young island girls are in the same situation. This clarifies how a patriarchal and aetonormative society abuses young girls to

prevent married couples from having more than two children. The view of males' sexuality this represents assumes that men both must have and are entitled to vaginal intercourse. To justify this, it is argued that the rapes are for the daughters' benefit: "We must [...] engage with them as the ancestors contracted when they left a forbidding land. We must deliver them safe, wise, and loved to their husbands" (25).

Amanda's father visits her after she is married (105, 108–109). He dreams about creating a life with her as his wife, which appals Amanda. This is a strict taboo, which is clarified when the girls are told during their summer of fruition that they cannot marry anyone "who is a father, son, uncle, or brother to anyone in your family" (85). Thus, there are incestual taboos on the island too—they are just different. The fathers' rapes are an exception to an overarching incestual taboo. The general incestual taboo is similar to the one in contemporary societies, but with the exception of excluding the fathers' rapes from the definition of incest.

The mother does not offer Amanda any support to handle the rapes. Amanda thinks her mother hates her, since she does not show any love for Amanda and is happy when Amanda moves out. Instead of protecting Amanda against the father's actions, she blames them on her daughter. The mother loves Amanda's younger brother, which adds to Amanda's feelings of being unwanted (46, 135).

The island society's religion ties the girls first to their parents, then to their husbands, and makes them unable to create their own, free futures. The boys will all get an occupation and be allowed to move more freely on the island (154). This showcases how the control of females is stricter. The patriarchal oppression creates a metaphorical prison for both the young girls and women, regardless of their age.

Another adolescent girl asks Amanda if her brother has ever complained to her after she left the house. The girl's younger brother died very suddenly, and she never got to see his body (142–144). While Amanda does not understand why he would complain, it is implied that fathers sometimes rape their sons if they do not have any daughters or if their daughters have reached fruition. Contrary to the endorsed rape of daughters, this is a taboo topic in the island society. The son in question seems to have been killed because he complained about what happened to him (cf. 144). Thus, boys also risk being raped and sexually abused in the island society.

The predominant dilemma for Amanda is how she can protect her unborn daughter from the patriarchal and aetnonormative island society. Through a magical ritual, she finds out that the baby is indeed a girl (35–37, 112), and she panics:

All Amanda can think of is a filthy winter, time spent trapped in her bed by bonds of flesh, clenching her teeth against a scream, over and over and over. *I won't do it, she thinks. I won't do it. And then, By the ancestors, I have to do it all over again.* (37)

She starts searching for ways to escape and tells Andrew that they have to leave, but he does not understand why (123–125). As a male who has grown up in a society where it is deemed good for the daughters to get raped by their fathers, he is unable to see the vulnerabilities this creates for both Amanda and the child, who he does not yet know is female. He simply blames her wish on the pregnancy (122–126). Thereby, her attempts to gain support from Andrew are fruitless, and his privileged position as a male is underlined.

Amanda is an adolescent mother who fiercely protects her unborn daughter. This is a recurrent motif in YA dystopian texts (Alkestrand 2021: 162). She tells Janey about her escape plans, since this is the only possible way to protect her daughter available, but they are overheard by an unknown male. Later, she is attacked by a male down by the beach, when taking a walk with the netting Andrew has given to her. The man forces her into the ocean, and instead of surrendering to him, she keeps backing further out. The scene ends openly when Amanda is still alive. One possible interpretation is to view this as a suicide, where Amanda rather goes into the ocean than back to the man. But, since Amanda literally had nowhere else to go, and would have been killed no matter what she did, I interpret it as a murder. It is later clarified that the killing was ordered by the wanderers, who claim that Amanda bled out. It is talked about as a “murder” in the novel. Caitlin sees the wanderers drag up the body from the water, and she tells the other girls (128, 134–138, 148–149, 162, 169, 174–175, 386).

Ironically, Amanda and her daughter do escape from the future oppression of the island society by getting killed, but this can obviously not be viewed as a successful escape. As a young, married mother-to-be, she is intersectionally oppressed due to her age, gender, female body, marital status, and as a future mother in the patriarchal and aetnonormative island society. When she attempts to rebel by finding a way off the island, she and the unborn child are killed. This is the uttermost consequence of the patriarchal society’s attempts to reinforce the religion and stop rebellious thoughts and actions from being successful. Thus, Amanda tries to make her voice heard, but only Janey listens.

### **Janey Solomon**

Janey is a 17-year-old girl who the other girls find frightening. She does not let her father touch her or her 13-year-old sister, and she is now a teacher assistant, since she has already been taught everything that an island girl is allowed to learn. Additionally, she has managed to stop her first period so far by rigorously starving herself (26–27, 44, 116, 165–166).

Contrary to Amanda, Janey has managed to escape both from incestual rapes and, for now, the summer of fruition. Later in the narrative, it is revealed that Janey’s father does not believe in the teachings and that it never felt right for him to even attempt to rape his daughters. He has been forced to live in a society that justifies the rapes and live with the hegemonic expectations on

males to rape his daughters. Still, Janey is expected to have her summer of fruition, get married, and have children like every other island girl (74, 282). The religion oppresses Janey due to the same intersection between her young age and female body that affects Amanda.

Throughout the novel, Janey rebels against her own and other females' oppression by 1) not letting her father touch her or her sister, 2) starving herself to stop her first period, 3) gathering the daughters of the island to tell them about what happens to girls and females who do not accept the ancestors' teachings and/or the authority of the wanderers, and 4) choosing death by starvation over becoming a woman.

Not accepting the incestual rapes is a definite breach against the ancestors' teachings and a proactive type of resistance. However, Janey realises that as soon as she reaches her fruition, she will no longer be able to escape from the sexual expectations. Stories of what happens during the summer of fruition, as well as girls being eyewitness to these sexual activities, prove that she will not be able to escape; she will be drugged into submission instead (40, 86). Therefore, stopping her fruition is the only escape available. Here, Janey uses self-harm in the form of starvation to stay in a liminal space between girl and woman, like a female version of Peter Pan (cf. 119). She abuses her own female body for it to not be able to live up to the expectations on an adolescent girl's bodily development: "*Never. Death first*" (74). This "becomes a way to re-establish her agency and free will in an extreme version of a patriarchal society" (Alkestrand 2023: 244. Refusing to become a woman is the escape from adult life that she has chosen.

Janey's most spectacular rebellion includes gathering all the island daughters in the church, talking to them about what happened to Amanda, asking what really happened to other women who "bled out", and encouraging them to live together on the beach, like they do during summer, but all year around (208, 211–218, 254–261). The summer is a time for escape from the incestual rapes. Janey wants all the girls to live freely and without the threat of incestual rape and adults with their aetonormative rules. Gradually, more girls join her. The wanderers originally decide to wait until the girls get cold and hungry, rather than physically force them home (273), but the girls turn out to be much more persistent than most wanderers expect. They and the parents eventually start catching girls when they can, and the parents are encouraged to beat the girls brutally (310).

However, even when some of the girls get caught and beaten, they tend to return to Janey, bruised and battered, but still rebellious and convinced that island life must change (263, 266, 285–290). By breaking the silence about the women who supposedly bled out after having criticised the ancestors' teachings and the wanderers, but whose dead bodies were never seen (199), Janey helps the girls to uncover hidden knowledge. Via this rebellion of thought, she intends to change the island society: "They can force us to do anything they want, but they can't stop us from thinking" (216). In essence,

she encourages the girls' critical thoughts, and makes them question who gets to have a voice on the island and not. These are central aspects of critical literacy. Mouna and Salah similarly underline how "[i]nformation is censored, reality and truth about the wastelands is distorted to discourage any attempt to flee the island" (Mouna & Salah 2020: 75), clarifying that lack of access to knowledge can counteract critique. The girls' rebellion is connected to gaining forbidden knowledge. Janey's statement also clarifies how profound the adults' power is and that they use it not only to protect the young, which is the justification for an aetnormative approach to the young according to Nikolajeva (2009: 16), but to rule over them.

Eventually, the wanderers come searching for the girls. Janey is captured when she distracts them from catching the other girls. She is punished for her rebellion. Even though she is not yet an adult, and only adults can be shamed and whipped in front of the whole population, Janey is punished this way. Her upper body is exposed, and this adds to her humiliation. Vanessa bears witness to how "Janey's beautiful, speckled-eggshell skin is suddenly severed, cracked open, a rosy welt with a spine of crimson wrapping around to embrace her fluttering rib cage" (292–293, 295–298, quote 297). The body which Janey controls by starvation is now at the mercy of and utterly maimed by a wanderer. Thus, the wanderers reinforce aetnormativity by using violence to clarify what happens when the children disobey their parents. The aim is to scare the other children into submission.

During the shaming, a young girl shouts about how the wanderers are murderers. She is captured and beaten to death by the wanderers for speaking the truth. After the shaming, the girls head out to the beach again and new girls join them, but eventually it is too cold. The only one who remains on the shore is Caitlin, who has nowhere else to go (298–299, 307, 309, 311). Hence, the attempt to suppress the rebellion was unsuccessful and just inspired more girls to join the rebellion.

What finally ends the rebellion is an epidemic. After the girls have realised that there is not one single adult outside the houses, they discover that people are ill and dying, especially infants and pregnant women. Most of them go back home to help their families. This changes Janey fundamentally: "The girl who once led a rebellion of daughters is trapped at home like a buzzing insect in a box" (325–328, 331–333, 339, 361, quote 363–364).

Janey's final rebellion takes place when she slowly dies from starvation. She knows that she must eat, but still does not. Before she dies, she gathers the girls one final time and tells them that she does not believe there was a scourge in the mainland and that it is all a lie (400–401, 412, 414, 416). The only way for her to escape from the fate of becoming a mother and wife is death, and she welcomes it as a preferable option. In one sense, the rebellion is a failure since she dies. In another sense, it is successful. She did manage to keep her body away from men, and she will never bear a child, nor be forced to watch her daughter get raped.

### **Caitlin Gideon**

13-year-old Caitlin's father is the worst and most violent of the focalised girls' fathers. Whereas the narrator Caitlin herself claims that he does not beat her, and that she just bruises easily, it gradually becomes obvious that this is not the case. Her mother even has a scar on her genitals, which suggests that the father is just as violent towards the mother (25, 41–42, 340). Just like Amanda—but contrary to Janey—Caitlin has been forced to endure incestual rapes and additional patriarchal violence in the name of the religion. She is the only mainland girl of the focalisers, but she only has a few vague visions from her time living on the mainland—no solid memories (42, 160–161).

Caitlin shares the first two of the oppressions that Amanda endures: 1) being the daughter of a rapist—and in this case very violent—father, and 2) being a young girl in a society where all girls must become wives and mothers. Unlike Amanda, she has not yet had her first period.

In Caitlin's case, age, gender, being the daughter of her father, and her female body all combined position her as intersectionally oppressed. In addition to this, the father's use of major violence (cf. 278), makes her even more oppressed than Amanda before she reached fruition and Vanessa. Contrary to Amanda, Caitlin has a loving mother. While the ancestors' teachings justify incestual rapes of the daughters, the violent treatment of females that Caitlin's father is responsible for makes the rapes radically harder to cope with. The daughters are literally at their father's mercy, and for Caitlin this means getting beaten in addition to getting raped (278). No wanderer punishes a father for being physically abusive. Thereby, the father's severe oppression based on an intersection between aetnormativity and patriarchy is accepted, even though nothing in the teachings seems to encourage violence during the rapes (cf. 25). It makes the dominant position of the father obvious and further disproves the religious statement that the rapes are for the daughters' benefit.

When she gets raped, Caitlin psychologically distances herself from the girl in the bed: “[S]he'll watch the girl on the bed and feel sorry for her. It's always so hard for her to breathe, and she bruises so easily” (159). This psychological mechanism helps her get through the abuse. Caitlin's disassociation from herself is interpreted as a common way to deal with incestual rape by Mouna and Sahil (Mouna & Sahil 2020: 79). The bruises affect Caitlin's position in society. The other girls seem to think that they are odd and not part of an acceptable paternal behaviour (25). However, no one offers Caitlin support. Instead, she is ostracised, and thus made even more at risk.

For Caitlin, Janey's rebellion is quite personal. She oversees Amanda being dragged from the water, and when she is back home “[s]he suddenly feels the weight of Amanda's corpse slump onto her shoulders, heavy and cold and wet, and she staggers” (160, quote p. 162). As an eyewitness, she tells the other girls something that makes them realise that girls and women

who do not conform quietly to the ancestors' teachings are quietened and repeatedly said to have "bled out". Caitlin's testimony makes the rebellion escalate, and for once she gets to experience freedom, living far away from her father in a group made up of only girls (256–257, 268–269). Significantly, this matriarchal society, where the girls decide for themselves, and live together in a group of females contrary to being separated into small families, is viewed as ideal and almost utopian for the girls who are used to the strict, patriarchal island society. Caitlin escapes the rapes and violence for a while, and her social status among the girls improves.

During the epidemic, Caitlin returns to her home. She gets very ill from the sickness, and so does her mother. When she is sick, she believes that her mother takes care of her, but in fact, it is the father (340–343). This is the only redeeming characteristic of him that is depicted in the novel. However, when Caitlin comes back to her senses and realises that her mother has died, she runs back to the shore, still sick. She digs a hole for herself in the sand as protection from the cold, and Janey brings her blankets. Caitlin knows that she could probably go to a different family and get protection there, but instead, she decides to walk into the ocean: "The waiting water embraces her softly. It's like a safe bed where nobody will ever bother her again" (358–360, 376–377, 379, 396, quote p. 397). Her suicide can, on the one hand, be viewed as an escape similar to Janey's. No one will ever beat or rape her again. But, on the other hand, for Caitlin, suicide is the only available option to escape permanently from the island. Both Janey and Caitlin rather end their own lives than accept the premises for island life that have damaged them permanently on a physical and psychological level.

To summarise, Caitlin's rebellion consists of two strategies: 1) to join Janey's rebellion, and 2) to end her own life. When the first option fails, suicide is what remains. Significantly, she walks into the ocean when she is still ill and mourns her mother's death (378, 380). Therefore, the second rebellion is different from Janey's starvation. It is not a long-sighted strategy, like Janey's, but the desperate actions of a girl who is suffering from mourning her mother and after-effects of continuous incestual rapes.

### **Vanessa Adam**

Of the four girls, 13-year-old Vanessa has the most privileged class position in society as the daughter of a wanderer. Among other things, this means that the other inhabitants bring her family food (18). Contrary to especially Caitlin's father, Vanessa has a father who shows kindness, for example by letting her read many of his books. Her mother tells her she is the only one who "has that privilege" on the island (18, quote 15). Vanessa has a young brother. The mother supports Vanessa by asking her if she wants the sleeping draft, which makes her drugged during the paternal rapes; the father dislikes but accepts this. Other girls, such as Caitlin, are not offered the draft by their mothers, since the fathers would get mad if they found out (18–19, 63).



As an island girl, Vanessa experiences both incestual rapes and a life limiting her to becoming a mother and wife, even though she longs for more options (153–154, 222). Contrary to the other girls, she can be viewed as a normative example of how an island girl *should* behave in relationship to her father, and contrary to Janey and Caitlin's fathers, Vanessa's father acts in the normative way that an island father is *supposed* to act.

Vanessa seemingly does not rebel against the oppression based on intersections between her female body, gender, age, and status as a wanderer's daughter. She does not join Janey's rebellion, even though she wants to. Her use of a shard of glass on a man who attacks and tries to rape her is in line with what society expects. The man is said to have survived the injuries and been exiled (267, 272, 418), but since Vanessa never saw him after her attack, he could just as well have died, just like the women who supposedly bled out according to the wanderers. Following that interpretation, Vanessa's wanderer father used his privileged class position to protect his daughter by covering up the fact that she killed the man.

Regardless of how the man's injuries are interpreted, Vanessa's rebellion is mostly on a psychological level. She dreams of a different life where she has more options, like the men. She dreams about joining Janey's rebellion, but she does not. And she gradually understands that Janey and Caitlin are right, when they accuse the wanderers of killing girls and women. She eavesdrops to the wanderers' meetings and asks the wife of the new family questions about the mainland, and she realises that her father was not included in the plans to kill those deemed disobedient or dangerous. He is seen as too weak. Her father is scared that his decision to let Vanessa read his books and develop a critical attitude will eventually lead to the other wanderers killing her (154, 242, 272–275, 385–392). Thus, reading books from the mainland, and not just *Our Book*—the only book written on the island (10)—can be viewed as a rebellion according to the wanderers. Their rule over the island, and especially its females, is based on scaring them into thinking that island life is a much better option than life in the mainland. By reading about the mainland, Vanessa can get insights that could potentially make her question the rules of island life. Mouna and Salah reinforce this interpretation, arguing that “books as a record of the past could help break [...] the isolation imposed by the dictatorship” (Mouna & Sahil 2020: 75).

In fact, the wanderers are right. The books, just like Janey's encouragement for the girls to imagine other islands, make her view her own life from a distance and imagine alternatives (Cf. Melamed 2018: 17). Vanessa's critical literacy skills are enhanced through reading. This thought rebellion is powerful, since it defamiliarises island life and makes her see it from more of an outsider's critical perspective.

One example of how Vanessa's class position is indeed more privileged than the other girls', thanks to her wanderer father, is how she is the only one of the girls who gets access to medicine when the epidemic spreads on the

island. Her father brings the family pills, and since no wanderer family members on the island die, it seems like all wanderers have done the same.

Vanessa questions the decision to give the medicine to only them. Her father then uses physical violence to push the pill into her mouth and make her swallow (350–352). In an act of violence that symbolically reeks with similarities to rape in the form of forced oral sex, and which reminds her of a similar experience earlier in life—potentially a sexual one—he uses his larger body and physical strength to force her to do as he says. Vanessa even chokes on the pill: “Back arched, hands trapped, his palm pushing into her mouth, she feels a surge of nausea and *a flicker to another time, long ago*. Inhaling sharply, she starts coughing [My italics] (352–353, quote p. 353). This clarifies that she could have died from this act of patriarchal and aetnormative violence. Ironically, the pill both gives her better chances to survive the epidemic and makes her the victim of a type of violence that her father does not seem to have used during the rapes.

It becomes abundantly clear that Vanessa still has more power in the island society than the other girls, when she is the only one of the four girls who manages to physically escape from the island. One night, her father wakes her and the rest of the family. He has convinced the ferry man, whose tongue has been cut off so that he cannot talk to the island population, to take them from the island. The novel ends with Vanessa seeing the shore and how brightly it burns: “Everything is in flames, blazing brightly, dark silhouettes outlined by flicker and glow. She can’t tell if it’s the wastelands burning their forever fire, or the sun catching light on human bodies as it rises behind them” (249, 427–429, quote 430). The fact that the wanderers repeatedly go to the mainland to bring resources, including the pills that probably saved Vanessa’s whole family, suggests that it is indeed the sun, and not some vengeful fire sent to punish humanity for its sins.

Contrary to Amanda, Janey, and Caitlin who all die because of, or as a part of, their rebellion, Vanessa is saved. Thus, “the only one who can escape from the island’s oppression is an adult male ruler. For adolescent mothers, young girls, and girls who refuse to become mothers, rebellions always lead to their deaths” (Alkestrand 2023: 244. Melamed is planning to publish a sequel (Goodreads). Not until that happens will it be possible to know if Vanessa did escape from the incestual rapes of her father, or if she only escaped from the island, not its teachings. Unni believes that “the possibility of recovery from trauma for Vanessa is doubtful” (Unni 2022: 141).

To summarise, all four focalised girls experience intersecting oppressions based on mainly patriarchal and aetnormative views. They all experience oppression differently, and they also rebel in diverse ways. The only one who manages to escape island life is the privileged wanderer daughter Vanessa. All the other three girls end up dead.

## Teaching plan for *Gather the Daughters*

In this section, the suggested teaching plan for teaching taboos using Melamed's novel is introduced. It is inspired by critical literacy, narrative imagination, and my analysis of the four focalising characters. Additionally, it is based on my overall sociocultural approach to learning and teaching in my role as a licensed secondary school teacher and an associate professor. I have discussed this approach and the connections between the different theoretical components extensively elsewhere (See Alkestrand 2021: 237–240). To summarise, I believe students learn best if they work together, engage actively with the content, and get different types of scaffolding from the teacher. In this way, they can reach the zone of proximal development—a concept coined by Lev Vygotskij—and continue their learning process:

The ZPD denotes the next stage of development for a learner. This zone cannot be reached if the learner works on their own, but with the social support of peers and/or a teacher, known as *scaffolding*, they are able to progress in their learning and reach this new and more advanced step. (Alkestrand 2021: 237–238)

I intend to inspire literature teachers in different countries, where it is possible to work with an English language novel in secondary schools. Therefore, the aims of the teaching plan include general text-analytical and critical literacy skills. I encourage teachers to adapt them to their own teaching context and syllabus if need be. For the same reason, teachers need to decide on their own how they grade the tasks and provide constructive feedback. It is also possible to make the teaching plan more or less extensive, or to use a similar approach to a different text dealing with taboo topics that may be a better fit for a particular student group.

### **Reading material:**

- Jennie Melamed, *Gather the Daughters*
- Mini lectures about central concepts for the novel created by the teacher.

**Age of students:** Upper-Secondary School

**Time frame:** 10 weeks

### **Overall aims:**

*Thematic:*

- To be able to define a taboo.
- To analyse the norms dictated by the island society's religion.
- To discuss how the prescribed relationship between fathers and daughters leads to oppression of the daughters.

- To discuss how Amanda, Janey, Caitlin, or Vanessa experience and rebel against life on the island.

*Narratological:*

- To define the concept of a focaliser.
- To discuss how the focalisation contributes to readers learning about the students' struggles in the island society.

*Text-world connections:*

- To analyse similarities and differences to incest, rape, and patriarchal violence in contemporary societies.

**Pre-reading preparations:**

- Read the novel well in advance and discuss your own view of taboo topics with your colleagues. The focus during the lessons must be on the students' reactions, which means that you must have processed the novel *before* you start teaching it (cf. Malo-Juvera & Greathouse 2020: x).
- Invite the school nurse or an equivalent to class a few weeks before you start working with Melamed's novel. Ask them to introduce concepts such as rape, incest, self-harm, and suicide. Inform the students that you will soon work with a novel that deals with these topics in an imaginary society. Give them contact details to the school nurse and anonymous phone lines in your area. Make sure that this contact information is easily available throughout the whole reading process.<sup>10</sup>
- Divide the students into pairs that they will work in.
- Make a classroom contract for what the students and their teacher(s) need to think about in the classroom. Let the students contribute with the content. Clarify that the aim of the contract is to create a safe learning environment. For example, letting everyone finish what they have to say, and not repeating what the others have said to anyone outside of the classroom, are potential areas to discuss and include.

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<sup>10</sup> The purpose of this setting is to give the students a so-called "trigger warning" (see Robbins 2016: 1–2 for a definition and discussion of the concept), when there is a professional available. Students may have own experiences of these topics or deal with close ones who are struggling with similar issues. Therefore, it is important to create a safe environment for these students. Even if they are not directly affected by these things themselves, these are sensitive topics, and it is crucial that the students know who they can reach out to if they feel a need. Of course, you need to be available in this role as a teacher too, but using the support of a professional can help you set up a safer environment for the students. It can also create more support for you if your choice of teaching topic is challenged by, for instance, the students' parents.

- Create a reading schedule for the students that matches your teaching schedule. Divide the novel into appropriately long sections.
- Decide which character each student should focus on.<sup>11</sup>

### **Lesson 1: Introducing Melamed and her novel**

- Read the prologue (pp. 1–3) aloud for the class. Here, Vanessa dreams about her daughters swimming in the ocean, escaping from the island. Instead of calling for them to return, she urges them on. It is clarified that this is a recurrent dream of hers.
- Divide the class into pairs and let them discuss why they think Vanessa acts this way. Use the text on the blurb and the cover image as additional sources. Then summarise the discussion on the whiteboard or a similar device and document the students' thoughts on the topic.
- Briefly introduce the author, Jennie Melamed. Mention that she is a psychiatric nurse practitioner who has experience working with traumatised children (Amazon).
- Introduce the concept of focalisers. Use, for example, Vanessa in the prologue as an example.
- Individual online work: Digital mini lessons (5 minutes each) plus quiz
  - What is a taboo?
  - #MeToo, including: What is the definition of rape?
  - Definition of incest
  - Definition of suicide and self-harm
- Assign pages 1–38 as homework. Ask the students to take notes about the island society in their logbooks.

### **Lesson two: The novel's society and introduction to the webpage task**

- First remind the students of the classroom contract for a safe learning environment. Then lead a discussion with the whole class about what defines the island society.

Example questions:

- What do we know about how the island society is organised?
- What is viewed as good and bad behaviour?
- What role does religion play in the society?
- Can you identify any taboos in this world?

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<sup>11</sup> Teachers can either make these choices randomly or based on their knowledge about the individual students' life situation.

- Is there anything in this world that you view as a taboo in our world that is *not* seen as a taboo in the island society?
- Summarise the discussion by writing a mind map on the whiteboard or a similar electronic device.<sup>12</sup>

Introduce the instructions for the webpage task below and hand out the reading instructions for the rest of the novel.

### **The webpage task**

You and the other students in your class will create a webpage<sup>13</sup> about *Gather the Daughters* and the taboo topics that it includes. The aim of the webpage is to spread awareness to your society about incestual rape and violence used by males against girls and women. You will focus on how these topics are depicted in the island society of the novel, but these same topics are just as relevant in your contemporary society. By creating a webpage, you can reach out to others and let them know what you have learnt from reading *Gather the Daughters*.

#### *Instructions:*

- The teacher will assign you one of the four following girl characters that you should focus on in your reading: Amanda, Janey, Caitlin, and Vanessa.
- When you read the novel, please focus on the questions listed below for your character plus the overall questions that everyone needs to answer. Imagine that you live on the island and that you must walk in the character's shoes. Take notes in your logbook about passages, incidents, and quotes that are relevant for your exploration of the questions.
- Apart from the logbook, you will show your interpretation of the character via one post for a webpage that your class is responsible for creating. You may choose from the following types of contributions: a debate article, a book review, a vlog, a meme, a piece of art, a song, a poem, and an interview with one of the characters. If you have any other ideas of contributions, please discuss them with your teacher. You will work in pairs that the teacher has decided beforehand.

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<sup>12</sup> In other literature discussions, I would suggest letting the students discuss topics in smaller groups, since they can use the social support of their peers as scaffolding, in line with a sociocultural view of learning (cf. Wilhelm & Smith 2016: 56). However, since the novel includes taboo topics that may resonate with students on a personal level, I prefer a whole class discussion in this case. Then the teacher has more control of the discussion, and only students who want to respond to the questions need to. In smaller groups, students may feel pressured to say something.

<sup>13</sup> If, for instance, computer filters for which words can be used make it hard to create a webpage, other possible options are Padlets and teaching platforms.

The post must focus on describing your assigned character's life on the island. Use the questions to guide you when you choose what to focus on. Consider if the character's situation is similar to or different from a girl in a similar situation in your own contemporary society.

- When the webpage is ready, it will be launched according to your teacher's instructions. During the launch, you need to pick one other post that intrigued you and that you want to comment on. Pick a post related to a different girl character than the one you did your own post about. Write your comment at home after the launch. Discuss what aspects of the character the post managed to portray, and add additional information about the character's life situation that could have contributed to a more detailed depiction. Approximately 1 A4 page typed in Times New Roman, 12 points, and 1,5 spacing is a good length for your comment.
- Your teacher will grade your post and your comment. You will also hand in your logbook, so that the teacher can see that you have worked with your character's questions.

*Overall questions:*

- What taboos exist in the island society?
- Discuss if there is anything in the island that would be seen as a taboo in your society but is not viewed in that way on the island.
- How is a young girl, a woman, a mother, and a father, respectively, supposed to act according to the island's religion? How does this affect who has power and who is oppressed?
- Using the online mini lesson on the #Me Too movement, discuss what types of sexual violence are present in the novel and in contemporary societies. Discuss similarities and differences.

*Questions for Amanda:*

- What kind of relationship does Amanda have to her father and mother?
- What is a "summer of fruition"? How did Amanda experience her own summer of fruition?
- Why is Amanda sad and scared when she finds out that her unborn child is a daughter?
- How does Amanda try to protect her daughter? Why? Discuss if she is successful or not.

*Questions for Janey:*

- Why is Janey viewed as different from the other girls?
- Why does she starve herself?

- What does she do when she finds out about what happened to Amanda?
- How does she want to change the island society? Why? Discuss if she is successful or not.

*Questions for Caitlin:*

- How does Caitlin's father and mother treat her?
- In what ways is Caitlin different from Amanda, Janey, and Vanessa?
- What does Caitlin do when Janey wants to change the island society?
- What happens to Caitlin after her mother has died from an illness? Discuss why this happens.

*Questions for Vanessa Adam:*

- Describe Vanessa's relationship to her father.
- In what ways is Vanessa different from Amanda, Janey, and Caitlin?
- How does Vanessa react to Janey's attempts to change the island society?
- What kind of life does Vanessa dream of? Discuss if it is possible for Vanessa to get a different kind of life.

**Lesson three–lesson nine: Work with the logbook and the reading as homework and the webpage task during lessons**

**Lesson ten: Webpage launch**

- Launch the webpage for the class, a parallel class, other teachers, and/or parents.
- Give the visitors the opportunity to view the webpage both on a big screen and on individual devices.
- Ask the visitors to write a brief comment about what they have learnt in a guest book.<sup>14</sup>

**After reading activity**

- Book a new visit from the school nurse or a similar professional. Use that visit to summarise what the students have learnt about the

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<sup>14</sup> There is space to include introductions by the teacher or by students who want to contribute. Ask the students how *they* want to launch the webpage and let them take charge if they want to. The purpose of this activity is to create a larger audience for their efforts than just their peers. It also intends to raise awareness about the taboo topics in a social justice project.



taboo topics by reading and working with Melamed's novel.

Include space for:

- the students to discuss with the professional what they have learnt about rape, incest, and how a patriarchal society can justify violence against girls and women.
  - the students to ask the professional questions about these or similar topics.
  - the students to tell the professional what they feel that they need to learn more about.
  - the professional to repeat both their own contact information and that of anonymous phone lines that the students' can turn to.
  - the teacher to ask the students about whether they feel like discussing these topics using a novel was helpful, and if so, why.<sup>15</sup>
- Stay in touch with the professional in case student reactions to the novel or related topics occur in the future.

### Concluding remarks: Teaching taboo topics with *Gather the Daughters*

*Gather the Daughters* communicates taboo topics to an adolescent and adult audience by letting readers walk in the shoes of the four focalising characters Amanda, Janey, Caitlin, and Vanessa. It encourages readers to use what Nussbaum calls the narrative imagination to explore topics that they hopefully do not have any actual experience of: rape, incest, and males' violence towards females. The teaching plan suggests how the students' abilities to use their narrative imagination can be encouraged and supported.

Simultaneously, the novel encourages critical literacy skills. It exemplifies what can happen when reading is restricted, information about the mainland is censored, fathers' rapes of their daughters are encouraged but not openly spoken about, and when those in charge silence anyone who disagrees with the religious teachings. However, it also shows the power of talking about the taboos; of speaking up about how those who criticise the wanderers are killed; of a group of girls who start using their voices to dream of alternatives to the oppressive and abusive island life. Similar to how the #MeToo movement brought acts of sexual violence out into public discourse and thereby revealed the extent of the issue, Janey's rebellion shows the power of speaking up, even if you technically do not have a voice in society. Combined, this makes *Gather the Daughters* a valuable novel for teaching the taboos. By high-

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<sup>15</sup> If the students are quiet during this session this should be respected. The most important purpose of this final activity is to establish a safe learning environment, and to use professional help to deal with thoughts and feelings that may have been raised by the novel.

lighting these aspects of the novel in the classroom, the teaching plan clarifies the need for students to learn critical literacy skills.

*Gather the Daughters* is an abundantly clear example of the educational potential of YA dystopias, which combines allegory and hyperbole to create a distance to real-world issues. It exemplifies how an imagined society where our world's taboos are not taboos, but accepted and justified, can be used to show how wrong the taboo behaviour is. Concurrently, it underlines the importance of talking about that same behaviour to break the taboo and hold people responsible for their actions. The importance of standing up against oppression is highlighted in the novel. It thus includes a meta comment about how voicing alternatives to the current social order is a crucial tool in the fight against patriarchal and/or aetnormative violence. Consequently, breaking the taboos in our own societies, for example via the suggested teaching plan, can function as a tool to help counteract the dystopian, incestual, and abusive tendencies of Melamed's island society in real-life communities.

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