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**Chapter 3**

**Breaking Out and Fighting Back: Female Resistance in the Trump-Era Horror Film**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1648-9790>

**Abstract**

Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election appeared to mark a significant setback for the advancement of female participation in US politics. However, one of the most striking features of Trump’s election is the degree to which it has inspired an upsurge in female-led political protests. From high-profile events such as the January 2017 Women’s March, to the record numbers of female candidates in the 2018 midterm elections, women across the country are choosing to fight back. Parallels to these protests can be found in a recent cycle of horror films that show women fighting back against violent and sadistic men. With their narratives of female survival and resilience, commercial and critical hits such as *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016), *Hush* (2016) and *Don’t Breathe* (2016), tap into a growing sense of anger at the patriarchal structures that dominate US society. This chapter explores the relationship between this cycle of films and recent political shifts. Specifically, it considers the role that contemporary horror cinema has to play in representing and mobilising resistance to the anti-woman agenda of Trump.

**Introduction**

Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, following a campaign in which he repeatedly used sexist rhetoric to undermine his opponent, appeared to mark a significant setback not only for the advancement of female participation in US politics, but the women’s movement more generally. However, one of the most striking features of Trump’s election is the degree to which it has inspired an upsurge in female-led political protests, as well as a broader revival of feminism in the United States (Enda 2017). From high-profile events such as the January 2017 Women’s March, the largest single-day demonstration in American history, to the record numbers of female candidates in the 2018 midterm elections, women across the country are choosing to fight back, rallying and mobilising at a level that has rarely been seen before. What’s driving these campaigns is more than just a desire to see the current president deposed. It’s a determination to challenge gender violence of all forms. Indeed, this groundswell of resistance has fed directly into calls for an end to workplace discrimination and assault, with outrage over Trump’s sexist behaviour providing fertile ground for the emergence of the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements. From the perspective of female protest, therefore, Trump’s victory has proved to be a galvanizing force, encouraging women (and girls) to come together to demand action on a range of issues that have long been ignored.

Parallels to these protests can be found in a recent cycle of horror films that show besieged and oppressed women fighting back. With their narratives of female survival and resilience, box office hits such as *The Purge: Election Year* (2016), and critically acclaimed features *You’re Next* (2013), *It Follows* (2014) and *The Witch* (2015), tap into a growing sense of anger at the patriarchal structures that dominate US politics and society. In each of these films, tough female protagonists turn the tables on their tormentors, and, in doing so, free themselves from a series of literal and figurative constraints. This chapter explores the relationship between this cycle of films and recent political shifts. Specifically, it considers the role that horror has to play in representing and mobilising resistance to the anti-woman agenda of Trump. Do these stories of female empowerment contribute meaningfully to wider calls for gender equality? And, how might they help to communicate the diverse goals of the feminist movement to wide audiences? For the purposes of brevity, I have chosen to focus my analysis on three films, all of which were released in 2016: *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016), *Hush* (2016) and *Don’t Breathe* (2016). Each of these films deals explicitly with questions of gender and power, and captures a broader feminist thrust that has been central to both horror cinema, and US politics, in the age of Trump.

Horror films have traditionally been criticized for their gratuitous depictions of violence against women, with many suggesting that the genre helps to promote a culture of misogyny (e.g., Wood 1986). However, this type of condemnation is built upon an overly reductive reading, which overlooks the presence of female pleasures within horror cinema (Jancovich 1992). In fact, one of the reasons why the genre speaks so strongly to the Trump era is because of its ‘contradictory’ mix of antifeminist and feminist elements (Pinedo 1997, p. 71). Isabel Cristina Pinedo, writing about the progressive potential of the horror film, argues that it can:

create an opening for feminist discourse by restaging the relationship between women and violence as not only one of danger in which women are objects of violence but also a pleasurable one in which women retaliate to become the agents of violence and defeat the aggressors (Pinedo 1997, p. 87).

Building on the work of Pinedo and other scholars, this chapter examines the gender politics of contemporary horror cinema. Overall, I argue that films like *10 Cloverfield Lane*, *Hush* and *Don’t Breathe*, make a valuable contribution to the ongoing fight against Trump; and that they do this by not only using sadistic male antagonists to represent and critique his hate-filled politics, but also offering up models for resistance in the form of their heroic female protagonists.

*10 Cloverfield Lane* is a loose sequel to found-footage monster movie *Cloverfield* (2008). Initially conceived as a standalone feature but retrofitted to sit within the *Cloverfield* universe, it adapts the original’s themes of paranoia and entrapment to a stripped-back narrative of male-on-female abuse. The film stars Mary Elizabeth Winstead as Michelle, a young woman who falls unconscious after being run off the road in a mysterious car crash. When she comes to the next morning, Michelle finds herself in an underground cell. Her captor is Howard, a doomsday prepper played by John Goodman. Howard tells Michelle that there’s been an attack (possibly ‘chemical or nuclear’, most likely ‘the Russians’), and that he brought her to the bunker beneath his farmhouse for her own safety: according to Goodman’s character, the air outside is toxic, meaning that anyone left on the surface is dead. The only other person present is genial handyman Emmett (John Gallagher Jr). Emmett confirms that something catastrophic has occurred, explaining how he made his way to the bunker after seeing a series of ‘bright red flashes’ in the sky. However, Michelle suspects that there may be more to Howard than meets the eye; and, when he begins to elicit increasingly aggressive and domineering behaviour, sets about to uncover the circumstances that led to her being underground. Working together with Emmett, she learns that it was Goodman’s character who ran her off the road, and that he has imprisoned and murdered at least one woman in the past. Determined not to be another one of his victims, Michelle resolves to break free of the bunker, irrespective of the dangers that await outside.

At its core, *10 Cloverfield Lane* is a critique of patriarchy. It uses Howard and his imprisonment of Michelle, to explore the way that society treats women, making visible the very real but often hidden limitations that are imposed upon what they can say and do. In this sense, the tagline ‘Monsters come in many forms’ serves to draw a comparison between the destruction caused by the Godzilla-like creature in the 2008 original, and the corrosive patriarchal structures that confront Michelle. Indeed, the primary threat to the female protagonist of *10 Cloverfield Lane* is not extra-terrestrial; it’s Howard’s insidious efforts to undermine and oppress her. One of the key ways Goodman’s character exerts control over his captive is through a process of infantilization, as he seeks to remake Michelle in the image of his estranged daughter, Megan. In the opening scenes, Howard gifts Michelle his daughter’s old clothes, and, when she’s looking for something to pass the time, points her to the teen magazines that Megan used to read. These early incidents hint at Howard’s retrograde vision of female identity, his belief that adult women should both behave as children, and submit entirely to male authority.

Perhaps the most significant moment in the film, at least in terms of its feminist critique, is the sequence in which the three central characters play a guess-the-word game. Emmett is giving Howard clues to the title of a famous novel – Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868). Howard is quick to get the first word; but, when Emmett prompts him on the second, stating ‘It’s what Michelle is …’, the older man becomes flustered: he guesses ‘girl’, ‘child’, and, just before the timer runs out, ‘little princess’. Howard’s failure – his utter inability to guess the word ‘woman’ – serves as a reminder of not just his sinister intentions toward Michelle, but also the wider patriarchal culture that he represents. It is the representativeness of Goodman’s antagonist, the depressingly familiar quality of his male chauvinism, that makes *10 Cloverfield Lane* such an effective piece of social commentary. When Howard patronizes Michelle, as part of a more systematic attempt to strip her of agency, the audience is reminded of the types of everyday sexism that routinely impact on women’s lives, and which played a key role in the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. As various scholars have observed, Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton, a vastly more experienced candidate, was at least partly informed by a deep-seated gender prejudice that views women as ‘less capable’ than men (Bock *et al.* 2017). This was a notion that Trump himself perpetuated over the course of the campaign, with his repeated suggestions that Clinton was ‘not fit’ for leadership.

 Echoing the sexist rhetoric that Trump directed at Clinton, Howard’s interpretation of what constitutes appropriate female behaviour is extremely limiting, restricted to the traditional duties of looking beautiful, staying silent and, more generally, caring for the needs of men. At one stage, for example, he tells Michelle that she will ‘learn to love cooking’, indicating the future domestic role he has planned for his captive. In a later scene, Howard instructs Michelle to attend to the wound on his forehead (a wound she caused during one of her escape attempts). However, when he hands over a needle and thread for the stitches, Howard unwittingly provides Winstead’s character with the tools for her escape: in one of several adept displays of survivalist technique, Michelle uses these to construct a hazmat suit that will enable her to venture into the (supposedly) toxic air outside the bunker, sewing together plastic soda bottles and a shower curtain, and sealing the seams shut with duct tape.

From the outset, Michelle establishes herself as a determined and resourceful hero. When she first wakes up in the bunker, for instance, she finds herself chained to a wall, the only objects at hand a broken cell phone and the crutch for her injured leg. Rather than panic, Winstead’s character immediately starts to whittle away at the bottom of the crutch, fashioning a spike that she uses to ambush her captor. At every stage, then, Michelle refuses to accept the role of passive victim, choosing instead to eke out a means of resistance in the limited items around her. Hence, it is while reading Megan’s magazines that Michelle first conceives of her idea for the hazmat suit, sketching the preliminary designs on advertisements for the ‘latest’ teen trends. As with the needle and thread, Michelle’s subversive use of the magazines functions as a symbolic rejection of patriarchy: her drawings of female survival gear, on top of photographs of smiling teenage models, indicate just how far she has strayed from Howard’s fantasy of obedient womanhood.

Michelle’s ability to repurpose the stereotypical trappings of female identity, using them to facilitate her escape, recalls the way that feminists have sought to weaponise elements of Trump’s misogynist rhetoric against him. A similar resourcefulness was evident in the latter stages of the 2016 election race, when protestors were quick to pounce on various blunders made by the Republican nominee. When Trump interrupted Clinton during the third presidential debate, leaning in to the microphone to call her ‘a nasty woman’, he was seeking to disparage her credentials, to frame the Democrat in terms of the stereotypical female traits of hot-temperedness and duplicity. However, within hours of the debate, Clinton supporters had turned this insult into a rallying call, sharing the hashtags #nastywomen and #IAmANastyWoman via social media in a powerful display of collective resistance. Although these campaigners were ultimately unsuccessful in getting their candidate elected, the #nastywoman slogan continues to exert an influence over everyday discussions about women’s political representation and rights – as evidenced by its ongoing circulation in memes, and on t-shirts and placards. Writing about the emergence of the #nastywoman movement, journalist Jenny Hollander (2016) notes: ‘It's a beautiful thing to see misogyny called out, repackaged, and rebranded as a message of female empowerment’. *10 Cloverfield Lane* shares in this sense of irreverent feminist protest, with Michelle’s heroics anticipating key strategies in the ongoing fight against Trump; namely, a willingness to re-appropriate his sexist vitriol as a site for resistance.

 Ultimately, Winstead’s hero escapes the bunker, dowsing Howard with perchloric acid, before crawling through the vents to freedom in her hazmat suit. However, upon reaching the surface, she is confronted with a new danger in the form of a giant spaceship. It turns out that Howard was partly correct: America is under attack; but from an army of alien invaders, not the Russians. In a further display of quick thinking and toughness, Michelle improvises a Molotov cocktail from materials found in a nearby barn, firebombs the spaceship, and drives to safety in an abandoned van. While driving away, she intercepts an SOS message on the radio, calling for any able-bodied person to head to Houston, where the army is currently battling an alien attack. Buoyed by her escape, Michelle turns the van around, making the choice to join the fight for humanity’s survival.

In the closing scene, then, Michelle puts Howard in her rear-view mirror, both literally and figuratively. Rather than dwell on the abuse she suffered in the basement, Winstead’s character moves on to the next fight, signalling once again her determination to break out of the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures. It seems particularly significant here that the SOS message in the final sequence should be delivered by another woman (Sumalee Montano), with this relatively minor plot detail further emphasising the feminist thrust of the film – its commitment to the principle that women have a central and active role to play in society.

Fighting back against her tormentor using a combination of ingenuity and grit, Michelle exemplifies a character type that Carol Clover (2015, p. 35) terms the ‘Final Girl’. She is the one left standing, who outlasts all of the other major characters, including, most importantly, the killer/monster. A recurring criticism of the Final Girl trope is that it constructs female subjectivity within the narrow parameters of patriarchal discourse. Vera Dika (1987, p. 95), in her analysis of early slasher pictures like *Halloween* (1978), argues that the limited agency accorded to the surviving female is most apparent at the close of the film, when, having killed or escaped her tormentor, ‘she loses her motivation for sight and for violence and so her ability to drive the narrative forward’. For Dika, these female protagonists are never entirely free: they are always ultimately ‘trapped within the confines of the frame’, with the final shots reinstating their status as objects. *10 Cloverfield Lane* subverts this trend through Michelle’s decision to join the human resistance. By turning the car around and heading for Houston, the frontline in the epic struggle against the aliens, she reasserts her agency and cements her status as a fighter. Thus, unlike the conventional Final Girl, whose victory is undercut by the killer/monster’s imminent return in the sequel, Michelle continues to wield control over her own narrative, and captures a trend of celebrating female self-determination within contemporary US horror.

Directed by Mike Flanagan, *Hush* also offers up a strong image of female empowerment, but does so through the conventions of the home invasion film. Co-writer Kate Siegel stars as Maddie, a deaf-mute author who lives alone in a remote cabin in the woods. The opening scenes of the film introduce Maddie’s deafness, as well as giving a series of insights into her professional and personal life: Maddie moved from the city less than a year ago, following a difficult break up, and spends all of her time trying to complete her belated second novel. While sitting down to write one evening, she receives a series of unsettling images via email - someone has been inside the house, and is now using her cell phone to take photographs. The unnamed intruder (John Gallagher Jr) - listed in the credits simply as 'The Man' - has already murdered Maddie's neighbour, Sarah (Samantha Sloyan), and plans to do the same to her. Maddie locks the doors just before he can re-enter, but has no way to call for help as the killer has switched off the power to the house. Instead, she must try to survive on her own. What follows is a tense game of cat and mouse, with the killer thwarting each of Maddie’s efforts to escape, until she decides to stand her ground and confront him head on.

Like Howard, Gallagher Jr’s character views women as objects for male gratification, taking a perverse pleasure in the power that he is able to exert over his victims. When he first reveals himself to Maddie, the pair coming face to face through the window of the locked front door, the killer explains that he intends to play with her, prolonging the misery for as long as possible. However, in contrast to *10 Cloverfield Lane*, where the primary threat to Michelle is psychological, the violence in *Hush* is much more physical and sexual in nature. At the simplest level, the threat of sexual violence is symbolised by the killer’s choice of weapons – a hunting knife and a crossbow (Newman 2017). Clover (2015, p. 32), in her influential account of ‘gender in the slasher film’, outlines the psychosexual dimensions of such choices, explaining: ‘all phallic symbols are not equal, and a hands-on knifing answers a hands-on rape in a way that a shooting, even a shooting preceded by humiliation, does not’. The threat of sexual violence is also implied through dialogue. In a later scene, for example, the killer remarks that Maddie is ‘holding out’ on him, that he thinks she will scream if he can get her in ‘the right spot’. There is a double meaning to what he says here, the words alluding to sexual penetration, at the same time as referring to the literal act of piercing her flesh with his knife.

*Hush*'s sexually suggestive dialogue recalls the violently misogynist rhetoric so often employed by Trump and his followers. For example, the killer’s boast that ‘I can come in any time I want… I can get you any time I want’ closely echoes the president’s own comments about grabbing women ‘by the pussy’. In an audio recording from 2005, and which was leaked to the media shortly before the 2016 election, Trump can be heard bragging about using his fame to get women to ‘fuck’ him, and groping them without waiting for consent (‘You can do anything’). The Republican candidate subsequently sought to brush aside the leaked audio, rationalising that his vulgar and degrading comments were merely ‘locker-room talk’. Yet, the ‘pussy tape’ became a lightning rod for the anti-Trump campaign, spurring countless women and men to take action against the politician. One of the ways they expressed their anger at his misogyny was through the knitting of woollen 'pussy hats', which appeared in the thousands at rallies and demonstrations across the country. This powerfully visible gesture of defiance parallels the way that Maddie is ultimately able to seize the initiative from her attacker. Like the pussy hat wearers, she turns the tables on a man (The Man) who demonstrates nothing but hate and cruelty towards women.

 In *Hush*, the killer underestimates his victim: he assumes that, because she is deaf and a woman, Maddie is powerless to resist. However, Siegel’s hero proves herself to be more than a match for The Man, demonstrating calm under pressure and utilizing each of her perceived weaknesses as a strength. What finally enables Maddie to emerge triumphant is the decision to confront the killer on her own terms. When she realises that running is not an option, after he foils yet another of her escape attempts, Maddie resolves to stand and fight. At this point, she uses her own blood to write a message on the window (‘DO IT. COWARD’), directly challenging Gallagher Jr’s character to come inside the house. Once inside, the hunter becomes the hunted, as Maddie employs a range of resourceful strategies to wrest control from the killer. She sets off the fire alarm, for example, using the extra-loud siren - designed specifically for the deaf - to disorient the killer and cause him to drop his knife. In the ensuing struggle, Maddie blinds her attacker with insecticide, before killing him by plunging a corkscrew into his throat. Much like *10 Cloverfield Lane*, therefore, *Hush* punishes male chauvinism, at the same time that it rewards female defiance. In this resepct, both Michelle and Maddie’s narratives speak strongly to a rising tide of female resistance in the Trump era, showing what can be gained by women who refuse to conform to the demands and expectations of men.

*Don’t Breathe* opens with a disturbing prologue, in which an elderly man drags a young woman through the street. The woman, who we later come to know as Rocky (Jane Levy), is battered and unconscious; and her attacker, ‘The Blind Man’ (Stephen Lang), is pulling along his victim by the hair. Even in the opening minutes, then, Fede Alvarez’s film foregrounds issues of gender and power, with this brief and enigmatic sequence flagging up the crucial question of who gets to control women’s bodies. Such issues are proving critical to horror cinema at a time when the US president is spearheading a renewed attack on reproductive rights. Films like *Hush* and *10 Cloverfield Lane* engage with debates surrounding abortion obliquely, by telling stories about women who are penned in and dictated to by sadistic men. *Don’t Breathe* brings these debates to the screen on a much more explicit level, doing so through the experiences of its aforementioned Final Girl, Rocky; and, more specifically, the violence that is enacted upon her body by the male antagonist. Indeed, the prologue turns out to be a flash-forward, the briefest of glimpses into the horrifying physical abuse that she endures.

Set in the ramshackle suburbs of present-day Detroit, the film follows a group of three teenage delinquents - Rocky, Alex (Dylan Minnette) and Money (Daniel Zovatto). When they hear about a blind army veteran hoarding up to $300,000 in cash, part of the settlement he was awarded after his daughter died in a car accident, the trio decide to break into his home and take the money for themselves. However, the heist doesn’t go according to plan, with The Blind Man proving far less helpless than Rocky, Alex and Money imagined. Upon discovering the break-in, he locks the unsuspecting teenagers inside the house and begins to pick them off one by one.

Like *Hush*, *Don’t Breathe* uses disability to offer a twist on the traditional home invasion narrative, but diverges from the previous film by locating the source of the horror inside the house - with the owner, rather than the intruders. Silently stalking his victims, Lang’s character is a truly terrifying figure, one of the most memorable movie villains in recent years. Indeed, the ease with which he dispatches Money, seizing the teenager by the throat before executing him with his own gun, recalls the cold-bloodedness of *Halloween*’s Michael Myers. Yet, the full extent of The Blind Man's monstrosity only emerges in the second half, following a much-remarked-upon twist that builds on the issues raised in the prologue. While searching for a way out of the house, Rocky stumbles upon a hidden room in the basement, where she discovers a pregnant woman (Franciska Törőcsik) chained to the wall. The chained-up woman is Cindy Roberts, the person who accidentally killed The Blind Man’s daughter with her car: Lang’s character has kidnapped and impregnated Cindy as part of a demented quest for justice (‘an eye for an eye’). Horrified, Rocky delays her escape so that she can free the pregnant woman; and, together with Alex, they manage to break the lock on the basement door. However, just as they open the door, The Blind Man appears and opens fire. Mistakenly killing Cindy and badly wounding Alex, he takes Rocky as his new prisoner, telling the teenager that he will only set her free once she bears him a child.

With its narrative about a man forcibly impregnating women, *Don't Breathe* plays on contemporary anxieties around reproductive rights, especially as they relate to the Trump administration. In an effort to win over conservative evangelicals during the 2016 election, Trump campaigned on an aggressively pro-life platform, suggesting at one stage that there should be ‘some form of punishment’ for women who have abortions. In the months following his inauguration, he has set about to deliver on these campaign pledges, working together with the hyper-conservative wing of the Republican Party to launch a series of attacks on women’s right to choose. One of Trump’s first acts as president, for example, was the reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule, a Reagan-era policy that bans US aid funding for overseas organisations that provide abortion services. At the same time, his nominations for Associate Justice - Neil Gorsuch (confirmed in April 2017) and Brett Kavanaugh (confirmed in October 2018) - have threatened to shift the US Supreme Court even further to the right, opening up the possibility of the gradual rollback of Roe v. Wade (1973). The character of The Blind Man speaks to one of the gravest injustices in contemporary US politics, whereby a male-dominated executive is able to sign into law policies that limit what women can and cannot do with their own bodies. Thus, his warped perspective on Cindy and Rocky, viewing them only as means to an end, mimics the callous disregard of Trump and his pro-life cronies towards women’s reproductive rights.

Of the three films discussed here, *Don’t Breathe* is least successful at critiquing gender violence, partly because it veers so far towards sensationalism. After disposing of Cindy’s body, its value as a life-giving vessel now gone, The Blind Man turns his attention to Rocky. Using a metal harness, he suspends the teenager from the ceiling, before thawing a sample of his frozen semen and sucking it up into a turkey baster. Just as he did with Cindy, Lang’s character plans to inseminate Rocky with the baster and hold her prisoner until she gives birth. Cinematography and editing combine in this sequence to make a spectacle of the sexual assault, Fede Alvarez’s camera lingering on the contents of the baster in a series of extended close-ups, while reaction shots of Rocky, looking on in wide-eyed terror, evoke the abject portrayals of women that are a common feature of the horror genre. From this perspective, it’s noteworthy that Levy’s character is unable to save herself. At the last moment, Alex intervenes to stop the assault, hitting The Bind Man over the head and untying his friend.

Earning over $155 million at the international box office, from a production budget of $10 million, *Don’t Breathe* was a major commercial hit, ending 2016 as the second highest-grossing horror in North America. The film’s twist was central to its success, with large numbers of critics and viewers praising the ‘boundary-pushing’, ‘gross-out’ nature of the baster scene (see Rafferty and Watercutter 2016). On one level, this scene risks trivializing the fight for reproductive rights, sublimating the issue into a generalised discussion about good versus bad taste. On another level, the sensationalism of *Don’t Breathe* captures something of the raw and urgent nature of this fight. Freed from the harness, Rocky turns on her attacker, retrieving the baster and shoving it down The Blind Man’s throat. Given recent political events, Rocky’s retribution - her willingness to pay back the violence she suffered in kind - reads like a moment of catharsis, an expression of rage at the way in which abortion services are currently being gutted across the US.

When Trump won the presidential election in November 2016, many voters were left reeling by the result, bewildered and frustrated at the success of a candidate who once bragged about grabbing women’s genitals and was committed to eradicating the gains of Roe v. Wade. However, in the months since, there has been cause for optimism - a sense of strength in collective action. Films like *10 Cloverfield Lane* and *Hush* tap into this sense of optimism with their narratives about women turning the tables on violent and sadistic men. *Don’t Breathe*, on the other hand, is far less optimistic, its coda revealing that The Blind Man survived Rocky’s retaliation, in addition to opening up the possibility for future sequels and victims. Irrespective of the differences between these three films, and the extent to which they offer up a new generation of Final Girl protagonists, what’s certain is that the depiction of female characters like Rocky, Michelle and Maddie, has assumed an increased significance in the current era. At a time when a sexist bigot presides over the White House, orchestrating a series of attacks on women’s rights, there has never been a greater need for progressive horror cinema – for popular stories of empowered women that might inspire audiences (both female and male) to take a stand against Trump’s reactionary politics. With this chapter, I have highlighted one of the ways in which a recent cycle of horror films has begun to do this, through an emphasis on the theme of female survival and resilience.

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