Finding Dystopia in Utopia: Gender, Power and Politics in *The Carhullan Army*
Abstract

Sarah Hall’s feminist dystopia *The Carhullan Army* presents a near-future society by using oppositional binaries traditional to the genre of the literary dystopia; Utopia/Dystopia, Male/Female, and Good/Evil. This essay deconstructs these binaries in order to unveil the inherent complexities in power structures that cannot be captured by such binaries. Previous research on the novel has approached it with feminist theory, and different branches of feminism such as ecofeminism. In this essay, I use feminist theory as a starting point to discuss the Authority’s oppression of women in the novel, but I also show the limits to this approach when considering the apparent post-9/11 context in which the novel is situated, which decisively inflects its treatment of power. Michel Foucault’s theories on power and knowledge are used in order to examine the complex power structures in *The Carhullan Army*, which relate to—and transcend—borders of gender. I find that the subtle political presence of American imperialism in the novel is vital to understand the power struggles that are apparent in both the patriarchal city of Rith and the matriarchal Carhullan farm. This essay examines the novel both as a critique to the political submissiveness that Great Britain showed when it followed America into war against Iraq in 2003 and as a depiction of what this submission might lead to.

**Keywords:** Hall, Sarah; *The Carhullan Army*; feminist dystopia; utopia/dystopia; power/knowledge; Foucault
What do you think, Sister? Do women have it in them to fight if they need to? Or is it the province of men? Are we innately pacifist? A softer sex? Do we have to submit to survive? (116)

Historically, literature has been inclined to foresee the possible futures of mankind—be it visions of good or bad—and this goes as far back as the Old Testament. Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (published as *Daughters of the North* in America) asks whether it is possible to create a utopia within a dystopian world, and rejects simple answers to complex issues. The setting of the novel is a near-future Cumbria in a disaster-stricken northern England, where we learn that oil has run out, that large areas have been flooded, and that an ongoing war is presently being fought. Previous wars and calamities have led to a collapse of the old government; a new state apparatus named the Authority has taken control, and the ration of food and energy is heavily controlled. These descriptions produce a society that fits the definition of “dystopia” as being an exaggerated version of reality, which often functions as a warning to the reader (Hagane 8). Sister, the novel’s protagonist and narrator, sets out on a quest to find the all-women farm Carhullan and leaves her husband and the dystopian city of Rith behind. However, the utopia of Carhullan slowly shifts into a dystopia itself, a paradox that is reminiscent of Thomas More’s original coining of the term “utopia” as a combination of a “good place” (*utopia*) and “no place” (*eutopia*) (Sargent 16). In other words, there lies an inherent tension in the concept of utopia as an ideal, but non-existent, place. This essay critically interrogates the dystopian world of *The Carhullan Army* as a complex statement regarding political structures and power, in a world where the rights of women have been erased.

Male writers have traditionally dominated the genre of quest-oriented dystopian fiction, but in the last decades there has been a rise in dystopias written by
women. As Ildney Cavalcanti argues: “[q]uest texts in Western culture are traditionally informed by a masculine economy: the hero is usually male, the object searched for being, in most cases, woman herself” (57). *The Carhullan Army* reverses this tradition of the quest text as a male experience as it is told to the reader by Sister, and as it is through her eyes that the reader sees women as silenced objects. As a result, Sister claims this narrative as her own and breaks the silence not only of the dystopian world she describes, but also of a genre that traditionally has belonged to men. This essay will pay close attention to the literary genre of dystopias to contextualize *The Carhullan Army* and its marked focus on gender.

Since its publication, there has been a limited amount of academic writing on *The Carhullan Army*; research on feminist dystopias has mainly been reserved for novels such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915). This previous research will prove valuable in this essay’s approach to gendered elements in dystopias. Inger Karoline F. Hagane comparatively analyzes *The Carhullan Army* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* through the lens of ecofeminism and finds that they both express a longing for (feminist) freedom, as “a dream which is illustrated by the more or less subtle instances of resistance by the protagonists towards the dystopian nightmarish societies which they inhabit” (80). Furthermore, she argues that both novels deconstruct the binary oppositions between woman/nature against man/culture, and she concludes that the “novels reject the notion that woman, like nature, becomes a resource, and a force which must be tamed” (80). While this essay’s focus is not on ecofeminism, complicating traditional binaries is a crucial part of the novel’s critical operation. *The Carhullan Army* deliberately juxtaposes the different dichotomies—utopia/dystopia and man/woman—in order to complicate the questions of gender and politics. The Carhullan farm is initially presented as a utopia—in contrast to the totalitarian city of Rith—but soon it morphs into a suppressing political structure itself. Initially, the protagonist Sister is reborn and liberated in Carhullan, but she ends up following another authority, albeit a matriarchal one.

This essay shows that *The Carhullan Army* comments on a patriarchal world order in which women are powerless objects. However, the novel is not merely a depiction of gendered hierarchies, as it can also be read as a critique of the post-9/11 climate with United States of America as hegemon and the United Kingdom as its lap
dog. The essay starts by contextualizing *The Carhullan Army* in the genre of feminist dystopias and discussing its influences from the utopian and dystopian literary canon. After discussing the novel through a feminist lens, the essay continues with a close reading of Sister’s evolution from silent submission to armed activism, and, following Judith Butler’s theory of gender, shows how a deconstruction of the ‘performance’ of gender takes place. Michel Foucault’s theories on power and knowledge are then used to examine how power functions in the novel. Finally, by deconstructing the binary oppositions of Utopia/Dystopia and Male/Female in *The Carhullan Army*, I suggest that in order to unveil the mechanism of power we have to look beyond any particular dystopian totalitarian state apparatus. The expressions of power are visible in both Carhullan and Rith, and both sides show apparent traces of American imperialism in their construction. I argue that *The Carhullan Army* represents a complex strategic situation in which incitement to submission is made visible both on an individual and a national level; Sister follows the leader, and England kneels to America. By unpacking the dichotomy between Utopia/Dystopia, this interpretation shows that power, in contrast to the traditional dystopian depiction of a singular oppressive State, is expressed in multiple layers in the novel.

**Utopia/Dystopia in Literature**

Thomas More famously coined the term “utopia”. It is an amalgamation of “good place” (*utopia*) and “no place” (*eutopia*) and, as expected, this inherent tension has generated debates between theorists and scholars as to how to approach it. Is a utopian society practically achievable in our world or is it merely a vision of something better that pushes mankind forward with hope? Fredric Jameson says that the idea of utopia can be seen as a positive force, and argues that it opens the mind to the possibility of societal change, whether it is in a struggle for gender equality or against political oppression (Sargent 99). Immanuel Kant, for his part, stated that “[o]ut of timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built” (qtd. in Berlin xi). Utopia embodies a vision of a better life, and both Jameson and Kant underline the power of utopian ideals rather than their realization. A helpful way to define “dystopia” is in contrast to utopia; Lyman Tower Sargent, for instance, concludes that if you look to the future with hope, the result is utopia, but “[i]f viewed with alarm, the result is usually dystopia” (22). *The Oxford English Dictionary*
defines “dystopia” as “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible” (“dystopia”). Following these definitions, The Carhullan Army shows the complex connection between utopia and dystopia: it presents a dystopia in order to show how it gives rise to utopian longing, thus confirming the power of utopia to open the mind to societal change. The setting of The Carhullan Army—a bleak world, broken by disasters both environmental and political—is clearly dystopian. In the descriptions of Rith we are told about “the familiar smell of flooded homes” (Hall 10), “the fuel crisis” (22), “strong UV warning[s]” (28), and memories of school shootings (35). All these components paint an alarming picture of the near future that is depicted in the novel, and it is in this horrifying society that we find the narrator Sister (a name that she is given later in the novel). At a young age she learnt about a self-sufficient farm called Carhullan made up entirely by women located in the mountain regions. Even though the general consensus of people in Rith conceives them to be “nuns, religious freaks, communists, convicts […] child-deserters, men-haters, cunt-lickers, or celibates,” Sister finds the farm and its inhabitants intriguing (48). After realizing that her husband Andrew, previously critical of the dire situation of the oppressed people, has given up on fighting the Authority, Sister sets out on a quest to find Carhullan. The Carhullan farm serves as a utopia for her, and this resonates with Sargent’s notion that the “most common form of putting a specific [utopian] vision into practice has been to create a small community either to withdraw from the larger society to practice the beliefs of its members without interference or to demonstrate to the larger society that their utopia could be put into practice” (41). Both forms Sargent suggests are readily visible in The Carhullan Army. Initially, the farm functions as a small community withdrawn from the larger society, and later, as they attack Rith, the armed women want to show that there is an alternative to suppressed life under the Authority. However, this “demonstration” of the Carhullan way of life—a coup d'état against the Authority orchestrated by the Carhullan leader Jackie Nixon—also shows a darker, and more complicated, side of this utopian farm of Carhullan.

To contextualize The Carhullan Army as a feminist dystopia, an unpacking of its influences, use of conventions, and canonical reference points is vital. Margaret Atwood, who herself has produced a number of works that focus on women within a dystopian world (The Edible Woman (1969), The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), The Year of the Flood (2009)), coined the useful term “ustopia,” which combines both utopia
and dystopia since “each contains a latent version of the other” (61). It seems likely that Sarah Hall is influenced by Atwood’s writing, and when Atwood explains what a literary utopia consists of we can see how The Carhullan Army is aligned with Atwood’s definition of utopia: “it is almost always bracketed by two journeys: the one that transports the tale-teller to the other place and the one that transports him (or her) back so he can deliver his report to us” (65). Clearly, Sister’s hopeful journey to Carhullan and her armed return to Rith at the very end of the novel conforms to the structure Atwood proposes as being typically utopian.

Furthermore, the tradition of literary dystopias is present in the novel, and Sarah Hall uses elements and ideas from that canon. In George Orwell’s classic dystopia Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), for example, the reader learns that the government has a weekly lottery that gives the lower social class a spark of hope, and the protagonist Winston admits that the “prizes were largely imaginary” (89). This notion of controlling the masses with a lottery is also present in The Carhullan Army where the first prize gives women the possibility of reproduction. This idea of controlling the people with hope is indeed a powerful one since it comes from—and grows in—the minds of the people themselves, almost like a virus. Ruth Levitas says that hopes of winning the lottery produce utopian dreams and, whether this means buying a new house or traveling the world, “[t]his dreaming transforms only the dreamer's place in the world, not the world itself” (28). This makes the lottery an excellent strategic tool for the state to control its people, and the utopian hope has a paralyzing effect on the people and their agency, as it redirects hope from societal change to private projects. Hope is privatized in order to disarm the collective visions of a better society. A second subtle reference to a literary dystopia appears when Sister speaks of Jackie Nixon’s anticipation and prediction of the economic downfall of society, and labels her alternative vision of Carhullan as “her brave new world” (Hall 104). This reference to Aldous Huxley’s famous futuristic dystopia Brave New World (1931) is unlikely to be coincidental, and since the phrase—lifted from Shakespeare’s The Tempest—is used with irony in Huxley’s novel it can be argued that it reveals the truth of Jackie’s intentions with the Carhullan farm. Brad Buchanan argues that Brave New World is a satirical attack on “modern life and […] its utopian fantasies” (89), and the World State’s motto “Community, Identity, Stability” refers to their prohibition of any individual agency. Arguably, Brave New World’s warning of the nullification of the individual for the greater good of the community presents a
striking parallel to Jackie Nixon’s idea with Carhullan, and its false utopian visions. Apart from the previously mentioned conventions and templates that are visible in the novel, these two examples constitute the most obvious links to past literary dystopias that Sarah Hall cleverly weaves into Sister’s narrative. But while the oppression targets men as well as women in Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four, The Carhullan Army borrows elements from the two novels and makes them visible in issues of gender.

Evidently, the farm functions as a community, withdrawn from larger society, that realizes the utopian visions of the women. Within this fictional dystopian world Carhullan is a utopia, but from within Carhullan we also see how it slowly changes into a more controlled and oppressive community, in contrast to its initial humane and liberating qualities. By unpacking the novel’s evident influences, use of conventions, and canonical reference points, we can understand that the Utopia/Dystopia dichotomy is not as rigid as it first may seem.

Mythologizing Women

The Carhullan Army is seemingly aware of the history of feminism and, to a certain extent, pays tribute to the different ‘waves’ that it is constituted by. The first-wave feminists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries fought for equality in such fundamental areas as women’s right over their own body, their right to vote, to loan money, study, and their right to inherit money (Lorber 1). Simply, the first-wave feminists made non-egalitarian structures visible and demanded equality. Jackie Nixon voices similar concerns when talking about the rights of women before arriving to Carhullan: “[w]omen were treated like cunts back down there […], like second-class citizens and sex objects” (Hall 115). The second wave of feminism’s fight serves as a double-edged sword in its reaffirmation of a gender binary. The importance of this movement in the 1960s cannot be overemphasized in terms of its achievements and results for women’s rights. However, at the same time it theoretically stressed binary differences rather than erasing them. In The Second Sex Simone de Beauvoir argues that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, and shows how men will always be the primary sex, and women the subordinate Other (1262). Furthermore, she goes to great lengths to unfold the myths that men construct about women, and to show that within this mythological image of women there is both room for a “demon”
and the “Goddess Mother” (1266). We can see the mythologizing—mainly demonizing—of women in *The Carhullan Army* when Sister tells the reader about the myths that the external world creates about the Carhullan women: “[t]hey [the Carhullan women] were, just as they had been hundreds of years ago, witches, up to no good in the sticks”; among the locals they are called everything from religious freaks to child-deserters (Hall 48). Additionally, the man who picks up Sister on her way to Carhullan calls the women “a gang of bloody terrorists” and promises that she will come down broken and beg for him to take care of her (18). It is men that give all these derogatory titles to the Carhullan women, whether it is her father, a boy at the market or the driver who gives her a ride. Thus, society’s myth of the unofficial women of Carhullan correlate with the demonizing de Beauvoir describes in her text, and they are condemned because they do not conform to the expectations of men. However, from a feminist perspective, the literary genre of dystopia is highly functional in rewriting these myths, as in the case of *The Carhullan Army*, because of its intrinsic capacity to criticize the present through a bleak depiction of the future. In other words, feminist dystopias often reverse this myth of women as demons and witches and give its female characters a subject position. It opens our eyes to what the mythologizing of women eventually result in: dystopia.

In her article on the role of narrative in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Karen F. Stein argues that “[f]eminists are particularly interested in stories, because, as a marginal group in society, women have often been the objects rather than the creators of narrative: their stories have often been untold” (269). Furthermore, she shows how the namelessness of the handmaids turns them into objects, and “as their names are erased so is their discourse” (271). In *The Carhullan Army* the objectification of women functions in a comparable way, as when Sister introduces herself in the first paragraph of the book:

My name is Sister. This is the name that was given to me three years ago. It is what the others called me. It is what I call myself. Before that, my name was unimportant. I can’t remember it being used […] I will not sign to acknowledge it. It is gone. You will call me Sister. (Hall 5)

This quote shows how far Sister has journeyed from the silenced object in Rith to the strong and independent storyteller Sister. Here she shows the connection between language—in this case her unknown given name—and her freedom, and since her name was previously unimportant so was also her entire personhood. Furthermore, the fact that she cannot remember her previous given name ever being used unveils
exactly how dire the situation is for women in Rith, and this shows the position of women as passive objects. However, there is an ambiguity in the fact that this name—much like her original name—was given to her, and I will connect this later in the essay to the fact that power structures are visible both in Rith and Carhullan. Also, the name “Sister” does not really signal an individual identity, but refers more to her as part of a collective, a sisterhood. Additionally, it should be clear that Sister tells her story (i.e. the novel we read) to the Authority that has taken her in custody when she has gone through her transformation from object to subject, and this raises questions about the reliability of the narrator. Nonetheless, Sister now has a name and a voice—in the subject position she has agency—and this is vital when approaching the book through the lens of feminist theory.

Butler & Foucault: Beyond the Binaries

To understand how the Authority controls its population, Michel Foucault’s concept of power is relevant. As a philosopher and social theorist, Foucault’s aim was not to produce rigid frameworks to help us understand and structure the world; he was more invested in the problematization of set concepts and institutions that define our present, and preferred the “analytical perspective” rather than “general theories” (Beaulieu & Gabbard ix). To him, sexuality and the body are social constructs and practices rather than biological truths—reminiscent of de Beauvoir, but refusing to simplify them into binary oppositions of Male/Female—and this insight has been a key concept for the third wave of feminism. From here on in, Foucault’s ideas will be integrated into the essay as I seek to unveil the mechanisms of power at work in the novel, and his ideas are applicable both to the post-feminist view on the body and the power structures of Carhullan and Rith.

Without a name to identify an individual all we have left is a body, and the female body has always been of great biological interest in dystopian fiction. For example, Alice M. Palumbo argues that in The Handmaid’s Tale “society is constructed to maximize the possibility of reproduction, while making it obvious that women are merely extensions of their reproductive organs” (29). Foucault coins the concept of bio-power to explain the “emergence of ‘population’ as an economic and political problem” (25). He shows that the government, through its various institutions, sought to control and analyze birth rates, the age of marriage, legitimate
and illegitimate births. In other words, sex became a governmental issue, and “this was the first time that a society had affirmed […] the manner in which each individual made use of his sex” (26). This expression of power is visible in *The Carhullan Army*, where the reader learns that the women in Rith have to have a metal ‘regulator’ inserted to prevent them from having children. Sister describes her feelings after the procedure the following way: “[a]ll I could think about was the doctor who had rubbed cool lubricant inside me, inserting the speculum and attaching the device as efficiently as a farmer clipping the ear of one of his herd” (Hall 28). Women are treated like cattle and this regulation silences them further. As previously mentioned, they take part in a lottery system organized by the Authority that grants the winners a removal of the regulator and, thus the possibility for reproduction. The man who gives Sister a lift with his car on her way to Carhullan simply concludes that “that’s the one good thing about all this, I reckon, a return to the era of free love” (Hall 16). Exactly what this male concept of “free love” translates into is shown when Andrew, her husband, comes home from work on the day her regulator is inserted and wants to see what the doctor has done to her. He starts off gently examining her, but ends up wanting to have sex with her—*on* her might be more appropriate wording—and she submits on the basis of their unspoken agreement; never to say “no to the other” (29).

To first have a male doctor (she asks for a woman) insert a regulator on behalf of the Authority, then to come home broken and be used sexually as a piece of meat by her husband shows the dire state of the woman’s body in this society. Upon settling in Carhullan she gets medical treatment from Lorry, who is the house doctor on the farm, and Sister calls the regulator by its true name before it is removed from her body: “[it was] an alien implant, an invader in my body, something that had been rejected all but physically” (90). From a Foucauldian perspective, this brief section shows how sex and sexuality are made into an instrument of power by which the Authority controls its population. By creating a myth of reproduction after violently eliminating the physical possibility of reproduction, the population is effectively controlled.

In addition to the Authority’s systematic control of the female body, Sister’s inability to ask Andrew to stop uncovers yet another component in the complexities of power relations. Foucault’s argues that “[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (93), and Sister’s submission is a testament to this notion: she wants to say no, but their relationship
was not built on the foundation of rejection. In this bleak and depressing world a woman does not reject her man. According to Foucault, power does not simply flow from one giant hegemonic body of evil, but “comes from below” meaning that “there is no binary and all-compassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations” (94). Significantly, he argues that an analysis of power should not only be fixated on the sovereign state, the form of the law, or domination, but also understand that “these are only the terminal forms power take” (92). Sister’s inability to reject Andrew comes from a built-in mechanism of power in their relationship as husband and wife, and while the Authority certainly pushes their relationship to its extreme, it is this less tangible and dispersed power that renders her silent and submissive. It is critical to understand that power does not have to come from high up, in this case the Authority, but indeed functions in interpersonal relations as well. The core of this Foucauldian perspective of power is that if Sister theoretically has the freedom to reject Andrew, the prevailing norms tell her that there is nothing wrong with his actions. This is apparent in the way Sister fights with a growing urge to stand up against him as he suggests that they can get a hold of anti-depressants but Sister tells the reader: “I knew that everything around me was wrong [but] I had not yet found a voice with which to make my arguments” (Hall 32). The voice she is searching for is the one that is unhooked from all of that which is expected of her as a woman in the dystopian world. Sister’s conclusion that their relationship resulting in a state of oxymoronic “unhappy peace” (33) highlights The Carhullan Army’s critique of the normative nuclear family, and makes visible the impossibility of finding peace in something that renders her unhappy.

Judith Butler, following Foucault’s ideas regarding gender and the normative, voices an argument that is crucial to the third wave of feminism (or post-feminism or queer theory), namely that “power appeared to operate in the production of that very binary frame for thinking about gender” (2540). Butler sees the limitations in viewing gender as a division between the fixed identities of man/woman in society, which supports “gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (2540). Her work calls for a more dynamic understanding of gender. Here we can clearly see how Butler builds on de Beauvoir’s work, but reveals the critical problems with the binary opposition that still persists in the second wave of feminism. The first-wave feminists revealed the man/woman binary, the second-wave feminists reversed this binary, and the third wave, in Butler, saw that the binary—always the differences between man
and woman—is itself part of the problem when thinking about gender. Butler argues that we “perform” gender and this perpetually produces and reproduces what we eventually identify as norms. However, the notion of gender as a performance can be liberating in that we, like actors, can change roles, and this break is a significant dynamic element in Butler’s work. *The Carhullan Army* plays with the notion of engenderment: “I knew then that I was nothing; that I was void to the core. To get here I had committed a kind of suicide. My old life was over. I was now an unmade person” (Hall 94). On first reading this quote might seem bleak and negative, but there is an epiphanic quality to Sister’s realization that she has broken away from the role as Andrew’s wife. The quote is applicable to Sister’s move from her normative, heterosexual life in Rith to the same-sex experiences with Shruti in Carhullan, and it shows that love and sexuality are not rigid concepts exclusive to male/female couples and the nuclear family. It makes clear how Sister’s performance of gender from her old life is unmade, and then reveals how a new gender identity is constructed in Carhullan. She undoes the cloak of her previous life—a life where women and sexuality are rigid and traditional notions with no wiggle room—and enters a new life where these preconceptions have no value. This ‘unmaking’ of Sister’s personhood shows how the Authority controls the people and ‘makes’ them into pawns. However, Sister’s liberation from a fixed gender role gives Jackie Nixon the opportunity to remake and reshape Sister’s “void core” and use Sister’s liberation to her advantage. Clearly aligned with the shift from dystopia to utopia, this transformation is not uncomplicated as it reinstates new power relations; Jackie’s control over Sister clouds the liberating effects of Sister’s remade sense of self.

*Carhullan* does not merely function as a utopia where women are liberated from the oppression of men, but the women—and their reasons for coming there—expose other motives for their escape. When Megan tells Sister the story of her mother, and how she had fled to Carhullan from an abusive husband, Sister realizes that this confirms the rumors she had heard of Carhullan being “a sanctuary for abused women” (106). It should be noted that Jackie repeatedly dismisses that Carhullan should be seen as a utopia, but, as previously mentioned, the hope it represents for Sister creates a utopia in itself. However, the idea of Carhullan being a utopia for abused women changes gradually as Jackie’s aim to fight back becomes more apparent on the farm, and this is mirrored in Sister’s narrative. Her first job at the farm is to shift and store peat bricks that, in the end, will give warmth to the
women on the farm. After hearing the stories of her co-workers, Sister realizes that “[t]here were fewer victims at Carhullan than I had imagined” and that “[o]ften it was the women themselves who had committed the crime or were misfits: they had been violent […] and aware they needed some kind of system to bring them in line” (130). This paints a picture of Carhullan as a form of voluntary prison where women go for rehabilitation. After the first day of work the women sing and drink in the dining room, and Jackie sings that in “a female prison, there are sixty-five women, and I wish it was among them that I did dwell” (132). The connection between Carhullan and a prison here becomes clear as Jackie previously mentions that they were sixty-four women on the farm before Sister arrived (83). This devolution of Carhullan, from utopia to prison, unveils the complexities in creating a self-sustainable and tolerant society within a bigger suppressive state: the women flee the society where they are oppressed, but become prisoners in that they cannot go back.

The initial distinction between the utopian Carhullan and the dystopian Rith is also complicated through the novel’s usage of symbolism. The symbol of metal is a reoccurring motif in the novel, and while this early on is connected to the industrial Rith as a contrast to the ecological Carhullan, it creeps into Sister’s mind and becomes a sign of the power that is exercised upon her. Firstly, Sister works in the New Fuel factory in Rith where they assemble machines, which need a technology that is never approved by the Authority, so the workers keep on building and “like drones we added to the vast metal hive” (53). This dome of metal takes up eight hours every day for Sister, and she realizes that the meaningless work will never result in actual progress. The Authority is simply controlling its workers, and this echoes Marx’s critique of capitalism as a pervasion of labor that makes labor alienating and meaningless (Fromm 33). Secondly, upon arriving in Carhullan, Sister is thrown in the small metal tank, or dog box, as a prisoner and she starts having nightmares of being in the mouth of an iron woman: “[h]er teeth were closed around me, and she was carrying me back to her den of wrecked metal in the mountains” (Hall 73). Undoubtedly, this iron woman is a foreshadowing of Jackie and the way she will put her teeth around Sister to control her. In addition, this iron woman is inevitably linked to the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was nicknamed “The Iron Lady” because of her ruthless and inflexible politics; since then, the term also denotes “any determined, strong, or unyielding woman” (“Iron Lady”). This further cements the idea that this is a foreshadowing of Jackie Nixon and her position of
power on the farm. Thirdly, the metal device mandated by the Authority that is inserted in Sister’s womb to prevent her from having children functions as a tool of control. All these usages of the symbol of metal correlate with the power that is exercised upon Sister, whether it is by the Authority or by Jackie Nixon, and this reveals that the dichotomies between Carhullan/Nature and Rith/Corruption are not rigid, nor true, binary oppositions. Both locations, and their respective leaderships, are connected and part of the same metallic symbolism. Furthermore, this symbolism reveals that the two structures are not distinct from each other, but inherently bound. The two societies are interconnected in a system of force relations that constitute their organization (Foucault 92). Simply, both societies are structured on and function by the same mechanisms of power.

The American Authority and the War on Terror

Clearly, the feminist approach to The Carhullan Army unveils the oppressed situation for women in the novel, and illustrates how Sister unlearns her old gendered identity. However, Sister’s submission to power—both in the case of the Authority and Jackie Nixon—is significant especially if we zoom out and consider the context of the book. Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the USA declared a “war on terror” and targeted Afghanistan, and later moved to Iraq and Saddam Hussein in their fight against terrorism. In spite of popular oppositions, the United Kingdom supported the USA in this war, and I argue that The Carhullan Army functions as an indirect critique of this involvement, partly in the depiction of The Authority, but also in that of Jackie Nixon.

The names of most characters in The Carhullan Army are significant, but that of Jackie Nixon perhaps more than others. Sister continuously refers to Jackie as having two oppositional personalities and the tension this produces gives her an electrifying persona. When Sister reflects on Jackie’s appearance on the photographs she has saved she realizes that she “looked both slim and stocky at once” (50), and upon meeting her the first she time she recognizes that she uses combinations of “humour and pragmatism, lightness and invective, as she presented herself” (86). This duality in Jackie Nixon’s appearance and personality gives rise to symbolism greater than her character, and the composition of her name holds the key to this symbol. Jackie (short for Jacqueline) Kennedy was the USA’s first lady between 1961 and
1963, and Carol B. Schwalbe argues that she “dazzled the American public with her intelligence, charm, and traditional femininity” (111). The dazzling qualities and skills are also found in Jackie Nixon as Sister describes her company as remarkable and “electric almost” (Hall 99). Richard Nixon, for his part, was the 37th President of the United States of America and the only American president who has resigned from office, following the USA’s war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. President Nixon was a conservative Republican who built his career on the “Cold War proposition that the U.S. had to defend the ‘free world’ against Communist domination” (Solomon). This more rugged side is also visible in Jackie Nixon, and President Nixon’s military background is also apparent in her character. Thus, the political references that make up the name and characteristics of Jackie Nixon explain both her more gentle and graceful side—stemming from Jacqueline Kennedy—and her more tough and brutal side—coming from Richard Nixon. One final, and critical, clue to this construction is Sister’s description of Jackie’s qualities in one of the democratic meetings between the Carhullan women: “she had an almost presidential (italics mine) right to comment, to approve or veto” (Hall 110). In other words, Jackie’s virtue of being two things at the same time—not only a man and a woman, but a president and a first lady—gives her a hypnotizing aura that gives her unfathomable powers of persuasion. Furthermore, just as the novel shows the binaries of Utopia/Dystopia and Man/Woman to be unstable, so does the character Jackie Nixon expose the limitations in seeing things as either one thing or the other.

Following this apparent American influence in the construction of Jackie Nixon’s name there is also a geopolitical presence of the USA in England that is vital to the novel. Even though it is subtle, the Authority can be seen as being a result of the USA’s influence on Britain. The British participation with the USA in invading Iraq, and removing Saddam Hussein, has produced a lasting picture of Tony Blair as being the USA’s lapdog, and, by extension, left a mark in the British national identity that showed their weakness when put under pressure by the USA (Wither 67). Critique of this submissiveness is highly present in The Carhullan Army. Firstly, the reader learns that a dangerous man named Powell has “got control of the party” and this is how the metamorphosis into the totalitarian Authority began (Hall 25). The name Powell here is critical as it could be connected to Colin Powell, the United States Secretary of State during the invasion of Iraq. Secondly, the tin food and anti-depressants in Rith are imported from the USA (31), and this shows the dependency...
of the USA for survival. Thirdly, Sister says that she is relieved that her dad did not live to see how Britain had become “little more than a dependant colony” (37). Finally, when Sister is about to eat her tin of tuna she notes that the brand “was Blessed Friends” and that the label featured “American and British flags [that] flew in opposite directions from the same (italics mine) flagpole” (32).

In London, January 2003, over one million people protested against the looming possibility of Britain supporting the USA in their attack against Iraq—which is echoed in the novel when Sister says that they “travelled to London and rallied at Parliament” (25)—and an online UK poll showed that its citizens saw America as the “greatest threat to world peace” (Wither 67). Despite these massive protests both from the people and from within the government, the UK decided to support the USA in their war on terror. As the novel’s references to the relations between the UK and the USA make clear, the popular disappointment about this support provides the context for The Carhullan Army and this is evident when Sister realizes that the “failure of international policy was so clear. The war was geopolitical. It was not ours to fight” (Hall 24). The connection between the British government’s actions in the novel and those they took in reality resonate in accordance, and when Sister sees the English flag painted on a house in an empty village and describes it as “distorted [and] bent out of shape” (22), it is clear that the prior government failed their people and “[t]his was not England” (30).

The defining moment, where criticism against the oppression of women and the disappointment with the UK’s involvement in the war of terror converge is when Andrew has lost all hope of freedom and Sister lashes out at him: “[s]he’s a female, is she, this country that’s been fucked over?” (31). Sister’s disappointment in Andrew giving up all hope is apparent, but this statement highlights an important theme. Sister declares this “out of a deep place” in herself and makes it clear that if anything is getting “fucked over” it is relatable to the situation of women and their nonexistent rights (31). The connection between the oppression of women is related to the downfall of their country, and I argue that the power relations between women and men can be seen as analogous to the power relation between the USA and the UK. The Authority functions as an extension of America’s influence over England post-9/11, and depicts England as succumbed to submission under the USA.

By using Foucault’s concept of power I find that there are multiple power structures at work in The Carhullan Army. According to him, “power is not an
institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (93). I have identified three levels on which power operates within the novel: the relationship between the USA and the UK on the national level, the relationship between men and women on the group level, the relationship between Sister and Jackie Nixon on the individual level. There is a technology of power working at all these levels that incites the subject to adhere to authoritative figures, and it is the same whether it is the women succumbing to men, the UK succumbing to the US or Sister capitulating to Jackie Nixon.

Conclusion

The major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism […] And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini – which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively – but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. (Foucault xiii)

After unpacking Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* it is clear that there are several mechanisms of power functioning alongside each other, and the novel connects them in an intricate way. Tom Moylan, in a somewhat simplified phrase, proposes that dystopia ”expresses a simple refusal of modern society” (xii), and, under this umbrella, the novel suggests a bleak future for England and its citizens. Sister represents the plight of women, and, under the Authority’s regime, both her name and body are erased; through Sister we learn that women are left without an identity. Initially, Carhullan’s positive force of utopian hope enables women to deconstruct the “old disabled” roles of performance (Hall 187), but in the end this deconstruction of gender permits yet another construction of performance orchestrated by Jackie Nixon. The post-9/11 influence in this dark future is evident, as the English national identity has been swallowed up by its dependency on America. However, the influence of America is not only realized in the, rather traditional, presence of a faceless totalitarian state. The leader of the Carhullan farm Jackie Nixon embodies the same qualities of leadership as the Authority, but in a different way. In contrast to the mechanical body of the Authority, she is a strong leader that convinces her sisters that there is hope for them and leads them to war in a dictatorial fashion. Nonetheless, both Jackie Nixon and the Authority are expressions of undemocratic structures.
These two manifestations of leadership and power have common denominators in that they both suppress the individual and have devastating effects for its people.

Previous academic research on *The Carhullan Army* tends to focus on the obvious influence of ecofeminism (Hagane 2010; Ng 2010; Espelid 2012), and while this influence certainly is valid, and highly present, I find that Sarah Hall’s novel encapsulates a larger societal destructiveness—a sickness—that results in these oppressive structures and that surfaces in the treatment of women, sexuality, freedom of speech, human rights, as symptoms. Aligned with Foucault’s approach to power and knowledge, this sickness—an abuse of power—lies not within an authoritative regime, or an oppressive rule of law, but within the regimes of knowledge and mechanisms of power that result in these symptoms. When Sister realizes that the Carhullan farm is as defective and “as guilty of failure and disunity as any other human society” we realize that Carhullan shares the same characteristics as the oppressive government controlling Rith (Hall 178). In other words, *The Carhullan Army* shows that the abuse of power encapsulates both sides of what initially seems to be the novel’s main themes; the dichotomized struggles between man/woman and utopia/dystopia.

The post-9/11 presence in the novel should be further investigated, and the militancy of the female army draws to mind the terrorists who hijacked the planes and crashed them into the Twin Towers with devastating results. Arguably, one can see that the army of Carhullan is uncritically following their leader, and their metamorphosis into warriors, who are willing to kill for their beliefs, makes them comparable to religious extremists. From a different perspective, one can see the Carhullan army’s attack on Rith as an effort to democratize, what they believe to be, a non-egalitarian society. Such a reading would unveil the Carhullan women functioning as a symbol for the USA’s pro-war rhetoric about “liberating” the oppressed Muslim women where “women’s rights and equality has been made a measuring stick in the politics of demarcating the civilized ‘us’ from the barbaric ‘them’, thus being a means to claim a ‘Just War’” (Hammami 86). Either way, the possibility of two such different readings is a testament to Hall’s achievement in not oversimplifying complex political issues with a traditional good versus bad dichotomy.

In conclusion, Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* shows that finding utopian hope in a dystopian world is possible, but fighting a war in the name of utopia will
inevitably result in dystopia. The utopian hopes that Carhullan initially injected into Sister eventually gives away to corruption and violence. Social exclusion—i.e. women in Rith and men in Carhullan—is the symptom, not the problem. The problem is humanity’s intrinsic need for guidance, and, thus, when “they say jump, you say how high” (Rage Against the Machine). In the quote that introduces this section, Foucault captures the essence of The Carhullan Army and the power structures within it. The totalitarian structures can be escaped, but we can never escape the fact that we are the building blocks upon which it is built.
Works Cited


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