Degree Project

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Ruling Bodies in Feminist Speculative Fiction

Body Politics and Reproductive Rights in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Carhullan Army*

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Introduction

There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women’s bodies by men. The woman’s body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected. (Rich 54)

There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it. (Atwood 34)

Utopian fiction is a genre concerned with alternative versions and vision of the world as we know it. The term includes work on utopia and dystopia, in which utopia describes an idealistic or dream world and dystopia deals with the so-called nightmare scenario. Utopian fiction can be a way of commenting one’s contemporary society and expressing concerns for humanity and politics (Tolan 19). Fiction that deals with dystopian scenarios can function as a warning example of what could happen to human kind if certain political agendas gain power.

Reproduction is a relevant theme in utopian literature as reproduction is a prerequisite for the survival of humanity and thus necessary when speculating of alternative or future scenarios and challenges of human kind in those futures. The topic of human reproduction has inspired writers of utopian fiction since the beginning of the twentieth century, with one of the earliest examples being Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Herland published in 1915. Gilman’s novel describes a utopian society free of men, a matriarchy, where women have mastered reproduction without male involvement. Some of the most famous novels with male protagonists in this genre, such as George Orwell’s 1984 (1949) and
Aldous Huxley’s *A Brave New World* (1932), focus heavily on how a totalitarian state controls the mind as the ultimate oppression, whilst the dystopia of female protagonists includes an emphasis on the control of the female body, as well as the politics that are used to control the female body, as a theme. Novels like Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937) and Kate Wilhelm's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* (1974) portrayed a society where women were viewed as commodities, valued only for their ability to reproduce. Valentina Adami claims in her article “Women’s Reproductive Rights: A literary perspective” that utopian literature “can enlighten contemporary debates on reproductive rights issues that we are facing today and contribute to the development of a universal ethics of human rights that take in the specificity of women’s rights” (Adami 101). She further categorizes the above-mentioned novels as “feminist speculative fiction”, defined as “…’what-if’-type of stories written by female writers and with a focus on feminist issues.” (Adami 102). This is a categorization this thesis will use.

Tracing the history of utopian fiction, one can see that the central themes change according to the challenges of the times in which they were written, and this is a pattern that the novels that deal with reproduction follow. In the wake of the baby boom and the rapidly increasing population due to medical and technical advances in the nineteen fifties and sixties, the theme of overpopulation resulting in reproductive control was seen in Anthony Burgess *The Wanting Seed* (1962). However, in the eighties, when environmental issues became pressing, as well as the threat of nuclear war and nuclear radiation as well as a drastic decline in birth rates, the body politics of speculative fiction took a different perspective. This can be seen in several novels within feminist speculative fiction which deal with the theme of infertility and its consequences such as Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and P.D James *The Children of Men* (1992). In the past fifteen years, however, the theme of eugenic control through controlled reproduction has once again emerged in
speculative fiction as seen in Hugh Howey’s *Silo-series* (2013) and Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (2007). In these novels contraception is forced on every woman of fertile age and a lottery decides who has the right to try and conceive as a way of controlling the population as there is not enough food, resources or space for an expanding population. These examples show that when the worst-case scenario shifts in the dystopia of the literary world, so does the body politics and the different views of reproductive rights in the text.

Valentina Adami’s definition of feminist speculative fiction includes the focus on feminist issues which then connects the theme of reproduction to the narrative representation of body politics that controls women’s reproductive rights in the texts. The change in the central themes and narrative representation of body politics in these novels can then also be analysed by examining the key issues of feminism of the time each novel was written and thus trace the development of feminism. Reproduction is closely related to motherhood, because the process of reproduction, as we know it, demands a woman to give birth and thus becoming a mother. The view on motherhood has changed over time within feminism as the movement has evolved. However, very little has been written on how the theme of reproduction in speculative fiction relates to contemporary views of motherhood within feminism.

Body politics is a term used for regulations and discussions regarding the body, and body politics entails the policies used to control the body and the question of the individual’s agency as well as the social control of the human body. Body politics are thus of great importance in relation to reproduction, as body politics entails the different ways and techniques that reproduction is being controlled in populations. The theorist Michel Foucault is one of the most influential voices within the area of body politics. He argues that sex and sexuality have become politicized as societies have started to control the behaviour and life of individuals and populations through the exercise of “biopower”, which he defines as “an
explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault, History of Sexuality 140). Any type of action from a ruling entity with the aim to protect the life of the population or even the species is an exercise of biopower. Body politics includes more than policies and generally accepted perceptions regarding reproduction, but this thesis will largely focus on the body politics of reproduction. Valentina Adami argues that the development of body politics in the twentieth century is mirrored in the literary world, especially within feminist speculative fiction.

One of the most studied novels in the genre of feminist speculative fiction is Atwood’s dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is concerned with the issue of reproductive rights through the exercise of oppressive body politics. In the novel the fertility rates have dropped due to environmental destruction, toxicity and radiation, and the chance of having a healthy baby is one in four. As people start to despair, many turn to religion and eventually a totalitarian theocratic regime seizes power. The regime revokes women’s rights, all forms of contraceptives become strictly forbidden and women who are fertile are used as breeders by high class families, in the name of preserving the population and saving human kind. The novel traces protagonist Offred’s life as a breeder and portrays vividly the effect the oppression has on the individual.

A recent and highly influential reading of the novel within feminist theory argues that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not only a critique against the hidden patriarchal oppression present in contemporary society, but also a criticism towards the second wave feminists of the 1970s, which can be seen in Fiona Tolan’s analysis “Feminist Utopias and Questions of Liberty”**: “By juxtaposing flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism with current descriptions of Gilead’s totalitarianism, each informs the other so that *The Handmaid’s Tale* depicts a dystopian society that has unconsciously and paradoxically met certain feminist demands” (Tolan 19). Tolan argues that Atwood examines and critiques feminism in a similar
way that Orwell examined and critiqued communism in *1984*. Although *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been interpreted as a feminist novel that argues for women’s right and shows the horrible consequences of a society where women are mere vessels for reproduction, Tolan argues that Atwood’s critique is pointed towards radical feminists of the second wave as well as the conservative political arguments of the early eighties. Atwood does this by cleverly making up society that not only fulfils the traditional values of right wing conservatives but also meets the demands of radical feminists active in the years before the publication of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The society of Gilead can be interpreted as an extreme version of conservative politics, with its religious elements, the return to strict gender-based roles, the removal of women from the work-force and the removal of any type of contraceptive. Gilead can also be interpreted as a society that meets certain feminist demands, such as the prohibition of pornography, the separation of the sexes and the focus on keeping women safe over the argument of individual freedom. Tolan’s interpretation is that Atwood wanted to show how oppression against women does not always come from men, but also from other women. The one thing the oppressors have in common is forcing their particular view on to others.

In Heather Latimer’s article “Popular culture and reproductive politics - Juno, Knocked Up and the enduring legacy of The Handmaid's Tale” the novel is analysed regarding the body politics and its stand on the abortion debate in America, as well as contextualized with the political background of the time it was written. Latimer writes

The backlash against women’s reproductive rights that gained momentum in the US and Canada in the early 1980s, spurred by the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan and following the widespread growth of the ‘pro-life’ movement in the late 1970s. This backlash took many forms and produced many anti-feminist messages, but one of its primary targets was abortion rights. As Mary Poovey
(1992) explains, the reason there was such a backlash against abortion in the early 1980s was that Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court decision guaranteeing the right to abortion in the US, had essentially made the abortion question about the competing rights of the woman and the foetus (Latimer 215). Latimer discusses how *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been interpreted as a pro-choice argument at the time, but current popular cultural phenomena, such as movies *Juno* and *Knocked-up* seem to avoid such a controversial standpoint and can be interpreted as pro-life. Both films centre around women who have fallen pregnant and decide to go through with the pregnancy despite unaccommodating circumstances. Although abortion is not explicitly pointed out as the wrong choice in these films, the narrative points the viewer in that direction through the happy endings of both films.

The release of the television adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 2017 sparked debates whether Atwood’s vision of a totalitarian theocratic state emerging in America could be a believable scenario and added fire to the question of the reproductive rights of women in America and the world, as Atwood’s description of society leading up to the oppressive regime, arguably shows similarities to trends within contemporary society. Several states have, for example, closed abortion clinics and birth control subsidization has been revoked due the right to claim religious reason for removing it from health care insurance coverage. These changes have happened since the victory of conservative presidential candidate Donald Trump and the conservative majority in American congress according to the article “How women’s reproductive rights stalled under Trump” from online newsmagazine Vox (Belluz). Latimer also argues that the conservative politics of the eighties are echoed in today’s political debates in America, as the question of foetal personhood versus the personhood of the woman is still vivid and strictly divided into the pro-life versus pro-choice movement. At the core of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, there is the question of the
competing rights of the woman and the foetus and Atwood stretches the argument of the pro-life movement the very furthest to show what devastating consequences this could have on the human rights of the individual woman.

A more recent novel within the genre of Feminist Speculative Fiction, which echoes Atwood’s in some respects, is Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (published as *Daughters of the North* in North America) from 2007. This novel is concerned with the female experience of totalitarian control and emphasises the question of reproductive rights. *The Carhullan Army* is set in the present time, where the UK has been subject to an environmental crisis, with floods, food shortage and an eventual financial collapse. This leads to the introduction of martial law which, just as in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is never lifted. A totalitarian regime called the Authority seizes power and all citizens are registered in a census and placed in urban areas, given work in factories and placed in housing, without the ability to choose for themselves. In the name of population control, the Authority fits a contraceptive coil on all women over the age of 14 and decides by a televised lottery who has the right to reproduce and can have the coil taken out. The novel follows an unnamed protagonist who chooses to leave the oppressive state and join a commune of un-official women, situated in a remote area called Carhullan. Hall is not recognised as an established and studied writer in the same way as Atwood, but her novel has been studied from an Ecocritical perspective (Lilley) in which it is argued that the relationship between pastoral and degraded landscape corresponds with the contemporary social and political landscapes. When it comes to an analysis of the novel in regard to body politics, Valentina Adami claims that *The Carhullan Army* is “possibly the most notable twenty first century work of feminist speculative fiction dealing with reproductive rights, and in particular with the treatment of women in population control policies” (Adami 121) as Hall presents the results of extreme population control through antinatalist policies and what effect those policies have on the individual woman. As
Hall’s novel is not as studied, but yet highly concerned with the topic of body politics, reproductive rights and motherhood, it is valuable to compare these two novels regarding those topics.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* investigates the results of body politics that controls reproductive rights in different ways. The oppressive body politics in these two novels shows the consequences of losing the power over one’s reproductive rights and how it can lead to an infringement of fundamental human rights and loss of autonomy for the female population. This thesis will argue that body politics which erases female reproductive rights results in a loss of human rights for women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Carhullan Army*. The analysis will also show how the different narrative representations of reproductive control can represent different views of motherhood within feminism.

The analysis will examine the different displays of body politics in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* with a feminist approach and by applying Foucault’s theory of power. The sections titled “Reproductive Rights as Human Rights” and “Body Politics and Feminism” will provide the theoretical framework for the analysis of the texts. The section titled “To Be Human” will analyse how the women’s human rights are lost as the reproductive rights are revoked, the section titled “To Seize Power” will analyse how power is being exercised over women in these dystopian societies and the final section of the analysis is titled “To Mother” and will show how different views of motherhood is mirrored in the different narrative representation of reproductive control.

**Reproductive Rights as Human Rights**
In the article “Historical development of the global political agenda around sexual and reproductive health and rights: A literature review”, Reproductive rights are defined in the following way:

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), which is identified by Amnesty International as an important human rights issue [1–4] not only comprises pregnancy/antenatal, childbirth and post delivery/natal but also refers to: “A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system. It implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capability to reproduce, and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so”. [5] (Hadi 64)

Reproductive rights entail the ability to choose if or when one wishes to start a family without interference from authorities and is a key freedom in societies that are considered democratic and non-repressive. During the United Nations Decade for Women 1975-1985 reproductive rights were established as human rights through the legally binding treaty “Women’s Convention” as this treaty explicitly stated that women shall have the right “to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights” (Adami 106). Reproductive rights cannot be exercised without accessing basic human rights, and basic human rights cannot be exercised without accessing reproductive rights. Adami explains this relationship in the following way:

women’s human rights cannot be realized without promoting their reproductive rights, reproductive rights cannot be achieved if basic human rights are not guaranteed to women. In fact, reproductive rights are essential to realizing most other human rights, as they are closely interconnected with political, economic
and social rights: in particular, women’s freedom, health, security, privacy and autonomy cannot be protected if women cannot make decisions regarding their own bodies and reproductive capacities. (Adami 102)

Manizha Hadi further underlines the relationship between reproductive rights as human rights: “Parallel to the debates and discourse around Sexual and Reproductive Health, the International Human Rights Organisation acknowledged health as universal human rights in their convention and wanted SRHRs to be incorporated into the global political agenda” (Hadi 66). Despite the reciprocal relationship between human rights and reproductive rights, Adami argues that “women’s reproductive rights continue to be highly contested concepts and they are in no means guaranteed all over the world” (Adami 103). Hadi presents similar conclusions “policy-makers and funders formerly considered general health issues but did not recognize the universal significance of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights” (Hadi 65). Reproductive rights are seen as marginal interests within the discussions concerning human rights discussions due to “tradition, prejudice, social, economic and political interests” (Adami 104) and because many of these issues have been controlled by authorities and essentially by men. In the article “Women’s Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Revision of Human Rights” Charlotte Bunch writes “the physical territory of this political struggle over what constitutes women’s human rights is women’s bodies. The importance of control over women can be seen in the intensity of resistance to laws and social changes that put control of women’s bodies in women’s hands” (Bunch 491).

**Body Politics and Feminism**

The twentieth century was a decade of politicising the private and the birth of the term “sexual politics” (Tedebrand 9). This resulted in many positive aspects in terms of improved
maternal health, access to contraceptives, improved infant and child health and more. However, as several countries introduced public programmes for family planning and eugenic control in the interwar period and after, the power over the female body and the reproductive rights of the individual woman ended up in the hands of the state. One clear example of this is the extreme Chinese ‘one-child policy’ where the Chinese government promoted one child per family as a way of keeping the population growth under control (O'Reilly 46). To enforce the policy heavy fines were given to those who had more than one child, birth control was distributed freely and there were extensive propaganda campaigns.

In the introduction of this thesis, body politics is defined as a term used for regulations and discussions regarding the body, and body politics entails the policies used to control the body and the question of the individual’s agency as well as the social control of the human body. Feminists and Women’s rights movements have been, and are still, concerned with reproductive rights and issues from maternity care and the right to education, as well as the right to contraception and safe abortions, as they are per say issues that are exclusive to the female population. Thus, the body politics that regulate the reproductive rights are highly relevant. Feminist theorists also add the perspective of how patriarchal structures contribute to the politics of the body (Phipps 8). Susan Bordo explains the relationship between feminism and body politics in the following way:

feminism imagined the human body as itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped and marked by practices and containment and control- from foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering, to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilisation, unwanted pregnancy and (in the case of the Afro-American slave woman) explicit commodification. (Bordo 189)
The struggle for autonomy and fundamental human rights has historically, and is still, taking place in discourses where the female body is the battleground, thus the politics of the female body are imperative for feminism as a movement. Quintessentially, feminists fight to place the power over the female body in the hands of the female who inhabits that body, instead of in the hands of governing entities, but the methods of reaching that goal has changed over time as feminism evolved.

One way of viewing the history of feminism is through the wave-concept. (Sørensen 1) First wave feminists fought for emancipation and the right to vote, own property, to study and divorce and ended with female emancipation. The second wave of feminism starts with the publication of The Second Sex and Beauvoir’s idea of breaking free from biological and deterministic roles was central for the movement. The movement focused on the social rights of women and contended that women should be able to participate in all parts of society and to see themselves as more than wives and mothers (Bordo 188). Some second wave radical feminists deemed that reproductive freedom entailed the rejection of maternity, as motherhood was regarded as limiting a woman’s ability to develop fully and participate in society. In the late eighties the third wave of feminism emerged (Griffin). Third wave feminism has an increased emphasis on the individual and a rejection of a collective identity as well as increased attention on the question of personal choice and is highly influenced by postmodernist ideas.

**To Be Human**

The changes in respective society of The Handmaid’s Tale and The Carhullan Army and the reality of the revoked reproductive rights, bring both protagonists to express the feeling of
being non-human. In The Handmaid’s Tale the protagonist Offred describes her reality at the Commander’s house as being one of a trapped animal: “I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig” (Atwood 79) and uses the analogy of being a dog, upon the realisation that the last Handmaid of the house had killed herself: “If a dog dies, get another” (Atwood 197). In The Carhullan Army Sister’s feelings are equated with being sheep-like as the contraceptive coil has been forced upon and inside her, like she is a farm animal with no autonomy or free choice: “All 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). Being one in the herd also means not being an individual. This is a way of expressing a loss of human rights as a direct consequence of the loss of one’s reproductive rights.

In The Carhullan Army Sister has experienced the loss of basic human rights in several ways. She has been placed in housing, thus her free choice has been taken away. Her right to health care and her control over her reproductive rights have been revoked as the doctor inserted the coil without her consent. Sister tells the other women at the farm about her experiences

I described the terrace quarters, the deprivation, the sickness, the Authority abuses. I told them what had happened to my marriage with Andrew. And then, without knowing I would, I described my own humiliation, at the hands of the doctor, and the monitors in the back of the cruiser. (Hall 119)

To emphasise her experience of oppression, she shows the listening audience the coil and passes it around. The body politics and the exercise of biopower has the effect that the protagonists envision themselves as animals, thus without human value and without human rights. The experience of being forced into housing or jobs, of losing the right to vote or own property is not what evokes the feeling of utter oppression for the protagonists. It is in both
cases the experience of losing control over one’s right to decide, specifically in the case over one’s reproductive rights that leaves Offred and Sister feeling dehumanized.

In *The Carhullan Army* the choice of biological motherhood has been eradicated as the Authority has forced a contraceptive coil on every fertile woman. The body politics of the novel are thus withholding the ability to choose motherhood as a state-regulated lottery decides who will be able to have the coil taken out and try to conceive a child and the individual has no decisive power over such a personal choice. The state owns the female body, in a sense, as the states has agency over it. Protagonist Sister looks back on the fights with her husband over the subject and the husband exclaims “Fucking hell, this country is in bits and you are obsessing over your maternal rights! Where are your priorities?” (Hall 33). His view is that her rights are unimportant and not a pressing issue and aligns with the view that reproductive rights are considered marginal issues, as Adami presents in” Women’s Reproductive Rights: A literary perspective”

assimilating women into existing norms and practise would support what are inherently male values and ultimately reinforce the invisibility of women. Therefore, the human rights community must move beyond male-defined norms and reframe human rights in order to include, recognize and support women’s peculiar experiences and needs. (Adami 105)

Human rights defined by male-norms reinforce the invisibility of women and one example of this is that husband Andrew had defined what entailed human rights and what was acceptable to complain about, and Sister had to justify her discomfort, her feelings and her experiences. When Sister can have her contraceptive device taken out by the farm doctor Sister expresses: “I did not have to explain myself to her or inch in to a difficult topic. I did not have to justify my discomfort, as I had to Andrew” (Hall 90). The regulator that has been forced upon the protagonist is a constant reminder that there is another entity that controls her, and she feels it
has robbed her of her human value. The analysis of these examples from the two novels shows how the protagonists experience loss of autonomy and human value and how body politics which revokes reproductive rights also revokes human rights.

**To Seize Power**

*The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* explore the modalities of biopower through placing the narrative in an alternative world where the techniques of biopower can be pushed to the extreme and examined in terms of results for the individual, as well as understand how the power and control is exercised. Foucault argues that a process called normalisation, as well as disciplinary and sovereign power, is used to exercise biopower (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 106). Normalisation entails the construction of an idealized norm and then enforcing social control through tactics of rewarding individuals for conforming to the norms or punishing individuals for not conforming to said ideal norms. Sovereign power means having ultimate control over the life of others. In totalitarian states this means that the sovereign power can decide who lives or dies, but in democracies this power is exercised through laws. Disciplinary power entails self-regulation to fit in to norms and gain acceptance in society and relies heavily on surveillance of others and of one self. Foucault explains: “Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (Foucault, * Discipline* 187). In a democratic setting an example of biopower can be promoting healthy eating. The government might use sovereign power to legislate against selling supersized sodas, whilst the disciplinary powers suggests healthy eating equates a happy and successful life and portrays unhealthy eating as shameful. The normalisation process means that the idea
of “healthy = good” has become the generally accepted truth and that this idea is promoted amongst individuals as well as by power structures.

In The Handmaid’s Tale the women of Gilead experience the type of power which Foucault defines as sovereign, where the ruling entity literally decides if they get to live. The control is also exercised through disciplinary power, as the societal discourse and the normalisation process of the value system in Gilead imply that power over the female population is internalised and self-regulating. An example of these powers can be seen when protagonist Offred is having a bath and reflecting on her own nakedness and body:

My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.” (Atwood 72)

This quote shows how the protagonist’s self-image is being affected by the normalisation process in place in Gilead as Offred has endorsed the Republic’s view of her body as “shameful and immodest” as well as accepted that her body decides her value as a human being. Foucault’s idea of disciplinary power and the normalisation process are evident, as the views she presents are not her own, yet she has internalised them. Offred remembers how she used to look at herself “I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will” (Atwood 83), which shows that her self-image has changed. In The Carhullan Army the female protagonist is similarly affected by the intrusive insertion of the contraceptive coil enforced by the Authority: “Since the regulator had been fitted I’d felt a sense of minor but constant embarrassment about myself, debilitation almost, as if the thing was an ugly birthmark.”
(Hall 90). The loss of control over her reproduction and the bodily intrusion has made her self-conscious and made her view herself as weaker. A birthmark is something one is born with and is not something one can control. When sister considers her contraceptive coil an ugly birthmark, it emphasises how it is beyond her control and the loss of power. Both protagonists are victims of the normalisation process where the values of the totalitarian regimes have been internalised and power exercised over them is causing harm to their image of themselves as autonomous individuals.

In the normalisation process individuals are self-regulating agents as they are trying to conform to scientific and social discourses that work as a confirmation of one’s own identity. This self-regulating can be seen in The Handmaid’s Tale where Offred states: “Waste not want not. I am not being wasted, why do I want?” (Atwood 17). Offred has been taught this saying in the training facility for handmaids as part of the indoctrination of Gilead’s values and morals into the handmaids. As she is contemplating the meaning of it, she is thus becoming a self-regulating agent when she questions why she wants. Offred is accepting the idea that she is not “wasted” as she is a Handmaid with the purpose of reproducing and thus her body’s function is used. However, Offred “wants” something else, something that she should not as she is on the path to fulfilment in her role as breeder. Even though Offred’s specific want is not spelled out, the internalisation that wanting is wrong has succeeded, as she questions this wants and accepts the ruling powers logic of biological destiny and purpose.

To further investigate the power structures and how the body politics affects the protagonist, one must look at the interpersonal relationships in the two texts. Foucault explains that between different entities there is a power structure:

Between every point of a social body, between a man and a woman, between the members of a family, between a master and his pupil, between everyone
who knows and everyone who does not, there exist relations of power which are
not purely and simply a projection of the sovereign's great power over the
individual; they are rather the concrete, changing soil in which the sovereign's
power is grounded, the conditions which make it possible for it to function.
(Foucault, Power/Knowledge 187)

Both protagonists experience that there is a power shift between them and their spouses and
that the oppressive treatment is not only enforced by the sovereign power. Their husbands’
compliance in the enforcement of the rules, is a prerequisite for each regime to continue to
exercise their power. An example of this is when both protagonists have been through
experiences which are an infringement on their human rights, they turn to their husbands for
support but find none. Instead they come to the realisation that the husbands do not mind, and
more than that, they seem aroused by the thought of what has been done to their wives. In
*The Carhullan Army* Sister comes home distraught and upset after having her contraceptive
coil forced on her. Her husband Andrew asks if she is ok, and then if he can see it. As he
inspects her privates he starts initiating sex “I wanted to ask him to stop, it had been too
traumatic, and there was still some blood, but neither one of us had ever said no to the other”
(Hall 29). After they have made love, against her will, Andrew is in a great mood: “For the
rest of the night he was attentive, treating me with kindness and he seemed happier than he
had been in months.” (Hall 30). Despite it being the day his wife has gone through a
traumatic and oppressive procedure, forced upon her by a ruling entity, Andrew does not let it
affect him, on the contrary – it seems to please him and puts him in a position of power in
their relationship. Offred has a similar experience in *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “That night after
I’d lost my job, Luke wanted to make love. Why didn’t I want to? Desperation alone should
have driven me. But still I felt numbed” (Atwood 191). Offred speculates further on her
husband’s view of the situation “He doesn’t mind this, I thought. He doesn’t mind it at all.
Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other’s any more. Instead I am his” (Atwood 192). Offred experiences her husband’s reaction to her loss of human rights with the realisation that it pleases him that she is his. These examples show that the oppressive body politics are not only forced from a ruling authority, but through disciplinary power and normalisation processes.

**To Mother**

The body politics of the dystopian societies in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Carhullan Army* can be viewed as representing two different views of motherhood within feminism and the body politics of these novels thus epitomises two different worst-case scenarios. As mentioned in the introduction, second wave feminists wanted to break free from biological and deterministic roles and thus advocates the right to reject motherhood and third wave feminists considers the agency of the individual and the freedom as essential and thus advocates the right to a choice. Both novels examine what happens when the power of reproduction ends up in the hands of an oppressive Other, but with two different postulations; *The Handmaid’s Tale* focuses on what happens when women are forced to reproduce, and *The Carhullan Army* focuses on what happens when women are withheld the possibility to reproduce.

The rejection of maternity and the idea that women are being enslaved by their biology and maternity was something that was argued by many radical second wave feminists of the seventies. This idea was first presented in Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* where she argues that “the whole organism of the female is adapted to and determined by the servitude of maternity, while the sexual initiative is the prerogative of the male” (Beauvoir 56). With these ideas within feminism as the political backdrop, Atwood created a dystopia in
The Handmaid’s Tale which is an extreme example of being forced to reproduce and forced biological maternity, or in other words; the nightmare scenario for second wave feminists. In The Handmaid’s Tale the women’s right to live is defined by their fertility as seen when Offred thinks to herself “Give me children, or else I die. There's more than one meaning to it." (Atwood 71). Offred knows that unless she becomes pregnant she will be sent to the Colonies and meet a certain death. The state has decided that women have a biological destiny, and unless it is realised their human value is non-existent. Hence, the servitude of maternity is at the centre of the body politics in the novel. Although it is hard to speculate about Atwood’s standpoint regarding second-wave feminism and the fight for being free to reject motherhood, her dystopia elaborates on how a world without the freedom to reject motherhood would look like and shows that when the reproductive rights are revoked – so are the human rights.

In the decades following the publication of The Handmaid’s Tale the third wave of feminism emerged (Griffin). Susan Bordo points to how choice is of greatest importance for third wave feminists, and any interference with choice hence substitutes a” totalitarian interference” (Bordo 188). The third wave of feminism is highly influenced by postmodern ideas of individuality and rejection of metanarratives, or a rejection or grand theories which explains and gives meaning to the world. Alison Phipps develops the relationship between postmodernism and feminism:

the marriage between postmodernism and feminism has been a particularly fruitful one, allowing the movement both to challenge claims to ‘objectivity’ in mainstream social science, research and policy focused on only men’s issues and needs and to examine its own limitations in terms of the use of fixed, universalist identity categories such as ‘woman’ and claims on this basis to speak for all women. (Phipps 17)
Some third wave feminists regard any decision a woman makes, in her exercise of free will, as an empowering act, even if that choice promotes patriarchal customs or entails choosing traditional female roles which the second wave feminists tried to break free from (Phipps 11). With these ideas as the political backdrop, Hall imagines her dystopian world as an extreme example of the removal of choice. In *The Carhullan Army* the choice of maternity is controlled by a ruling authority and the body politics is focused on removing choice and individual agency. This can be seen when protagonist Sister is being questioned why she did not fight back as she had the contraceptive coil fitted and Sister answers: “What choice did I have?” I finally managed to say. ‘It’s the law. I was surrounded by the system and… ‘I stumbled over my words,’ …and they have these places where those who refuse are sent. I’ve heard about them’ (Hall 117). Hall focus is on how the removal of choice and individual agency is experienced as equally oppressive as being forced into biological motherhood and thus being valued solely for one’s reproductive capabilities, as seen in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Both writers use the contemporary debates surrounding reproductive rights and body politics and creates a dystopian world based on what feminists of their respective time would consider the nightmare scenario, to examine and analyse what effects policies stretched to the extreme would have on the individual woman and how the reproductive rights are closely related to human rights.

To connect the views of motherhood within the second and third wave of feminism to previous research on the topic, one can examine the views presented in Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* published in 1976. This is one of the most influential works on motherhood within feminism in which she examines the history of motherhood from a feminist perspective. In this study Rich argues that the patriarchal definition of motherhood is oppressive, but the concept of mothering without patriarchal elements holds untapped potential for empowerment "Between the two meanings
of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (Rich 25). Andrea O’Reilly develops this further in *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s of Woman Born*, where she exemplifies that the views of maternity did have two competing discourses; the negative discourse where motherhood is seen as patriarchal oppression and the positive discourse where mothering holds the potential to empowerment as long as the patriarchal elements are eliminated. (O’Reilly 12). The oppressive body politics of the society of Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an example of the negative discourse of motherhood as it is used as a mean of oppression rather than something empowering for the individual woman. Atwood illustrates the oppressive nature of being valued solely for one’s ability to breed:

We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favours are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no toeholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (Atwood 146)

Being a “two-legged womb” is what the radical feminists of the second wave argued that women were, in the eyes of society and due to patriarchy. Both Rich and de Beauvoir claim that the biology of the female body, the ability to reproduce and carry children, is used to justify and legitimise women as second-class citizens without access to the real power of society, and this is something Atwood illustrates in *The Handmaid’s Tale* by explicitly making women second-class citizens in Gilead, and this refusal of power is justified by ruling powers with the argument that women are for breeding.
Rich argues that motherhood restricts a woman; “In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them” (Rich 25). Atwood shows, through her protagonist Offred, the experience of being incarcerated in her own body and being valued solely for one’s functionality: “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own” (Atwood 83). This quote does not only enlighten the reader how Offred’s bodily function is what decides her value, but also how she has internalised the view of herself as a breeder and thus regards herself as a failure. Atwood underlines the focus on biological functions as the base for human value, when naming the women without viable ovaries “Unwomen” in the novel, to further enforce how women are solely valued for their reproductive capabilities. One is not a woman without the biological function. However, a man is still a man, regardless of his reproductive abilities: “There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law” (Atwood 70).

*The Carhullan Army* shows instead how withholding the positive discourse of mothering can be experienced as equally oppressive as being forced into patriarchal motherhood as is the case in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. When Sister and her husband Andrew understand the impending changes of their freedom they protest by making love and not using the issued contraceptives, fully aware that there would be consequences if they conceived and Sister says “Maybe it was the only protest left for us” (Hall 26). Sister describes how the private protest of not using contraceptives is the only sense of agency they have left as the Authority seizes power and describes how the protagonist is trying to avoid being fitted with the coil until the monitors forcefully escort her to the Doctor’s appointment.

Hall does not argue, however, that motherhood is innately female or essential to the experience of womanhood, which can sometime be the case when arguing for the positive
discourse of mothering. Protagonist Sister does not seem to be very concerned with the concept of motherhood at all: “Working in the kitchen had not been as natural to me, and when I had helped Helen with Stella I had been slightly uncomfortable, as if my hands were the wrong shape to hold the baby” (Hall 131). Sister does not express a great interest in mothering, even though the inability to choose motherhood is precisely what drives Sister to leave the oppressive Authority. As she walks out of the city she thinks “I was no longer complicit in a wrecked and regulated existence. I was not its sterile subject” (Hall 41), which shows how she focus on being part of the Authority as something she chooses to take part in, a complicit, and now is choosing to leave. This represents the third-wave feminists focus on individual choice and agency. Alison Phipps explains this in the following way: “the context in which everyone is responsible for constituting themselves as an individual and in which failure is one’s own fault rather than the result of social inequality and disadvantage” (Phipps 13). Although Sister does not explicitly long for a child or sees motherhood as something innately natural to her as woman, the fact that she has no control over the choice is what ultimately pushes her to join the rebels at Carhullan farm.

**Conclusion**

*The Carhullan Army* echoes many important elements of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, such as unnamed female protagonists, the oppressive use of reproductive control, the question of the right to mother a child, the emerging of a totalitarian state and the focus on relationships between women. Both take place in a near future or in a time parallel to the present and both stories are told with a retrospective narrative voice and end with a present narrative voice. However, they are written 25 years apart with different waves of feminism as their
background and thus with different approaches to body politics, reproductive rights and motherhood, as well as attitudes towards individual freedom. In both worlds the body politics which revokes women’s reproductive rights are explained to be for the good of humanity and that women should accept being oppressed for the greater good; either to limit the population or to sustain it, thus either antinatalist or pronatalist.

The second epigraph of this thesis states: “There is more than one kind of freedom. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it “(Atwood 34) and this quote can represent the different ways body politics is carried out in the two novels studied in this thesis and the different views of what freedom regarding reproduction entails. When imagining oppressive body politics, the authors of The Handmaid’s Tale and The Carhullan Army choose two different stand-points within reproductive rights and reverse them in their respective dystopias. Even though the novels depict the ruling of bodies in different ways, the central theme is still the survival of humanity in one way or another. Hence, the question of reproduction and motherhood become crucial. To survive as a race, we must procreate, and women must become mothers. Atwood focuses on what happens when the right to reject motherhood is taken away and Hall writes what happens when women are deprived of the right to choose motherhood. Both these novels examine the extremes of being forced into motherhood or having that choice taken away and their differences in the depiction of these reproductive rights can be interpreted as indicators of the issues present in respective time of writing. Atwood has in her novel shown the consequences of foetal rights weighing heavier than the rights of the woman carrying the foetus, as her novel was written in a time where this question was widely debated and the pro-life versus pro-choice movements emerged. Hall has in her novel focused on the consequences of loss of agency and choice for the individual
woman, as this is a central question for contemporary feminists when Hall’s novel was written.

The analysis of these two novels show that the lack of reproductive rights represents a loss of human rights for the protagonists, no matter how or why it is executed. Through analysing the exercise of biopower and the Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary power and sovereign power in the novels, one can see that the oppressive body politics of the two dystopian societies causes the female protagonists to experience loss of human value.

Adrienne Rich stated “There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women’s bodies by men. The woman’s body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected” (Rich 54) and these two novels exemplify how patriarchal control of women’s bodies is experienced and its consequences in terms of self-image, autonomy and sense of humanity. One reason why female writers are concerned with the issue of reproductive rights in speculative fiction is to embody and humanize the effects of policies and societal standards surrounding reproduction, according to Valentina Adami. Speculating about what consequences body politics might have on the autonomy, freedom and human rights for women, can help understanding the long-term effect of certain decisions, and these works of fiction can and have been used as warnings and powerful political allegories.

Works Cited


