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Escaping the Chaos: An Analysis of Joe Hill's *The Fireman* and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* from A Cult Mentality Perspective

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Kaostan Kaçış: Joe Hill'in *İtfaiyeci* ve Naomi Alderman'ın *Güç* Eserlerinin Tarikat Zihniyeti
Bağlamında İncelenmesi

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ÖZET

Kaostan Kaçış: Joe Hill'in *İtfaiyeci* ve Naomi Alderman'ın *Güç* Eserlerinin Tarikat Zihniyeti Bağlamında İncelenmesi

Bu tez, Naomi Alderman'ın *The Power* (2017) ve Joe Hill'in *The Fireman* (2016) eserlerini karşılaştırmalı analiz ederek tarikat zihniyetinin toplumdaki güç dinamiklerini nasıl şekillendirdiğini incelemektedir. Michel Foucault'nun iktidar kavramından yola çıkan tez, disipliner ve baskıcı güçlerin tarikat oluşumu, kolektif birlik ve toplumsal etki üzerindeki etkisini irdelemektedir. Bu tartışma, tezin bir tarikatın işleyiş kapasitesini ve toplumu etkileme gücünü belirlemede disipliner ve baskıcı gücün rolünü ele almasını sağlamaktadır. Bunu yaparken, tez alternatif toplumların hedeflerine ulaşmalarının disiplin, baskı ve denetim mekanizmalarının etkili bir şekilde uygulanmasına bağlı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda, *The Power* eserindeki Allie'nin tarikatı, *The Fireman* romanındaki Carol'ın liderinin ellerinde çöken tarikatının aksine, grup bütünlüğü ve toplumsal etki açısından başarılı bir örneği temsil etmektedir. Bu kurgusal tarikatlar aracılığıyla tez, etkili bir karşı güç oluşumunun kolektif bir inanç sistemi aşılacak için baskıcı ve disipliner güçlerin birleşimine ihtiyaç duyduğunu göstermektedir. Bu yaklaşım, salt sadakatin ötesine geçerek alternatif güç yapılarının gelişebileceği ve potansiyel olarak egemen yapılara meydan okuyabileceği alanlar yaratır. Bu bakımdan, Allie'nin dengeli yaklaşımı, düşmanca bir dünyayla baş etmede başarısız olan Carol'ın baskıcı tutumuna kıyasla daha etkili bir model sunmaktadır. Bunun sonucunda, Allie'nin iktidarı ele geçirmedeki başarısı, marjinalleştirilmiş takipçilerini din yoluyla güçlendirerek alışlagelmiş toplumsal düzene güçlü bir şekilde meydan okuyan bir karşı anlatıyı sunarken, Carol'ın dış güçlere karşı başarısız direnişi, yapılandırılmamış bir gücün hükümetin sistematik gücüne rakip olmada yetersiz kaldığını gözler önüne serer. Buradan hareketle tez, karşı güçlerin hayatta kalabilmesi ve toplumsal dinamikleri yeniden inşa edebilmesi için baskı ve disiplin arasında bir denge kurulması gerektiği sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tarikat Zihniyeti; Güç İlişkileri; Michel Foucault; *İtfaiyeci*; *Güç*

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how cult mentality shapes power dynamics in society through a comparative analysis of Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2017) and Joe Hill's *The Fireman* (2016). Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of power, it investigates the influence of disciplinary and repressive powers on cult formation, collective unity, and social effects. This discussion allows the thesis to address the role of disciplinary and repressive powers in determining a cult's capacity to operate and affect the public. In doing so, the thesis reveals that the achievement of alternative societies' goals relies on the effective execution of discipline, repression, and control mechanisms. In this sense, Allie's cult in *The Power* represents a successful example of group cohesion and societal influence, in contrast to Carol's cult in *The Fireman*, which crumbles at the hands of its own leader. These fictional cults help the thesis illustrate that establishing a profound counterpower necessitates a combination of repressive and disciplinary powers to instil a collective belief system. This approach extends beyond mere loyalty and fosters environments where alternative power structures can thrive and potentially challenge dominant ones. In this respect, Allie's balanced approach outweighs Carol's oppressive disposition, considering the latter's ineffectiveness in coping with a hostile world. Therefore, while Allie's success in rising to power illustrates a counter-narrative that strongly challenges the established order by empowering the marginalised through religion, Carol's unsuccessful resistance to external forces highlights how an unstructured power falls short in rivalling the government's systematic power. Accordingly, the thesis concludes that a balance has to be maintained between repression and discipline if counterpowers are to survive and reconstruct social dynamics.

Keywords: Cult Mentality; Power Dynamics; Michel Foucault; *The Fireman*; *The Power*

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INTRODUCTION

The myth of Echo and Narcissus, as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2010), stages a dynamic of dependency and self-absorption that continues to resonate in modern cultural and psychological discourse. Cursed to repeat only the words of others, Echo loses her voice—and eventually her sense of self—while Narcissus is consumed by his own reflection. This dual loss of identity, through either self-erasure or self-obsession, offers a metaphor for the relationship between cult leaders and their followers. Echo mirrors the devotee, speaking only in the voice of the leader, while Narcissus reflects the charismatic leader, enthralled by a manufactured ideal of power and purity. Together, they form a loop of projection, repetition, and ultimately, dissolution.

As depicted by Ovid, the myth of Echo and Narcissus highlights the tragic consequences of a curse inflicted upon a garrulous-natured nymph, Echo, by the goddess Juno. The curse strips Echo of her ability to initiate conversation, forcing her to repeat the words spoken by others. The story takes an emotional turn when she falls in love with Narcissus, a young man renowned for his outstanding beauty. Locked in a world of repetition, Echo reveals her love for Narcissus by reiterating his words and rushes to embrace him. Nevertheless, her love remains unrequited as Narcissus says, “Take your hands off! I’ll die before I let you have me” (Ovid, 2010: 77). He fails to requite her love because Narcissus is entirely absorbed in his own reflection in a puddle of water, leading him afloat in self-love. Upon hearing this, Echo withdraws into the woods and slowly “begins to waste away” (Ovid, 2010: 77). In this way, she metamorphoses into an undying reminder of a plea hanging in the air for anyone to hear, a symphony of silence, unspoken words, and yearning for an eternally unfulfilled love. She is always around, waiting for someone to give her a voice and revive her presence.

The story of Echo and Narcissus is a powerful literary illustration of the human condition of narcissism, from which the term itself is derived (Ornstein, 2012: 178), and the yielding urges of the lovelorn. On the one hand, the myth explores the complexities of love, longing, and the consequences of being lovesick through Echo's withering self. On the other, it focuses on humanity's vain, self-righteous nature as well as the aftermath of undue self-love, which can bring one's demise via Narcissus. Such thematic richness has led to diverse interpretations of the story over time. For this reason, during the fifteenth century, it was typically accepted as “a moral allegory,” which over time left its place to signify “a parable of creative autonomy, or, very differently, of homoerotic desire” (Barrow, 2017: 300). This interpretation also changes through time, ultimately developing the myth itself into an essential

concept in psychoanalytic theory in the early twentieth century, to illustrate ego formation in child development (Barrow, 2017: 300). Adding to these interpretations, this thesis uses the Echo-Narcissus myth as a conceptual step to analyse how cult mentality operates in two contemporary dystopian novels: Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2017) and Joe Hill's *The Fireman* (2016). Hence, it briefly delivers an alternative perspective where the dual examination of surrendering oneself to the presence of one's self (Narcissus) or others (Echo) showed in the story can, by analogy, mirror the very nature of the relationship between cult leaders and their followers. In other words, Echo's tale of losing her identity and turning into only a reflection of others, in conjunction with Narcissus' story of losing his entire existence to transform into a beautiful flower, can be seen as encapsulating the essence of cults and their adherents.

Simply put, the resemblance between the cult phenomenon and this myth lies in the eerie reverberation of unfulfilled love in Echo's voice, stuck in an endless loop, alluding to the instances of cult members who have lost their unique identities within the remnants of their leaders. Echo's relationship with Narcissus perfectly captures this since, as Ovid (2010: 76) puts it, "The more she followed him, the hotter she burned / From his proximity." This dynamic is characterised by Echo's quest to find self-completion in an ideally beautiful other together with Narcissus' desire to maintain a distance from his lovers, perceiving them as mere reflections of his own idealised self (Disalvo, 1980: 17). Only by assuming the role of the mirror does she find a place to bring her thoughts to the world, for it is only through Narcissus that Echo can find a place to exist. In this sense, the two have an intertwined relationship, with Echo repeating what Narcissus says in a manner that suggests admiration. She is akin to an extension of him, reminiscent of the fervent followers of cult leaders. Even if Echo attempts to advance her own agenda by echoing his utterances, as illustrated by her expression of desire to be with him by repeating "Have me" (Ovid, 2010: 77), she has to seek meaning and identity through Narcissus. Moreover, since he "falls in love with a bodiless fantasy / And takes for a body what is no more than a shadow" (Ovid, 2010: 78), Narcissus serves as a metaphor for self-absorption that can cause people to become blind to the true feelings of others. This way, his presence in the myth can be considered as a hint at the cult leaders who have become lost in the fictitious realm of their manufactured personas. Thus, at the story's end, a beautiful flower supersedes Narcissus' corporeal presence, echoing the cult leaders' eventual desertion of their own selves for the sake of the idealised persona they have constructed.

A cursory analysis like the above can give a rough idea about the phenomenon of cults, briefly bringing to light the complex interplay between the group and its members. By means

of a close examination of such a dynamic, this thesis analyses the factors that give rise to cults and the mechanisms that enable or hinder their projection onto broader society. To illustrate this, the study examines Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2017) and Joe Hill's *The Fireman* (2016). By initially analysing Alderman's novel despite its later publication compared to Hill's novel, an achronological approach is employed. This approach facilitates the practical demonstration of the argument by showcasing one success story and then presenting a case of failure in terms of achieving their goals. In other words, through a detailed analysis of how a cult can successfully infiltrate and subvert societal structures, it is claimed that cultivating extreme devotion through cult mentality alone cannot empower alternative power structures to gain authority unless they establish a profound counterpower by combining repressive and disciplinary powers. Thus, firstly, Alderman's novel is examined via a focus on the group established by Allie, who assumes the persona of the religious figure Eve, to show a successful example of a counterpower that infiltrates and subverts social norms. To provide a counterpoint, Hill's novel is employed to exemplify the failure of a similar cultic group to thrive in a society marked by distress, turmoil, and cruelty. The juxtaposition of these two narratives, as argued in this study, reveals that although social disorder can act as a catalyst for the emergence of cults whilst nurturing a cult mentality that coerces members to forego their individuality, a strategic balance of disciplinary and repressive powers needs to be employed for the group to either successfully integrate its belief system into society or maintain its own existence.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's conception of power—particularly his theories of discipline, repression, biopolitics, and the docile body—this study analyses how fictional cults reproduce, resist, or collapse under the pressure of social crisis, aiming to demonstrate how alternative power dynamics can flourish and potentially challenge dominant structures. The primary argument of this thesis is that cultic structures succeed or fail not merely through charisma or ideology, but through the effective management of disciplinary and repressive powers. That is to say, any attempt at a radical social transformation requires leadership that can exercise a Foucauldian regime of power, since loyalty alone, without any desire to act, cannot guarantee reaching one's goals. Hence, through a comparative analysis, it is argued that Allie's cult in *The Power* achieves sociopolitical transformation by integrating Foucault's dual modes of power—normalising discipline and controlling repression—while Carol's cult in *The Fireman* collapses due to its reliance on repressive force alone. This contrast exposes the critical role of strategic power application in cult survival and influence.

To explicate the dynamics present in the selected novels, the first chapter respectively concentrates on the cult phenomenon and Michel Foucault's concept of power. Firstly, the

chapter provides a definition of cult and the factors that predispose individuals to join such groups to explain the cult mentality as well as the impact of a cult on its followers. Within this framework, it draws upon prior studies dedicated to understanding cults to form a basis for comprehending how cults function and how they forge a cult mentality that enables them to exert influence over their members. Then, a generic profile of a cult leader is constructed based on these studies to help later the thesis detect the differences between the two leaders (Allie and Carol) featured in the selected novels. This is followed by a review of various methods cults employ to cultivate a cult mentality in order to develop a more precise understanding of the group's leader-follower dynamic. Such a review further highlights the intricate strategies utilised by cults to effectively exploit their followers without raising suspicion. The next subsection of the chapter introduces Foucauldian theory to offer a theoretical framework for discussing later the societal factors contributing to the emergence of cults and the power dynamics that impact the characters' mental states as well as their desire to belong to a group. This also helps the study to explain why Allie's group can flourish while Carol's falls apart, using concepts from the Foucauldian tradition. By doing these, the chapter aims to present a foundation for the intricate relationship between cults and society, which will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapters.

The second chapter focuses on analysing Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, aiming to demonstrate how Allie's cultic group attains absolute power. With this objective in mind, the chapter begins its analysis by examining how the novel's social atmosphere is characterised by unrest due to the discovery of skein. By underlining women's experiences of social inequality and conflict, the chapter's first subsection explains how Allie creates a group that takes advantage of social tensions surrounding women to become an agent of change. These insights reveal not only why these women chose to follow her but also the motivations behind Allie's decision to establish such a group. Moreover, this analysis showcases Allie's ability to form a foundation for her leadership, thereby displaying how a cult leader can gain credibility among potential followers. Subsequently, the second subsection examines the methods by which Allie's group cultivates a deep sense of cult mentality that gradually decreases individuality in favour of her position as a trustworthy leader. This is followed by the third subsection, where an analysis of how Allie's cultic group achieves public validation and influence is presented, ultimately giving rise to a new social order that subverts the dominant structures of power and social norms. Taken together, these sections draw attention to Allie's charismatic leadership and ability to gather women under a shared ideal, allowing her to create a sufficient force against the status quo by carefully balancing disciplinary and repressive powers.

The final chapter revolves around Joe Hill's *The Fireman* to discuss the reasons why Carol's cultic group struggles to achieve success as her leadership reveals the limits of domination without infrastructure. Divided into three subsections, this chapter initially examines what leads to the formation of a cultic group centred around a deadly spore (i.e. Dragonscale), which is responsible for significant destruction. As such, the first subsection explains how individuals perceive a lethal infection and why some reframe it as a means of survival as well as ambition. Moreover, this subsection also outlines how Carol ascends to a leadership position within her future cult, illustrating how groups can become cults. Building upon this, the subsequent subsection analyses how Carol's group fosters a sense of cult mentality that generates a collective identity at the expense of individuality. Here, Carol's group displays how individuals within a cult sacrifice their autonomy for safety by giving up their freedom to conform to the group's demands. This is followed by the final subpart, which counterpoints the previously analysed triumph story by revealing how cult dynamics can fail to thrive in a turbulent society. The subsection not only analyses the failure of Carol's group to achieve social acceptance but also discusses its inability to survive as a lasting group due to internal clashes and external opposition. All things considered, these sections depict a contrary case to Allie's group by pointing out the asymmetrical use of disciplinary and repressive powers that leads Carol's group to collapse.

The conclusion synthesises these findings in order to present a meaningful comparison and thereby give greater clarity to the argument laid out in this thesis. By comparing Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and Joe Hill's *The Fireman*, the chapter reiterates its main argument that societal conditions and leadership styles significantly influence cults' (i.e., alternative power dynamics) success or failure in propagating their belief systems to the general public and/or securing such groups' longevity. For this purpose, the study once more turns to cult studies and the power conception of Foucault to explain the similar qualities of both groups alongside their contrasting fortunes. Hence, it begins by noting the groups' parallel circumstances within their respective societies, where everyone perceives them as threatening and violent. The discussion then investigates how these groups display different forms of resistance to the dominant powers, following Foucault's notion of power. This demonstrates what makes Allie thrive in ensuring her group's longevity and accessing entire social structures, in contrast to Carol's fate. By reading *The Power* and *The Fireman* through the dual lenses of cult theory and Foucauldian power, the thesis reveals the fragile threshold between transformation and collapse in times of chaos. Thus, it concludes by restating the need for a balanced interplay of disciplinary and repressive powers to ensure success in achieving social

legitimacy or maintaining the group's very existence. This way, the thesis exhibits how counterpowers can effectively use discipline, repression, and control mechanisms to achieve their goals against the systematic power of the state within the framework of fictional cults.



CHAPTER ONE

THE ANATOMY OF ECHO: CULT MENTALITY AND THE DYNAMICS OF POWER

As a complex system, society displays a broad spectrum of colours, which, in combination, provide a rich tapestry of diverse shades. Of these hues, some radiate positivity, emphasising such values as unity, serenity, and joy. Meanwhile, others radiate negativity, denoting qualities such as chaos, conflict, and malice. Together, they demonstrate how these forces interact to shape social structures and dynamics. Adopting a nuanced stance, cults can offer an alternative yet reflective model of power, often mimicking the prevailing societal structures from which they emerge. Since cults arise within a fully developed society, they strategically exploit both the positive and negative forces at play. The Peoples Temple, for instance, successfully attracted numerous followers by promising to safeguard its members from the political climate of the time, taking advantage of the existing racist prejudices. Its legacy, however, is marked by the tragic mass suicide orchestrated by its leader, Jim Jones, creating a lasting impression of destructiveness in people's minds. Similarly, during the countercultural movements of the 1960s, the Manson Family arose following the shift from political activism and utopian idealism towards mysticism and extremist religious movements (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985: 517-518). The group progressed towards violent extremism, driven by Manson's charismatic leadership and exploiting the marginalised youth with a messianic doctrine characterised by animosity towards mainstream society. Hence, it can be regarded as a destructive cult, for its violent nature aligns with the conventional conception of what constitutes a cult. This is mostly not the case with Scientology, which has been subject to differing responses from across the globe. To elaborate, although some countries like Greece, Germany, and France reject its religious status for being dangerous, Scientology is formally recognised as a religion in several countries, including Australia, Italy, New Zealand, and the USA (Cowan and Bromley, 2015: 19-20). Evident in the juxtaposition of Peoples Temple, Manson Family, and Scientology is not only the fluid nature of cults but also the difficulty in grouping them under a single category. It is, therefore, imperative to know how cults interact with society, as this interaction can result in catastrophic and/or transformative outcomes.

Despite their apparent unconventionality owing to their unique customs, cults tend to replicate established power structures, occupying intricate roles within existing social dynamics. This suggests that cults utilise cues that require empathy and emotional intelligence rather than cunningly manipulating their members' minds. As with any relationship that

involves power dynamics rooted in discourse, social interactions, and other forms of interpersonal engagement, cults also follow a similar blueprint. Power in such relationships operates through discourse, institutions, and social practices instead of being solely monopolised by a single authority. Correspondingly, the previously mentioned cult examples demonstrate that these groups attract followers by taking advantage of the troubled times in which they emerge. They inspire individuals to align themselves with the group's objectives, whether to take their own lives or the lives of others. The question, then, is how cults become so influential. In what ways can such groups persuade people to follow seemingly destructive and violent paths? Finally, what drives individuals to comply with the demands of such groups?

In order to provide responses to the aforementioned questions, this chapter offers a theoretical foundation for the thesis. Firstly, it examines the concept of cults and the mechanisms that enable them to gain influence. It draws on previous cult studies, whose insights are used to shed light on the cult phenomenon to provide a comprehensive understanding of cults. This is done to establish a foundation for understanding how cults operate and form a cult mentality that empowers them to instil a sense of obedience in their members. Subsequent to this, it delves into Michel Foucault's conception of power. To this end, it elucidates Foucauldian power in the context of Foucault's oeuvre while incorporating commentaries from fellow scholars on his standpoint. This will serve as a theoretical framework for the forthcoming discussion on how societal factors contribute to the emergence of cults and how power dynamics influence the mental states of individuals and their inclination to seek group affiliation. Ultimately, the points discussed in this chapter will be utilised in the following sections of the thesis to scrutinise the selected novels, *The Power* and *The Fireman*, in relation to the power dynamics within cult-like groups that generate a cult mentality.

1.1. The Cult Phenomenon

During the twentieth century, incidents such as the Tate murders (1969) and the Jonestown massacre (1978) not only exposed the public to the threats posed by cults but also popularised the term itself. Although this popularity casts cults in a negative light, the concept has not always had a derogatory implication. In fact, the earliest accounts of cults trace back to spiritualism, where it had a rather innocent implication. The term itself originally meant religious worship to and adoration of a divine being, with roots in the French term *culte* and the Latin term *cultus* (Lifton, 2019: 83). By the seventeenth century, it began to denote worship or veneration towards specific figures or objects. At this point in history, early distinctions were made between cults centred on specific individuals or objects and widespread religions.

However, in the nineteenth century, the concept of reverence to a deity or saint came to encompass non-Christian religions, tribal beliefs, and revival movements such as Druidism (Newcombe, 2014: 568). This shift in definition led cults to acquire a more positive connotation in the United States, particularly in reference to newly formed or unorthodox religious groups (Montell, 2021: 27). Therefore, the American colonies were seen as a safe harbour where unorthodox believers could practice their faith without worrying about persecution because of its principle of religious freedom. In this sense, cults became another classification following religion and sect to define a church or religious group that was different or eccentric, such as the Oneida Community and the Harmony Society (Montell, 2021: 28). However, during the Fourth Great Awakening¹, the term's meaning changed once again. It took on a more negative, fear-inducing connotation for being associated with heretics and charlatans (Montell, 2021: 28). Consequently, the term has evolved through time to encompass a broader definition and is no longer limited to peripheral factions in major religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Instead, it has become a broader term for groups marked by a fervent devotion to a specific individual, item or philosophy, with members willing to commit themselves entirely to the leaders' cause (Zhang, 2023: 837).

A precise definition of a cult is impossible due to its constantly shifting reputation, focus, and meaning in people's perceptions. Hence, the word conjures many descriptions when it is brought up. At one extreme, it might evoke images of marginal religious groups whose practices pose a potential threat to society because the term has been used as "a 'social weapon'... against groups which are not viewed with favor" (Richardson, 1993: 352). On the other, cults might be correlated to stan culture, wherein a particular celebrity is the object of unwavering and fervent devotion (e.g. the Beatles' Beatlemania, Beyoncé's BeyHive, and Taylor Swift's Swifties). Interestingly, there is no legal definition of cults in France; instead, these groups are characterised by criteria (Rousselet et al., 2017: 27), perhaps owing to the term's multiple interpretations. Such criteria interpret cults as a group or an individual whose aim is to dominate followers by means of psychological manipulation and pressure. Similarly, if parallel elements of different definitions are taken into account, an overall description of cults can potentially be arrived at. As an illustration, while Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark (1966: 245) regard cults as unconventional religious groups drawing inspiration from sources other than traditional faiths, Bruce Campbell (1978: 232) highlights their focus on believing in

¹ The Fourth Great Awakening is part of a recurring cycle in American history, each with significant sociological and political impacts that benefit society (Darnell, 2022: 15). It is a period of advancement in material and spiritual egalitarianism. For more information on this topic, see Robert Fogel's *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (2000).

a divine element within the individual as well. Thus, cults often depart from the models of traditional religion, focusing instead on personal experience and issues. Furthermore, Willa Appel (1983: 162-163) underlines cults' tendency to isolate themselves from external influences and unite members through powerful spiritual leadership coupled with an intense ideology, engendering hostility towards broader society. Hai-Van Karin Sponholz (2005: 121-122) elevates these definitions by portraying such groups as "a mirage, offering sanctuary from the difficult journey while paradoxically engendering suffering and drawing one toward the object one seeks to escape." Drawing upon these definitions, one can characterise cults as groups of people with a shared worldview that separates them from the outside world under a spiritual leader whose teachings offer a false sense of sanctuary.

As cults mirror and refract aspects of culture, there is a dynamic interplay between the two. While they borrow the same values and trends, cults also create new ones (Appel, 1983: 75; Barker, 1986: 336). This allows them to act as a substitute for the loss of community and idealism that exists in the culture from which they spring. In this sense, cults often arise in societies characterised by unrest and discontent. This gives rise to several factors that contribute to their emergence, including the breakdown of families and communities, the growing sense of chaos in society, and adverse economic conditions coupled with the increased exposure to diverse world beliefs and cultures (Hassan, 2013: 16; Newcombe, 2014: 571). Correspondingly, disillusionment and detachment from cultural support lead people to pursue answers "from fanatical religious sects to militia groups" (Hassan, 2013: 16). Claudia Daniela Luiz (2019: 4-5), for instance, argues that Peoples Temple members joined this cult because of various societal and individual factors that rendered them vulnerable. According to her, the political climate, segregation of the period, the people's vulnerability, and Jones' charisma are how he won over his supporters. Similarly, Robert Jay Lifton (2019: 95) posits that Aum Shinrikyo's ability to recruit people was likely due to the fixation of the post-war Japanese public with apocalyptic imagery. In his view, this fixation originates from Japan's defeat and the atomic bombings of its two cities, making the public receptive to a charismatic leader like Asahara. From these examples, it becomes clear that cultists seek to remain in a hierarchy that can provide order to a chaotic society by its very nature. In this case, many cult members remain in the group as they need a rigid pattern of behaviour and a clearly defined way of life (Levine, 1981: 536) to avoid potential problems. This need originates from humans' evolutionary drive to belong within a community (Carlton Best, 2018: 7-8), situating the group as a safety net against vital factors such as lack of shelter and food. Members thereby reinforce their chance of survival with a sense of security by adhering to a hierarchy.

Indeed, cults offer order that draws individuals in (e.g., clear expectations, communal support and decision-making), but there are many other attractions as well. These include fundamental necessities like shelter, food, and opportunities for new friendships and/or a sense of family. In this way, cults can serve as safe havens for misfit individuals. The affiliation itself provides a sense of acceptance and safety, removing the pressure to conform to societal norms, as conformity is a prerequisite for joining the group. Moreover, Alexander Deutsch and Michael J. Miller (1983: 769) have identified a number of characteristics possessed by individuals who join cults, such as sexual conflicts, a desire for protection and purity, a wish to serve and unify, occult spiritual leanings, naiveté and intolerance of badness. Mark I. Sirkin (1990: 117) advances these findings by drawing attention to cult members' history of psychological difficulties, evidenced by a higher incidence of psychotherapy and significantly more indications of dissatisfaction with their lives. Interestingly, however, Steven Hassan (2013) underscores that even intelligent individuals hailing from stable backgrounds can fall prey to cults due to a lack of awareness regarding the harmful effects of such groups. He further notes that people facing situational vulnerabilities, including recent job loss or divorce, are more likely to be targeted for recruitment. In essence, factors ranging from cultural disillusionment, religious framing of issues, low ambiguity tolerance, dependency, need for validation, to predisposition to trance states can lead people to gravitate towards such groups (Appel, 1983: 60-61). Given these reasons, cultists are either ordinary people who join cults during a particularly turbulent phase in their lives, people who have shown throughout time significant evidence of emotional and developmental issues, or those who are in distress. Even though research and anecdotal evidence from professionals working with former cult members suggest that many cultists are remarkably well-adjusted, healthy, intelligent, highly educated, and successful (Lewis, 2014: 23; Petherick, 2017: 580), ultimately, the traditional cult followers have been stereotyped as social outcasts.

Similar to how specific characteristics define cult followers, cults are also classified into various typologies. Their categorisation can depend on factors related to the group's organisational structure, the extent of its influence over its members, its lifestyle, or, most frequently, its objectives, such as "doomsday cults, destructive cults and religious cults" (Carlton Best, 2018: 2). Despite this diversity, there are four primary sorts of cults that fall under a fundamental classification. The first group consists of religious cults whose practices and doctrines are centred around religious dogma or spirituality. This group is the most common form of cult. They may be based on the Bible, Eastern religions, occult lore, or may be entirely created by their leaders (Hassan, 2013: 21-22). Although these cults profess an emphasis on

spirituality, they place a high value on worldly possessions, including vast real estate holdings, luxurious lifestyles for their leaders, and significant commercial ventures (Hassan, 1990: 39). Examples of religious cults include the Unification Church, Heaven's Gate, The Peoples Temple and the Church of Scientology. The second type is political cults that are built around specific political ideologies. They are often characterised by dictatorships with repressive regimes that restrict freedom of speech, assembly and elections (Hassan, 2013: 22). Among these groups are the Democratic Workers Party, The Aryan Nation, Lyndon LaRouche's group and the Symbionese Liberation Army, which gained notoriety for the Patricia Hearst kidnapping. The third type is therapy cults. Such cults develop when individual or group psychotherapy that is supposed to be therapeutic is corrupted or when opportunistic non-professionals deceive and prey on the unwary (Singer and Lalich, 1995: 179). The Sullivanians, Lifespring and the Center for Feeling Therapy are a few of these groups. The final type is commercial cults that exploit people's desire for financial success by promising them wealth and power in exchange for minimal or no pay (Henderson, 2023: 31). Examples of commercial cults are pyramid-shaped or multi-level marketing organisations that rely on continuous recruitment.

On the whole, despite the existence of various typologies that group cults under different categories based on diverse approaches, destructive cults are perhaps the most prominent type of cult. There are three fundamental signs that characterise these groups:

[F]irst, a shift in worship from broad spiritual ideas to the person of a charismatic guru; second, the active pursuit of a thought reform-like process that frequently stresses some kind of merger with the guru; and third, extensive exploitation from above (by the guru and leading disciples)—whether economic, sexual, or psychological—of the idealism of ordinary followers from below (Lifton, 2019: 14).

In essence, destructive cults are generally small groups centred around a charismatic leader. The leader in question is typically a “narcissistic” and deeply disturbed figure (Carlton Best, 2018: 14; Henderson, 2023: 108; Ross, 2014: 121). Within these groups, the world is clearly divided into absolute good and evil, while individuals' inner lives and external communications are controlled. This is facilitated by de-individuation processes, which allow for identity transformation through community intrusion into personal privacy (Galper, 1982: 143). The internal structures of these groups range from ill-defined, loosely connected groupings of equals to tightly hierarchical structures that share authority and responsibilities. Since the leader holds the most power, it is important to realise that these groups usually have an authoritarian structure. Given this, Margaret Thaler Singer and Janja Lalich (1995: 20) liken destructive cult hierarchies to an inverted T, with the leader alone at the top and all the followers at the bottom. These groups also challenge the existing social order, which makes them reject society and

break its rules. For this reason, members rely upon the leader's capacity to discern and define reality (Kramer and Alstad, 1993: 33), but if the latter's view is distorted or delusional, it can lead the group astray, causing them to lose touch with reality. Ergo, the relationship between the leader and members is symbiotic in nature. This is because members are often influenced to think, feel, and behave the same way as the leader. Apart from these characteristics, destructive cults exploit their members' fear of rejection, create a perceived family that supplants biological ties, incite an end justifies the means mentality and illustrate the group itself as the only path to salvation (Hughes, 1993: 352-353).

As the primary architects of their respective cults, leaders hold the responsibility of defining the group's distinctive boundaries that reflect their characteristics and preferences. Despite their unique qualities, they exhibit a set of common characteristics that are shared among them. These similarities often contribute to their portrayal as charismatic leaders, owing to their extraordinary capacity for widespread appeal. By using their charisma as an instrument to charm others to follow and even obey them, these leaders obtain authority through their personal qualities rather than knowledge or experience. This "charm is based on both inspiring awe and love ... [which] is often heightened by an intermittent and sudden outright brutality" (Ulman and Abse, 1983: 649). Members are thereby instilled with a for-them-or-against-them attitude, cultivating an allure stemming from a chance of merging with the leaders' powerful unconscious personas, feeding an illusion of freedom (Alper, 1994: 115). Correspondingly, the personal image of a leader plays a crucial role in driving change and inspiring others to adopt new role models (Biviano, 2000: 4). This dynamic enables leaders to stimulate change and encourage their followers to embrace the leader's frame of mind by forging a positive image in their followers' eyes. On top of this, they are usually highly gifted at employing language to entice, confuse and deceive their followers. Therefore, the power of charismatic leaders like Hitler lies in their ability to leverage the fantasies and desires of their audience, effectively turning their own fantasies into perceived realities (Deikman, 1990: 80-81). These leaders give their followers a feeling of direction and meaning in life by boosting their aspirations and motivating them to make sacrifices for the greater good. In connection with this, since they frequently present themselves as "a great rebel, a messenger of a cultural salvation, and a kind of messianic genius" (Alper, 1994: 124), their followers still hold them in high regard even when they are corrupt.

Beneath the captivating facade of revolutionary cult leaders lies a complex web of dark traits. Although some may appear to seek material wealth, the majority crave attention and power, which can become a dangerous addiction. This insatiable thirst for control only

intensifies over time, exacerbating their psychological instability and causing them to believe their own propaganda, making them more perilous genuinely. The leaders' behaviour often manifests narcissistic tendencies, an "inferiority complex," and antisocial characteristics (Hassan, 1990: 98). They thus often consider themselves as God, the Messiah, or enlightened masters owing to their faith in their divine or messianic status (Henderson, 2023: 48). Some even assume extraterrestrial origins or psychic links to historical individuals, which furthers their warped sense of their role in moulding the world to suit their ends. Concordantly, they see their relationship with their followers as a reflection of their connection to the divine, resulting in a spiritual awakening for their disciples. This practice leads to the leaders being seen as saviours and their followers as chosen ones. This is why the group often interprets the leaders' ramblings as special insights or that they are shedding their earthly bodies as they ascend to higher knowledge (Petherick, 2017: 581). Put differently, the leaders' actions demonstrate a deep-seated feeling of entitlement as they engage in pathological lying and create intricate belief systems centred around their perceived talents and powers. Moreover, cult leaders usually come from marginalised backgrounds or have faced various obstacles that have prevented them from achieving traditional success (Appel, 1983: 38-39). This causes them to struggle with personal instability, including trauma, mental breakdowns, and physical illnesses, making it challenging for them to fit into mainstream society. As a result, in addition to experiencing challenges in controlling their impulses and displaying intolerance to emotions like anger, worry and depression, cult leaders also exhibit rigidity, closed-mindedness, defensiveness and an unwavering sense of self-importance (Sponholz, 2005: 39-40).

Cult leaders use various techniques to replace old beliefs and values with new ones, destroying the bonds that once attached their followers to society. Hence, they craft a narrative that revolves around the desire for power, love, and protection. This simplifies the complex world and provides a "world of total meaning" in a universe full of "loneliness, alienation, and doubt" (Bucher, 1981: 279). Through these narratives, cults claim to accurately describe reality, which can lead to dogmatism and potential danger. To succeed in this goal, the conversion process encompasses three phases that alter an individual's identity and worldview, eventually giving rise to a cult mentality. In this process, the individual is first isolated from their past life and identity; following this, they face humiliation and shame to relinquish their former identity in favour of a new one (Appel, 1983: 77). Consequently, cult members adopt a new identity, separating their cult-self from their former self. Sociobiologically speaking, the group influence stems from the evolutionary benefits of humans banding together in familial tribes for mutual protection and support (Deikman, 1990: 54). As per this perspective, individuals adapt to the

needs and dynamics of their social groups to receive a sense of security and belonging. They, for instance, might use the group to maintain “emotional stability” and “cope with extreme distress” in times of psychological crisis (Galanter, 1989: 29). Ergo, they exhibit an increased awareness of the needs and dynamics of their social groups, which can lead them to sanction or ostracise dissenters, labelling them as disloyal or obstructive to the group’s objectives. Given this, it can be said that cultists immerse themselves in a collective mentality that carefully wipes out their sense of self because of the overwhelming sensations of relief and acceptance they experience. This state of mind makes it challenging for these people to think clearly or make autonomous decisions. Despite this, cultists continue to identify with the group, as their membership and emotional ties shape their character. Their group identity leads them to employ self-protective techniques to safeguard themselves and the group from external threats, danger, or criticism.

While destabilising the members by stripping them of their ordinary reality and worldview, the cult confronts them with a new, unanimously approved one. The distress and inner confusion formed by this erode the inner confidence of the members, leading them to dependency on the group (Singer and Lalich, 1995: 69). In fact, since people’s brains release feel-good chemicals like dopamine and oxytocin when part of a group, they are attracted to be surrounded by like-minded people, making them social and spiritual by design (Montell, 2021: 21). Therefore, even if the members begin to question the cult’s teachings, the group will adopt its mindset as they receive answers from other members since the cult milieu generates a mindset, which is the by-product of the cult’s systematic process of coercive persuasion. To guarantee that potential doubters are controlled, monitored, or quickly put an end to, the group as a whole applies peer pressure, the threat or use of punishment and the strict norms of the cult itself. In this case, cults manipulate the vulnerability of humans to achieve radical change in a short period. They place potential converts in situations of tremendous stress by bombarding them with unfamiliar information, cutting them off from their own world and depriving them of adequate protein, sleep, and dream time. This results in the potential converts cracking or dissociating, and their brain’s ability to regulate and interpret information becomes severely disrupted, making them very suggestible, given that frames of reference are necessary for the mind to organise reality. Ultimately, such an environment fosters an Echo-Narcissus dynamic where members reflect their leader’s agenda through their conduct and speech. Their identity stems from the leader’s influence, and their place in the world revolves around that individual’s guidance. This identity loss leads to conforming behaviours and groupthink among members, erasing their personal identities and aligning them exclusively with the group’s ideology.

Cults operate a variety of methods, including mind control, to attain this kind of mind state. The concept of mind control (brainwashing, thought reform, or coercive persuasion) was initially employed in political contexts to stifle dissenting opinions. However, its meaning evolved in the aftermath of the Korean War to encompass any tactic utilised to coerce prisoners or marginalised individuals into displaying compliant behaviour. While some dismiss mind control as a mere fallacy, others contend that it can have a genuine detrimental impact on those subjected to it (West, 1993: 2-3). Aligning with this latter perspective, there is a prevailing belief that cults leverage mind control techniques to establish firm connections between new members and the group. This claims that cults employ mind control to indoctrinate members into believing and acting in a specific manner, with little respect for their uniqueness. People become entirely dependent on the group and lose their capacity to act autonomously due to this process. To achieve this, the group typically employs eight methods detected by Lifton (2019), which are thought-terminating clichés, personal manipulation, control over communication, dividing the world into pure and impure, fixation on confession, presenting core beliefs as the only way and dispensing with existence. Following these methods, members usually develop an alternate personality or mindset that mimics certain behaviours consistent with the qualities or attributes the group or leaders value. In consequence, they might give rigid, emotionless responses to highly charged situations, have trouble thinking clearly due to imbuing cosmic meaning into every action, thought, and decision, as long as experiencing a sense of extreme guilt for challenging the cult's beliefs and the binary world (Goldberg and Goldberg, 1982: 166).

Apart from mind control, cults employ diverse methods to cultivate dependency in members, constructing a cycle of interdependence that promotes a sense of community and shared purpose. Given their focus on controlling individuals' thoughts and sense of reality, these groups often impose a specialised language that limits independent thinking and expression among members. This language causes any pre-existing knowledge to lose relevance when not aligned with the group's principles (Sponholz, 2005: 34). Within this paradigm, members internalise a narrow worldview aligned with the cult's teachings, fostering a sense of superiority and exclusivity. These beliefs isolate the members from external influences and engender potential radicalism. Moreover, cults propagate a belief that only their members will be spared from impending doom by using purification rhetoric. According to this rhetoric, cleansing oneself is possible only when members merge with the cult leader or become clones of him/her. Correspondingly, the leader is often regarded as the sole being of absolute purity, and this notion is reinforced further to solidify the cult's grip on its members (Lifton,

2019: 16). Ultimately, these strengthen the power dynamic between cult leaders and their followers. This dynamic gets even more potent by the cult's attempts to exert absolute control over its members' surroundings. For this reason, cult members are placed in a highly controlled, regulated social environment where the cult can control their thoughts, emotions, and actions in an attempt to obliterate their original identity and replace it with a modified one. In line with this, just as how propaganda aims to mould collective beliefs and behaviours by affecting individual thought patterns (Marková, 2008: 41-42), cults frequently generate an outlook in which non-members regard cult adherents as simpletons and social outcasts. By doing this, they present the outside world as hostile, intolerant and perilous. In other words, even while a cult may seem to provide its members with a safe haven from their traumatic pasts, in reality, it makes use of these experiences to repress the underlying problems and maintain control over these people.

Cults try to control behaviour, information, thoughts, and emotions to gain even more control over members' identities. Manipulating these components enables the cults to produce further dependency and obedience to the leader or the cause. Firstly, members' physical environment and conduct are regulated through behaviour control. This is done in an effort to control its members, entailing tactics like isolation, sleep deprivation, dietary restrictions, violations of privacy, and separation from friends (Hassan, 2013: 37). Even basic communal activities such as eating and sleeping become instruments of control, aimed at suppressing individual autonomy. Thus, they are assigned specific tasks to limit their spare time, and in more severe cults, they are prevented from ever being alone. These efforts are coupled with procedures designed to reinforce group cohesion, incorporating practices like group rituals, prayer, chanting, and confession. Secondly, cults selectively disclose or distort information to potential members in order to manipulate their understanding, prevent critical thinking and maintain control. This includes reporting improper conduct or comments, encouraging members to spy on one another and limiting access to non-cult resources. By doing so, cults seek to control how their followers think, indoctrinating them to accept the cult leader as infallible and any discontent results from their own flaws. Such a mindset is reinforced through peer pressure, causing members to refrain from expressing concerns, even when they detect errors in the leader's reasoning or evidence. This ultimately compels them to internalise the cult's practices and their consequences. Moreover, some cults urge members to criticise themselves before a small confessional group during the recruitment process to increase their dependency on the group (West, 1993: 12-13). Finally, to keep members off balance and to make them think only of the group, cults employ strategies like love-bombing and labelling

emotions as selfish. They use emotional control to limit and regulate members' emotional spectrum (Hassan, 1990: 63). For instance, cults may induce paranoia or phobias by instilling fear in their members, hoping to render them dependent on the group. Consequently, members are systematically trained to forsake autonomous thinking to become more and more dependent as the process progresses.

All things considered, the term cult is seen to have had different definitions and connotations over time. Its lack of fixed definition has given rise to various interpretations and typologies. Each focuses on a different aspect, ranging from religious devotion to seeking comfort. This is partly due to cults' nature, which reflects the society in which they emerge while offering an alternative path for those searching for meaning and purpose. However, given the objectives of this study, it is imperative to adopt a definition that prioritises the mechanisms of power, group identity, and social influence. To this end, drawing upon the perspectives of Glock and Stark (1966), Campbell (1978), Appel (1983), and Sponholz (2005) offers a richer understanding of the concept. Their insights reveal that cults typically form around an exclusive in-group, united by a shared worldview that fosters a sense of alienation from mainstream society. This often results in an overreliance on a charismatic leader for guidance and purpose. From this standpoint, cults can be defined as groups whose cohesion arises from a common worldview, which creates a perceived distinction from the external world, leading members to seek refuge in a spiritual leader associated with an unconventional religious organisation. By adopting such a definition to analyse the cult dynamics in *The Power* and *The Fireman*, it becomes possible to understand how these fictional cults construct alternative power structures, enforce ideological conformity and interact with broader societal forces. In other words, the synthesised definition allows for a broader critical examination of diverse aspects of cults' influence and activities in relation to social forces which shape societies through non-visible power dynamics.

Given these points, the focus must shift towards a theory that offers an alternative perspective on the issues of power and power dynamics regarding cults. It has already been pointed out that cults use diverse methods designed to form binding ties in order to gain members' trust. This approach is seen to engender dependency, wherein members submit to the leader's influence, aligning their behaviours and beliefs with the group's. Accordingly, they face a type of suppression where the leader effectively controls their internal world, thoughts, and actions. As a result, they gradually lose their connection with the external world, solidifying their immersion in the group and fostering a sense of emotional and psychological safety. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that cults operate within and interact with broader

sociopolitical power structures where a complex web of dynamics exists. This interplay can offer a crucial basis for understanding the operation and influence of such groups when analysing Alderman's and Hill's novels. Therefore, Michel Foucault's conception of power can supply key insights for the thesis to explain why and how cults come into being, survive, and sometimes collapse. In this regard, the following subsection focuses exclusively on Foucauldian power while explaining some of his key concepts, such as discipline, surveillance, biopower, and docile body.

1.2. Michel Foucault on Power

In Foucauldian theory, there is an inherent connection between truth and power. This is because Michel Foucault (1980: 131) considers truth as not "lacking in power ... [but as] a thing of this world ... produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint." This perspective suggests that truth is socially constructed and that every society has its own set of rules for what constitutes truth. In this regard, Foucault focuses on comprehending how social functions operate within the framework of many practices, such as politics, economics, and technology. He intends to show how the fundamental notions of society, culture as a worldview, and the individual are forged as a component of a cumulative change in the relations of power and discourse (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 9). Thus, Foucault is primarily concerned with the process by which specific bodies of knowledge and power came to be deemed as authoritative, leading people to mould themselves in accordance with them. In his eyes, the notion of justice serves as a tool wielded by certain political and economic forces or, conversely, as a means of contesting their power. In this context, Foucault (1984: 245) posits that liberty is a practice that can potentially transform almost anything into a tool for liberation or oppression, depending on how it is utilised. Put differently, since B will always oppose A, the exercise of power by either party can be regarded as oppression or resistance, depending on the viewpoint used to evaluate the power relation. Considering this, Foucault (1984: 245) highlights that despite being designed to ensure the liberty of individuals, institutions and laws are vulnerable to corruption.

In light of this vulnerability, power often carries negative connotations and is regarded as bringing domination or abuse. Commonly, power equals control and dictation, leaving little room for individual autonomy. In this framework, it enforces authority and requires obedience through mechanisms like law, taboo, and censorship. Correspondingly, Foucault (1980: 89-90) argues that many contemporary studies illustrate power as fundamentally repressive in nature, functioning as a suppressor of temperament, instincts, social classes, and individuals. On the one hand, this stems from the Western concept of humans as autonomous, rational agents and

the division between the powerful and the powerless (Christensen, 2024: 182). On the other, Barry Smart (2004: 70–71) asserts that this view comes from both the juridical-liberal notion of power as a right or possession similar to a commodity and a Marxist perspective on power, in which power is seen primarily in relation to its role in maintaining the relations of production and class domination. In this sense, Foucault observes that earlier authoritarian systems rendered power to the sovereign, who then enforced it on a relatively anonymous population. The sovereign's right to deprive its subjects of life, privileges, taxes and wealth formed the basis of their power (Foucault, 1978: 136). The law itself signified the sovereign's will and power, and those who violated it were punished to demonstrate this hegemony. The aim was to terrorise potential opponents, stifle dissent and make people afraid to voice grievances or criticisms. Even so, if any criminal refuses to obey the sovereign and maintains their innocence by condemning the authorities, social unrest or even rebellion could quickly become a reality (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 146). Accordingly, an entire economy of power is invested in the excesses of torture, turning the punishment ceremony into a theatre of terror intended to alert everyone to the sovereign's excessive presence through the criminal's body (Foucault, 1995: 35, 49). This is because power is traditionally viewed within a hierarchical structure in which people operate. Such a view typically results in the abuse of power through exploitative rule without consideration of the subjects' welfare.

Unlike the traditional understanding of power explained above, Foucault's vision of power is not focused on violence or coercion but rather on facilitating change. For him, power functions as a chain that circulates through "a net-like organization" (Foucault, 1980: 98). Rather than being limited to institutions, structures, or individual strength, it is manifested through an interconnected nexus (Heller, 1996: 84). This means that power operates in various directions beyond legal frameworks, as it is multifaceted and not limited to political or legal institutions. In this respect, Joseph Rouse (2007) likens Foucault's conception of power to that of Thomas Wartenburg, who regards power as being spread throughout social networks. According to Wartenburg, power is embodied only when there is a significant alignment of agents, instruments of power and practices (Rouse, 2007: 109). In order to exert power over others, coordination should be maintained between both parties and the constitution of power as a power relationship depends on its reproduction over time. Similarly, Foucault maintains that power relations are in constant flux, exerting and resisting in different domains of social life. In this way, he indicates that power relations are at play in each and every social interaction, not merely in the projection of great sovereign power (Foucault, 1996: 209-210). Then, everyone is both subject to and an agent of power, meaning that the individual is not the vis-a-

vis of power; it is one of its prime effects and an element of its articulation. As a result, power acts as a transformative catalyst that promotes social integration and collectivity, even if it also has the potential to fracture society and encourage factional repression. This causes power relations to become ingrained in society, allowing them to be a component of its social fabric.

Power is also a subject of governance. This is because power is “[a] set of actions upon other actions” (Foucault, 1983: 220). As opposed to just being a conflict between opposing forces, it entails organising possible outcomes and directing behaviours. Power thereby has the ability to incite, induce, seduce, facilitate, hinder, or even prohibit actions to varying degrees, perpetually operating upon individuals who possess the capacity for action or potential action (Foucault, 1983: 220). This is where power penetrates deeply into people’s lives. It touches their bodies, affects their behaviours and attitudes, forms their discourses and infiltrates their day-to-day lives (Foucault, 1980: 39). In the case of a new economic system, for instance, the State found it necessary to enhance its police force, legal officials and judicial system. Such measures were prompted by a “shift from a criminality of blood to a criminality of fraud” (Foucault, 1995: 77). These changes were related mainly to the state’s emergence as a significant influence in the administration of criminal justice. Thus, judicial investigations developed, characterised by specific questions, procedures and involved distinct roles such as prosecutors, defendants, accusers, witnesses for and against, and judges (Cooper, 1981: 80). Ultimately, power is what acts upon actions to construct reality as well as to establish domains of objects.

The elaborate ceremonies and formalities that uphold obligations and privileges cement the war of dominance, which is more than just the dynamic between rulers/dominators and ruled/dominated. Its subtle nature makes it challenging to identify, considering that it usually does not surface in overt forms spotted in beliefs, organisations, structures, or ethics (Kramer and Alstad, 1993: 2). Domination can, hence, advance since the laws and duties resulting from the rituals of power are ingrained in “civil law, moral codes, and the universal laws of humanity” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 110). That is to say, the mechanisms that humans use to construct and maintain power dynamics are where power manifests itself. With this in mind, Foucault (1983: 211) proposes exploring forms of resistance and the strategies employed to truly understand power relations. One should scrutinise power through the methods used to dissociate power relations rather than looking at it from within. Therefore, one should pay attention to the methods and evolution of power to understand how it influences people. In the context of absolute power and authority, both the monarchy and contemporary governing systems seek to control their subjects. However, whereas the monarchy, as previously

demonstrated, mistreats its subjects and imposes harsh control over them without regard for their welfare, modern authorities maintain complete control over people's lives by disseminating propaganda, thought monitoring and quelling opposition.

Since power is not fixed and changes over time, allowing creation or destruction at any moment, political struggles are undertaken to modify power relations. The sovereign power, as a result, underwent a transformation into disciplinary power during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, inducing "[t]he body as the major target of penal repression [to] disappear" (Foucault, 1995: 8). This not only put an end to punishment as a spectacle but also abolished practices such as public executions, pillories, and the exhibition of prisoners. These changes were brought about by a group of humanist reformers who criticised the drawbacks of sovereign power's manifestation and called for the abolition of the theatre of atrocity, which was ineffective and centred around excessive violence (Foucault, 1996: 146). From this point of view, the manner in which penalties were administered underwent a revision as follows:

The old partners of the spectacle of punishment, the body and the blood, gave way. A new character came on the scene, masked. It was the end of a certain kind of tragedy; comedy began, with shadow play, faceless voices, impalpable entities. The apparatus of punitive justice must now bite into this bodiless reality. (Foucault, 1995: 16-17)

Consequently, the punishment received by criminals became more lenient, limited by the humanity of each subject and grounded in the theory of social contract. The purpose of sentencing changed from punishment to correction and improvement, entailing an assessment of the offender's motives, passions and instincts in order to supervise and direct the individual. In other words, the effects of power in modern societies are increasingly subtle, permeating people's bodies, gestures and daily acts, unlike the often brutal power exercises of the past (Bartky, 1988: 79). Thus, society no longer requires a specific, powerful body to govern itself, as it has become proficient at regulating itself. This leads Foucault to claim that individuals learn to discipline themselves and others by continuously monitoring their thinking, lifestyle and appearance.

As a consequence of the significant shifts that occurred in the state's relationship with individuals, an art of government emerges with a more extensive reach than previous notions of state power, granting itself "the function of administering life" (Foucault, 1978: 138). This new political understanding extends to nearly all aspects of human activity, including the economy, making society a political objective. Hence, an innovative form of power known as biopower, takes root, emphasising the promotion of life alongside the expansion and upbringing of the population (Güleşçe, 2023: 447). Initially, it was centred on two distinct poles (i.e. the human species and the human body), which stayed apart until the eighteenth century. Then,

these poles came together to form the power technologies that still characterise the current state of humankind. Correspondingly, systemic political attention and intervention are directed towards the human species, while the human body is treated as an object to be manipulated and controlled (Rabinow, 1984: 17). To put it another way, biopower views the human body as either a machine that produces a more efficient, disciplined population or as an entity that reproduces to manage the population statistically. It thereby aspires to regulate essential biological processes ranging from birth, death, and reproduction to health in order to enhance and organise society as a whole (Güleşçe, 2023: 447). This makes scientific categories the centre of political intervention and necessitates the emergence of new procedures to establish a disciplinary technology for governing and manipulating the body. In line with this, biopower is an approach that reinforces only to maintain the status quo and power structures. It can construct and shape reality by influencing how individuals perceive their surroundings. People are frequently classified into groups of subjects and objects by this perception, which later becomes the accepted way of seeing the world.

During the seventeenth century in Europe, leper houses were repurposed as houses of confinement for the impoverished. The establishment of the Hôpital Général in Paris marked a significant historical event as it allocated multiple buildings for the care of the poor, homeless, and mentally ill. The king appointed high-level administrators to oversee those confined there and the city of Paris. Foucault considers this move towards confining the poor under one roof as the first step towards classifying and controlling human beings. This is because the Hôpital Général was never a medical establishment but rather a semi-judicial administrative institution that operated alongside existing powers and beyond the judicial system's reach (Foucault, 1988: 48-49). Accordingly, the human body is placed within a studied and reorganised system. This system, also known as disciplines,

dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. (Foucault, 1995: 138)

Put differently, the disciplinary power connects forces to maximise and utilise them by creating distinct units out of its subjects, as its primary objective is to provide training. Instead of replacing current power structures, discipline refines or forges them, enhancing their impact. For this reason, bodily punishments that date back to pre-modern times have lost their original intent and acquired a psychological dimension in the modern age (Apalı, 2021: 298). Unlike other forms of exerting power, disciplinary techniques and training methods have the ability not only to coerce or destroy their intended target but also to reconstruct it. This reconstruction mainly results in the development of new skills, habits, actions, and gestures, eventually leading

to the emergence of new types of people. Although disciplinary power is present in various settings (e.g. workshops, barracks, prisons, and hospitals), discerning it becomes challenging because people are often mentally conditioned to accept such mechanisms due to social norms and standards set by different organisations.

Discipline operates through a combination of “hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and ... the examination” (Foucault, 1995: 170). In the context of hierarchical observation, the exercise of discipline necessitates a mechanism that enforces obedience through surveillance. Ideally, such a disciplinary mechanism should provide comprehensive and continuous visibility. As a means of normalising judgement, “all disciplinary systems functions a small penal mechanism,” utilising rewards and punishments by arranging qualities into hierarchies and creating gaps (Foucault, 1995: 177). In order to qualify, categorise and punish, examination combines these two methods. Given this, Foucault (1995: 187–192) observes that examination brought individuality to the documentation field, changing the way visibility is used to exercise power and making every person a case while putting itself at the centre of the processes that mould people’s identities as products of knowledge and objects of control. The more precise and statistically accurate the knowledge gathered through this apparatus, the finer and more comprehensive the criteria for normalisation become. By making conduct more thoroughly knowable or known, he suggests that observation, normalising, and examination practices serve to restrain it. In this manner, such methods subject “the human body, its elements and behaviour ... to a political anatomy of detail, to discipline” (Smart, 2004: 80). They thereby play a crucial role in forming, classifying, and controlling anomalies within the social body. The first step in discipline, then, is to organise space and mandate that it be contained inside a particular area. It, subsequently, makes it possible to monitor and discipline the people. Prisons, for instance, use schedules, activities, and strategies that are intended to produce obedient individuals who follow rules, customs, and guidelines. Historically, Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad (1993: 189) state that categorising good and evil has made it easier to control people inside hierarchies. In this respect, by establishing what is deemed right and wrong as well as good and bad, disciplinary power can shape the prisoners’ (as well as individuals’) behaviour without subjecting them to torture, as they will eventually embrace these rules.

Characterised by constant observance and surveillance, disciplinary power remains hidden from the subjects under scrutiny. For Foucault, this aspect of power is best exemplified through the panopticon, a prison design. Rather than being a symbol of power or having any hidden meanings, panopticon is a tool for exercising power in a given space. Operating through

a reversal of visibility, it is designed perfectly to surveil its inhabitants. The building's design discourages communication between prisoners and wardens, preventing the formation of groups or crowds. The perpetual visibility created by the panopticon ensures the effective functioning of power, as it is always visible yet never verifiable (Foucault, 1995: 201-202). Hence, the prisoners are constantly aware of the central tower's presence but never certain of when and where they are being observed, preventing them from committing crimes or disobeying. This design ensures that the panopticon serves as a potent tool for power and control over its occupants. It is, in Foucault's (1995: 205) words, "the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form," as it enhances the effectiveness of power by enabling control over more people with fewer operators. As such, its architecture serves to gain control over people's thoughts, making it a highly effective instrument of power. In essence, Foucault's analysis of the panopticon highlights the insidious nature of disciplinary power, which remains hidden beneath the visibility of those subject to it. By understanding this mechanism, the development of control and correction can be better understood, revealing the schematisation of disciplinary power.

Another source of disciplinary power is knowledge, which generates what Foucault refers to as power-knowledge. Since the exercise of power itself induces knowledge and information, and knowledge continuously exacerbates the effects of power, power and knowledge are constantly in flux. For this reason, Foucault (1995: 28) points out that instead of the subject of knowledge, it is power-knowledge that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge. To put it differently, possessing knowledge is a manifestation of power and the possession of power is predicated upon this knowledge, causing the two to be mutually reinforcing and interdependent phenomena that cannot exist apart. Moreover, as knowledge becomes the basis for power, those claiming to have it can employ it to further their agendas and power. As an illustration, in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1991), the protagonist's mother not only defines her daughter's universe but also manipulates reality to match her own religious ideas. By altering *Jane Eyre*'s original ending, her reinterpretation effectively imposes these beliefs on the daughter, displaying the transformative nature of power-knowledge. Similarly, by projecting their version of truth onto reality, political regimes too use the shifting power-knowledge dynamics to validate their own legitimacy and suppress oppositional political structures (Oksala, 2012: 86). These two examples show that truth is always influenced by the time and place in which it is expressed and can never be entirely objective. All in all, power and knowledge are linked to possibilities that take the shape of differentiations, classifications, and distinctions attained by continuous assessment,

quantification, differentiation, homogeneity and hierarchy of space, time, and bodies (Christensen, 2024: 187). This results in the disciplinary power's internalisation within the bodies of individuals, prompting them to self-discipline.

As reality cannot be understood outside of discourse, power and knowledge go hand in hand in the disciplinary model, as mentioned above. Since discourse spreads knowledge, it enables power to constantly renew itself (Özdemir, 2023: 51). Therefore, Foucault (1980: 93) states that power cannot be exercised without the production and circulation of discourse and that one is subjected to the production of truth through power. He argues that despite speech (or discourse) often seeming insignificant, its prohibitions are closely tied to power and desire. As such, it is not merely a medium for expressing desire or articulating conflict and systems of domination but also “the object of desire” and “the very object of man's conflicts” (Foucault, 2005: 316). Accordingly, before popularising confinement through the Hôpital Général, for instance, the state had developed a new type of discourse and social institution to justify its actions (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 6). Power thereby used the establishment of new institutions and discourse to validate its goals of restriction and imprisonment, directing society to adjust. Furthermore, “[d]iscourse makes the body an object of knowledge and invests it with power” (Martin, 1988: 9). This causes the technology of science to create an illusion of being able to tell the truth about oneself with the help of an expert through confessions. In this case, the psychologist who holds power and authority remains silent while the patient shares their truth. The dynamic between them causes the patient to be impacted by the discourse of truth and allows the power to classify and categorise people based on these. All in all, not only does science establish social norms for acceptable conduct, but it also labels those who behave abnormally as unsuitable to participate in society. These anomalous individuals are deemed a potential danger to society and are monitored and reformed through institutionalisation. In other words, science gains greater insight as subjects divulge more information, leading to an expanding examination scope and a more intricate web of confessional technology.

Through the previously illustrated methods utilised by power, disciplinary power causes the body to gradually transform into a docile body, which makes it an essential element of power relations. Correspondingly, “[t]he indefinite segmentation of a few spectacular criminal bodies pulled apart in public executions dissolved, in the modern age, into the indefinite interrogation of many bodies under constant observation” (Cooper, 1981: 89). This is how disciplines control the body's operations according to “a relation of docility-utility” (Foucault, 1995: 137). Thus, each individual becomes subject to detailed specifications covering every facet of their day-to-day activities, making nearly everything punishable as an outcome of

observation. Since every behaviour is defined as good or bad, disciplinary power can possibly create objective dossiers for each individual. These dossiers establish an objective hierarchy concerning people and help the authorities create a network of objective codification. Hence, power is localised due to the political technology of the body and functions through precise rituals; its dynamics function as power's microphysics (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 114). That is to say, the state's power regulate and control individuals through the increasing specifications of individuality. In the case of women, for example, instead of being taught how to be a proper woman externally, they simply live with "a panoptical male connoisseur" in their heads, who makes them perceive their bodies through the lens of "an anonymous patriarchal Other" (Bartky, 1988: 72). Thus, the disciplinarian, who imprints femininity on the female body, is both everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This means that women internalise the societal norms concerning womanhood without any external help to tell them what to do and not to do. By the same token, the exercise of disciplinary power subtly pushes its victims to absorb the norms, thereby rendering them self-controlling and self-observant.

In conclusion, Foucault offers a counter-perspective to the conventional reading of power, which is possessed by a select few. Instead, he paints a more nuanced and intricate theoretical picture. Here, power manifests as an invisible yet interconnected force or system that acts in a dynamic and subtle manner. It shapes individuals both directly and indirectly through instruments such as discipline, surveillance, and discourse. In this manner, individuals internalise the prevailing norms promoted by the power structures, self-regulating their conduct and ideas accordingly. However, the relational nature of power also generates a space for counter-power, where resistance plays a crucial role in shaping the balance of power. This space can be the reason why any attempt to impose strict totalitarian rule will inevitably fail because, in the face of oppression, resistance will always find a way to get a foothold in the collective mind. Therefore, power does not always restrict; it also improves. By acting upon actions, it facilitates change and helps construct reality and object domains. Considering this, Foucault's unique conception of power has significant potential to explain the complex power dynamics between cults and society. This is because cults are deeply connected to the broader sociopolitical sphere, significantly influencing their emergence and evolution. Thus, Foucault's approach to social structure and power dynamics can support the thesis in examining how cults and social change function in the selected novels. His theoretical framework can reveal how such groups employ varied mechanisms of control, surveillance, and discursive practices to consolidate their authority, like how societies regulate individuals. This specifically can provide beneficial insights into the anatomy of cult mentality, which ushers cult members to lose

themselves in the confines of the group's tenets. By viewing cults through a Foucauldian lens, the study can show that any interaction between counterpowers and prevailing powers intended to achieve dominance can be conceptualised as a dynamic force wherein each party alternates between resistance and oppression. Drawing upon these insights, the subsequent chapters discuss how the selected novels showcase the rise of cultic groups and whether power dynamics within the new sociopolitical structure disrupt or reinforce the existence of such groups.



CHAPTER TWO

THE POWER AND CULT MENTALITY: FROM AN INDIVIDUAL TO AN ECHO

Naomi Alderman's feminist dystopian novel *The Power* (2017) explores gender norms, violence, and boundaries of power. It depicts a shifting society in which women gradually obtain the role of the dominant sex, ruling over subservient men. By depicting a matriarchal revolt and revolution, Alderman not only portrays a cruel patriarchal society but also exposes the inherent flaws of every gender-biased system. In this sense, the rise of Mother Eve's cult becomes a striking critique of these systems, as her group practices the very actions they condemn patriarchy for. The group aspires to protect women from the dangers of issues like male violence, oppressive regimes, and sexual assault, yet they enact these same abuses on men. Examples like Tunde's journey from a pro-women journalist to an oppressed refugee and the sexual assault Moldova's civilian men face are perfect demonstrations of this gradual decline of human rights for men. These highlight the dangerous dehumanisation that comes with this power. Accordingly, the book suggests that the problem stems not only from male supremacy in patriarchal societies but also from the inequalities created by a system that prioritises one gender over the others by dehumanising and oppressing those who are not part of the favoured gender.

As a result of this innovative insight, *The Power* became the first science fiction novel to receive the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction in June 2017. In addition to qualifying the novel for such a prize, its critical stance on "the big issues that affect all humanity, from greed to power" (Kean, 2017) has placed Alderman's book at the forefront of academic discourse, particularly in the context of gender studies. One such example is Akhtar Ali et al. (2021), who analyse the story using Selma James' feminist theory on social feminism. This theory suggests that patriarchal society limits women's potential and prevents them from competing with men, even when they have the means and ability to do so (Ali et al., 2021: 2970). Building on this concept, the researchers claim that the novel shows how, although women's capability is on par with men's, the social stigma prevents them from overtly displaying it. Similarly, Afza Sabir et al. (2021) discuss the combat for gender superiority between women and men. They discuss that the narrative presented is "the wish of liberation of feminists" since they aspire to liberate themselves from the patriarchal chains imposed on them (Sabir et al., 2021: 29-16). They further assert that despite the rude and cruel actions of the female characters, their behaviours actually echo how men treat women all over the world. In essence, these studies stress how Alderman addresses the disadvantaged position of women in society. They present women's

electric powers as an opportunity to fight against these injustices. However, they fall short when it comes to highlighting Alderman's critique of extremism. While using a gender-focused lens, they forget to consider a crucial detail, which is the reality of another shackle Mother Eve's cultic group confines the novel's women. This shackle might reposition women as the dominant, yet it simultaneously pressures them to comply with the new roles developed under Mother Eve's leadership.

By building a fictitious universe monopolised by women who slowly become the reflections of men in a patriarchal system that has been taken for granted as the ideal form, Alderman criticises the domination and violation of the weak by the powerful. This hints at the fact that matriarchy cannot be the answer to overcome the dreadful state of contemporary society. In this regard, matriarchy is as harmful as patriarchy since both privilege one gender over the others, implying that the answer is in achieving an equal distribution of power. If there is no equality, then one gender suppresses the others, which is what happens in the novel. Therefore, Aline Ferreira (2018: 159) argues that the power provided by the skein over many generations, together with the long-term conditioning of men to be gentler and submissive, has altered the power dynamics between genders within Alderman's novel. Unlike the prevailing belief that women are inherently empathetic and peace-loving while men are violent and cruel, the novel offers a world where women feel empowered and entitled to rule, keeping men in subordinate roles by oppressing them. Unlike Ferreira's study, which focuses on women and violence, Melodie Roschman (2021) has a more political take on *The Power* by examining Margot's rhetoric as a satire of American politics and evangelical Christianity. She stresses that the novel's portrayal of an American matriarchy that is "sexually violent, nationalistic, and ultimately apocalyptic" is actually an image of American evangelicalism (Roschman, 2021: 10). This enables Alderman to use Margot to critique evangelical Christianity and its right-wing political agendas that are more likely to bring harm to humanity. Accordingly, Margot mirrors the power abuse of male religious and political figures exhibited in modern American society (Roschman 2021: 25). Given these points, instead of solely focusing on the gender issue from women's perspective, Ferreira and Roschman's studies address the topic from a broader political and dystopian position.

Since the novel exposes the perils of one group of people dominating another, it also reveals the corruptive impact of power and power relations by accentuating the hazards of group thinking that possesses individuals and pushes them to extremes to attain a common target. In this respect, Rosalee Ross (2020) examines in her dissertation three speculative texts named *Moi qui n'ai pas connu les hommes* (1995), *El país de las mujeres* (2010) and *The Power*

through a critical linguistic framework. In contrast to the studies of Akhtar Ali et al., Sabir et al., Ferreira, and Roschman, Ross focuses on Alderman's novel in terms of its representation of group dynamics, individuality, and interconnections. Drawing on the novel's narrative perspective, she reveals how such themes are illustrated in *The Power*. Consequently, she proposes that the early harmony in the novel transitions into an "eerie unity," where "the emancipatory and subversive laughter becomes heartless and scary, and solidarity gives way to mob mentality" (Ross, 2020: 212-213). To explain, Ross (2020: 213) displays that Alderman changes the story's narrative perspective to accentuate "the increasing violence and brutality of the collective's actions" by a simple shift in "the psychological perspective" from which the group is seen (i.e. from the in-group viewpoint to the out-group viewpoint). This change demonstrates how group dynamics can shift from supportive to destructive, as reflected through women's altered behaviour following their acquisition of power.

Differing from Ross' thesis, this chapter explores the relationship between individual and group in the context of cults and cult mentality with the help of Foucauldian theory. Put differently, the chapter seeks to investigate the cult mentality that permeates the universe of *The Power* and unites all women under a prevalent, vindictive cause. For this purpose, it first explains the reasons behind the creation of a cult that revolves around women and why it has become a public sensation among them. Subsequently, the chapter examines how this cult generates a sense of cult mentality (or collective identity) that gradually supersedes the individuality of its members and gains legitimacy among the mass public, allowing it to subvert the existing social structures completely. In doing so, the chapter employs both the pre-existent cult studies and Foucauldian theory as a means of grounding and supporting its claims and findings. While the cult studies provide a framework for understanding how cults perform and operate their power on their members, Foucauldian theory becomes a lens for identifying how this female-centric cult undermines existing social structures and establishes its own authority and legitimacy, showcasing the dynamics between the individual and collective.

2.1. Rising Above the Chaos: Establishment of a Cult

As previously discussed, cults reflect and refract the societal norms and values from which they stem (Barker, 1986; Galper, 1982; Hassan, 1990, 2013; Nelson, 1968; Newcombe, 2014; Singer and Lalich, 1995; Tøllefsen, 2016). By substituting new values and commitments for previously held beliefs and allegiances, cults seek to disrupt and dismantle the preexisting order. To achieve this objective, they often target individuals who feel deprived of something because they are more likely to be obedient followers and susceptible to propaganda. Following

this pattern, Alderman uses the disadvantaged position of women in patriarchy to expose the dangers of group dynamics prone to exploitation and marked by a dangerous sense of one-mindedness. In light of this, *The Power* is set in a patriarchal society and chronicles the rise of Allie's cultic group, which can be named the cult of Mother Eve. Since patriarchy denotes male dominance in both public and private domains (Sultana, 2010: 2), this corrupt image opens the ground for groups like Allie's cult in the novel. As the patriarchal society puts male experiences above female ones by defending that women are inferior to men by their inborn nature, Allie's group aims to abolish patterns of patriarchy that reduce women to inferiority. It takes advantage of women's unfavourable social position to spark a revolutionary change that grants women control in a new matriarchal society. Hence, through Allie's teachings, women unite in a single voice in the face of an unsafe environment where they are considered subservient. Their oppression drives them to take revenge on their oppressors, namely men. By uniting women from all walks of life to speak out against their oppression, Allie's cult slowly transforms into a significant religion that elevates women and subjugates men. Consequently, patriarchy becomes more than just a term. It serves as the basis for the origin and social influence of Mother Eve's cult, offering a lens to understand women's reality and lived experience.

For women who suffer under patriarchy, trauma constructs a strong bond between them on a psychological level. Typically, traumatic events shatter the construction of the self and undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience (Herman, 2015: 51). This leads the victims to question both the significance of the self and the safety of the world. They have trouble trusting themselves, others and even God since their previous identity has been irrevocably shattered by the trauma (Herman, 2015: 56). This vulnerability can leave people more susceptible to influence, which cults can use to their advantage to lure new members. In this respect, Sponholz (2005: 148) contends that by drawing people into a spiritual realm where life is reduced to vaporous, insubstantial illusions, cults assist people in avoiding emotional bankruptcy and provide a psychological haven from the intense internal fight within the mind. The group functions as a kind of safety net for those whose inner lives are turbulent in the first place. Given that women in *The Power* live in a patriarchal society, they experience violence, sexual assault, enslavement, abuse, and many more mistreatments that leave them traumatised. In Moldova, for instance, some of them are imprisoned in a dark basement. This is because Moldova is "the world capital of human sex-trafficking," with numerous towns that have "staging posts in basements and apartments in condemned buildings" (Alderman, 2017: 93). There, women are coerced into becoming sex workers and are nothing more than a financial commodity, highlighting their oppressed status as the Other and the object. Other countries

have also curtailed women's autonomy and freedom, causing them to feel socially marginalised and fostering a climate conducive to the cult's flourishing. These are the places where "men come when they want a woman they can use without law or licence, discard without censure," where "a woman could not walk alone ... not if she were under seventy, and not with certainty even then" (Alderman, 2017: 132-133). Despite making women doubt their safety in society, these experiences provide a point of unity, allowing them to relate to each other's agonies.

United around their shared agony, women are motivated to organise a mass movement to exert superiority through a cult that revolves around them in a patriarchal society. However, patriarchy views humanity through a male-centric lens. Instead of recognising women as autonomous individuals, men are seen as the arbiters of women's identity (Beauvoir, 2011: 5-6). In this sense, patriarchy can be said to have a prescribed standard by which to judge what is normal or abnormal. With this standard, norms specify proper behaviour and define the group's identity and collective actions (McDonald and Crandall, 2015: 147). Those who consistently break from the norm experience social reactions like losing their status or being expelled from the group. For this reason, while the novel's women gain the ability to control electricity, their social acceptance decreases. They face further marginalisation. This is evident in the case of Allie, who, despite her initial ease in obtaining rides, finds it difficult to do so after the widespread of such powers. As she tries to hitch a ride, Allie encounters people who shy away from her with panic and a woman who "makes the sign of the cross as her husband drives on" (Alderman, 2017: 37), marking her as an ominous and dangerous other. This reaction is based on the prevailing discourse surrounding women with *skein*, which has led to the formation of certain beliefs and attitudes towards them because, by their very existence, they challenge social norms. To explain, women have traditionally been limited to a nurturing role, whereas men perform all activities that link society to the natural world and humanity, such as hunting, fishing, and warfare (Beauvoir, 2011: 85). All of this encourages men to elevate themselves above the animals and make the sex that kills more valuable than the sex that gives birth (Beauvoir, 2011: 76). Nevertheless, women with electric powers can subvert and change this narrative, for they can employ these skills to suppress men who can no longer physically overpower them. This characterises women as dangerous forces for society's safety and puts them at odds with the current social structure.

Once women's *skeins* become a significant social issue, the public discourse shifts in favour of protecting the social order from them. Since power depends on the production and circulation of truth (Foucault, 1980: 93), this discursive shift is necessary to establish power relations. This is exemplified by how the media changes the narrative surrounding the girls'

apparent electrokinetic abilities despite its initial dismissal of the matter. At first, their abilities are discussed in light-hearted terms about electric eels and compared to made-up scenarios. However, as more scientific evidence becomes available (e.g., identifying a unique organ in the girls' collarbones), a conflict between scientific investigation and religious interpretation has emerged. Accordingly, an Israeli anthropologist interprets the skein to validate the aquatic-ape hypothesis, whereas preachers and televangelists see it as a sign of the end of the world (Alderman, 2017: 20). This uncertainty surrounding the existence of women with skein causes society to mistreat them, leading it to produce the truth that power demands to function effectively. Such a social state echoes Foucault's conceptualisation of discourse as a body of knowledge. Hence, discourse moves away from its linguistic connotations towards the notion of discipline (McHoul and Grace, 2002: 26). In this sense, discourse reveals the connections between bodies of knowledge and forms of social control. This connection directly influences public reactions to women with skeins. It not only causes skein to assume an enigmatic and monstrous quality that fosters collective paranoia but also paints women as anomalies to be feared, oppressed, and eliminated. Thus, some girls are seen as possessed, are abandoned by their families, or seek medical help to remove the skein to end their alienation (Alderman, 2017: 42). Many other girls are blinded by the warlords who put "their eyes out with hot irons," or even murdered by "a bunch of guys ... in Nebraska" (Alderman, 2017: 26, 261). In view of all these incidents that have grown out of the ambiguous discourse that terrorises the population, women with skeins are pushed to the periphery of society. Their presence within the public becomes detrimental, given that even the media fails to explain the origin of skein.

Following the increasing harmful public responses, Allie finds ground to develop a cult that comforts and supports women's suffering and fears as they face life's challenges. Unlike cults that indoctrinate beliefs of a hostile, hateful and dangerous outer world to ensure that their members feel like misfits (Hassan, 2013: 150), Allie does not need to convince them. Her soon-to-be followers are already experiencing these feelings because the patriarchal society has instilled dread in them. In this context, Sonja, a twenty-year-old survivor, exposes how every man contributes to the suffering of sex-trafficked women in Moldova within the narrative. Her testimony shows that despite being aware of the trafficking, the mayor, the police, and even the common townsmen did nothing to stop it (Alderman, 2017: 94). This statement not only displays a systemic corruption and collusion that permitted trafficking to continue untouched but also stresses a problem within the larger social framework in which abuse was condoned and facilitated. It is this problem that induces women to unite under Allie's guidance. Accordingly, witnessing and experiencing such mistreatments just because of their gender,

women become open to influence and gravitate towards like-minded people who share the same power. Thus, before their affiliation with Allie's group, life for women has been as follows:

'It was like being part of a wave of water [that] feels powerful, but it is only there for a moment, the sun dries the puddles and the water is gone. Then you feel maybe it never happened. That is how it was with us. The only wave that changes anything is a tsunami. You have to tear down the houses and destroy the land if you want to be sure no one will forget you.' ... 'Now they will know,' ... 'that they are the ones who should not walk out of their houses alone at night. They are the ones who should be afraid.'
(Alderman, 2017: 133-134)

This thirst for revenge catalyses women to band together under the banner of a cult that claims to be committed to their safety and prosperity. Rather than seeking refuge in God, distraction or entertainment to cope with existential questions and discomfort (Cinnamon and Farson, 1979: xiv), women resort to resisting abuse. Given this, all Allie has to do is light a spark in the hearts of women who want to take revenge on the culprits responsible for their lifelong suffering, as they know that nothing will change unless they take matters into their own hands.

Considering Allie, too, has had her share of traumatic experiences in a patriarchal society, she aspires to kindle such a spark by founding a cult. Similar to most cult leaders, she comes from a traumatic background and has faced many challenges. As an orphan whose only memory of her mother was "[a] pale pink Sunday church hat" (Alderman, 2017: 109), Allie underwent a challenging life filled with frequent placements. She recalls various homes that exemplify nurturing and uneasy moments in her formative years. However, it is her maltreatment at the hands of the Montgomery-Taylors that leaves her severely traumatised and instils in her a deep-seated hatred of men. There, not only does Mr. Montgomery-Taylor inflict regular physical and sexual abuse upon Allie, but also Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor displays apathy towards his crimes, framing them as well-deserved punishment for her foster daughter's misdeeds. Still, Allie only hates men and regards women as innocent. Echoing how cult leaders unconsciously reflect their own history of abuse while justifying their harmful practices (Shaw, 2003: 110), Allie adopts a distorted worldview that influences her leadership style and doctrines. This is indicative of her trauma. After all, a traumatic experience is an image or event that possesses the victim and only unfolds fully in another place and time (Caruth, 1995: 4, 8). Thus, despite Mrs Montgomery-Taylor's evil intentions, Allie initially believes that she was unaware of her husband's abusive acts because Mrs Montgomery-Taylor was seemingly listening to the radio as Allie was suffering upstairs. As a result of this belief, Allie thinks that man stands for danger, whereas woman denotes safety or, at least, the absence of harm. This thought reshapes her worldview and causes her to alter her views about human nature, intimacy patterns, interpersonal relationships, and personal identity, as John P. Wilson (2004: 12) asserts

on the effects of trauma. For this reason, Allie seeks to remould the world according to her own desires, striving to construct a safe haven where she can rule men through a cult of her own that preaches misandrist doctrine.

To legitimise her doctrine, Allie constructs a religious persona for herself. This persona parallels many cult leaders who, as Appel (1983: 18) defines, claim to be messiahs, heavenly messengers, or saviours sent to save the world from an approaching catastrophe. Like these leaders, Allie emerges amidst a crisis and offers immediate salvation through absolute redemption and fulfilment in exchange for unwavering loyalty. This enables her to offer a sense of certainty and answers in an uncertain world, attracting potential members. Therefore, much like some cults that advocate for the transformation and purification of society from perceived evil influences (Henderson, 2023: 31), Allie promotes a new religion that can subvert the existing order on behalf of women. She does this by introducing a revised women-centred religious discourse against the pre-existing societal discourse that casts women unfavourably. As discursive practices play a strategic role in power dynamics (Foucault, 1978: 101-102), Allie uses discourse to assert her religious persona to gain an advantage in influencing society, especially women. Drawing upon scriptural and Jesus' teachings, Allie seeks to construct a matriarchal interpretation of God, in which the maternal figure, rather than the paternal, serves as God's messenger. She asserts that "God the Mother came to earth in the body of Mary, who gave up her child that we could live free from sin. God always said She would return to earth. And She has come back now to instruct us in her ways" (Alderman, 2017: 80). By asking her followers, "which is greater, God or the world," Allie employs the Socratic method to support herself, causing them to conclude that "the one who creates is greater than the thing created" (Alderman, 2017: 80). Here, discourse serves to shape reality and affirm Allie's religious persona. It allows her to hold the power to decide what qualifies as truth based on her connection with God. This persuades her audience that "God has returned, and Her message is for" only Allie's followers (Alderman, 2017: 81). Consequently, Allie distorts religious doctrine to construct a convincing narrative where she acts in God's name to introduce a new religion to serve her cult.

For Allie to solidify her persona, she must also reassure her potential followers of her leadership skills. Since cultists seek an idealised figure to submit to (Kramer and Alstad, 1993: 89), Allie initially exploits others' hostility towards her potential followers to secure their support for her messianic identity. For instance, at the Sisters of Mercy Convent, she discovers that skein is considered to originate from "the Devil working in the world," giving the girls "powers that men are not meant to know" (Alderman, 2017: 45-46). This belief drives Sister

Veronica to refuse Gordy's request to help Luanne's seizure. She asserts that Luanne "should not have welcomed the thing into her body" and simultaneously punishes Savannah for using her power during a lightning storm by saying, "no meals tomorrow" (Alderman, 2017: 76). As language shapes social dynamics, interpersonal relationships, mental states, and behaviour (Grischechko, 2013: 145), such expressions arguably modify the girls' perception of reality, enabling the nuns to justify their adverse practices. However, Allie deliberately showcases her messianic qualities to challenge their dehumanising and oppressive approach. This resembles how some cult leaders strategically deploy myths, symbols and imagery to instil in their followers a sense of submission to a superior cosmic force, revered purpose or fundamental principle (Ross, 2014: 159). Accordingly, Allie kneels beside Luanne to detect the erratic electrical impulses in her body and gently touches her skull to administer a slight surge of power to halt her convulsions, causing her to awaken. This remarkable occurrence not only causes the girls to label Allie as a healer, ascribing her ability to divine intervention but also enables her to disprove Sister Veronica's claims. Such recognition paves the way for Allie to be seen as a powerful and reliable leader. To elucidate, "Allie employs ritual performativity to gain power within her specific community" (Froslic, 2020: 3). Since performativity operates as a temporal process through the repetition of norms (Butler, 2011: xii-xix), Allie can affirm her religious authority by mimicking Jesus Christ in the gospel stories. This portrayal establishes Mother Eve's cult and gradually leads Allie to become the leader of women's triumph over men.

In addition to performativity, Allie's aptitude for grasping the nature of *skein* better than those around her has granted her even more authority to build a cult. Her unique ability to perform miracles in ways beyond the girls' capacity to explain allows her to be perceived as a divine agent of sacred power by those who receive her healing touch. This can be explained through Foucault's concept of power-knowledge. Contrary to conventional humanist views that suggest power breeds ignorance and blindness, Foucault points to the continuous relations between power and knowledge. He argues that power not only shapes the search for knowledge but also constructs new knowledge objects and information accumulation (Foucault, 1980: 51). As such, knowledge constantly produces itself through the use of power, and power effects are formed through knowledge. This mutual relationship suggests that power without knowledge cannot be exercised, and knowledge inevitably leads to the exercise of power (Foucault, 1980: 52). Similarly, Allie operates the knowledge she has gained at an aquarium to consolidate her religious persona. There, she encounters a sign saying that electric eels can disrupt "the electric signals in the brain" of their prey, even causing them to "swim straight into their mouths" (Alderman, 2017: 40). This information reveals to Allie how she can employ the *skein* to

manipulate people's minds as well as overpowering them. In this way, she presents herself as an authority figure to women. For instance, when Allie performs a baptismal ceremony on the girls in the name of the Holy Mother at dawn on the shore, she secretly bends their knees with the skein. However, they interpret the act as something heavenly. This is because Allie "stand[s], dry in the water," whereas the girls "stand in the circle, wet-headed and amazed" (Alderman, 2017: 79), enhancing the exalted atmosphere set up by her religious rhetoric. In this instance, Allie draws on her knowledge acquired from the eels to designate herself as an authority figure within the group. This position of power allows her to conceive new truths that reinforce her leadership, echoing the Foucauldian power-knowledge.

All things considered, Allie joins the chorus of female voices crying out for women's protection in a society where they suffer disproportionately. Her advocacy provides a unifying platform where each of them finds hope in the darkness surrounding them. With women being forced into prostitution, enslaved, and scared to go out alone, Allie's cult gains a foothold. In fact, she even creates herself a religious persona to appeal to the masses. This enables her to generate a counter-narrative to that harmful image of skein as a dangerous phenomenon. Hence, Allie's narrative centralises women and legitimises her position as the leader of a female-centric movement. Her apparent association with God helps Allie to establish her own cult, in which everyone obeys the Holy Mother's wishes through Allie's own voice. Accordingly, some of the key points her cult promotes are that God is a woman, women should lead with love, salvation lies in justice, and women should support each other rather than live under male authority (Alderman, 2017: 83-84). The existence of the Holy Mother and Allie's status as the bearer of her truth are used to validate these beliefs. For this reason, the group's religious set-up not only justifies her leadership but also foregrounds a collective agenda for women. This dynamic encourages Allie's supporters to follow her will, just like how Echo repeated Narcissus' words.

2.2. From Polyphonic Sounds to A Monophonic Voice: Creation of the Cult Mentality

People in crowds have the potential to perform behaviours that they usually avoid. This tendency is driven by a desire to fit in with the group to feel a sense of belonging and solidarity. Hence, individuals define themselves according to their interpersonal relationships and base their self-evaluation around such social identities (Brewer and Gardner, 1996: 83). This can lead them to identify themselves primarily through their group affiliation, internalising the group's perspective as their own. Accordingly, they adjust their self-concept to their social context by taking on multiple social selves corresponding to the different groups of people whose views they value (Abrams and Hogg, 2001: 425). In compliance with this view, cults

operate collectively, where individual differences in the personalities, emotions and thoughts of members are minimal. This causes the members to develop homogeneous patterns of behaviour, thoughts and preferences that are moulded by group dynamics and the influence of significant figures within the cult (Carlton Best, 2018: 13). Such uniformity constructs a state which can be referred to as a cult mentality, where members forfeit their individuality and become de-individualised, identifying solely with the group's ideology. In essence, the cult environment fosters a mindset that is a direct result of the cult's systematic use of coercive persuasion. In this respect, cults destabilise their members for the purpose of replacing their everyday reality and worldview with a new, unanimously accepted alternative one (Singer and Lalich, 1995: 69). This process can lead to inner discomfort and confusion, eroding members' inner confidence and promoting reliance on the group. It often results in black-and-white thinking, characterised by a low tolerance of ambiguity towards other people, as opposed to group members.

One of the central aspects of cults is the dichotomy they create between the external world and the cult itself. This division devalues external influences and binds members of the cult to the group by creating an internal, family-like structure (Alper, 1994: 105). In order to achieve such an outcome, cult leaders use communication styles such as negation, elaboration, intensification, and othering to instil extreme non-religious ideologies in their adherents (Palayon et al., 2020: 55). This is why Allie draws upon commentary to foster an us-versus-them dichotomy among her followers, which ultimately leads to the othering of men. She strategically modifies theology to introduce an additional insight into the body of knowledge that benefits her agenda. In doing so, Allie's commentary offers a new interpretation of religion. She delivers a sermon in which she preaches how God's grace is available to all as the following:

'I have not come to tell you to give up a single strand of your belief. I am not here to convert you. Christian, Jew, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, if you are of any faith or none at all, God does not want you to change your practice.'... 'God loves all of us,' she says, 'and She wants us to know that She has changed Her garment merely. She is beyond female and male, She is beyond human understanding. ... 'You have been taught that you are unclean, that you are not holy, that your body is impure and could never harbour the divine. You have been taught to despise everything you are and to long only to be a man. But you have been taught *lies*. God lies within you, God has returned to earth to teach you, in the form of this new power. Do not come to me looking for answers, for you must find the answers within yourself.' (Alderman, 2017: 114-115)

In this passage, Allie acts as a compassionate and open-minded messenger, delivering a message of inclusivity and empowerment to a diverse audience with varying beliefs. Despite emphasising that she intends to validate and embrace her listeners' existing practices and

beliefs, Allie introduces a new perspective through her commentary. She urges her listeners to reconsider their traditional ways and embrace female figures like Miriam, Fatimah, Tara and Mary as embodiments of divine wisdom and liberation in place of the usual patriarchal figures. Moreover, Allie's religious instructions suggest a distinction between her group (women) and outsiders (men), reminiscent of religions where believers are separated from non-believers. Her affirmation of the inherent sanctity of each person challenges the social norms that promote impurity and inadequacy, particularly among women. In this way, Allie empowers individuals to acknowledge the divine within themselves, replacing the promotion of an idealised version of masculinity with a rebellion directed at male-centred religion. This paves the way for a cult mentality among her disciples, as her language carries an implicit us-versus-them narrative that eventually leads her followers to believe they are superior to men. Such a belief grants Allie, like other cult leaders, the power to gain or hold onto influence over her followers.

The us-versus-them narrative allows Allie to act as a saviour who can bring salvation or survival to women. This stems from their innate need to find an external, miraculous solution to their existential problems and fears related to living and dying (Kramer and Alstad, 1993: 32). In this sense, it is clear that women with skeins seek to affiliate with a collective organisation because society deems them as dangerous and detrimental, making nowhere in the world safe for them. Even the very convent that welcomes these girls does not offer a wholly secure refuge. For example, a heated debate engulfs the nuns over Allie's doctrines. In favour of the doctrine is Sister Maria Ignacia, who compares it to traditional beliefs centred on the Mother and the Son. On the opposite side, Sister Katherine raises concerns about possible heresy, in addition to Sister Veronica, who advocates radical measures by saying,

The Devil is in this house, ... We have allowed the Devil to take root in our breasts and make his nest in our hearts. If we do not cut the canker out now, we shall all be damned. ... Damned. If we do not burn them as they burned these girls in Decatur and in Shreveport, the Devil will take us all. It shall be utterly consumed. (Alderman, 2017: 81-82)

Such hostile and radical reactions to the cult's doctrines feed into Allie's us-versus-them narrative. On this basis, akin to numerous cults with a clear insider/outsider distinction (Ross, 2014: 138-139), Allie's group begins to view non-members as impure and unenlightened. This explains the festivity in the convent when Sister Veronica dies, with more girls seeking baptism with a sense of celebration. Initially, her death is attributed to a heart attack, but on closer examination, the nuns notice that Christ's figure on the cross appears to have vine-like markings on his flesh. The markings imply that someone (e.g. Allie or her followers) might have killed Sister Veronica with their electric powers. Nonetheless, since power is often perceived subjectively, with people attributing it to others (Horner, 1989: 20), the girls explain it as a

divine intervention that signals Sister Veronica's repentance and forgiveness of her sins. Her death demonstrates how a simplistic black-and-white view driven by an us-versus-them narrative can lead to cruelty and generate solidarity among believers through rejoicing in someone's death merely because they do not share their beliefs. This also enhances their faith in Allie's doctrines as the truth and convinces them that God condemns heretics. Thus, they feel superior to the others.

Based on this self-image, the girls begin to inflict pain on men whom Allie's teachings consider as threatening and enemies to be protected from. This reflects cults that paint the external world negatively where harm can be done to members (Goldberg and Goldberg, 1982: 168). Considering Allie's us-versus-them narrative forged through her sermons, she propagates women to engage in a "war of all against all" (Alderman, 2017: 312) because she considers only places without men safe. This gathers women under the same hostile umbrella and reinforces the cult mentality. In other words, they celebrate whether a heretic woman dies or an enemy (i.e. men) is abused to feel protected. Some women push men to the ground, for instance, and use electric shocks to control them in a ritual that takes place in the forest. During the ritual, a blind woman wearing a scarlet robe talks about ownership, sacrifice, superiority, and subordination, exhibiting Mother Eve's theology through remarks such as the following:

'You are weak and we are strong. You are the gift and we are the owners.

'You are the victim and we are the victors. You are the slave and we are the masters.

'You are the sacrifice and we are the recipients.

'You are the son and we are the Mother.

'Do you acknowledge that it is so?'

All the men in the circle looked on eagerly.

'Yes,' they whispered. 'Yes, yes, please, yes, now, yes.' (Alderman, 2017: 269)

This speech adopts a ritualistic power dynamic in which women are the masters and men are the enslaved, reversing the existing power relations within gender roles. Since power is both deliberate and non-subjective, its distribution can change through the deliberate exercise of power by specific individuals and groups within particular historical contexts (Heller, 1996: 83). In this instance, too, the blind woman's discourse actively reshapes normalised power dynamics, giving her superiority over men. This resembles how religions utilise norms, traditions, and sacred figures to define appropriate behaviour (Kramer and Alstad, 1993: 24). Such dynamics foster a system of control over subjects by rulers and domination over wives by their husbands. Hence, the blind woman accentuates men's new status in society and the animosity that unites women under a cult mentality by describing men as weak, gifts, victims, slaves, sacrifices, and sons. This discursive representation of men allows women's superiority

to gain further momentum. Ultimately, these depictions create a system of control over men by women, for society progressively internalises such views and acts accordingly. In this way, men's inferiority to women is not only emphasised but also slowly inscribed into the collective consciousness of society.

In order to reinforce her doctrines, Allie aligns her speech with her religious persona. Since charismatic leaders adjust their language to influence their listeners' attitudes (Smith and Zárate, 2015: 666), Allie's religious performativity allows her to recruit followers and manufacture truths around her holy persona. In her use of Foucauldian power-knowledge, she reinforces such an authority. Given that power and knowledge are interdependent, her possession of knowledge enables her to exert power. Therefore, she takes advantage of followers' tendency to mindlessly obey orders when they have great faith in a leader (Luiz, 2019: 15) and uses her extensive knowledge of skein to perform purported miracles. In one of these instances, she heals a boy named Christian, who "haven't been able to walk" since childhood (Alderman, 2017: 183). While performing her miracle, Allie speaks through the voice of the Holy Mother, saying,

'Not my will, Holy Mother, but Thine be done. If it is Your will to heal this child, let him be healed, and if it be Your will that he suffer in this world to reap a great harvest in the next, let that be done.' ...
'But there's a great multitude praying for this humble and obedient young boy, Holy Mother. There's a great crowd here pleading with you now, yearning for Your grace to fall upon him and Your breath to raise him up as You raised up Mary for Your service. Holy Mother, listen to our prayers.' (Alderman, 2017: 183-184)

Here, her prayer underlines the acceptance of the Mother's will, whether she heals or brings suffering, in the knowledge that Allie's miracles do not always remain. Given that both outcomes have been ascribed to the Holy Mother's will, Allie's conduct silences any critics and nurtures her bond with the divine. Just as she cures Luanne, Allie draws on her powers to heal Christian, letting the crowd testify to her prowess. Even though such a miracle can be performed by anyone with a sufficient understanding of the power, Allie's unique and sacred appeal springs from the fact that other wielders can merely harness skein's violent nature compared to how she presents herself. In this way, she "weaves a hypnotic spell over" (Ulman and Abse, 1983: 641) her followers, captivating their hearts and minds. After all, the more miracles she performs, the more she equates herself with divinity, causing her supporters to identify with her and adopt a cult mentality. This drives them to blindly obey her instructions, whether heroic or barbaric, without any sense of conscience, guilt, or shame.

The collective obedience of Allie's supporters is also a product of the cult's shelter for women. To explain, once the right group setting is in place, commitment to the cult grows

efficiently, allowing the development of a rapid sense of belonging (Galanter, 1989: 90-91). This is vital to how cults function, as increasing attachment to the group encourages selfless behaviour and a shared perspective (Galanter, 1989: 37). Thus, the sanctuary Allie's group provides for its members leaves them susceptible to the cult mentality. Since people often join cults to find a sense of family or community, socialisation, comfort, validation, affection and the like (Sponholz, 2005: 11), Allie fosters belonging among her followers who have suffered maltreatment and injustices. They find serenity in her community, which creates a fertile ground for the growth and maintenance of the cult. This is demonstrated when Roxy first arrives at the convent. The warm and kind atmosphere makes her feel "a little bit soft inside, a bit teary" (Alderman, 2017: 104). There, not only does Roxy find a place at a table where the air is filled with chatter and the welcoming aroma of a hearty stew, but she also receives help from another girl to dress, adding to the comfort and familiarity that pervades the room. These comforting moments directly contrast with Roxy's uncomfortable family life. She feels unwanted by her family, as when her father brings her home late at night, only to be sent away by his partner (Alderman, 2017: 105). This shows how the sense of community offered by cults provides a substitute similar to the family structures from which members had to depart (Appel, 1983: 66). Consequently, Roxy discovers belonging and solidarity among the girls, "many [of whom] come from underprivileged backgrounds or are representatives of the dispossessed" (Warchał, 2020: 94). Her different family and cult experiences highlight the embracing and loving nature of Allie's group and associate it with notions of acceptance and fellowship. This way, Allie can isolate the (potential) members from outsiders, such as their families, to keep them dependent on the cult.

In addition to encouraging belonging, Allie exploits similarity to gain the members' trust and loyalty, which helps solidify the cult mentality. Their likeness enables the members to identify with each other and allows the cult to function as a home where the socially marginalised can find refuge and inclusion. Since humans seek connections and relationships with others (Carlton Best, 2018: 25), Allie draws on her personal attributes to build a stronger bond with her members. This is the primary source of her influence as a charismatic leader. Therefore, Allie discloses her vulnerabilities and desires to Roxy to strengthen her bond with the group, for she considers Roxy a potent and beneficial tool for her political agenda. By revealing her past in foster care and confessing that she, too, has killed someone (Alderman, 2017: 109-111), Allie shows her trust in Roxy. This causes Roxy to validate Allie's decisions, solidifying their bond and mutual acceptance of each other's personal histories. Moreover, similar to cult leaders who use a range of personality traits and discursive strategies to

manipulate people effectively (Henderson, 2023: 41; Lemke, 2015: 29), Allie adapts her personality and speech to suit the person she is talking to in order to create an affinity with them. Accordingly, Allie's interactions with Roxy always revolve around Roxy's apparent power, understanding her obsession with being strong. In the same way, whenever Allie speaks to Tatiana, she tells her that God has a special mission for her and that the Holy Mother's way will spread worldwide, despite her suspicions about Tatiana's success. This is because Allie is aware of Tatiana's wish to get her blessing for the war against Awadi-Atif. After all, as Mother Eve, Allie "speaks slowly and carefully," measuring her words and saying nothing "without consequence" (Alderman, 2017: 190). She does this to earn their devotion and seize further dominion, resulting in Roxy becoming a drug lord on the cult's behalf and Tatiana eventually handing over Bessapara to be ruled by Allie.

All things considered, it leads to the assertion that Allie utilises specific tactics to instil a cult mentality within her followers, inducing them to comply with her directives without questioning them. The first tactic that Allie employs is to redefine religion in a feminine context by modifying existing religious knowledge and making commentaries on it. This enables her to create a narrative of us-versus-them, which allows women to gather around a female religious figure. Following this, Allie uses miracles and discourse to establish a connection between herself and the divine, thereby gaining authority and causing women to identify with her political agenda. As has been noted, she harnesses "the power that biology has provided young women with to meet her political purposes" (Yebra, 2019: 76). Lastly, Allie exploits the idea of similarity and belongingness to strengthen her followers' identification with her cause and gain their trust, while simultaneously assuring their loyalty and dependence on the cult. Hence, members form strong empathic connections with one another, fostering a sense of unity and cohesion within the group (Ulman and Abse, 1983: 645). Through various instances and methods, Allie builds a sense of community and belongingness, reinforcing the cult's ideology and beliefs and further fostering reliance on her as the leader. These strategies operated by Allie are pretty effective in ensuring that her followers trust and obey her without questioning her directives, forging a cult mentality among women. Through this mentality, Allie reduces her followers to images of Echo, whose voice repeats what Narcissus tells her. Just as Echo becomes reliant on Narcissus to express herself, Allie's followers rely on her to express who they are. The more they hear Allie speak, the more they repeat her words, believing her path is the sole line towards success.

2.3. A Conversion of Society: The Subversion of Social Norms

As previously discussed, Foucault's concept of power is comprehensive and nuanced. This conception challenges traditional understandings that correlate power solely with repression. Accordingly, Foucault (1996: 260) argues that power emerges from ongoing societal struggles rather than being a static entity wielded by one group over another. These struggles continue to shape and redefine power dynamics over time, irrespective of their political, economic or social nature. Therefore, Foucault envisions power as ingrained in social change, operating to produce transformations that either limit or expand human freedom. He posits that power manifests as a series of clashes within the social body, driving various forms of change (Heller, 1996: 83). This makes power a network that permeates society instead of a practice limited to particular individuals or organisations. In this sense, power is a constructive force that frames social relationships and institutions by seeping into the social fabric. Moreover, Foucault suggests that power and resistance are not ontologically distinct but rather two sides of the same coin, denoting the capacity to effect social change. This is why he uses the term resistance to highlight those power-exercising subjects with less power than others (Heller, 1996: 99). Such forms of power are called resistance not because they lack power altogether but because they challenge prevailing power structures.

Given that society does not have fixed power structures, they can be challenged from below as well as from above. This way, no power apparatus has "the status of a transhistorical law" (Gordon, 1980: 256), meaning that no single ideology of oppression or subversion can maintain dominance indefinitely. In other words, the dynamic nature of power and resistance requires an intricate interplay between individuals and groups enmeshed within the power structures of society. In accordance with this, no group is ever thoroughly powerless, for there will always be counter-hegemonic groups with access to some power mechanisms in order to resist hegemony (Heller, 1996: 101). This notion of power harbouring resistance is also expressed in Alderman's novel. On the one hand, an oppressive and despised patriarchal order is torn apart when women gather under a group canvas and empower themselves. On the other, some men band together and endeavour to organise a force to defend their individual liberty and rights against the increasing female-centric tide. Men's resistance stems from their belief that women will take over absolute control, denying men their equal rights and freedom. In pursuit of these, some men protest at a mall in Tucson, Arizona, holding banners demanding "Justice for men" (Alderman, 2017: 170), analogous to women calling for equality in real life, while women in the novel yield power and status. Even a bombing, claimed by "a terrorist

group calling itself Male Power,” takes place to pressure the government to take action against “the so-called ‘enemies of man’” (Alderman, 2017: 174).

On top of the protests, the growing harassment of men has led them to rally around UrbanDox, a conspiracy theorist and a leading figure in men’s rights groups. Not only does he espouse conspiracy theories and misogynistic beliefs about how women are colluding to kill men by various means, but he also insists that men are being deliberately diminished and controlled by women under the guidance of a secret council of female conspirators as seen in the following quotation:

You know they’re going to try to kill us. ... The women. ... They hate us all. They want us all dead. ... They want us docile and confused. ... Have you seen the numbers on domestic violence against men? On murders of men by women? ... They’ll only keep the most genetically healthy of us alive. See, this is why God meant men to be the ones with the power. However bad we treat a woman —well, it’s like a slave. ... We need laws now to protect men. We need curfews on women. We need the government to release all the funding they need to “research” that cure. We need men to stand up and be counted. We are being ruled by fags who worship women. We need to cut them down. (Alderman, 2017: 178-180)

These claims and allegations against women incite further misogyny among men, culminating in a gender war. In this way, language is both a tool to reflect as well as to shape thoughts and experiences. It profoundly influences both individuals and society as a whole. Thus, when wielded violently, language can foster a culture of aggression and even fuel actual acts of violence. This is because language is not merely a means of communication but an active force that can influence behaviours and actions (O’Connor, 1995: 309). In line with this, UrbanDox’s discourse not only reveals his inner world and character but also offers guidance to other men in search of answers and means to regain their position in society. His speech is rife with hatred and paranoia, characterising women as the enemy and calling for drastic measures to defend men’s rights, as the passage above shows. He presents himself as a saviour of men against predicted oppression and uses unreliable evidence to support his radical thoughts while pleading with men to join him in his fight. Nonetheless, in stark contrast to Allie’s seemingly embrative manner that does not blatantly display men as the enemy at first, UrbanDox openly expresses his hatred towards women and fosters violent behaviour, which sabotages his cause.

The resistance to Allie’s authority is not limited to the men’s rights movement. There is another notable figure within the cult who exhibits a similar defiance. After witnessing the cruelty and vileness of women first-hand, particularly the abuse and torture inflicted on defenceless men at a camp in Bessapara, she refuses to follow Allie and her teachings any longer. This causes her to realise the cruel gulf between Allie’s promoted ideals and the true nature of her group. Like many cults seeking positive publicity (Hassan, 2000: 167), Allie publicly promotes a supposedly inclusive religious ideology to attract more followers and

convince people of their actions' morality. Nonetheless, her misandrist propaganda covertly encourages her adherents to treat men as the enemy. Accordingly, Roxy discovers that women in Bessapara are mercilessly and systematically preying on young men, subjecting them to atrocious levels of sexual violence and torture. Since rape intrinsically aims to terrorise, dominate and humiliate the victim by intentionally inducing psychological trauma (Herman, 2015: 58), the cultist women rape the camp's men without any thought of repercussions or accountability, simply because they have the power to do so. There is no territorial gain, no "particular wrong to be avenged, or even soldiers to be taken" (Alderman, 2017: 283) other than pure, unadulterated monstrosity behind their heinous acts. Moreover, the raid constitutes a violation and a source of trauma for the rest of the camp, including Roxy, due to their inability to intervene. Precisely, Roxy's loss of her powers because of her family's betrayal (i.e. stealing her skin) helps her to view the situation from the powerless men's perspective, making her understand how such helplessness fosters horror. Hence, as the evil emanates from the very cult she believes in, Roxy voices her concerns about the escalating conflict in the North to Allie to find a peaceful solution. However, Allie still believes that "[t]he war has to start now ... then the women will win" (Alderman, 2017: 312-313). This revelation convinces Roxy to abandon Allie's cult, which advocates the sacrifice of countless innocent lives. Considering these oppositions, how does Allie's cult successfully subvert social norms by imposing its mentality on society?

Power lies in a complex network of relationships instead of a centralised authority. In its modern form, it does not function in terms of restrictive physical control (McHoul and Grace, 2002: 63). For this reason, modern power does not rely on the absolute concentration of power in a single individual. It operates through a circulation of mistrust in which everyone functions within their assigned roles like cogs in a machine (Cooper, 1981: 110). Hence, if one seeks to possess all power, this attempt will eventually fail and be met with greater resistance. In light of this, Allie strategically deflects her followers' atrocities away from her own image. She poses as a sacred messenger who simply follows the Mother's bidding. On the surface, Allie seems like a fighter for women's freedom who tries to construct a fair world "for [them] to live freely" (Alderman, 2017: 155). She plays a vital role, for example, in rescuing Rachel Latif from police brutality among a multitude of women by facilitating her access to proper medical care. In another example, Allie helps women like Jocelyn to control their powers or to "heal ... and make [them] normal" (Alderman, 2017: 226). This positions her as someone who can heal vulnerable women and restore their powers. As such, Jocelyn places her wholehearted belief in Mother Eve, who "cured her ... gave [her powers] back to her" (Alderman, 2017: 303, 305). In

other words, Allie's deliberate actions reinforce her image as a fearless leader who deeply cares about women's well-being and the pursuit of peace. Her leadership presents a counterpoint to the predominant narrative that equates skein with violence, positioning her as a figure who can potentially challenge the status quo. In so doing, she highlights the authorities' failure to ensure women's safety. This helps her to cast a negative light on the government and generate a climate of mistrust. Therefore, her careful management of the role she performs in public allows Allie to be seen as a favourable and revolutionary leader.

However, beneath the surface, Allie plans to overthrow the prevailing order in favour of women's supremacy over men. Given that group members' emotional bonds to a leader facilitate the internalisation of that leader's ideals (Ulman and Abse, 1983: 644-645), it can be posited that the members are inclined to align themselves with the leader's values. Consequently, despite Allie's outwardly inclusive image, her misandrist discourse and beliefs incite her followers to perpetrate mistreatment and abuse against men. Nevertheless, such qualities are not apparent to the general public due to her success in dodging blame by projecting herself as an embodiment of holiness and women's rights. Hence, even when Allie wages war against men using the North Moldovans as an excuse, her rhetoric promotes unity in the struggle against the North in the interest of women's lives, urging America to join her cause by asking the following:

Will the greatest nation on the Earth, the land where I was born and raised, look on while innocent women are slaughtered and while freedom is destroyed? Will they watch in silence while we burn? If they abandon us, who will they not abandon? I call on women across the world to bear witness to what happens here. Bear witness and learn what you can expect to happen to you. If there are women in your government, hold them to account, call on them to act. (Alderman, 2017: 325)

Her speech is notable for its power and persuasiveness because Allie effectively establishes a connection between righteousness and herself. This approach enables her to employ a modern understanding of power since her discourse not only juxtaposes her opponents with atrocity and oppression but also links her cause with ideas of innocence and freedom. To put it differently, her plea for aid further highlights her as an agent of resistance against domination. This portrayal serves to strengthen Allie's positive image and particularly increases the spread of the cult mentality within society.

The perceived leniency of Allie's actions opens the door for her to challenge social norms, reinforcing her favourable reputation and positively affecting her influence in society. This is understandable, considering that societies have moved from a predominantly juridical society to one dominated by norms (Foucault, 1996: 197). Such a move facilitates vital changes in how society is organised and controlled. Accordingly, the control of individuals and

populations through norms becomes easier, turning them into actively compliant subjects whose submission enhances governance (Kelly, 2019: 16-17). This new societal configuration makes the power of law less prominent and gives precedence to norms in regulating behaviour as well as shaping the social order. Moreover, since norms represent “collective awareness about the preferred, appropriate behaviors among a certain group of people” (Chung and Rimal, 2016: 3), they constantly change depending on their interactions with society and its members. This suggests that crowds play a crucial role not only in reflecting social dynamics but also in actively participating in social transformations by causing changes in collective ideologies themselves. Beyond their role in initiating novel concepts, theories in science and political identities, crowds have the power to trigger enormous social transformations (Reicher, 2001: 183-184). These collective actions drive individuals to re-evaluate their agency within society. Indeed, studies and activist autobiographies consistently illustrate that people often participate in collective movements devoid of fully formed ideologies, but they refine their understanding of society and themselves in the process (Reicher, 2001: 183). In this respect, Mother Eve’s cult functions as a reforming force for society, particularly for women, by virtue of the shifting power dynamics brought about by skein. The cult mentality instilled by Allie’s charismatic persona and tactics allows her to restructure the very fabric of society, subverting social norms through a mixture of repressive and disciplinary powers.

Disciplinary power goes beyond just selecting or punishing individuals. Its goal is the internalisation of the dominant power dynamics, making it an integral part of their existence through training. This allows discipline to focus on individuals to map their existence and control them. As a “political anatomy of detail” (Foucault, 1995: 139, 170), discipline employs training and organisation to break down the masses into individual elements or cells. These individual elements are subsequently manipulated and used as both objects and instruments of power. Hence, disciplinary power works through an organised, regulated and diffused system of power relations in society, which is enforced through various control mechanisms. This exercise ultimately aims to establish a comprehensive and pervasive system of power designed to control individuals’ external and internal behaviours. In this context, the novel’s authorities attempt to mark the women with skeins to keep them in line. On the surface, the test seeks to identify women who endanger society with their uncontrollable power, but beneath this lurks a subtle reaffirmation of men’s power over women. This is illustrated in Madam Mayor Margot’s participation in the test to remain eligible for her government position. In a male-dominated political environment, Margot must stand her ground to maintain her authority with determination and resourcefulness by manipulating circumstances to her favour. Thus, despite

its invasive and psychologically distressing nature, she justifies the testing process as a matter of public safety. She persuades herself that any woman unable to withstand a discharge under minimal pressure is “a danger to herself, a danger, yes, to society” (Alderman, 2017: 69-70). Although this highlights the government’s practical disciplinary approach to bringing down powerful women, it also fosters opposition to this directive. Accordingly, regardless of the test’s accuracy on babies, Margot successfully hides her ability and maintains her position, even assuming a leading role in the testing program. This gives women access to influential positions of power, “thus exercise prominent social positions, relegating men to a role of submission and inferiority” (Garroni and Guimarães, 2021: 150). In this case, Margot unconsciously plays a pivotal role in infiltrating the cult mentality into society.

Contrasting the government’s ultimately futile attempt to exercise disciplinary power through women’s testing, Margot perfectly harnesses it by establishing the NorthStar camp, an institution reminiscent of schools and armies. The camp serves as a means of achieving political power and fulfilling her political ambitions. However, it also becomes a vehicle for the cult by making the girls more acceptable and normalised by society. According to Foucault, normalisation involves a complex structure of measurable intervals that places individuals within a standard range (Rabinow, 1984: 20). Concordantly, the camp plays a central role in shaping society in terms of identifying and controlling the anomaly (i.e. girls with skein) that exists within the social body. It implements a threefold strategy comprising creating safe practice spaces, identifying mentors and enforcing zero-tolerance outside these spaces. Through this, the camp functions like a military discipline. Such a discipline is a key factor in transforming the army into a unified force by improving individual skills, coordination, and overall effectiveness (Foucault, 1995: 210). For this reason, the camp gradually normalises the girls by training them to master their power and entrusting them with important duties such as protecting the world leaders or participating in wars in the name of the country. In addition to creating work opportunities, the camp also helps reduce street violence, promotes community safety, and provides an optimistic outlook for the future. This not only normalises the girls but also grants them respective positions within society, causing younger generations to look up to them. This is why Margot’s fourteen-year-old daughter, Maddy, is “already practising military stances in the mud room” (Alderman, 2017: 150), imitating the moves she has seen on TV or learnt from Jocelyn at camp. Henceforth, society becomes more and more amenable to the new power dynamic between the two sexes following the cult’s doctrine, which regards women as the superior gender that must rule the world and men as the subordinate one that needs to be dominated.

In order to consolidate the new discourse surrounding society and gain more power, the NorthStar camp manipulates and falsifies the truth about its own activities, which inadvertently advances the cult mentality. This relationship becomes evident when considering the Foucauldian framework, which offers a dynamic interplay between power and knowledge. Such an interplay causes political regimes to “justify themselves and eclipse alternative political arrangements by casting their representation of the order of things as true” (Oksala, 2012: 86). Hence, political regimes employ knowledge strategically to enhance the authority of those in power by eliminating or discrediting different perceptions and political systems. This is why a NorthStar employee named Esther fabricates a story to justify Jocelyn’s unintentional killing of an armed intruder as self-defence. Since stories are highly effective tools to convey information or influence attitudes and behaviours (Hassan, 2013: 147), Esther guides Jocelyn through a scenario that frames the intruder as an imminent threat, justifying her actions and presenting her in a heroic light. This allows the camp to alter reality. After all, truth is created and regulated within the society’s power structures to serve the effects of power (Cooper, 1981: 134-135). For this purpose, Esther sets up evidence to prove the intruder’s fault by saying, “He was holding his gun [and] was about to fire ... You’re a hero, soldier” (Alderman, 2017: 210-211). This fabricated tale acquires reality once Jocelyn appears on national TV, underlining the media’s role in forming and reinforcing public discourses. There, Jocelyn humbly downplays her role as a hero by attributing her actions to instinct and saying that anyone would have acted similarly in her situation, while the anchors praise her actions to reinforce her narrative. To illustrate, when the male anchor says, “It’s great to know that we have young women like you ready to defend the country,” Jocelyn emphasises “the training [she] received at NorthStar Camp” (Alderman, 2017: 212). This foregrounds women’s role in defending the country and situates their actions within a broader context of national security. Consequently, Esther’s efforts to maintain the camp’s positive image by distorting reality inadvertently validate Allie’s misandrist vision, affecting public opinion about women.

As the distortion of reality benefits Allie’s cult, truth becomes a more fluid concept. According to Foucault (2003: 110), “the truth [not only] indicates the way by which it may be acquired [but also] offers itself to knowledge by offering itself to recognition.” However, it is also inextricably connected with power. This puts truth in a circular relationship with the power systems that generate and uphold it, as well as with the effects of power that it creates and perpetuates a truth regime (Foucault, 1980: 133). In this way, truth arises through varying constraints and produces different effects of power. Accordingly, following the unintentional validation of Allie’s doctrines, certain websites, newspapers, and media outlets contend that

men are inclined towards criminal activities, possess lower intelligence, and are less beneficial to society compared to women. This emerging discourse aligns with Foucault's perspective on the term as "a political commodity" (Gordon, 1980: 245). In this case, discourse not only operates by internal principles but also by social regulations and control mechanisms that empower it to construct a world where reality becomes programmable and rationalizable (Gordon, 1980: 244-246). Therefore, the disparaging discourse that diminishes the position of men results in individuals believing that the NorthStar girls require greater authority to safeguard people against such threats. Even an attractive TV anchor named Matt "blame[s] those men's rights people" since "they're so extreme, [and have] provoked this kind of response" (Alderman, 2017: 278). This discourse further validates Allie's legitimacy and the very existence of her cult in the context of the group's belief in men's wickedness. It also justifies the subversion of social norms. Correspondingly, although officials in Bessapara gather men without papers for "work detail," prolong the list of crimes punishable by death, or send men to labour camps for disobedience "on three separate occasions," the majority of people, including men, submit to these vicious practices (Alderman, 2017: 277-278). Thus, the cult's discourse painting men as violent and harmful increasingly conquers society and induces it, even men, to adopt its rules and conduct themselves appropriately.

The redefined discourse generates new social norms that reflect the altered power relations. Since norms emerge in group settings, they form a benchmark for how individuals perceive and evaluate situations, even when they are no longer part of the group (Sherif and Sherif, 1953: 202-203). This means norms largely shape an individual's social beliefs by providing behavioural guidelines for appropriate conduct within a group dynamic. Therefore, norms provide women with control over "the parameters of society" (Ali et al., 2021: 2974), making men the weaker sex. This allows women to take men's earlier roles by subverting gender norms in the cult-inflicted society where men's privileges and positions are restricted. Such a shift happens because women become the dominant figures in all aspects of society over men, thanks to their physical superiority over their former oppressors. Moreover, they gain more influence through commercials. Through commercials, for instance, power can influence viewers' behaviour, determine their bathroom breaks, promote romantic relationships, and direct individuals to affordable camping options (Özdemir, 2023: 61). They can also reinforce social norms and encourage expected behaviours from the public, as Yelda Şenkal (2016) reveals in her article on women's image in advertising. This often involves portraying women as either skilled housewives, nurturing spouses and good mothers, or indecisive and needing guidance in advertisements (Şenkal, 2016: 94-95). However, the commercials in Alderman's

novel push matriarchal messages asking women to strive for greater power by featuring “sassy young women [with] long, curved arcs in front of cute, delighted boys” (Alderman, 2017: 258). The image challenges women to seek power to achieve their desires. This causes Jocelyn to feel different from the new feminine standards, as she struggled with her skein until Allie’s cult cured her. Her desire to be appreciated by Ryan for her strength and assertiveness also stems from the ideals of new womanhood. She worries that being valued for other reasons will make her seem weak or undesirable since the dominant ideals around power and femininity differ from hers in advertisements and online content. These advertisements contribute to spreading the cult’s teachings and instil new social norms in the public’s mind.

After starting to impose its way of thinking on society indirectly through NorthStar, Allie’s cult is now beginning to do so directly through Bessapara, a recently formed nation close to Moldova’s southern border. This is largely due to the fact that the leader of the nation, Tatiana, is a devoted supporter of Mother Eve and has even passed legislation incorporating her teachings. Aside from explicitly placing the cult mentality on society, the new laws serve a panoptic purpose by placing men under the microscope to make them conspicuous. In this context, panopticon functions as a mechanism that separates the act of seeing from being seen (Foucault, 1995: 201-202). Once individuals become caught up in the surveillance and control system, continuous observation allows for a detailed assessment of their behaviour to measure, compare and rank their performance. The implementation of such systems can result in a dynamic where individuals are subject to constant monitoring, resulting in a loss of privacy and an increased sense of control (Oksala, 2012: 57). Through the panopticon embodied in new laws, Allie’s cult achieves legitimacy and subverts social norms. As per these laws, all men are obliged to have their passports and official documents stamped with the name of their female guardian and seek her permission to travel; they are also not allowed to drive, own businesses, gather in groups without a woman present, or even vote (Alderman, 2017: 242-243). Indeed, these regulations position men outside the confines of power, permitting the state to monitor their movements while also placing women in the centre of authority, casting them as the keepers of the nation’s security and integrity.

The classification of proper and improper practices through the new regulations facilitates societal control and encourages citizens to internalise the expectations. After all, the public thinks these are the rules put in place by the government as a wartime measure intended to protect the nation. As a consequence, the new legislation finds its justification in a rhetoric that labels men as terrorists, for, as the Bessaparan Minister of Justice declares, they “work for our enemies” (Alderman, 2017: 242). In conjunction with the rules enacted, this rhetoric renders

the citizens into docile bodies. Foucault (1995: 137) defines docile body as “an art of the human body” designed to increase obedience and utility. This “political anatomy” and “mechanics of power” (Foucault, 1995: 138) facilitate the shaping and disciplining of bodies to construct the intended effects. In light of this, Tunde experiences increasing difficulty finding people willing to excuse his lack of the necessary documents for men to travel in Bessapara, pointing to societal internalisation of the new rules that follow the cult and its doctrines. This internalisation stems from the punishments inflicted on those who are eager to help the lawless, given that such punishments “are intended to correct, reclaim, [and] ‘cure’” (Foucault, 1995: 10). As such, when Tunde needs to purchase food from a bakery, the man behind the counter meticulously inspects his documents, looking for the official stamp that indicates his guardian’s approval for him to be out shopping. In the face of Tunde’s persistence and finding no such endorsement, the man looks down at his hands brimming with “long, whorled scars ... upon scars, older and newer” (Alderman, 2017: 263). His visible scars serve as a stark illustration of what happens to those who violate the rules. Such scars testify to the repressive power incorporated in the disciplinary power that Bessapara wields over its citizens to keep them docile.

The women’s gaze monitoring Tunde’s departure introduces another layer to the scene, alluding to a power aware of its subjects’ every move. This demonstrates the psychological dimension of the panopticon, as constant surveillance generates a heightened fear of punishment among citizens. This results in the exercise of self-control to reduce any chances of penalty, thereby producing docile bodies. As an illustration, the corpse of a dead man who has been tortured is seen by Tunde. The man’s skin shows several colours of markings from the struggle, along with a sign on his neck that reads “*shut*” in Russian (Alderman, 2017: 264). It is evident from the gory details (i.e., the humiliating symbol around his neck, the improvised handcuffs, and the marks of torture) that the man not only had been dead at the scene for several days but also had been subjected to brutality and abuse. Prior to coming across the deceased body, Tunde had a sense of security. However, much like the wounds on the baker’s body and the scrutinising gazes of the women around him, this lifeless form serves as yet another example of the pervasive and perilous influence of societal power in Bessapara. It is this penetration that pushes Darrell to respond to Irina’s inquiry regarding his guardian by mentioning his sister Roxy—even though he betrayed her by stealing her skein to gain power—and Tunde to use flattery to manipulate in order to motivate Roxy to help him survive, both of which evoke parallel references to a patriarchal society wherein women have to rely on men for their very survival in a world ripe with danger.

With Allie's cult increasingly becoming mainstream, it slowly becomes a religion and dominates the religious sphere, possibly uniting millions. To elucidate, following the rise of a cult into a new religion, the previously dominant faith typically devolves into a cult due to being displaced by a new dominant religion (Nelson, 1968: 360). This means that once a cult reaches a certain level of influence, it can replace the previously dominant religion and set up its own beliefs and practices. Historically, such changes have occurred through Buddhism when it replaced Hinduism as the Asoka dynasty's established religion, and Christianity, which overtook the Greco-Roman pagan faiths to become the Roman dynasty's new religion (Nelson, 1969: 159). Likewise, Mother Eve's cult ultimately turns into a religion that succeeds Christianity. This is exemplified through a secret service led by a priest who prays to the Son rather than the Mother. The priest is not only "in an underground room by candlelight" during the service, but afterwards, he also whispers to Tunde, "Do not forget us" as he hugs him (Alderman, 2017: 242). In this context, the location of the service and the words of the priest foreshadow the cult's future success in becoming an established religion. The underground setting signifies the priest's need to conceal the service because he is breaking the rules by invoking the Son in place of the Mother. The use of candlelight further reinforces the secrecy, as its dim glow is well-suited for keeping things hidden beneath its flame, indicating the priest's possible deep-seated fear born of his disobedient practices. On the one hand, the cult's triumph is crowned with the priest's words, for he presumably realises that he will be punished if he is caught by the authorities. On the other, 'forget' in this sense suggests that the cult is slowly taking the dominant faith by transforming or destroying the old religion. Furthermore, the implied surveillance reveals that the cult's beliefs and regulations have been profoundly rooted in society. Hence, despite the priest's rebelliousness, the internal mechanism of discipline within him facilitates the cult's dominance to take hold.

In conclusion, the tale of Mother Eve's cult culminates in a global war to consolidate its power and women's new-found position in society. Henceforth, the cult evolves into a religion that profoundly permeates the very fabric of society with its doctrines, which have subverted social norms. This is precisely why Neil, the writer of this tale, feels obliged to legitimise his depiction of "some terrifically troubling stuff about Mother Eve" on the grounds that "everyone claims to be an atheist now, anyway" (Alderman, 2017: ix). Therefore, by using a frame narrative featuring the correspondence between Neil and Naomi, Alderman displays the many years after the cataclysm, revealing that the cult's worldview has thoroughly restructured society and permanently subverted its social norms. In this timeline, women occupy the traditional roles of men in a patriarchal society. Thus, Naomi "feel[s] instinctively ... that a

world run by men would be more kind, more gentle, more loving and naturally nurturing” (Alderman, 2017: 333) while providing feedback on Neil’s story. Moreover, she also claims that, following evolutionary psychology, men have evolved into peaceful caretakers, unlike women, who have had to develop aggression to protect their offspring. As their exchange shows, patriarchy has long been a faint memory left behind in the new society, where women dominate its social structures by means of their skein and the cult mentality that permeates the entire framework of the society.

In order to achieve such an outcome, Allie initially exploits the chaotic social milieu along with the marginalisation and unjust treatment of women due to their differences. She establishes a group centred around them to provide a platform for others looking for a place to belong. This enables Allie to capitalise on the female experience and skein, providing a favourable ground for a new belief system to subvert the existing social structures. Through this, she builds a religious persona that grants her a position of authority. Such an authority allows Allie to form a counter-discourse around female empowerment and personal salvation. This narrative finds a strong response among women and starts to reshape her followers’ mindset. To this end, she performs miracles and refines her sacred image, causing people to identify her with the Holy Mother. The more Allie gains respectability as a religious figure, the more her followers devote themselves to her. This results in the emergence of a cult mentality within her group. She effectively exploits social conditions, public validation, and propaganda to foster this cult mentality throughout society. Simply put, Allie’s cult functions as an echo of women’s collective anguish within a patriarchal society marked by abuse and dehumanisation. The group’s collective identity fosters solidarity through their shared experiences and intersects with Allie’s agenda of suppressing men. Hence, Allie’s cult offers a different ending to Echo’s myth because the echo of women’s struggles strengthens and grows across society towards a new divine order. Instead of becoming irrelevant, the echo becomes the dominant voice and reshapes society through its vibrant sound. Therefore, Allie’s sermons take on socio-political significance, promoting her covert misandrist doctrines while giving her group a politically active position. It is this position that defines Allie as a leading voice of women’s freedom within a patriarchal society dominated by sexism and misogyny. Her prominent position illustrates how social turmoil and charismatic leadership interact to transform social structures through the creation of a unified ideology.

More importantly, Allie’s nuanced balance of disciplinary and repressive powers ensures societal cultic domination. This delicate dynamic reveals that Allie’s influence does not stem simply from repression or outright domination. Her strategic use of tools like surveillance,

discourse, power-knowledge, ritual practices, and indoctrination suppresses any opposition from the authorities, who are incapable of protecting the prevailing status quo. These tools also mask her ulterior agenda, which seeks to subjugate men to a collective female force under her leadership. Since power operates through a web of connections, social antagonism towards Allie's group encourages others to accept the beliefs and truths she presents. This means that her cult gains further legitimacy in the name of opposing an oppressive power. The group cleverly employs the state's influence to mould public opinion but relies on violence to silence opposing voices. This discrepancy fails to inform the population because Allie's charisma, women's unity, social instability, and men's perceived cruelty justify the repressive practices of her cult. As a result of this, her cult gradually trains people to internalise her beliefs and act according to her truths. Through such training, Allie can produce new knowledge, shape agency, and mould collective conduct. This naturalises her authority and integrates her beliefs into her followers' daily lives. Consequently, she manages to organise a mechanism wherein her leadership is unconsciously accepted as necessary and righteous. This is precisely why the cult mentality she encourages permeates the public sphere and alters socio-political power structures. Thus, given her success in balancing disciplinary and repressive powers, Allie mobilises her devotees' faithful commitment to subvert the status quo and construct a significant counterpower. Her cult goes from a reactionary movement driven by tumultuous social conditions to a new order, where the general public adopts her ideals until they become absolute.

CHAPTER THREE

***THE FIREMAN* AND CULT MENTALITY: BREAKING THE ECHO**

Joseph Hillstrom King, alias Joe Hill, is an accomplished American author born in 1972. He is the son of the well-known authors Stephen King and Tabitha King. Taking the pseudonym Joe Hill, he has spent almost a decade writing and publishing a collection of short stories without revealing his real identity to gain recognition beyond the shadow of his renowned family name. Accordingly, his decision to write under a pseudonym is explained by Hill himself in a past interview when asked about his fears in his youth as follows:

I was afraid I'd write mediocre fiction that would get published anyway. And I didn't want people to accuse me of riding on anyone's coattails. And I wanted to earn it. And I needed to know for myself, for my own confidence, that when I sold a story that it sold for the right reasons - because an editor was genuinely psyched about it. (Martin, 2016)

Driven by this fear, Hill has pursued an artistic identity separate from his family name. In the process, he has built a remarkable body of work that has given him a notable place in the literary world. His oeuvre encompasses short story collections such as *20th Century Ghosts* (2005) and *Strange Weather* (2017), the comic book series *Locke & Key* (2008–2013), as well as four novels: *Heart-Shaped Box* (2007), *Horns* (2010), *NOS4A2* (2013) and *The Fireman* (2016). Over the years, his gift for constructing unique and captivating worlds within his stories has won Hill various awards, most notably the Bram Stoker Award, the British Fantasy Award and the World Fantasy Award.

While Hill mostly writes horror, science fiction and comic books, Lisa Kröger (2017: 596) states that critics regard his writing style as a 'slipstream' because of his ability to blend and cross numerous genres, from horror and science fiction to fantasy, mystery and literary fiction. Moreover, as Hill's style fuses supernatural and dark fantasy elements with traditional religious morality, he provides a less nihilistic and more creative take on horror (Reyes, 2016: 199). This weaves a more humanistic dimension into his exploration of humanity's dark side and adds a hint of hope to his lines. As such, his work not only rewards innocence, perseverance, and hard work but also condemns thematic issues such as incest, the abuse of women and the mistreatment of children (Reyes, 2016: 199). In this regard, Xavier Aldana Reyes (2016) contends that *20th Century Ghosts* introduces the themes and motifs that would later become the recurring elements in Hill's novels. These themes, often rooted in Christian concepts, delve into the struggle between good and evil, the pervasiveness of sin, the possibility of an afterlife and the innocence of children (Reyes, 2016: 198). All in all, Hill's works engage with the more

sinister aspects of human nature, but they offer a less nihilistic perspective in the face of humanity's sombre existence.

Depicting a world inhabited by evil with the facade of maintaining society amidst the flames, his post-apocalyptic novel *The Fireman* tells the nerve-shredding story of a lethal spore known as Dragonscale. The spore has swept through the world by spreading rapidly from person to person in a process of spontaneous combustion that reduces its hosts to cinders. Through this calamity, Hill offers a subtle examination of humanity as it faces a grave peril that forces it to shed the social masks of civilisation. In this respect, the narrative functions as “a microcosmic survey of human behavior” (Maslin, 2016). Therefore, as the spore brings people to the brink of death, they can no longer follow the voice of empathy and compassion that is buried under all the pain, grief and fear they are battling. However, this is not the case for all, as some characters, like Father Storey and Renée, can still hear this voice and brighten up the dreary situation caused by the infection. In other words, Dragonscale operates as an indifferent entity that reveals the inner world of individuals by responding either to their distress and concerns or to their serenity and happiness. In this state of the spore, Hill introduces “a Sartre-esque portrayal of hell” as Harper, the novel's protagonist, has to find her way around “the conflicting agendas of others” (Tremblay, 2016) claiming to know the best for her and the society. This leads the story to investigate the limits to which humans will go to justify certain actions under the guise of security, the meaning of power and its tendency to corrupt people, the danger of the unknown taking the place of the familiar, and the possibility of being taken over by a community founded on its participants' collective anxieties resulting in their loss of selfhood in relation to the group's beliefs.

On the basis of the abovementioned issues, this chapter aims to analyse the cult mentality that pervades the universe of *The Fireman*. For this reason, the chapter first addresses the motives that led to the emergence of a cult in which a deadly spore responsible for the demise of countless people is revered. Then, the chapter discusses how this cult constructs a sense of cult mentality (or collective identity), which slowly erases its members' individuality, pushing them to sacrifice their agency to the group mindlessly. Following this, the chapter analyses the failure of this cult mentality to gain a foothold in society and impose its doctrines on it, unlike the cult of Mother Eve in Alderman's *The Power*. In doing so, the chapter relies on the pre-existing body of cult, pandemic and disease studies with Foucauldian theory in order to base and support its claims and findings. In this regard, while cult studies frame an understanding of how cults exert authority and power over their members, pandemic and disease studies shed light on the societal conditions that have led to the rise of cult-like

organisations. Meanwhile, Foucauldian theory offers an insight into the inability of this particular cult to successfully infiltrate the social fabric and gain legitimacy or influence beyond its members, highlighting a different dynamic between the individual and the collective compared to *The Power*.

3.1. Born of Flames: Origin of a Cult

Historically, religious transitions have often been marked by turbulent times of social and economic changes (Galper, 1982: 142-143). During such times, people often feel marginalised, fearful, frustrated, hopeless, or in despair, given that mainstream institutions do not meet their needs, and they have limited opportunities for a meaningful life (Sponholz, 2005: 9). In the midst of this societal uncertainty and ambiguity, intensive religious groups play a crucial role, providing a sense of community, a coherent worldview, and clear ethical guidelines to their members (Lewis, 2014: 46). This sense of belonging and security stands in stark contrast to the prevailing worldviews that “no longer seems to apply,” leading people to pursue “new visions” (Lewis, 2014: 41). As an illustration, Suzanne Newcombe (2014: 570) notes that during the 1960s, the swift social changes sparked a growing public interest to explore new forms of religiosity among middle-class youth, many of whom drifted away from their parental faiths in favour of alternative religious and occult groups. This has given considerable prominence to groups such as the Children of God, the Divine Light Mission, and the Unification Church. In this case, cults can take advantage of upheaval and social unrest as individuals become more susceptible to influence in times of uncertainty and turmoil. This is supported by Marc Galanter (1989: 57) in *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion*, where he notes that members of the Unification Church often experience high levels of psychological distress prior to their recruitment, rendering them especially prone to the group’s beliefs. All things considered, distress serves as an essential catalyst in the emergence of cults, meaning that mass conversions occur when people are actively stressed out or during turbulent societal periods.

Similar to the chaotic and disordered society of *The Power*, Hill’s *The Fireman*, too, presents a universe marked by social unrest that forces people into contact with cultic groups. This is mainly caused by a highly infectious, lethal spore named “*Draco incendia trichophyton*,” or “Dragonscale” (Hill, 2016: 46). Its virulent nature swiftly elicits a state of global panic. Since the spore triggers a pandemic, social stability is gradually deteriorating within the novel. Pandemics are typically initiated when an infectious disease becomes widespread worldwide, and most of the population has no immunity to it (Taylor, 2022: 583). This often results in extreme psychological responses, including “waves of fear, panic, and

stigma” (Strong, 1990: 249). Such feelings are usually intrinsic to the pandemic’s mysterious essence because unknown threats evoke more fright than familiar ones. Indeed, the public’s poor understanding of the spore’s spread and its prevention in the novel causes “two infections running rampant,” namely that of “Dragonscale, and ... panic” (Hill, 2016: 244). Their concern stems from potential contagion, particularly the possibility of deadly combustion after exposure to Dragonscale. Furthermore, although the infected undergo quarantine, “the simple stress of seeing one person ignite” can trigger “[c]hain reactions” (Hill, 2016: 28). This adds to the already-perceived danger of the pandemic, driving the medical community to categorise the infected into two different groups as “symptomatic normals” and “smolderers” (Hill, 2016: 26). While the former has been considered more stable due to their optimism regarding a potential cure, the latter have been significant trouble since they tend to emit smoke from their bodies, exhibit signs of hysteria and engage in erratic behaviours like biting, screaming, and experiencing delusions of being dragons (Hill, 2016: 26-27). On occasion, smolderers have also demonstrated a proneness for violence involving attempts to take doctors hostage. Thus, the general panic regarding the spore results from the dual threat the infected poses. Not only do they present a psychological threat to people due to their potential to transmit the spore, but they also exert a physical danger, as they tend to trigger combustion that can result in the death of those in their vicinity.

People tend to perceive the pandemic’s dangers more grandiosely due to their consistent contact with its ravages. Indeed, the novel makes clear that the pandemic not only destroyed Maine from the Canadian border to Skowhegan but also left its mark on Harper’s dreams. One particularly disturbing dream involves “heads charring on the ends of their sticks instead of wieners,” which so unsettled her that she woke up screaming (Hill, 2016: 26). Harper has been compelled to confront the devastation wrought by the spore, as evidenced by her dream. It reflects the mortality’s cyclical essence prompted by the pandemic and shows the intertwined nature of death with daily life by juxtaposing wieners and heads. Through this, Hill exemplifies the pandemic’s psychological impact on humans, highlighting the epidemic psychology. Such psychology often drives societies to panic while engaging in moral discussions over the disease’s cause, leading to conflicting approaches to containing the illness and social unrest (Strong, 1990: 251). Those affected by the disease typically experience stigmatisation, labelling, and scapegoating (Mukhtar, 2021: 115). Once irrationality and terror merge to generate stigmatisation, pogroms can ensue and turn into “collective witch-hunts” (Strong, 1990: 253-254). This results in a loss of rationality and knowledge-based responses to the perceived threat. Accordingly, the novel’s universe becomes a sinister realm for the infected,

whose inability to control the spore's danger renders them shunned and hunted by society. For instance, while Public Works personnel build a gun emplacement on the Piscataqua Bridge to prevent the infected from crossing, two hundred infected are killed at a monastery in Alta Gracia and buried in a pit by the military (Hill, 2016: 70, 335). These increase the infecteds' dehumanisation, fuelling underlying malignancy among people. Hence, the Marlboro Man openly espouses sexist beliefs and racist opinions without discomfort. He mockingly describes the former president's infected corpse as "blacker than" before and tells vulgar stories involving forcing women to undress to prove their health since his team is fighting for "[h]ealthy American boobies" (Hill, 2016: 75). Ultimately, the epidemic psychology present in the novel further marginalises the infected, fostering favourable conditions for cult-like groups to emerge in the social order.

Another factor intensifying people's impression of the pandemic's perils is the negative discourse surrounding the spore and the pandemic itself. Discursive practices interact with a range of social, technical, institutional, and economic factors (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 64). This interaction unifies the said factors under a coherent framework to influence the practice and structure of knowing. In this context, knowledge formation necessitates systems of communication, record-keeping, and the replacement of prior knowledge (Foucault, 1972, as cited in Cooper, 1981: 79). Together, they constitute forms of power linked to other forms of power. Therefore, discourse functions as a tool for exclusion, punishment, and control at the hands of the novel's government. This dynamic resembles *The Power*, where speculative narratives arose surrounding the skein's emergence. Correspondingly, the initial news media response to the spore's presence centres on various narratives attributing its origin to either "ISIS" or "engineers at Halliburton," whose creation potentially got stolen by "culty Christian types fixated on the Book of Revelation" (Hill, 2016: 13). These scenarios build fear and mystification around the spore's origin, potentially causing public panic. Moreover, media reports highlight the tragic deaths of the infected by emphasising "the dangers [faced by those] who don't seek [help]" (Hill, 2016: 69). Although sensible communication and responsible media reporting are crucial to reducing concern and engendering resilience during public health crises (Uddin and Uddin, 2021: 2594), societal apathy towards the infected grows as the news presents the new reality quite negatively through images of danger and inhumanity. This causes J.K. Rowling's execution in Edinburgh to be associated with her perceived sins of writing "godless" books, being diseased, and aiding the infected (Hill, 2016: 622). Hence, her death is justified on safety and faith. Its account is filled with religious extremism and violent rhetoric that tie the spore's symptoms to evil and demonic practices by associating her marked body

“with the devil’s handwriting,” rendering her death “a blessing” (Hill, 2016: 622). This illustrates the interplay between discourse, violence, and the fear of contagion in maintaining social order amidst a pandemic, setting a social boundary between those infected and the non-infected.

Following the integration of negative discourses on the spore into everyday life, not only does violence and exclusion towards the infected dehumanise them, but these practices also foster a favourable climate for the emergence of cult-like groups. In times of crisis, people often collaborate in response to the shared challenges presented by such circumstances (Abrams et al., 2021: 202). These circumstances create a chaotic atmosphere, allowing cultic groups like Carol’s to flourish. To explain, the hostile and segregating approach, encouraged by the pandemic’s psychological impact and the pervasive negative discourse, unites an infected minority through their recognition of a lack of acceptance from others. This joint experience compels them to seek support through group action and leads them to become part of a cultic community. The susceptibility of individuals to exploitation by cults is heightened during such moments of vulnerability. This is because cults can address the deep emotional needs of their members and offer solutions that appear satisfactory (Jackson, 2013: 158). These groups provide an alternative social structure for their members, proposing a sense of belonging and a set of values that may assist in self-definition (Greenidge, 2021: 2). Accordingly, despite a society with no interest in saving the infected people’s lives, Camp Wyndham ensures a secure environment for them. For the sake of a safe and tranquil atmosphere, there are strict rules against using telephones, hoarding, going outside during the day, carrying weapons or keeping secrets. In this way, camp life places great emphasis on communal living and collective responsibility, with the understanding that each individual’s actions have an impact on the entire group. Everything they need to do is to remain calm, be positive, and respect the rules since although “[o]ther folks may fall and burn ... here no one burns [they] shine” (Hill, 2016: 205). Thus, like many cults (e.g. the cult of Mother Eve in *The Power*), the camp promises hope and community to its members by teaching them that they do not have to die of the disease. It provides a haven for those afflicted by the infection in a world defined by grim and inhumane actions.

Despite its underlying cultic qualities, the camp is initially framed as offering a democracy in which the infected can enjoy a community tailored to their needs. It resembles an oasis, bringing order out of chaos and generating function in a dysfunctional society. Each member contributes to the camp by performing a specific role. Among these roles, Carol Storey offers music to soothe the residents to avoid combustion, Ben Patchett ensures their overall

security, and Norma Heald handles the preparation and distribution of food. Moreover, since charismatic figures instil a sense of transcendence and purpose (Ulman and Abse, 1983: 638), Father Storey's peaceful voice reduces the residents' lonely, helpless, and insecure selves. Hence, the camp residents, most of whom are young and bereaved, believe that "Father Storey and his daughter Carol ... [have] offered them hope when they had none, and a very concrete form of salvation" (Hill, 2016: 120-121). During his leadership, the camp demonstrates values of love, peace, and justice. Such values are pointed out through his compassion and strong ethical principles. His approach to thefts, for example, reflects a deep belief in human goodness, even when it falters. Contrary to cults, where authority is exercised in a highly manipulative and abusive manner over members (Palayon et al., 2020: 43), Father Storey aims to cultivate an environment characterised by communication, understanding, forgiveness over judgment, and exclusion. In this regard, he states, "When all of us are walking with a death sentence inscribed right on our skin, what need is there of punishment? We have all been found guilty of being human. There are worse crimes" (Hill, 2016: 208-209). Consequently, he appeals to the group's sense of compassion while requesting the perpetrators to come forward, making it clear that forgiveness will be offered to anyone who confesses. This embracing and kind disposition to members hinders any cultish inclinations on the part of the group. In other words, Father Storey's influence moderates any potential cult-like dynamics within the group because he encourages members to act out of a genuine desire, not out of fear.

Although Father Storey's care fosters a cordial climate where the camp has a serene and nurturing community, his lapse into a coma radically shifts the camp's every aspect. This transformation leads the camp to become a cult devoted to Carol Storey and her growing fixation on protecting everyone with the Dragonscale. Since power emerges from a complex network of social, historical, cultural, and structural factors, leaders and followers play a specific role within the said network (Ladkin and Probert, 2021: 4). This relationship modifies how these roles are enacted and interacted. Hence, Foucault proposes that individuals achieve social recognition as subjects with intelligible intentions and actions by operating within the power-knowledge networks of society (Oksala, 2012: 58). These networks not only construct the subjects themselves but also influence their behaviour and foster forms of self-awareness. Therefore, there is a direct tie between Carol's position and her relationship with the residents. They view her as integral to their survival, owing to her role in providing them with hope through her songs. By making the spore feel secure, these songs prevent combustion and reduce the likelihood of detrimental outcomes. While the oxytocin release "puts the Dragonscale at ease" (Hill, 2016: 441), those in the camp believe it occurs through Carol's actions. Thus, her

new position as the leader conforms to the camp's established leadership structure. Carol can instil a sense of safety and community among members akin to Father Storey, fulfilling Camp Wyndham's fundamental safety and communal requirements. This motivates the members (particularly Michael) to persuade Carol to perform a song to guide Father Storey in his coma by emphasising the following:

We'll sing together and call him to the Bright with us. If you want him to feel you close, that's how to do it. If you draw him into the Bright, he'll know you're with him, and he won't be scared or in pain. Nothing hurts there. It's the one thing we can do for him now. (Hill, 2016: 258)

Accepting to sing with Michael affirms Carol's conformity to the group's religious practices and embodies the role that has been assigned to her. Thus, guiding Father Storey symbolises a transfer of authority within the group. In accepting control over his coma, members believe Carol "sang him outta worst of it" (Hill, 2016: 265). This symbolic act enables her to influence the members significantly, fostering obedience and consent. Consequently, her elevated prestige among the residents positions her for leadership, driving her to act on this perception.

Following Carol's leadership, group dynamics gradually shift, and what was once a functional collective begins to resemble a cult. In this context, Hill presents a stark contrast between Father Storey's and Carol's approaches to leadership. Through his empathetic guidance, Father Storey builds an atmosphere of inclusivity and acceptance. His benevolence is so profound that it extends even to Harold, a former resident who was shot for contacting outsiders. During the service, he respectfully provides a platform for Harold to articulate his views, typically a task reserved for him or Carol. When confronted with Harold's wish to contact outsiders and his consequent mistreatment within the camp, Father Storey exerts leniency, offering him support by "sitting with him ... at lunch" (Hill, 2016: 167). He even assumes responsibility for Harold's death, claiming that "if it was anyone's fault it was his own" (Hill, 2016: 172). Despite his failure to maintain peace in this instance, Father Storey offers a leadership characterised by open-mindedness, empathy, mercy, compassion, and respect for individual autonomy to preserve a democratic atmosphere. Such an atmosphere contrasts with Carol's leadership due to the prevalence of tranquil coexistence within the camp. Unlike her father, Carol reigns with an iron fist, during which her voice overrides alternative views. Similar to destructive cults, where an authoritarian, charismatic leader exploits their power to strip their followers of autonomy and individuality (Hassan, 2013: 21), Carol instils fear in her followers to compel obedience. For instance, she threatens Harper with exile without her baby if Father Storey dies "to ensure [her] silence" (Hill, 2016: 425). She contrasts Father Storey's kind demeanour by using terror to achieve her desires. This approach imposes limitations on members' autonomy and personal welfare because she redefines the group's

social structure and guides it towards cultic dysfunction. Therefore, whereas Father Storey abstains from eating out of consideration for the camp's nutritional needs, Carol indulges in "treats to help [her] keep up her strength" during her leadership (Hill, 2016: 368). Her choice highlights how she lacks empathy for her community's struggles and indicates a sense of superiority. Thus, Carol's interests prevail over collective wellbeing within the formerly secure space.

By juxtaposing parallel settings, Hill further hints at the replacement of Father Storey with an authoritarian figure who replaces his warmth with anxiety and violence. This is vividly illustrated through two contrasting scenes in the camp's cafeteria. In the initial scene, Carol guides Harper through the seating area of the cafeteria. It is "a dim cavernous space with exposed beams of red pine," where plates clatter amid "the odor of marinara sauce and stewed pork" (Hill, 2016: 134). The cafeteria during Father Storey's leadership is notable for its modest yet cohesive ambience. This suggests a social structure defined by strong ties based on mutual care and respect. Hence, the scene encourages social interaction and provides communal sustenance. Compared to the cafeteria's welcoming air, its current state under Carol's control implies a sharp and unwelcoming shift. This is demonstrated by the plywood that has been nailed to the windows as well as the exterior padlocking of the entry. Once full of cheerful clatter, the cafeteria now has a "dusty dimness," where the chairs and benches are "all turned upside down on tables" (Hill, 2016: 271-272). Moreover, two men are locked in its cellar, where they wait "on tiptoes against the far wall," chained to a pipe "almost seven feet off the floor" (Hill, 2016: 272). Hence, Carol's rise to power causes the same place to lose its warm and relaxing qualities. It evokes feelings of oppression, secrecy, distrust, desolation, and exclusion. Hill achieves this change through warm and comforting phrases (e.g., clatter, marinara sauce, and stewed pork) in conjunction with cold and unsettling ones (e.g. plywood, padlock, dusty darkness, and on tiptoes). As a result of this, although the cafeteria has previously represented care, community, and solidarity under Father Storey's leadership, it progressively becomes a place where pressure, control, and fear prevail as Carol gains influence. Such a shift closely mirrors the group's move towards cult mentality, where individual autonomy is replaced with external control and intimidation.

All things considered, Carol's rise to power offers a microcosm of society's descent into disarray in the wake of the spore's emergence. Her increase in status is closely linked to the sociocultural shift caused by Dragonscale. As the spore drives the infected outside society, it intensifies their need for connection, guidance, and hope. Therefore, Camp Wyndham offers a sanctuary where mutual support, compassion, and optimism flourish for the infected in need of

a nurturing community. This is achieved through Father Storey's compassionate leadership, which values empathy and humility over authoritarianism to establish a functioning collective. However, his eventual fall into a coma triggers a radical shift in the community's dynamic. Once a supportive collective becomes a repressive group characterised by fear and submission. This reveals how Carol's ascent to power highlights an interplay between vulnerability and marginalisation. It demonstrates a scenario where social pressures lead to authoritarian leadership that fosters a cult mentality. Thus, the relationship between Father Storey and Carol exemplifies how cults arise in a society. These two figures are juxtaposed to demonstrate how easily groups can adopt an authoritarian structure during turmoil, and how people's desire for protection and community can be exploited to implement compliance. As such, given her central role in pacifying Dragonscale via singing, Carol not only gains authority within the group but also achieves a ground to justify her emerging authoritarian tendencies to maintain order. Father Storey's weakening increases her influence over those around her, just like cults arise in a society. This way, Carol restructures the communal order in the camp into a cultic one.

3.2. One Note Symphony: Building the Cult Mentality

In the view of Mariusz Gajewski (2020: 235), identity is a dynamic and evolving concept continuously influenced by a complex interplay of individual characteristics and social belonging. Therefore, individuals can refine their identity in light of new roles and social group involvement, which helps them to form clearer perceptions of themselves and of how they are perceived by others (Gajewski, 2020: 236). It is this fluid essence of identity that allows cults to forge and exploit an alternative identity that best serves their interests, ultimately leading to the manifestation of cult mentality. To explain, given their social disposition, members of one's inner circle have a significant mark on one's thoughts, beliefs and conduct. This suggests that even when people believe they are evaluating matters objectively, their responses are affected by social norms and group dynamics (Marmarosh et al., 2020: 124–125). Correspondingly, since cults prioritise rigid obedience to cultivate blind conformity,

[c]ult influence is designed to disrupt a person's authentic identity and replace it with a new identity. By immersing people in a tightly controlled, high-pressure social environment, destructive cults gain control of members' behavior, thoughts, and emotions. They limit their access to outside information. They literally take control of their minds. (Hassan, 2013: 21)

In other words, with members conditioned to think, speak and behave in particular ways, it is unsurprising that these groups are particularly successful at generating the said effect on their members. Following this conditioning, new beliefs and faiths become so overpowering that

logical reasoning and factual evidence lose their clarity and importance, thereby normalising extremism (Tamm, 2013: 25). This creates a narrative which portrays the cultic environment as the only source of safety and security for its members. Such a narrative encourages the member to undertake whatever measures are necessary to safeguard the group. As a result, cult members progressively submit their autonomy to the hands of the leader and the regulations instilled within the group.

A widely acknowledged premise of sociology suggests that societies need enemies, particularly during times of change, as external threats help unify people and reinforce societal norms and values (Lewis, 2014: 33). When no external enemy is present, societies often designate certain internal groups or individuals as scapegoats (Lewis, 2014: 33). Such behaviour is vividly illustrated in the hostility shown towards the infected in the novel's universe. This dynamic can also be applied to cults, where the same structure is required to function as a society. To this end, they construct an us-versus-them narrative. It facilitates the group's ability to exercise control over its members while instilling feelings of fear and distrust towards the outside world. By virtue of its binary form, this narrative enhances isolation and fosters the cult's separation from mainstream society (Sponholz, 2005: 17). Nevertheless, such a narrative is not required within the context of the novel because society has already ascribed an enemy status to the infected. Consequently, Carol's security chief Ben prioritises order and safety in the camp, citing the protection of "a hundred and sixty-three people," plus one additional unborn child, as his primary objective (Hill, 2016: 351). This allows Carol to influence the group's behaviour and daily activities according to her standards and expectations. Since failure to follow regulations can jeopardise the entire group, strict compliance with the set instructions becomes imperative. Therefore, camp residents are prohibited from venturing outside in the morning during snowfall. This is due to the risk of leaving behind tracks for others to locate them, which could have adverse consequences. Hence, unlike cults exploiting the idea of being special to devalue non-members and justify treating them violently (Deikman, 1990: 101-103), Carol's group uses safety to cultivate the us-versus-them narrative already propagated by society. Ultimately, there is a clear correlation between the group's black-and-white thinking and society's structural elements, both driven by the necessity to survive the brutal reality of the pandemic and marginalisation. That is, the group's survival-oriented mindset promotes a dichotomous perspective where individuals are perceived as either a potential threat or a beneficial resource to the group.

In order to promote the sense of us against them, cults aim to nurture belonging. As individuals without stable familial or social support systems need structure, protection, and

security, cults often provide such needs by functioning as “surrogate famil[ies]” (Curtis and Curtis, 1993: 453-454). This creates an environment favourable to establishing alternative communal experiences to replace those available in society and increase members’ feelings of belonging. In this sense, Carol employs her personal qualities to appeal to her followers and motivate them to identify with the group. Her ability to cultivate a welcoming atmosphere within the camp is evident in how she introduces Harper to the female members. She asks various informal questions concerning personal preferences about Harper’s “favorite song, celebrity crush, and the name of [her] first pet” (Hill, 2016: 145). This introduction facilitates Harper’s integration into the group and highlights an independent commune formed in the camp. Since the infected no longer fit into society, Carol’s nonchalant manner dispels the anxieties generated by the ongoing pandemic. By doing so, she positions herself as a relatable figure within the camp, providing a sense of solace and relief from the harsh realities of the external environment. Considering how affiliation-driven comfort increases obedience and loyalty to the group without overt coercion (Galanter, 1989: 59-60), Carol’s warm demeanour establishes a foundation for constructing cult mentality. In other words, her initial warmth offers a haven juxtaposed with the outer world’s coldness, which allows her to shape members’ attitudes and encourage self-sacrifice. This is why Michael devotes himself to Carol and would “rather die [himself] than lose another” family (Hill, 2016: 136). His statement emphasises the extent to which a sense of belonging drives members to forsake personal well-being on behalf of the group. In this case, belonging results in looser personal boundaries because “the cult community ... [is] the only social relationships available to them” (Luiz, 2019: 14). As society expels the infected from its periphery, they have no option but to conform to Carol’s group, leaving them open to cult mentality under the guise of belongingness.

Once members begin to identify with the group and its beliefs, their discursive practices tend toward a cult mentality. Since language plays a pivotal role in how one perceives and conceptualises the world, it influences how people engage, interpret, and conduct themselves. Therefore, the more Carol’s group associates her presence with life and survival, the more willing they are to obey her commands. They regard her not only as a source of protection against combustion but also as a barrier between life and death. This impression mainly stems from their belief that Carol’s voice and presence miraculously saved Father Storey from death. Although Allie’s CPR successfully treats his convulsion, those in the camp predominantly believe that “[o]nce again [Carol] had confronted death, armed only with her voice, and once again the doomed had been saved” (Hill, 2016: 422). This offers a fertile ground for Carol to influence and shape the lives of her followers. Her powerful influence pervades the members’

speech, revealing their cultic mindset. As such, their unwavering devotion to Carol leads them to self-sacrifice in her name by proclaiming, “My life for Mother Carol! My life for the Bright!” (Hill, 2016: 413). This dynamic causes language to operate as an “instance of power where power is considered as a set of relations of force” (McHoul and Grace, 2002: 40). Hence, Carol’s role in calling “Father Storey back from the deep Bright” (Hill, 2016: 435) leads the others to deem her a saviour who must be obeyed without question. As their language validates Carol’s authority, the members shape their behaviours according to her wishes. Her directives are mirrored by them, causing the group’s unique voice to disappear, like Echo’s silenced voice without a response. This becomes evident when Ben stresses that some members can even take Harper’s child from her without hesitation “if Carol [tells] them it [has] to be done” (Hill, 2016: 426). His words demonstrate the fundamental shift in the group’s mentality, highlighting Carol’s absolute power over the members. Thereafter, her words become an imperative that demands compliance. This cultivates an intense loyalty towards Carol, whose rule is reinforced by a cult mentality.

Another factor strengthening the cult mentality among members is a phenomenon of collective harmony akin to “a single perfect chord” achieved through “the Bright ... Or the Network” (Hill, 2016: 137-138). Since Dragonscale requires security to stop self-ignition, the Bright fulfils the role of taming the spore by making it feel safe. Therefore, it prevents the infected from burning by fostering emotional harmony through interpersonal connection and serenity. This causes the members to view the Bright as a miraculous entity protecting the infected from dying, a blessing reminiscent of “a force field made of love” (Hill, 2016: 583). However, while securing the spore, it also erases traditional indicators of identity (i.e., names, memories and personal preferences) and instead fosters a profound connection to a broader collective. This dynamic generates a collective experience where members become interconnected in a symphony of shared consciousness. Thus, in the Bright, they “don’t just feel [their] happiness [they] feel everyone else’s, too ... [as if they are] all notes being played together in a single perfect chord” (Hill, 2016: 138). Their individual perspectives meld into a cohesive whole within the overarching framework of the group. Such an effect parallels how cults employ altered consciousness to indirectly coerce their members to embrace the group’s values and beliefs (Galanter, 1989: 69). In this state, collective identity and belief systems become central, serving as a powerful tool for unifying members within the group. This is because people become more susceptible to social influence once their mental stability is disrupted, pushing them to embrace the beliefs and attitudes promoted by cults (Galanter, 1989: 65). Accordingly, Carol’s devotees emulate her beliefs because the Bright enables her to

override their inner thoughts. It comes as no surprise, then, for Carol to exert significant influence over her followers, which induces them to perceive the Bright as a form of afterlife (Hill, 2016: 565) and a means of escape (Hill, 2016: 584). Ultimately, the interplay between Bright's perceived divinity and its capacity to alter individuals' cognitions further consolidates the cult mentality that grants significant authority to Carol.

After Carol's rise to absolute power, the previously discussed us-versus-them narrative begins to manifest itself in the group dynamics. Those who fail to respect her authority and disrupt the group's harmony are now perceived as enemies. As times of uncertainty cause people to seek leaders to reduce anxiety and restore collective control (Abrams et al., 2021: 203), the members are more willing to obey and align themselves with Carol. This creates greater emphasis on conformity to the group's norms because safety coincides with its aim. Consequently, being part of a crowd leads to a loss of autonomous thought and an increase in irrational thinking, which results in a willingness to sacrifice personal interests (Reicher, 2001: 186). This generates a dynamic where opposition to Carol's authority risks losing face in the group. Her unchallenged reign casts doubt on alternative perspectives and keeps her voice as the sole credible authority on the group's welfare. Hence, potential rivals to Carol are often characterised as a threat to the group's safety and stability. For instance, although René believes that John "looks *out* for" them, Carol portrays him as someone who "looks down on" the group (Hill, 2016: 138). She even remarks that he "is all right risking" their lives "for a couple outlaws" before John attempts to rescue some prisoners from dying (Hill, 2016: 215). In another instance, she suggests that Father Storey nearly died due to John's plans, implying a favourable outcome for his interests. These remarks seek to tarnish John's reputation by associating him with malevolent and violent qualities. Her discourse accentuates the us-versus-them dichotomy, whereby members outside her inner circle undergo demonisation. Thus, John and his comrades eventually become the group's internal enemies. While John is accused of murdering Father Storey and Sarah, Harper is suspected of participating in a conspiracy against the camp (Hill, 2016: 561-563). Here, Carol victimises herself of a sinister plot intended to destroy what she identifies as Father Storey's idyllic dream. Such a depiction not only equates loyalty to her with commitment to collective survival but also allows her to prevent potential resistance, making the cult mentality even more effective.

Once the group adopts an us-versus-them attitude, Carol's perceived enemies face punitive measures because they presume to threaten the well-being of all. This shift in approach signifies a radical change towards a more authoritarian group dynamic, where non-conformists face repression for holding deviant beliefs. Through this change, Carol's group exercises

control over the adversary through punishment. In this context, punishment constitutes a site for vengeance where the imbalance in power is visually illustrated. This is exemplified through an act of penalty, where offenders must hold a stone in their mouths. The act is ritualistic in nature due to its connection to the late Father Storey's habit of using a stone to focus his thoughts. On the surface, this shows a penalty imposed on the group for their lack of precautions, considering how a stone was used "to crush Father Storey's head" (Hill, 2016: 330). Nevertheless, its true purpose is to convey a lesson on responsibility and coerce the resisters into obedience through shared punishment. This is why Harper must carry a stone after her unannounced decision to leave the camp. From the group's standpoint, she is justifiably punished for jeopardising their safety by leaving without permission. Thus, Harper's refusal to fulfil the punishment to preserve her self-respect renders her a public enemy. This new status encourages the members to harass her verbally and physically, including an assault that forces her to accept the punishment. As she undergoes assault, Harper's attackers display a disturbing and eerie presence, wearing masks and chanting in unison (Hill, 2016: 383-384). Their behaviour explicitly echoes the cult mentality that drives them to internalise their leader's ideals in their thoughts, words, and actions. Since "[b]efore the justice of the sovereign, all voices must be still" (Foucault, 1995: 36), their actions reflect not only the strict order maintained within the camp but also a willingness to enforce conformity through brutal means. Consequently, punishment provides a justifiable excuse to inflict violence on non-conformists and cultivates rigid obedience among members by compelling them to enforce conformity on others.

All in all, a close analysis of the text shows that Carol encourages thought patterns that link conformity with survival. This is primarily achieved through a range of tactics, including an us-versus-them narrative, intense social pressures towards conformity, a desire for belonging, and the phenomenon of the Bright. These tactics go beyond encouraging group cohesion because they discourage members from questioning the group's agenda or thinking for themselves. By doing so, most of Carol's supporters are effectively indoctrinated to align their moral compass with in-group beliefs. Such a dynamic enables Carol to propagate a dangerous cult mentality which progressively strips away personal autonomy in favour of collective identity. As members become more dependent on the group and its beliefs, their autonomy diminishes, reshaping them into docile participants within a rigid group order. This even leads to a tendency to act violently to protect those beliefs. Hence, violent reactions to those who deviate from the group's impositions serve to nurture obedience and force compliance upon others. Harper and John's trial displays how groupthink can manifest in a

brutal attack on those who refuse to adhere to the dictates of the group. Their punishment sends a clear message to potential dissidents within the group and aspires to silence any potential opposition. These findings underscore the group's transition into extreme devotion to Carol. This shift in dynamic discloses how collective fear, seclusion, desire for security, social pressures, and groupthink can work in unison to validate authoritarian rule. Together, these elements produce a group structure that strongly emphasises strict adherence rather than autonomy. This dynamic causes each member to adopt Carol's will as their own, aligning their values, concerns, and worldview with hers. In this sense, they are akin to Echo, who cannot speak without reference to Narcissus' words for self-expression. Carol's leadership takes their personal autonomy and diminishes it into a chain of conformity and passivity. They find themselves in a state of subjection, devoid of independence. As a consequence, "[t]here's only one song to sing [in the camp]—Carol's song" and failure to echo her results in sticking "a stone in [one's] mouth" (Hill, 2016: 343).

3.3. A Voice Contained: The Cult's Failure to Influence the World

In his analysis, Foucault presents a novel view of power that departs from traditional understandings. Instead of functioning through signs and levies as in feudal societies, power begins to be exercised through social production and service during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Foucault, 1980: 125). This shift in focus has resulted in another aspect of power becoming increasingly visible, namely its capacity to influence the actions of others. Accordingly, power moves from traditional punitive methods to strategies of care and regulation designed to encourage individuals to become actively compliant subjects (Kelly, 2019: 16-17). Its influence is manifested in how individuals act and respond rather than forcing them to act in a certain way (Foucault, 1983: 219). In this way, power acts at a fundamental level. It plays a significant role in shaping the actions and attitudes, discourses, learning processes, and everyday lives of individuals (Foucault, 1980: 39). Therefore, for Foucault, power denotes a form of action that influences actions and potential choices. It is often perceived as exercised exclusively by those at the top, fostering an illusion of power operated only on those at the bottom (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 185-186). However, its multidirectional nature enables it to operate from both the top down and the bottom up. This allows power to be practised on the dominant as well. Consequently, Foucault (1983: 225) suggests that any power relationship has an intrinsic potential for battle, whereby opposing forces maintain their "specific nature" and can always switch roles. Only when one side assumes control of the resisting force and introduces stability can it exercise power. Hence,

resistance is inherent to power's existence because, in Foucault's (1983: 225) words, "power relations [cannot] exist without points of insubordination." To put it differently, since resistance facilitates the propagation of power throughout the societal fabric, it not only serves as a catalyst for the perpetual instability of power dynamics but also constitutes an integral aspect of their presence.

The notion of power as a driving force is inherently contradictory, as it encompasses the very resistance it seeks to overcome. This is exemplified in Hill's portrayal of Camp Wyndham as a microcosm of the novel's overall society. It allows him to present two contrasting scenarios. In the first, the camp represents resistance against an oppressive power because its inhabitants collectively embody marginalisation. They not only face social ostracism but also carry the mark of stigmatisation inflicted upon them by the very disease the society seeks to eradicate. In the second scenario, the narrative shifts to depict the triumph of oppressive power over the resistance represented by the camp. This is because, within the narrative, the camp deviates from its original purpose and emulates the behaviour of the oppressive power, engaging in the persecution of those who do not conform to its unity. Through such portrayals, Hill explores a dynamic where both the power and the resisting force present a cyclical and interchangeable relationship. This relationship is achieved through how power is utilised in the respective societies of the state and the camp. On the one hand, the camp appears to function as a resistant force, offering a haven for the infected amidst a hostile environment. On the other, the state can be seen as an oppressive regime, employing lethal measures against the infected. By portraying the other as dangerous, both behave in relation to the other and fuel a continuous battle of defiance and control. Consequently, these two forces can be viewed as manifestations of a similar underlying dynamic. As much as the camp offers sanctuary from the state's dangers, it also constitutes a site of internal uprising, which Carol attempts to suppress. In this sense, there is a clear parallel between the two societies, where the deviants are subjected to a form of witch-hunt by the dominant power. They both seek to repress anyone who rejects submission to the authority exerted by the power in question. This enables Hill to elucidate why Carol's group ultimately falls short of instilling the tenets it wishes to spread under the cult mentality cultivated within the group.

The early days of Camp Wyndham are characterised by disciplinary power that slowly encourages a monophonic structure reflective of the cult mentality. As spores can kill any individual without exception, the rules and practices are always validated by security concerns, making harmony a crucial factor to maintain. In this case, disciplinary power becomes a driving force influencing norms and behaviours by organising potential outcomes through indirect

influence. It aspires to construct “useful subjects” who conform to a standard instead of acting as “free agents who invent their own standards” (Walzer, 1986: 59). Therefore, disciplinary power ties individuals to an imposed identity, enforcing a law of truth they must accept and that others are compelled to recognise as well (Foucault, 1983: 212). This enables it to train and organise them more efficiently. Accordingly, the camp employs discipline to exercise control over its population. It conditions them to conform to predetermined norms rather than cultivating independent, rights-based self-governance. This approach demands that all the group members give up a certain level of autonomy to ensure their safety, such as prohibiting mobile phone usage and restricting access to lunch. However, the group generally views these measures favourably, taking comfort in the knowledge that “someone was thinking about how to keep [them] all safe” (Hill, 2016: 161). This is an understandable response due to the public perception of the infected as a public enemy. Such stigma leads the group to develop a strong sense of collective identity and a willingness to prioritise the collective good. Hence, they justify Harold Cross’ ostracism and subsequent execution by Ben Patchett since his actions jeopardised the group’s well-being by unauthorisedly disclosing their method of dealing with the infection (Hill, 2016: 165-173). This illustrates how disciplinary power shapes the group’s normative framework, whereby those who violate these standards are labelled as a menace whose deviance may jeopardise even the possibility of survival.

Although the group’s initial disciplinary practices have truly fostered a cult mentality within the camp, this perspective shift has prompted concern among some members regarding Carol and her colleagues’ methods. Despite the group’s primary appeal to inclusiveness and collective decision-making, Carol’s leadership provokes an internal conflict by overshadowing individualism with her personal preferences and ideals. In other words, her focus on security over other concerns becomes a significant point of conflict. This leads the Bright to play an instrumental role in disseminating Carol’s personal beliefs and values to the group by creating a collective cognitive realm where her dominant presence becomes an influential source. There, she transcends the role of a mere guide to safety and evolves into a defining voice in shaping group conduct. Mirroring the disciplinary practices forming an “anatomy-politics” of the human body (Doring, 2005: 148), the Bright provides a fertile ground for aligning members’ demeanour according to the group’s norms. Thus, Carol effectively transforms them into “lamps made of human skin” (Hill, 2016: 150), erasing individuality in favour of unity. Although group membership affects how the self is formed and maintained on both individual and collective levels (Brewer and Gardner, 1996: 85), some members disillusion themselves

after realising the extent of group influence. For instance, Don Lewiston elucidates the physical and emotional impact of the chapel gatherings as follows:

You feel like you're inside of the world's biggest beehive and everyone around you looks like they're burnin' from the inside. Their eyes just fackin'... *blaze*. They don't smoke, but they throw heat, so much heat you could just about pass out from it. ... The worst part isn't forgettin' who I am, either. That's bad, though... but thinking I might be Carol is worse. It's like your own thoughts are a faraway radio station, and Carol's station is closer, broadcasting her music right over yours. Hers gets louder and clearer and yours gets fainter and thinner. ... What you feel in your heart is that if you have to die, you want to die singin', with the whole camp around you. Everyone holdin' hands. ... you aren't scared of the end, because you'll be burnin' up with all the people you love right close beside you. (Hill, 2016: 475)

This dynamic showcases Carol's abuse of power through the Bright's coercive effect on her followers. Such identity erasure sparks disobedience and opposition because resistance is intrinsic to power. Thus, Don's dread of losing his identity by becoming Carol denotes a counteraction or resistance. This outcome is inevitable because of her dualistic approach, which tries to blend repressive control with disciplinary power. Her attempt to impose a collective identity on the group ultimately backfires because the unity she desires becomes eroded. Consequently, Carol progressively diminishes the efficacy of disciplinary power via repressive approaches. Given Foucault's conception of power as "a set of interconnected strategies, each with its own, not fully controlled, feed-back mechanisms" (During, 2005: 146-147), Carol's ambition to grasp and control power fails to secure total submission, as evidenced by Don's disillusionment.

Another reason Carol fails to control her cult is society's tendency to display cult-like traits at all levels. On a macrocosmic level, the leader-follower dynamic observed in cults finds expression in the microcosmic level through the family unit, where asymmetrical relationships may be cultivated. Typically, such dynamics manifest as abusive or domineering behaviours from one spouse towards another who adopts an obedient and submissive role. The controlling partner can restrict their victim's social interactions, prevent them from meeting with former friends, or dictate their actions and speech (Hassan, 2013: 17). Over time, the victims become increasingly dependent on their controllers. This form of control impacts victims irremediably by impairing their capacity for independent thought and leading to withdrawal from social networks (Ross, 2014: 205). Hill illustrates this via Harper's relationship with her husband, Jakob, after which she finds herself at the forefront of resistance against Carol's group. He treats her as a child who needs care because, in his eyes, she is inferior and simple-minded. Therefore, Harper's inability to exert agency in the relationship causes him to regard her like "an excitable puppy" (Hill, 2016: 62), reducing it to a mere game. Moreover, in a manner reminiscent of cults utilising guilt, shame, and internal surveillance (Tamm, 2013: 23-24), Jakob seeks to erode

Harper's agency to ensure her complete dependency on his authority. This dynamic aims to place her in a position where she cannot govern her own life since he deems her to be his possession. It puts Harper in a position where her "entire self-worth" depends on "doing and being just what he [wants] her to do and be" (Hill, 2016: 63). Accordingly, despite her inevitable demise, Harper apologises for becoming "sick" (Hill, 2016: 48), reflecting her sense of guilt over Jakob's alleged infection, and her submission to him. This power imbalance permits him to hope to "be holding her hand on the way down" rather than handing her over to a "faceless agency" (Hill, 2016: 56, 98). Not only does this turn Harper into an object, but it also evokes a cultic pattern within their marriage where the leader exploits his follower via disempowerment.

Since cults have a similar effect on their members, those who have survived an unhealthy relationship might be more perceptive of the potential issues in cultic environments. Given Harper's experience of feeling "as if she was simply [Jakob's] audience" (Hill, 2016: 43), she cultivates an intuitive faculty which illuminates what lurks beyond veiled pretences. It ultimately grants her the insight to identify Carol's genuine intentions because Jakob's efforts to establish a leader-follower dynamic align with those found in cults. This is why Harper regards Carol's unwavering sentiments as reflecting the innocence of a fanatic initially, which profoundly worries her, particularly due to her prior instruction from Jakob "to think of people who spoke of blessings and faith as simple and a little infirm" (Hill, 2016: 130). Even when Carol behaves in a warm and nurturing manner, Harper senses something incongruous beneath the surface. Her insight lets her realise that Carol genuinely dislikes John Rookwood despite her "carefully composed" conduct (Hill, 2016: 147). Therefore, although Father Storey tries to mollify Carol's actions as "caring for the people she loves" (Hill, 2016: 530), Harper still senses an underlying malevolence in Carol's desire to control others. Her stance is actually supported by an earlier incident when Harper tries to convince Carol to prevent Allie from carrying a rock in her mouth. Instead of helping her niece, Carol exploits the situation to repress her rivals by telling Harper that Allie "carries *your* stone in her mouth" and "[o]nly you can pluck it out" (Hill, 2016: 379). Furthermore, she likens the camp to "a house of cards" (Hill, 2016: 379), whereby collectivity enables survival. Such statements assist Carol in blending duty with coercion, employing moral authority to regulate Harper's opposing voice and preserve control.

In relation to employing language, Carol's approach is reminiscent of that employed by Jakob, who equally relies on discursive means to exploit his wife, Harper. Similar to Carol's use of others to influence Harper's actions, Jakob does so by suggesting that in infecting him, Harper has turned him into "a potential murderer" (Hill, 2016: 70). He even declares that she killed "both of [them], and [their] baby ... to satisfy [her] ego" (Hill, 2016: 71). These

allegations allow Jakob to abuse her emotionally since he cultivates a sense of guilt and responsibility by repeatedly referencing the hypothetical aftermaths of her actions. Moreover, Jakob derisively dismisses the expression of love as a mere “cheap” gesture, deeming it a token phrase attached to “a surge of hormones, with a little hint of loyalty thrown in” (Hill, 2016: 42). This sentiment is particularly noteworthy in light of Harper’s earlier statement of love, underscoring Jakob’s deep-seated resentment towards his wife, and how he uses words to hurt her. Ultimately, based on the human tendency to seek and protect interpersonal bonds (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980: 1394), Jakob and Carol aim to exploit Harper’s kindness to advance their agendas. Their discursive practices are employed to influence and manipulate Harper. However, her prior exposure to Jakob’s influence causes her to develop a heightened insight into the nature of persuasion. This eventually helps Harper identify a pattern in Carol’s conduct, indicating a tendency to disempower and control those who follow her.

In addition to experiencing a general erosion of identity in the group and observing cultic patterns in interpersonal relationships, another significant point to consider is how the state’s stance towards those infected affects Carol’s ability to govern effectively and advance her position as a leader. This is particularly evident from the active effort to annihilate the infected. To this end, the state applies biopower. For Foucault (1978: 138), biopower’s objective is “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order.” It prioritises control over life processes such as health, birth, and mortality. Such control enables a comprehensive approach to governing life in a manner that disciplines individual bodies and regulates populations (Foucault, 1978: 139). Hence, as the infected pose a significant risk to human existence thanks to their combustion-prone nature, the state employs biopower to justify cleansing them from society. By doing so, it aims to increase control over the general public under the guise of improving living standards for both individuals and the population. A governor, for instance, goes so far as to devise a plan to “[b]ring all the sick to one processing center and then humanely dispose of them” before dropping them in “the North Atlantic current” to dispose of their bodies (Hill, 2016: 733). It is also notable that public opinion generally tends to accept similar measures, viewing the sick as less than human. Accordingly, public executions of the infected take place in society. Even if a woman pleads for freedom by stating, “This is Ameri—,” guns suddenly flash like “firecrackers on a July night” (Hill, 2016: 68). These instances illustrate how grave the assumed threat feels to citizens and the state alike. Given this, it becomes clear that Carol is up against an extra layer of resistance due to the state’s aggressive policy of expelling the infected off the earth to protect its healthy population. Confronted with an unsystematic disciplinary power under the authoritarian rule of its leader,

the state's systematic approach poses a significant challenge to Carol's authority and her cultic group, as it can rationalise its violent measures through the concept of biopower.

By employing biopower, the state fosters a ground for social perspective formation. Since biopower structures reality through perceptions, it creates categories and solidifies these divisions as the standard (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 203). Therefore, it scientifically identifies and categorises anomalies to systematically extend its monitoring and control of societal behaviour (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 195-196). In this respect, discourse plays a pivotal role in determining the parameters of norms and anomalies, allowing power to exert its influence under the guise of knowledge. This affords the power to construct anomalies, thereby facilitating its role of treating and reforming them based on identification, categorisation, and management. The Marlboro Man has a key role in this process, as his radio show consistently dehumanises the infected and emphasises their abnormal position within society. This way, he feeds into the negative discourse about them. His inability to consider the infected as human leads him to say, "You think a girl with Dragonscale can blow smoke rings with her vajayjay," or "something about a woman who had smelled like a wet cat when she burned" (Hill, 2016: 192, 195). He even names them as "burners" and accuses their charge at "the barricade with sticks" to lead "the besieged soldiers [to open] fire to disperse" them (Hill, 2016: 193). These statements trivialise the violence they face and encourage the public to view them as objects of disgust and hatred. His choice to foreground their marginalised status cultivates social polarisation, mirroring the government's stance on the infected as the public enemy. Hence, he glorifies the Cremation Crew as "heroic" (Hill, 2016: 296). This gives the perpetrators credibility and a rationale for their violence and facilitates collective support for the government's harsh measures against the infected. Consequently, the Dalmatians express their support by preparing "lunches and cupcakes for the volunteer fire crews" (Hill, 2016: 72) to maintain their morale. As a result of being bombarded with negative accounts, the public becomes wary of the infected, believing they can destroy everything they have. It is within this context that discourse concerning the infected deepens and forms the basis for social solidarity against a perceived common enemy.

Alongside its role in fostering a common enemy to the public, the state also effectively indoctrinates the infected with that very image. This is because hegemony asserts itself by constructing knowledge that aligns with the dominant powers' interests, manipulating societal subjects into accepting constructed truths (Poorghorban, 2023: 323). In this sense, the state utilises disciplinary power to maintain order through power dynamics. This disciplinary process aims to cultivate social conformity and compliance with expectations. Such efforts generate an

“analytical space” focused on acquiring, mastering, and utilising knowledge (Foucault, 1995: 143). This allows the state to coerce the infected into accepting their own dangerous nature. Given how frequently Dragonscale gets portrayed as hazardous in various media channels, people are led to internalise views regarding its destructive and uncontrollable nature. Accordingly, Harper refrains from stepping outside following her infection to avoid the risk of “bumping into someone in the corner store and accidentally sentencing them to death” (Hill, 2016: 74). For people like her, existence becomes “a monstrous act, an act of towering, possibly homicidal selfishness” (Hill, 2016: 86). Their mindset stems from first-hand experiences and exposure to those of influential figures. Thus, they are convinced that Dragonscale has placed an irreversible halter around their necks. However, this prevailing narrative faces challenges from certain counterexamples. For instance, an infected group inhabiting Martha Quinn’s island has rebelled against the CDC, stating that they learnt to control the spore and created their own remedy. Instead of investigating their claims, the governor bombs the island and turns it into “a black rock” (Hill, 2016: 81) due to his belief in the prevailing narrative. Therefore, despite cases where the spore is tamed, the state continues to label the infected as detrimental to the public. This causes them to perceive themselves as mere vessels of misfortune, which Harper’s inner conflict illustrates. They unconsciously submit to the state’s power and stigmatisation concerning their perceived instability. As this acceptance creates division and prevents alternative ways of living with Dragonscale, Carol cannot maintain her group’s solidarity. Consequently, the state-imposed discouragement of unity through internalised discipline wins against cult mentality that bonds her devotees.

Adopting the dominant narrative transforms Dragonscale into a surveillance tool reminiscent of Foucault’s panopticon concept. The panopticon is a mechanism designed to render its subjects visible through a watchful gaze. Foucault (1995:200) refers to it as a “trap,” whereby individuals simultaneously become both the observer and the observed. The presence of the panopticon remains concealed due to its apparent power to manifest wherever and whenever without prior notice. This dynamic creates a powerful tool for highlighting infected people within a monochrome world where their presence stands out. Notably, their distinctive appearance (e.g. skin adorned with black and gold scales, along with a tendency to emit smoke when distressed) makes hiding from public view highly challenging. In other words, since “the gaze that sees is a gaze that dominates” (Foucault, 2003: 39), Dragonscale becomes a signifier inscribed on their body to expose their identity. This prompts them to monitor their own behaviours to avoid second-class status imposed by society’s gaze. Thus, Harper stresses a dichotomy by stating, “we’re the bad guys in this story” (Hill, 2016: 327) to the Fireman,

underlining the societal stigmatisation experienced by the infected. Such a viewpoint is further accentuated when she refers to Jakob's perception of their slaughter as "wiping out the zombies" (Hill, 2016: 327). On this basis, society's pervasive discourse on the infected facilitates the state's justification for hostility towards them, while coercing the infected to internalise their subjugation and avoid overt public opposition. This renders escaping the public eye imperative for survival since public exposure often proves fatal. Consequently, Carol's credibility as a leader gradually declines, propelling her towards authoritarianism aimed at crushing dissenting voices. Despite her genuine intentions and desire to protect her group, Carol's actions paradoxically result in her inadvertent submission to the state's hegemony by disempowering collective resistance. This causes anyone in control of the spore to self-oppress and lose their chance of turning the tide in their favour. Therefore, transforming Dragonscale into a self-governing panopticon consolidates the state's authority, systematically isolating and weakening the infected. This way, resistance to authority becomes so tricky that Carol's group eventually crumbles, despite its cultic mindset.

Following the internalisation process described heretofore, Carol's group becomes a docile body and eventually conforms to the status quo. Although she successfully maintains order amongst her followers until their tragic demise, her aspiration to shield them from external threats fractures their collective harmony once fostered by cult mentality. This preoccupation undermines her ability to lead a cohesive community and extinguishes the hope of subverting the larger societal structure. Moreover, since Dragonscale possesses a panoptic quality, the state perpetuates an illusion of surveillance and superiority over them, resulting in unconscious docility with no room for revolt. This illusion exerts such influence that Renée flees a hospital to "explode outside where no one will get hurt" (Hill, 2016: 33) before joining Camp Wyndham. Given her reaction to a foreseen explosion, it becomes clear how effective measures against the infected have been at forming docility in them, a concept Foucault (1995: 135) describes as "formless clay." Hence, Renée's intention mirrors the infected individuals' fear of potentially harming others. This displays that Dragonscale functions as the state's instrument of authority over the infected since docile bodies are "political puppets, small-scale models of power" (Foucault, 1995: 136). It unintentionally empowers the state to exploit the infected to advance its agenda. Consequently, although Camp Wyndham remains under Carol's authority thanks to groups like the Cremation Crew, her influence gradually weakens due to their actions. Thus, as the Cremation Crew's looming threat increases, the camp must implement regular drills and maintain vigilant lookouts for "seeing all the people" (Hill, 2016: 126). However, such a heightened focus on external dangers breaks the group's unity. Accordingly, the meticulous

effort to cultivate security dooms them, as the group (except a few rebels like Harper, John, and Renée) perishes at the hands of Jakob and Marlboro Man's crew. This is because the internal divisions and lack of a functional collective force render the group incapable of resisting external threats or challenging the status quo. As a result, the state prevents the infected from forming a functioning community and rebelling under an adept leader. It solidifies its power by aligning the public with a state-approved perspective.

In conclusion, Carol's rise to power within the camp illustrates how cult mentality flourishes once fear, charismatic leadership, control mechanisms, and social dynamics come together in a turbulent society. Therefore, the shift in leadership from Father Storey's benevolent and democratic disposition to Carol's controlling approach marks a turning point in the group structure. Under her guidance, what initially functioned as a sanctuary for the infected gradually transforms into yet another oppressive order, where personal autonomy yields social control for the sake of safety. Her role in this regard extends beyond simply promoting the prevailing binary views held by society. She actively reinforces ideological conformity among her followers through coercive means while exploiting their collective experiences to cement cult mentality. This enables Carol to drive her devotees to behave as mindless minions willing to make any sacrifice for her and the Bright. In this context, Dragonscale transcends its biological essence as a mark of difference and assumes a greater significance by enabling a dynamic interplay between power and control. Its presence empowers Carol to wield authority over the group due to her ability to calm the spore with her singing, instilling trust in those around her. Moreover, she integrates belief and submission because her voice can induce an altered state where the members feel an intense connection to her and momentarily escape their bleak circumstances. This relation prompts the group to adopt Carol's viewpoint in their cognitive and emotional processes, transforming the group into an embodiment of Echo. Paralleling Echo's loss of vocal autonomy and consequent reliance on external sources to communicate, the members collectively become voiceless echoes lacking independent expression. This highlights how such altered states boost the deterioration of autonomy in favour of groupthink. Consequently, Carol's cult demonstrates several layers of influence wielded by power over identities, behaviours, perceptions, and memories.

Regardless of Carol's success in cultivating a cult mentality among her followers or acquiring their undying allegiance, she remains incapable of subverting societal norms and preventing her group's decline. This is mainly because she cannot balance disciplinary and repressive powers. Despite her initial inclination towards disciplinary power, which encourages members to internalise her agenda, Carol's growing fixation on protecting the group prompts

her towards repressive power. This ultimately undermines her effort to conceptualise Dragonscale as a unifying force within the narrative. The reliance on repression causes withdrawal from solidarity and contributes to the group's inability to function effectively. This is why, confronted with a more systematic manner of power wielded by the state, she fails to alter the trajectory of society. Her leadership falls short of what is required to match state power in terms of structure, unity, and reach. Since the state's authority stems from a meticulous synthesis of disciplinary and repressive powers that keep society in line, Carol cannot build a solid counterpower to influence people. In this case, the state produces a narrative wherein the infected jeopardise humanity itself through biopower, discourse, surveillance, discipline, and violence. This enables authorities to regulate the population effectively and instil societal compliance with the state's agenda. Hence, Carol's group cannot find a suitable platform to preach its tenets. Such a position turns the group into a reaction against and a victim of the socio-political structures it aspires to overcome. This outcome indicates the group's difficulty in validating itself within the broader nets of power dynamics. As a result, although Camp Wyndham acts as a resistance against the state-inflicted portrayal of the infected as dangerous, Carol's shortcoming in gaining political impact, like Mother Eve, halts her group from developing into a strong resistance point in the novel's trajectory.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that counterpowers require a balance of disciplinary and repressive power to achieve social legitimacy and/or maintain their existence using two fictional cults as a point of reference. Building on the insights of cult studies and Foucauldian theory, the thesis has discretely analysed Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and Joe Hill's *The Fireman* to highlight the delicate interplay between cults and societal forces in similar settings. Power dynamics can differently influence the trajectory of cultic groups that originate in similar environments based on their effective or ineffective execution of disciplinary and repressive powers. In other words, while similarities in origin and environment suggest that counterpowers share parallel dynamics, discrepancies in how disciplinary and repressive powers have been applied impact the respective success of these groups. Hence, it is contended that *The Power* succeeds where *The Fireman* fails because it deploys a strategic balance between Foucauldian disciplinary and repressive powers, allowing the cult to integrate itself into a disordered society. In contrast, the cult in *The Fireman*, led by Carol, is markedly reactionary and lacks the systemic infrastructure required for long-term influence or survival. The thesis compares these two cults, the cult of Mother Eve and that of Carol, by referencing its previous findings to conclusively clarify which factors allowed one group to infiltrate and maintain a presence in society while the other clearly failed to do so. To this end, the chapter first turns its attention to the novels' settings to display the similarities and differences that led to the establishment of the two groups. Then, it shifts its focus to the two leaders who demonstrate different tendencies to place greater emphasis on why these groups differ. Lastly, the chapter concludes the analysis by restating the factors that enabled the success of Allie's group as opposed to the failure of Carol's in achieving a dominant voice within similar societies.

As outlined in the thesis, societies that are unable to offer safety, certainty, and peace foster an environment favourable to the emergence of cultic groups. Such an example has been identified in both *The Power* and *The Fireman*. A close analysis of both novels reveals that their narratives depict a societal struggle against the challenges posed by a phenomenon so extraordinary in nature that it leaves society disoriented and overwhelmed. There is a clear correlation between these societies' difficulty in dealing with the anomalies they face and the development of the cultic groups led by Allie and Carol in their respective novels. This is because when society cannot fulfil people's needs, provide them with meaningful lives, and cause them to feel frustrated and hopeless, people "desperately seek redress" (Sponholz, 2005: 9). In terms of *The Power*, upon discovering skein, society initially views women as a threat

due to their dangerous, abnormal powers that can inflict harm or even death upon others, regardless of their intentions. Hence, society's pre-existing unfavourable position towards women intensifies, resulting in their marginalisation by propagating a discourse that demonises them as a danger to society. This negativity causes violence against women with skein, as evidenced by incidents of girls being killed (Alderman, 2017: 26), accused of being possessed by the Devil (Alderman, 2017: 42), and subjected to torture (Alderman, 2017: 261). Similarly, in *The Fireman*, a pandemic caused by Dragonscale creates a chaotic and uneasy atmosphere that results in the exclusion of the infected from society. These individuals are dehumanised and marginalised because of the spore's deadly nature, which typically causes its victims to combust, and a fear-mongering discourse regarding its origin. This atmosphere of fear and distrust drives some officers to justify the killing of all infected prisoners for the sake of preventing them from combustion and infecting others (Hill, 2016: 369-370). Consequently, society's lack of answers generates a polarisation between those seen as 'normal' and 'abnormal' in the novels. Within this paradigm, dominant social narratives foster a culture of fear and animosity against the abnormal, leading them to search for alternative structures to find security and peace.

Following the rift caused by social exclusion, both societies witness the emergence of new communities which embrace those previously marginalised. These communities put them at its centre and help them not only to find themselves a sanctuary but also to escape from the violent and brutal society. Simply put, despite the unfavourable social atmosphere, Allie and Carol's groups offer an alternative space for the marginalised to express themselves openly without harassment and violence. This starkly contrasts the society's oppressive tendencies since Allie and Carol foster an environment characteristic of cults with a strong emphasis on "community, spirituality and doctrine, and unending commitment" (Grant, 2022: 31). For instance, the government in *The Power* tries to separate women with skeins from regular citizens, instructing them to perform futile exercises without training them to control their powers. Women are expected to "keep [their skeins] under control" by maintaining a reserved demeanour (Alderman, 2017: 102). However, Allie's practices advocate a contrary position, cultivating an empowering environment where her followers can fulfil their potential and flourish. Under her wings, they broaden their understanding of skein and gain proficiency in its control, paving the way for them to gain influential social positions. Akin to this government, the authorities in *The Fireman* also isolate the infected from the general population, albeit through violence. By targeting and killing them, the authorities seek to resolve the crisis with a more radical approach instead of conducting proper research on the spore and initiating

precautions to prevent its detrimental effects. This radical approach forces the infected to live in constant dread, knowing that they are hunted. Nevertheless, Carol's group becomes a beacon of hope for them by instilling in its members a belief "in each other, in the future, and in the power they share as a flock" (Hill, 2016: 121). This sense of community promotes resilience in the face of peril, helping them to overcome the deadly curse imposed by Dragonscale. Consequently, it is evident that in both novels, the marginalised are denied opportunities to integrate into society, leading them to seek solace in cult-like groups through Allie and Carol's embracing attitude.

When considering how Allie and Carol's groups interact with the social structures created by their governments, it becomes evident that they act as a counterforce to the prevailing power dynamics. This perspective reflects the Foucauldian concept of power, as how they engage with these structures positions them as a source of resistance against the existing order. For Foucault, power is a decentralised phenomenon that manifests across numerous nodes, forming a web-like structure. In this sense, power does not impose obligations but operates through individuals, shaping, and transmitting itself (Smart, 2004: 70). This causes power to be a dynamic and fluid matter. Hence, its "existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance" (Foucault, 1978: 95). These points play numerous roles in power relations, including that of "adversary, target, support, or handle," and "are present everywhere in the power network" (Foucault, 1978: 95). This implies a dynamic interplay between power and resistance, where not only does the opposition challenge the prevailing power, but the latter also actively resists the loss of its advantageous position. Hence, a simple shift in perspective can render authority figures as either oppressors or resisters, depending on the viewpoint adopted while examining the power dynamic in question. In this regard, both groups within the novels fulfil the role of resistance since their very presence challenges the predominant assumptions of their respective societies. Nonetheless, there is a divergence in their modes of resistance, which distinguishes them and leads them to fulfil different roles in power dynamics.

In *The Power*, the contrast between how the authorities and Allie's group address the issue of skein creates a zone of interaction where power and resistance collide. This prompts an interplay between skein's depiction as a public danger that must be averted and the response of those affected. The authorities see the women with skein as potential "terrorists" for what happened "in the Middle East, in India and Asia" (Alderman, 2017: 90). Recognising the women's unified aspiration to liberate themselves and overthrow their oppressors, those in authority are fearful that a similar scenario might unfold before their eyes. However, Allie presents a counterpoint through her actions. By rescuing both the girls in the convent and Rachel

Latif from police brutality amidst a multitude of women (Alderman, 2017: 113-118), Allie demonstrates the authorities' lack of regard for women's safety and positions herself as a figure who could potentially challenge the status quo. These acts of heroism create a favourable impression of Allie as a resolute leader willing to take risks for the welfare of innocent women. Thus, "[t]he more the authorities say she's illegitimate ... the more women are drawn to" Allie (Alderman, 2017: 119). Furthermore, since resistance presents itself in numerous forms (Foucault, 1978: 96), Margot's meticulous proposal to train women to master their new abilities establishes an additional point of resistance to power. In this case, although the Governor protests against her proposal, Margot's opponent position advocates for a different viewpoint that prioritises women with skein. Considering her position as a prominent figure allied with the government, Margot becomes an outstanding presence with the potential to effect change in governmental operations. Hence, combined with Allie's group, her adversary position unintentionally creates a strong counter-power to the dominant one. This is because her proposal becomes a catalyst that opens the door for women with skein to assume influential societal roles and creates a foundation for their social acknowledgement. In this respect, while Allie's prominent role in leading a controversial religious movement centred on women is crucial in altering the social landscape, Margot's indirect and unintended support for Allie's agenda significantly facilitates the movement's success.

Contrary to the resistance's triumph in *The Power*, *The Fireman* presents a narrative where the resistance enacted by Carol's group fails to change the status quo. In this novel, authorities initiate a reign of terror on the infected to safeguard the healthy population since, in most cases, infection results in fatal outcomes. Therefore, Carol's group functions as a form of resistance against an oppressive power, given that each of its members is infected. By providing a shelter where they can reside, interact, and even learn to neutralise the spore, Carol's group directly opposes the predominant powers. The group shelters Renée, who has escaped from medical care to "explode outside where no one will get hurt" (Hill, 2016: 33), stops Harper's Dragonscale symptoms (Hill, 2016: 188), and becomes a family for Michael upon losing his family (Hill, 2016: 136, 142). Accordingly, a collective resistance against the established order where the infected are the subjects of intense social disfavour and stigmatisation is formed in the group. Nevertheless, change becomes impossible due to the sophisticated counter-power put forward by the authorities. Indeed, Carol offers protection from the state's dangers, but she cannot engage in widespread activism to alter public opinion on the spore. However, revolution requires a strategic organisation of dispersed and irregular resistance points woven into social structures (Foucault, 1978: 96). In this context, Carol's actions are limited to a tiny platform at

the camp, which hinders direct engagement in socio-political activities. In contrast, the state exerts a significant social influence, shaping public opinion in a manner that favours its own agenda. Such influence materialises through the constant stream of negative news, such as the demise of numerous Celtics players (Hill, 2016: 8), and the harrowing footage of flaming figures jumping off a building (Hill, 2016: 11-12). The impact of this negativity even extends to the point where those who are rumoured to control the spore, such as an infected monk and the people on Martha Quinn's Island, suffer victimisation and are killed. These demonstrate that Carol's group lacks the resources and the reach of the state, which ultimately leads to its downfall.

When considering how the two groups differ in terms of their role as resisters, cultivating a cult mentality plays a crucial role in their opposition to the status quo, regardless of their success in doing so. This is mainly due to cult mentality's predisposition to impair individual agency and enhance group cohesion, strengthening a collective urge to protect the group's well-being against opposing forces. Accordingly, the group's creed becomes so powerful that rational thinking and factual evidence diminish significantly, leading to the normalisation of extremism (Tamm, 2013: 25). Such an effect ultimately encourages members to regard the external world as a malicious entity, filled with enemies eager to cause harm to the group. With the group becoming the sole source of safety, the members slowly give up their agency and follow the directives set by the group leader. Consequently, they adopt uniform behavioural patterns, beliefs, and preferences driven by group dynamics as well as the influential figures in the cult (Carlton Best, 2018: 13). In this context, it should be noted that there is a clear correlation between the cult mentality and resistance, in both novels. In Alderman's novel, cult mentality facilitates a change in the social structure, illustrating how an alternative social order can be established. Contrastingly, Hill's novel demonstrates that although cult mentality allows the establishment of an alternative community by forming a space to defy the status quo, its mismanagement causes the group's downfall.

From the perspective of cult mentality, both Allie and Carol display a similar trajectory, which appears to parallel Foucault's concept of power as a relational mechanism. As Foucault conceptualises power not as a unified force but as a mechanism constituted by the convergence of diverse elements (Deleuze, 2006: 25), the novels portray cult mentality as the product of a continuous interaction among the society, cult leaders, and their followers. This suggests that the cult mentality is not a passive phenomenon, but a dynamic process shaped and influenced by interpersonal interactions as well as social structures. In this case, both leaders employ similar methods that lead Allie to create a holy persona and Carol to cultivate a saviour persona.

Drawing upon an us-versus-them narrative, both leaders effectively portray the external world as perilous, thus fostering a sense of collectivity and community within their respective groups. However, it is crucial to recognise that this duality is, in fact, a by-product of the very societies they seek to safeguard themselves from. At this point, the operational nature of power becomes important, for power “is a way in which certain actions modify others” (Foucault, 1983: 219). As such, societal hostility towards the marginalised reinforces the acceptance of the beliefs and truths presented by Allie and Carol’s groups. This, in turn, intensifies their solidarity against those who seek to jeopardise their existence. Moreover, Allie and Carol further cultivate this solidarity by encouraging members to identify with each other, fostering a sense of belonging and similarity. The heightened levels of trust among the members allow them to exert a high degree of influence over them. This atmosphere cultivates a cult mentality that serves as a catalyst for mobilising the members’ collective will towards Allie and Carol’s objectives in a hostile society. In other words, by providing a sense of safety to the marginalised in an era of intense socio-political animosity, Allie and Carol’s presence becomes crucial in generating the cult mentality that positions these groups as resisters.

Even though the cult mentality allows both groups to establish tight-knit communities, their outcomes differ. This is primarily due to Allie and Carol’s disparity in balancing disciplinary and repressive powers. When power relies on repression, it forces individuals to surrender and submit to the will of the dominant power by using fear as a means of control. This dynamic cultivates a culture of fear and silence, where voices are muzzled and perspectives are suppressed, leading to submission and subordination. Hence, repression is “a sentence to disappear, ... an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, ... an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know” (Foucault, 1978: 4). Although this form of power may appear effective in fostering control over individuals, its aggressive nature can, in fact, result in antagonism towards the agenda it seeks to enforce. Furthermore, since modern societies display a disciplinary character, power generally operates through division, fragmentation, separation, categorisation, and definition. In this context, power becomes “a political anatomy of detail” (Foucault, 1995: 139), through which individual bodies undergo constant observation and regulation. This process not only encourages conformity but also shapes how people think and behave, reflecting the training and social control imposed by such a power structure. Thus, disciplinary power works covertly to mould individuals so that they internalise the values and behaviours deemed appropriate by the prevailing power dynamics. This process of covert influence distinguishes discipline from repression, where there is explicit interference in the autonomous actions of individuals by

means of violence and fear. Despite their inherent differences, juxtaposing the two can amplify the efficacy of power dynamics because their combined impact can promote a milieu where people adhere to the dominant power and internalise the status quo. In light of this dynamic, Allie's ability to balance repressive and disciplinary powers, as opposed to Carol's reliance on repression, is a distinguishing factor between the two. It is this capacity that allows Allie's cult to exert a dominant influence over society and transform its teachings into a religion, while Carol's leadership results in the collapse of her group.

In *The Power*, Allie successfully overturns the very fabric of society and transforms her doctrines into the dominant religion thanks to her carefully balanced use of disciplinary and repressive powers. Her disciplinary approach, as previously discussed, allows her to create a cult mentality which unites her members while erasing their individuality. It also helps her to present herself as nothing more than a sacred messenger doing God's bidding, diverting attention from the monstrosities committed by her supporters. Accordingly, even when her followers brutally rape (Alderman, 2017: 280-282), torture (Alderman, 2017: 283, 287), and kill (Alderman, 2017: 264) men, Allie can still appear like a victim and declare war on men using the North Moldovans as an excuse since men are slaughtering "innocent women" (Alderman, 2017: 325). Her misandrist views are invisible to the public because she appears as the embodiment of divinity and women's rights. Additionally, the media and some websites assert that men have lower intelligence, are less beneficial to society and are more criminally inclined than women (Alderman, 2017: 278). Given her group's belief that men are evil, such narratives further strengthen Allie's legitimacy and justify the cult's role in subverting social norms. Moreover, the group's violent methods proactively suppress the public, as evidenced by Tunde's gradual loss of people willing to help him out of fear (Alderman, 2017: 262-263). Although their fears increase their submission to the new authority figures, their response to oppression and violence is because of the balance created between repressive and disciplinary powers. This allows Allie's group to turn people into docile bodies. Hence, in order to rob men of their fundamental rights and force them to submit to women, Bessapara labels men as terrorists who are eager to collaborate with the enemy (Alderman, 2017: 242). At first glance, this law seems to protect Bessapara from malicious attacks by internal enemies, encouraging people to support its implementation. Nevertheless, it also performs a panoptic function by putting men under constant surveillance in public. Consequently, Allie's group uses the state's sphere of influence to shape the public and operates violence to hush the opposing voices, enabling her to infiltrate society successfully.

Contrary to Allie's successful group, Carol's group in *The Fireman* ceases to exist due to its leader's repressive approach to lead. Initially, Carol uses discipline to control its members, conditioning them to follow a rigid order. This creates a positive perception of repressive measures (e.g., forbidding mobile phones and limited access to lunch) among the members, knowing that "someone was thinking about how to keep [them] all safe" (Hill, 2016: 161). However, as Carol prioritises safety above all else, the group's primary goal becomes conformity to her personal preferences and ideals in place of collective decision-making. This desire for safety pushes some members, such as Don Lewiston and Harper, to defy Carol's leadership, contributing to the group's downfall. Carol unknowingly destroys the group's unity in her efforts to mould the collective mind through the Bright to her own liking. This is why Don's fear of losing his identity and becoming Carol (Hill, 2016: 475) clearly indicates how her quest to obtain power and control fails to ensure everyone's submission. Carol's coercive effect on the members, thanks to the Bright, decreases disciplinary power's impact due to her increasing shift to repressive behaviour. On top of this, the state's systematic nature challenges Carol's group, given its ability to justify its brutality via biopower. The authorities employ such power in the name of social improvement to increase control over the public. This encourages people to support the state's radical practices towards the infected, who become dehumanised. Correspondingly, not only are there public executions (Hill, 2016: 68, 70), but people also prepare food "for the volunteer fire crews" (Hill, 2016: 72) to express their support and boost the crew's morale. The central role played by the state here is to prevent the infected from organising resistance by reinforcing the idea that Dragonscale is genuinely destructive and uncontrollable. This generates a constant illusion of surveillance and superiority over the infected. Dragonscale's inherent panoptic quality fosters such illusion, discouraging any potential rebellion by creating tacit submissiveness. Thus, Carol cannot establish a powerful resistance with cult mentality because the state counteracts such unity by imposing internalised discipline.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of *The Power* and *The Fireman* illustrates that balancing disciplinary and repressive powers is essential to maintaining the existence and influence of counterpowers in society within the context of cults. Despite people's tendency to join such groups to escape from a chaotic environment and find a welcoming space, without a balanced disciplinary and repressive power, alternative power dynamics cannot penetrate individuals and/or society with their agenda. Thus, even if Allie's and Carol's groups foster a cult mentality that slowly drives their members to surrender themselves to the groups' goals, only Allie's cult succeeds in transforming societal structures. This is because she strategically

blends both types of power to alter the prevailing standards and consolidate her cult as the overpowering influence. However, Carol only focuses on repression, causing her group to crumble internally and eventually collapse. In this case, what makes power effective is not simply coercion but the ability to design a well-structured system that can shape people into willing adherents to sustain and propagate the desired result. As demonstrated in Alderman's novel, a cult can transcend its boundaries and assume an influential position in society by virtue of employing a balanced formula of repression, surveillance, and discipline. Hence, social structures mirror Echo's loss of autonomy and become echoes of Allie's dominant voice. Instead of demonstrating agency, the public merely repeats Allie's beliefs due to a loss of subjectivity. Such a transition is not possible in Hill's novel as Carol's group cannot withstand the authorities that seek to exterminate the infected, owing to its internal collapse caused by her repressive practices. Here, Echo's fate is exemplified by Carol's group, where individuality is forsaken in favour of groupthink, replacing unity with silence. Although Carol successfully engenders a cult mentality that binds members together, her failure to formulate a systematic resistance against the state's pervasive narrative leads to her group's downfall. These fictional portrayals demonstrate how power assumes diverse manifestations to reproduce itself through reinforcing particular narratives. Consequently, any attempt at a radical change will fail to achieve its goal without a structured mechanism for directing society to internalise the desired revolution.

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