

Naomi Alderman's *The Power*: Gender and Gendering Power

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Abstract: This paper explores the reversal of gender power relations and its consequences as described in the novel *The Power* by Naomi Alderman. Inherently a feminist work of science fiction, *The Power* breaks apart the stereotypical power dynamics between the male and female gender. This paper argues that a matriarchal society with undue authority will be no different from that of a society that is patriarchal. Power, irrespective of who wields it, demands domination. When girls around the world suddenly develop the ability to produce electricity from their hands, it causes a cataclysmic shift of power in a world that is at large patriarchal. It explores the corruptive nature of power, reversal of gender roles, and re-examination of the realities that women face at the hands of men in today's world. The patriarchal forms of power, their use and abuse, are simulated when women become the authoritarians. By showing that either gender is capable of violence and domination when in power, the assumption that male dominating societies exist because of the traditional concept of men being superior to women just because of their gender is nullified. This paper pays close attention to the novel's invalidation of gender discourse; that it is a social construct, and thus, inconsistent.

Keywords: Corruption, domination, gender power relations, gender roles, *The Power*

I. INTRODUCTION

Naomi Alderman is an English novelist and game writer. Her works include *Disobedience*, *The Lessons*, *The Liars' Gospel*, *The Power*, etc. She has been a firm believer in gender equality, postulating that women and men are inherently equal and thus should be treated equally. She advocates for women's empowerment, encouraging young women to embrace their abilities and wake up the power in older generations of women as well. The mutually beneficial process of young generation of women empowering themselves as well as older generations is touched upon in her feminist work *The Power*. The novel strives to break apart the power dynamics between the male and the female gender. Taking the stereotypical portrayal of men as superior beings, it completely flips the narrative. Alderman brings to attention the prevailing social and political issues faced by women by means of providing a terrifying image of what the world would be like if men were oppressed instead. The female gender has been overtly, and later, covertly oppressed for so long that it has become socially acceptable and come to be seen as the standard way to treat women. It is difficult to acknowledge this blatant practice due to centuries of oppression normalizing it. But in this novel the author has incongruously put men in the shoes of women through

violent means, and it is jarring to witness. All girls around the world develop a strange new ability that allows them to electrocute people at will. Their collarbones develop striated muscle membranes that are called the organs of electricity, making them produce shock waves at the touch of their hands. Thus the female body becomes a means of weapon rather than a vehicle for punishment. It doles out justice and exacts revenge upon its oppressors without mercy.

II. WOMEN EMPOWERED

The role of a woman has historically been secondary to a man. It is expected of her to stand at the periphery and observe his victories. The goal of subjugation of women was "male control of female sexuality and their reproductive potential" (Crandall 1). So when girls come to possess this unique ability, the new shift in the power dynamics between men and women is impossible to ignore. The rate of growth of this power is ever expanding. It is not unnatural or bizarre for girls to suddenly be able to do this. "My children, nothing has happened here that has not been in accordance with the natural law" (*The Power* 3). Looking at it thus only goes on to show that female oppression has been accepted and internalized for too long that it's impossible to accept that women could be stronger than men. Anything that is kept covered or hidden over a period

of time simmers within, and when it cannot bear to be kept hidden anymore, it explodes in fury. The strength of such an act is sure to shake everything around it up. The system and the society are two interwoven entities as it is the society that entrusts the authority to the system. But the society is not dependent on the system as the system is on the society. When the people of a society feel that they want something changed, it is easier for them to overthrow the system.

It follows that there are two ways for the nature and the use of human power to change. One is that an order might issue from the palace, a command unto the people saying 'It is thus.' But the other, the more certain, the more inevitable, is that those thousand thousand points of light should each send new message. When the people change, the palace cannot hold. (*The Power 4*)

Having the power is an assurance that, be it for destruction or protection, women are capable and strong. Younger girls with the power awaken it in older women when they touch them. This echoes Alderman's own idea of women empowerment in which she believes in the power of young women to educate and empower the older women. "The younger women can wake it up in the older ones; but from now on all women will have it... She must be eighty years old, and the tears run down her face as she does it again and again" (*The Power 59*). It not only empowers women but also fills them with relief and joy to be able to be free of the stereotype that women are subservient. The inherent knowledge that with just the touch of their fingers they can bring a man down to his knees offers them comfort, an ease in the way they see the world that they couldn't before. In the age-old quest for dominance, men have always come on top. Dismissed as being passive, to possess this kind of inhuman power is something no woman wants to give up now that she has it literally within her grasp. "It doesn't matter that she shouldn't, that she never would. What matters is that she could, if she wanted. The power to hurt is a kind of wealth" (*The Power 71*).

III. MEN OPPRESSED

Being a man, once a symbol of superiority, now represents weakness. "Boys dressing as girls to seem more powerful. Girls dressing as boys to shake off the meaning of the power, or to leap on the unsuspecting, wolf in sheep clothing" (*The Power 70*). The compliant language that women are expected to adhere is now expected of men. They are outraged in the beginning, unable to accept that women could be as powerful as men. They deny and dismiss this strange new power as coincidence and trickery, but as they realize that it is in fact the new reality, they slowly retreat and succumb to defeat. "Blokes have got a thing they can do: they're strong. Women have got a thing now, too" (*The Power 102*). Women free themselves from

sexual slavery, form gangs and destroy the men that exploited them. The power structures in all the countries are crumbling. The number of women seeking revenge and trying out their new powers in creative new ways increase every day. Justice for all the atrocities that the male population has committed against women is at last meted out. Men are now the prey and the women have become huntresses. Seeing their terror gives them a kind of satisfaction. Fear is instilled in the hearts of men as their safety is called into question:

They'd separated the boys from the girls on the fifth day; it seemed obvious, when they worked out the girls were doing it. Already there are parents telling the boys not to go out alone, not to stray too far... Boys-only buses took them safely to boys-only schools. They fell into it easily. You only had to see a few videos for the fear to hit you in the throat. (*The Power 21*)

In oppressive Asian countries, war destroys the existing government. Women are hungry to lash out with their electric power. For the first time ever, men are afraid to walk alone in the streets. "Man's structural capacity to rape and woman's corresponding structural vulnerability are basic to physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself" (Brownmiller 5). With the reversal of power dynamic between the sexes, sexual violence against men becomes the new reality. The number of domestic violence against men increases every day. The women find glee in seeing the life leak out of a man's eyes as he is raped and electrocuted. Government ruled by women impose strange new laws on the citizens such as men not leaving anywhere without having the written permission of a female guardian, they can no longer drive cars or own businesses or vote, "Any man who does not have a sister, mother, wife or daughter, or other relative, to register him must report to the police station, where he will be assigned a work detail and shackled to other men for the protection of the public" (*The Power 243*). Groups that call themselves as men's rights people, men protesting with banners that demand justice for men, and online forums that practice men's activism emerge. The ultimate insult for a woman is to be called a man.

IV. REWRITING RELIGION

Allie, one of the four protagonists of the novel, who joins a convent while on the run, goes on to become a major religious figure around the world. Her religious ideas disregard with the very foundation of Christianity. She declares that God is a woman and that everyone should henceforward address God as a 'She'. Women don't oppose to this heretic idea, in fact they feel that they have earned this, "And this 'She' is a new teaching, and very shocking. But they understand it, each of them. They have been

waiting to hear this good news” (*The Power* 78). The creator is greater than his creation.

So I teach a new thing. This power has been given to us to lay straight our crooked thinking. It is the Mother not the Son who is the emissary of Heaven. We are to call God “Mother”. 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. (*The Power* 80)

Allie calls herself Mother Eve. She believes that it is her personal mission to act as a messenger of God. She preaches that it is a blessing for women to live in harmony with each other than to live as husband and wife. She dismantles the institution of marriage and unites women together to rise up at the top. Religion is a very powerful tool that can unite as well as drive people apart. Allie’s New Church introduces people belonging to various religions to pay attention to and follow the often forgotten female figures of the narratives. “Jews: look to Miriam, not Moses, for what you can learn from her. Muslims: look to Fatimah, not Muhammad. Buddhists: remember Tara, the mother of liberation. Christians: pray to Mary for your salvation” (*The Power* 115). Her heretic teachings draw women in more than anything. They are eager to accept her proclamations and abandon the ones they have believed in for all their lives. It shows that deep down they were always quite unsatisfied with the religions that were built from the male perspective. Religion is rewritten in all major parts the world. Muslim women tear off their purdah and march the streets in protest. The Hindus turn to worship Goddess Kali, and celebrate her long awaited arrival by going on violent killing sprees. The power women now have over men is heady, and they want any and all reason to continue basking in the feeling of revenge, so much so that they resort to rewriting their religions to suit their interests. Religious beliefs have political interests and their power allows women to branch out their religious and political agendas everywhere: “The voice says to Allie: Remember, sweetheart, the only way you’re safe is if you own the place. Allie says: Can I own the whole world?” (*The Power* 120).

V. CONCLUSION

. Power is corruptive. The Gender War is a race where men and women try to overthrow each other. Gender stereotype is based on the assumption that men are superior, and women, inferior. But power doesn’t discriminate between genders. It makes anyone that possesses it superior. It makes men as well as women greedy, violent, and dangerous. What started as retaliation and justice for women’s sufferings soon turned into a show of domination and anarchy. The gender roles reversed quickly once girls

developed their powers. “Eliminating some of the most hidden, yet pervasive, a form of discrimination against women requires the dismantling of gender stereotypes” (Cook and Cusack 2). And to dismantle the stereotypes, Alderman employs the reversal of gender roles to show that both men and women, given access to power, would act identically. The fundamental element any gender that wishes to come on top needs is power. When power is stripped from them, only human beings remain. Gender equality cannot be achieved unless one learns to dissociate power from gender. A male character in the novel consciously makes the decision to artificially implant the skein on his collarbone in order to become as powerful as women. His desire to be characterized by an organ that only women have possessed so far sets him apart from either gender. The ending of the book where the fictional author of the manuscript is asked whether he would consider publishing his work under the pseudonym of a woman in order for him to be taken seriously as a writer speaks volume. He is also asked if he thinks a world run by men would be more loving and peaceful, and kinder compared to the one now run by women. Thousands of years have passed since the day girls everywhere developed the power to electrocute, and it has become the norm for women to be the aggressors and for men play secondary role to women. So much so that, no one even knows definitively if there ever was a time when women were not in power. Alderman thus shines light on the problems of gender discourse and identity by presenting an alternate power structure that simply nullifies it.

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