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The Power: Gender: A Superhero or a Scapegoat?

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The Power:

Gender: A Superhero or a Scapegoat?

Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, published in 2016, is a frame story chronicling the societal shift that occurs when women gain a mysterious power. The main body is a fictional historical retelling set in our present time, written by Neil in the frame story hundreds of years later. The main body follows Allie, Margot, Tunde, and Roxy, and the events that occur when women suddenly discover they have the power to emit electricity from their fingertips. As society flips upside down, Allie becomes Mother Eve, Margot rises from mayor to governor, Roxy takes over the family business, and Tunde, the journalist, documents it all. As women take over the world, real-life atrocities committed against women by men, such as genital mutilation, are instead committed against men by women. The main body comes to a close just before the "Cataclysm" occurs, sending civilization back to the Stone Age. The frame story is told through letters between Neil and Naomi, another writer. Their correspondence mirrors many aspects of society today, swapping the gender roles we have seen throughout history and in our day-to-day lives.

Today, there are movies, comics, and books about almost any type of superhero one can think of, and there are now more female superheroes than ever before. The biggest trope in all superhero media is that the hero is good, and will save us from all evil. There is a common cultural belief, especially in the West, that just as superheroes are intrinsically good, women are more gentle, nurturing, and kind, and therefore a world run by women would be a less violent and more loving one. By giving women superhero-like powers, *The Power* sets out to imagine a world where women can overturn patriarchy and build a new world in an almost biblical sense.

Although this is the dream for most feminists, *The Power* demonstrates the impossibility of creating an equal society when one side holds more power. *The Power* subverts the stereotype that women are by nature more gentle and would be able to create an equal world if they held the power instead of men, and emphasizes the idea that gender is a construct and power is the true force behind oppression.

In today's culture, it is often assumed that female politicians will be more lenient, and focus their policy and process around family and community values. On the other hand, male politicians are assumed to be harsher and more self-serving. In response to the question of whether female politicians have different values and approaches, Moira Rayner writes "Women's priorities tend to favor those whom they can least bear to disappoint, and this is very rarely themselves" (133). In Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, we bear witness to Mayor Margot Cleary's rise to political power alongside female's physical rise to power. As the Power begins to spread, Margot focuses her political power on a personal cause, her daughter Jocelyn. As her daughter struggles to control her Power, Margot begins a public-private initiative for training camps for young girls. In this action, Margot reflects Rayner's ideas. Her daughter is one of the people she cannot stand to disappoint, and this drives her political action. Near the end of the novel, after Jocelyn is critically injured during deployment from the NorthStar training camps Margot created, there is a shift. "Margot says 'My country comes first. We need strong leadership.' There is a bonus in her contract if NorthStar deployments top fifty thousand... The bonus would buy her a private island" (Alderman 137). At this moment, although her daughter is critically injured, Margot cannot help but think of personal benefit. Margot is no longer worried about failing her daughter, she has become self-serving and focused on power.

Mayor Margot Cleary paid a high price for her political involvement- she lost a daughter. But she was not the only one who paid dearly. Tatiana Moskalev paid the ultimate price, her life. After the Power spread, Tatiana took over the throne from her husband and attempted to create a utopian country for women, with Allie (Mother Eve) at her side. However, when she outlives her usefulness, Allie takes her life to assume control of the country. Rayner asks, “What price do women pay for political engagement? Must it be a pound of women’s flesh?” (137). For Roxy, it is her skein. After taking control of the family drug business, she is targeted by her brother and father, who cut out her skein. In today’s society, there are a thousand ways to take power from a female politician, but it is much harder to de-throne a male politician. In *The Power*, the physical removal of the skein is one of the only ways to take a woman’s power, while men have no power at all.

Feminists and authors throughout the ages have often imagined a world run by women. A utopia without oppression, where all are equal. Men are the problem, and without them, the world would be a beautiful place. Alderman’s *The Power* contradicts this hopeful narrative. By giving women the physical power to overpower men, Alderman explores and deconstructs the idea of gender as a marker of morals and values. “It is not raw numbers of women... that changes a culture, but the qualities that women may (or may not) bring to the mix” (Rayner 131). Society often assumes women would bring positive qualities to politics, but *The Power* is a jarring reminder that oppression comes from those who choose to exert their power on others, whoever they may be.

As it parallels our past and present, *The Power* invokes real-world violence. In the body of the novel, women trapped in a basement in Moldova, “the world capital of human sex trafficking” (Alderman 46), discover their power and fight back. In the world today, airport

bathrooms are plastered with human trafficking hotlines, and young women carry pepper spray on their keychains. “It is in Moldova that the transfer of power is realized most rapidly and most violently, as it transforms from a state of absolute male rule to the declaration of a feminist utopia. In this context, the ability of women to protect themselves from sexual abuse is regarded as a miracle from God” (Miller 411). In this light, the Power shines as a beacon of hope for women, an opportunity to right the wrongs of men and end oppression. As the novel progresses, Alderman again invokes real-world violence- genital mutilation. Still practiced in many countries, female genital mutilation involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons. This act is rooted in patriarchy and purity culture, often done before child marriage. In *The Power*, Alderman describes a “‘curbing procedure’...in which key nerve endings in the penis are burned out” (106). Through this parallel, Alderman suggests that the very same actions we blame the patriarchy for could and would be committed by women if they had the power.

The Power draws parallels, not just to violence, but also to all the small ways men sit higher in the social order. In the frame of the story, the idea of male soldiers is sexualized as women so often are. Neil, the author, refers to his female correspondent Naomi as “one of the good ones” (Alderman 142), a phrase often used now by men to separate themselves from the harm their gender inflicts on women. So many female authors have published work under a man’s name to be taken seriously, and in the final line, Naomi asks Neil if he would consider publishing his story under a female name. “Alderman’s intent behind mirroring the gender violence and anarchy of our present world in a future upside-down world is to force her readers to rethink everything about the current conventional power relation between men and women” (Sen 145). Although it could be read as simply a critique of past and present patriarchy, *The*

Power is more than a reflective revenge fantasy. *The Power* investigates the true forces behind oppression, and gender comes out empty-handed. “Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn’t. What is a woman? Whatever a man is not. Tap on it and it’s hollow” (Alderman 142).

Through subversion of the stereotype that women are more gentle and would create a better world if they held power rather than men, *The Power* emphasizes the idea that gender is simply a construct, and power is the true force behind oppression. By gaining superhero-like powers of electricity, the women in *The Power* overturn the patriarchy and build a new world. However, the idea that a matriarchal society would be far kinder crumbles as politicians and civilians alike enact the same violence we see against women upon men. Female politicians start wars and threaten each other with nuclear weapons, and civilians harass and assault men on the street. Using real-life parallels, Alderman exposes the true meaning of gender as a construct and makes it abundantly clear that any person or group can, and might, oppress another if they have the power to do so.

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