

Naomi Alderman's *The Power*: A Speculative Feminist Dystopian Fiction Mirroring the Here and Now

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*Speculative fiction, containing speculative elements based on supposition and imagination, changes the dynamics of what is real or possible as we perceive them in our current world and then surmises the likely consequences. Litterateurs have employed speculative fiction as a means of suggesting the latent possibilities and promises for our immediate reality which are not yet enacted or materialised. Accordingly, female writers of feminist speculative fiction, particularly from the 1970s onwards, have used this genre as an effective tool both to expose and to interrogate the oppressive status quo and the normative ethos of the conventional power relation between the sexes prevailing at present. In keeping with this, Naomi Alderman, in her Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction 2017 winning novel *The Power*, strategically flips the current power structure between the sexes on its head by investing the women, primarily adolescent girls, with the unforeseen yet inherent power of electrocuting men which ultimately results in a Cataclysm initiating a new world order ruled and dominated by empowered women some time in the future. This paper aims at exploring how Alderman, a staunch feminist, purposefully demonstrates in *The Power* that her novel's fictional dystopia, though macabre and gruesome, is, in essence, a fairly accurate representation as well as a critique of the hierarchical gender relationship as it is prevalent in our present reality.*

Keywords

Power; speculative fiction; feminist dystopia; speculative future; present reality; gender relationships

Speculative fiction, a broadly inclusive genre, encompasses such literary forms as science fiction, fantasy, fairytale, utopian and dystopian fiction, supernatural fiction, superhero fiction, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, and the

like. In general, speculative fiction, often set in a version of our real world in present times or in the immediate future, introduces a technological innovation or a startling new concept into our everyday reality to extrapolate its possible outcomes. This genre envisions changes in our existing world by introducing a seemingly innocuous concept “What if ...?” (what if a section of human beings could see the future, or what if human beings had a vastly increased lifespan through an innovation in medical science) into the novel’s fabric and follows its logic to an unexpected conclusion. By doing so, speculative fiction critiques the present reality that serves as its background as well as attempts to unearth potentialities that the existing reality ignores under the impact of a rigid crust of tradition, norm and manner. Speculative fiction’s inherent capacity of reflecting and critiquing the present reality is foregrounded by David Ketterer as he posits that “SF is only worthy of serious attention when it is about something real” (209). Thus, speculative fiction, by creating an alternative vision of the existing reality along with a different perspective, enables feminist writers to examine and challenge the doctrines that are held sacred and immutable in the existing patriarchal world order. Moreover, highlighting the subversive potential of speculative fiction to interrogate the socially-constructed repressive notions of gender and sexuality, Sarah Lefanu has claimed: “... science fiction is by its nature interrogative, open. Feminism questions a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms” (100). In view of this, Elyce Rae Helford also perceptively articulates that feminist speculative fiction in its different literary forms has the tremendous capacity of representing “the ultimate goals of feminism: worlds free of sexism, worlds in which women’s contributions (to science) are recognised and valued, worlds that explore the diversity of women’s desire and sexuality, and worlds that move beyond gender” (291). Speculative fiction, thus, allows its readers “the freedom to imagine beyond the confines of contemporary social life and the restrictions of contemporary politics, and, like Mary Shelley, to dream a world into existence: a world structured by the possibilities of scientific theory but informed, necessarily, by the politics of gender” (Shaw 178).

In feminist speculative fiction, using both utopias and dystopias, authors envisage a space and time in which women are not restricted to their stereotyped gender roles and identities enforced on them by the authoritarian patriarchal values that pervade the present reality. Jen Green and Sarah Lefanu have also stressed the spatial and temporal fluidity of speculative fiction when they suggest that this genre “allows us to take the present position of

women and use the metaphors of science fiction to illuminate it. We may be writing *about* the future, but we are writing *in* the present" (4). Feminist speculative fiction, thus, projects "potential futures whose most important function is to distance the reader from, and thus offer a critical perspective on, her present" (Shaw 2). Moreover, the genre sets out to expose the existing gender inequality, break down the gender binary and, thus, open up new vistas of potentiality for women to work towards their own empowerment and contribute to the development of the human race. Sophie Gilbert in her article in the *Atlantic* opines that the recent notable rise of the feminist speculative dystopia imagining preposterous scenarios is very opportune, since "something is very wrong with the shape and trajectory of the world" (Gilbert, "The Remarkable Rise"). She also deplores the fact that "many younger women who'd grown up mostly assuming that things could only get better for gender equality were seeing hard proof of the opposite" (Gilbert, "The Remarkable Rise"). Speculative feminist dystopian fiction, representing a distorted world, shows how much worse things could get and, thus, "prompts us to look at our own reality from different angles" (Gilbert, "The Remarkable Rise"). Patricia Melzer, an associate professor of Gender, Sexuality and Women's studies at Temple University, also stresses the need to read these fictional works as "cultural texts" (4). She likewise claims that the "realness" of these narratives "enables individuals (and groups) to relate to and recognize the [feminist] debates as relevant to their own lives" (Melzer 4). Underscoring the core focus of feminist science fiction to critique "a culture that has historically viewed women as passive, as lacking, as the Other and as inferior" (DeRose 86), Maria DeRose in her article has also said: "Through feminist science fiction, feminist writers can create other worlds and alternate histories in order to add their voices to this world and hope they are heard" (85). Furthermore, emphasising the significance of the elements of hope contained "only outside the story" (Baccolini 520) of a dystopian science fiction, Raffaella Baccolini has purported: "It is important to engage with the critical dystopias of recent decades, as they are the product of our dark times. By looking at the formal and political features of science fiction, we can see how these works point us toward change. We need to pass through the critical dystopias of today to move toward a horizon of hope" (521). Following the subversive and groundbreaking potentials of feminist speculative fiction, Naomi Alderman in *The Power* heralds a view of a world which, though turned upside down by violence and mayhem, is still replete with possibilities for real-world women to realise and exercise their empowered strength. In fact, Alderman's *The Power*,

though set in a speculative future, can be read and appreciated as both an inverted replica of the traditional power relations between men and women in our present world as well as an inspiring account for present-day women urging them to recognise their power of controlling their own destinies.

Naomi Alderman presents *The Power* in the form of a “frame narrative” or a story within a story. The novel opens and ends with the exchange of letters between a fictional male author Neil Adam Armon, an anagram of “Naomi Alderman”, and an established female writer named Naomi Alderman. Armon has sent a historical novel titled *The Power* to Alderman, hoping she will read, and give him some guidance on, his manuscript which is “a sort of ‘novelization’ of what archaeologists agree is the most plausible narrative” (Alderman ix) of the ten years leading to a significant event in human history called the Cataclysm which in the course of the novel will pave the way for a new world order ruled by women. Throughout this exchange, Armon is ingratiating and apologetic over taking up Naomi’s time, whereas Alderman is flippant and condescending, even once addressing him as a “saucy boy” (Alderman x). Armon is more circumspect with his phraseology, i.e., “Anyway, sorry, I’ll shut up now.”, “Thank you so much for this. I am so grateful you could spare the time.” (Alderman ix-x), since he is writing at a time when men are hardly considered as serious writers in the prevailing literary tradition. Armon’s deferential approach during the whole exchange indicates that he is not in a position of authority. Moreover, when Alderman writes: “I Think I’d rather enjoy this ‘world run by men’ you’ve been talking about. Surely a kinder, more caring and – dare I say it? – more *sexy* world than the one we live in” (Alderman x), we, as readers, get an inkling that the whole thing is set either at a time different than the time in which we live or in a different world than our own. Accordingly, this “frame narrative” device employed by Alderman draws our attention as readers to the context of her main narrative and, thus, enables us to gain a better understanding of the multiple levels of meaning within the story stemming from diverse perspectives.

The plot of Neil Adam Armon’s *The Power: A Historical Novel*, which comprises almost all of Naomi Alderman’s real novel *The Power*, starts in our present time, which is hundreds of years in his (Armon’s) past. Armon calls it a historical novel because it chronicles a period of ten years leading up to a momentous moment in human history in our near future sparked by the discovery of a surprising physical power in teenage girls. They can wield this power, electricity gathered in a physical organ connected to the strip of striated muscle across the girls’ collarbones called a “skein”, from their fingertips over

another person and cause serious pain and even instant death. Following this, more and more girls across the world learn how to harness this new ability and start electrocuting men. Furthermore, teenage girls can wake the power up in older women. A group of scientists explains the phenomenon as a change in human genome structure due to a nerve gas released during World War II, and confirms that all girls born from now on will possess this power and retain it throughout their lives. All these uncontrolled individual exercises of power by women ultimately invert the “normal” balance of power between men and women. As upshots, women forced to work as sex-slaves turn on their male assailants and free themselves; single-sex schools are established to ensure boys’ safety; the roles of men and women are swapped in broadcast media with women reporting the serious news items as lead anchors and men turning into side-kicks; women carry out successful uprisings to attain emancipation from strict patriarchal rule in Saudi Arabia and India, and women in other parts of the globe straightaway follow the trend of carrying out similar revolutions; Tatiana Moskalev, the fictional first lady of the late Moldovan president Viktor Moskalev, declares a new fictional kingdom named Bessapara ruled by women which is at war with the northern neighbouring country that still holds on to the old ideals of patriarchy; a new matriarchal online religious group is flowering headed by a new religious leader naming herself “Mother Eve”; women with political ambitions rise to political power; women take control of border towns forming paramilitary gangs; women turn into casual murderers and gang-rapists; a drug, “Glitter”, is developed and smuggled to heighten the power among girls; both men and women suffering at the hands of warring factions are herded into refugee camps; private female armies and security forces are formed; pornography is created to fetishise the power. Overall, gender violence flows in the opposite direction as an aftermath of this inversion of the global power structure between the two sexes.

Alderman traces the origin of this seismic global change through the experiences of four protagonists: Roxy, a mighty British gangster’s illegitimate daughter who revels in her new-found super-power; Allie, a sexually abused mixed-race foster child who reinvents herself as Mother Eve with the help of a mysterious voice inside her head; Margot, an unscrupulous New England female politician who fulfils her political ambition by taking advantage of the new dispensation; and Tunde, a Nigerian student of Journalism who achieves professional success as he covers the new developments for the global media. Sophie Gilbert, in another article in the *Atlantic*, has written: “Each of her primary characters seems to represent a particular pillar of society

– politics, religion, media, crime – which allows Alderman to examine the manifold implications of the power’s arrival” (Gilbert, “What If Women had the Power”). In an interview with Ruth La Ferla, Alderman simply expresses her contentment that visualising themselves in her fictional world, present-day women will be able “to feel or imagine what it would be like to be in a position of control ... to have a little peek and see how society would look from the other side” (Ferla). Moreover, eminent feminist critic and theorist Elaine Showalter, in a recent article on the rise and development of feminist speculative fiction from its early days to the present times, has pointed out that Naomi Alderman in *The Power*, being exasperated with the apathy of the passive female victims of dystopias in the genre’s earlier examples, divulges “the anger of a young generation of feminists who will not forgive, excuse, cover up, and accept male abuse” (Showalter). In fact, Alderman’s *The Power* is an angry response to the present-day real world in which multifarious implications of the socially-constructed concept of “gender” closely align with the social, cultural, economic, religious, political, physical, and military manifestations of ‘power’ to lay down the fundamental organising principle of our present reality.

From the outset, Alderman equates this sudden discovery of power in teenage girls with strength which manifests itself when they are under male coercion. Roxy first feels the presence of the power like a prickle of light in her thumbs when two men from the gang of her father’s rival, Primrose, arrive at her home to kill her mother over a gang-related animosity. She feels, “[s]omething’s happening. The blood is pounding in her ears. A prickling feeling is spreading along her back, over her shoulders, along her collarbone. It’s saying: you can do it. It’s saying: you are strong” (Alderman 9). In our real world, adolescence is considered to be the most vulnerable time for a young girl whose budding sense of her own sexuality is brutally suppressed and controlled at this stage under the dictates of rigid societal norms. Alderman, on the contrary, makes the adolescent girls of her novel feel the excitement of possessing this raw power which enables them to take control of their lives into their own hands. Though Roxy cannot save her mother at that point in time, it later becomes evident that she possesses this new-found power more than anyone else. The trauma of her mother’s murder, along with her pride in having such enormous power, leads her to join her father’s gang on a mission to kill Primrose and avenge her mother’s murder. Afterwards, besides taking over her father’s illegal business, Roxy joins hands with Allie at the “Sisters of Mercy Convent” where Allie takes shelter after electrocuting her sexually and

physically abusive foster-father Mr. Montgomery-Taylor. Allie names herself Eve at the convent and, with the help of a mysterious voice inside her head, starts her mission to be the new prophet to initiate a new doctrine and a new order. Allie soon takes control of the convent and preaches: "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 always said she would return to earth. And she has come back now to instruct us in her ways" (Alderman, 80).

Allie's newly preached faith spreads unbridled among the women of the world through the Internet and different online forums. Allie then comes to Bessapara, the Republic of Women, and declares it to be a new nation for free and mighty women. In the meantime, Roxy starts dealing in "Glitter", a drug capable of making the power more pronounced, in Bessapara with Allie's help. In return, funded by Roxy's mafia money earned through illegal Glitter deals, Allie builds a powerful new religious faith that subscribes to the idea of female supremacy which is evident in her new sermon addressed towards her female followers across the globe: "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" (Alderman 115). Later, Allie even offers Roxy to be the new president of Bessapara when she feels that Tatiana Moskalev has outlived her usefulness. Towards the end of the novel, despite desperate pleas from Roxy to stop the ensuing Armageddon, Allie goes on with her single-minded pursuit of creating a new matriarchal world order, no matter how crazily violent it would be. Allie here appears to reproduce the words of Naomi Alderman who justifies the menace and violence perpetrated by women in *The Power* in her interview: "If we lived in the world of the power, I don't think I would be magically excluded from the way the world operates ... With or without the power, I behave the way the system teaches me to behave" (Ferla). Since power is the most significant determining factor in constructing the polarity of gender stereotypes prevailing in the society, the reversal of the balance of power necessarily reverses the binary of the stereotypical gender roles and identities. Thus, through Roxy's becoming a formidable yet successful drug lord and Allie's turning into a spearhead of a feminised religious faith, Alderman's novel represents her desire to lay out the blueprint for a world replete with immense potential for young girls who, by using their empowered strength, can forge new identities for themselves.

Margot Cleary, a small-town mayor in New England, predominantly relishes the effects of this new dispensation. After her fifteen-year-old daughter Jocelyn awakens the power in her, she immediately makes big plans to exploit her power to rise through the political ranks. During her verbal confrontation with the male governor, Daniel, she finds pleasure in controlling an almost irresistible urge to kill both Daniel and his accountant Arnold in a conference room which she could achieve without exerting much of an effort. The narration goes, “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” (Alderman 71). An empowered Margot sets up a training camp for girls named “NorthStar Camp” defying Daniel’s opposition, first in her state and then all over the country, to assist young women in controlling and sharpening their new gift of power to use it effectively and safely. Within a week, she starts receiving millions of dollars in donations from worried parents and Wall Street billionaires who want to invest in her new scheme as well. Soon, the NorthStar camps for girls turn into huge money-making private military corporations. Margot then runs for the office of Governor. She prevails over Daniel in the election by showing the voters that “she’s strong” (Alderman 169), thanks to her courage of reaching out and striking Daniel in the chest during a live election debate on TV. This particular incident is a reversed replica of one of the 2016 US presidential election debates, and Margot accomplishes a feat that Hillary Clinton could not. Afterwards, Margot travels to Bessapara as part of a US delegation and strikes a deal to deploy the NorthStar girls as Tatiana’s private army in return for the non-interference of the US government in the internal affairs of Bessapara. Despite losing her daughter Jocelyn who dies while being employed in Bessapara, she wants women to gain more power globally and, thus, plays an instrumental role in bringing about the Cataclysm. Alderman’s depiction of Margot’s character is, in essence, emblematic of her urge to envision an exemplary figure of an empowered woman in public office, who can bring about changes in the current deplorable conditions for women through her individual enterprise and ardent initiatives. Though she candidly exemplifies the corrosive influence of power, Margot, like Allie, realises that the only way to ensure the continuation of this power in women is to completely destroy the old patriarchal order and recreate a new matriarchal one. What is also striking about both Allie and Margot is that they are powerful women whose source of strength does not depend solely on their ability to inflict violence on others by using their new-found power, rather they also derive their power from their inherent desire to establish their self-identities, from

their ability to think and act ingeniously, and from their determination to change their lives as well the world.

Tunde, a twenty-one-year-old student from Nigeria, finds a fortuitous upstart in his professional career as a journalist after capturing and uploading the first viral online video of a teenage girl exercising her power against a man trying to tease and assault her in a supermarket in Nigeria. He, taking a break from study, starts video-capturing and documenting the global changes happening as a result of the new-found power in women and selling them for good money to CNN. It is striking to note that Tunde's traversing the world in *The Power* allows Alderman to create an extensive setting that sweeps the globe. Tunde reports on the successful counter-revolution of the women in Riyadh, Delhi, and Moldova. Tunde's video reporting through online media helps the counter-revolution of women spread globally like a bushfire in the Harmattan. However, he soon starts encountering and recording the disgusting sides of the atrocities and violence perpetrated by women. At the back end of the novel, Tunde starts experiencing restrictions on his own rights and movements as Tatiana Moskalev ordains a new set of laws for men in her country. During his lone journey to the northern mountains, he feels completely helpless and vulnerable to the marauding female army who almost kill and rape him. He also undergoes traumatic experiences when he sees photographs and interviews taken by him appearing in the media under the name of his girlfriend Nina, whom he has entrusted with these photographs and interviews. With the changes brought about as a result of the power in women, Tunde also transforms from a handsome and confident journalist to a timid and skittish young man in a woman's world. The readers of Alderman's novel perceive the fundamental imbalance of power that characterises man-woman relationships in our present-day patriarchal world, where the idea of a woman belonging to the weaker sex is woven into the very fabric of the society, when they see Tunde as a frail man in a woman's world sensing the impending perils involved in his interactions with the strong opposite-sex. Alderman very judiciously includes a male protagonist in Tunde through whose experience she demonstrates how helplessly horrible women actually feel in our present world ruled by men, people who are violent and cruel to women just because they can. Tunde's shocking vulnerability as a man in a speculative matriarchal world order is also a potent reminder to Alderman's readers about how unjustly and appallingly men naturalise violence against women in our present real world.

Though the first half of the novel depicts the positive changes in the lives

of Roxy and Allie along with the lives of many other women in Saudi Arabia, India, Moldova, and elsewhere in the world due to the impact of women possessing the power, the second half portrays a bleak, grim and disturbing picture of power abuse by women. The emergence of the new power in women, as it sweeps across cultures throughout the world, changes the dynamics of gender relations. The change that Alderman's novel chronicles elevates women above men in the gender hierarchy, and the readers witness the reiteration of the same power abuse and gender violence that characterise our present world, though in a reverse order. However, despite these unnerving consequences, Alderman finds gratification in believing that this possession of power would be transformative for women which she admits in her conversation with Lynn Neary who later transcribed the interview on NPR's website: "If I could go and give to women being sex trafficked right now today in some dirty basement, waiting to be raped – if I could go and give them the power to electrocute people at will, even knowing that this might end badly, I would give it to them" (Neary). It is also noteworthy that Alderman does not appear to be the least concerned about the horrible implications of the abuse of this power by women on men since she recognises that a mere shift in the balance of power without a change in the overall socio-political, religious, and cultural system will result in the reiteration of the same grossly unfair present reality of gender inequality and gender violence. She rather boldly claims in the same interview that in the fictional world of *The Power* "nothing happens to a man that is not happening to a woman in the world we live in today. So, if we find my [Alderman's fictional] world to be a dystopia, then we are already living in a dystopia" (Neary). In fact, the dystopian world of violence and mayhem that Alderman portrays in her novel seems real for women living at present who, being on the losing side of the world's existing gender hierarchy, regularly find themselves in similar perilous situations and coercions inflicted on them by men.

The readers of Alderman's novel can also easily identify and understand the occurrences of Alderman's speculative dystopian fiction since the happenings within the fictional plot are just a potpourri of incidents that they have already witnessed or are witnessing in the real world. The women of the real world can effortlessly place themselves in a host of familiar situations as depicted in Alderman's *The Power*, with the same threats and perils that the empowered fictional women can resist, while the real-world women have to give in. For instance, instead of women being afraid to be catcalled, harassed, or assaulted by men on the streets at night, we see men and boys being fearful of girls in *The*

Power. In Alderman's novel, women become predatory and cruel, women seize political control, women wreak violent retribution on the men who have raped or enslaved them, women defend and liberate themselves, and women become the chief newscasters presenting the serious news items turning men into handsome side-kicks reporting the soft segments. However, we see all these things happening recurrently in the real world where men are the controlling agents and women are the helpless victims. Furthermore, Bessapara, the new country ruled by women in Alderman's *The Power* and the place where the Cataclysm engenders a matriarchal world order with its female-oriented religion and female-led military forces, closely mirrors the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, a country where dominant men hold positions of authority and rule supreme. In essence, Naomi Alderman's *The Power* abounds in incidents that prompt its readers to evaluate them in relation to similar happenings in our present-day world where the power dynamics between the sexes are the opposite. Alderman who takes immense pride in being a part of the feminist movement tells the *Literary Hub* interviewer Daneet Steffens that *The Power* is about her effort to pass something a bit better on to the women who come up after her. To quote from the transcribed interview: "It's like we allow something to come into being that can then teach us something. We created a world in which these amazing young women could thrive, and now we get to enjoy the world that they're going to make for us" (Steffens). Therefore, in *The Power*, 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 seeing as well as realising the striking similarity between the two worlds.

Overall, Naomi Alderman's *The Power* is more engrossing as it urges its readers to explore and gauge a futuristic dystopia that has already existed in our present reality for millennia. The writing of *The Power*, in essence, arises from "a need to express a truth, a concept, a conviction or a question which, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'important truths, needed but unpopular', find their most potent expression through the invention of imaginary worlds in which the future has already happened" (Shaw 178). Alderman's novel, through feminist counter violence and reversed gender roles, makes shockingly visible the violent abuses and the numerous disparities that women experience in the existing gender hierarchy. Moreover, Alderman's use of the strategy of flipping the traditional power dynamics between the sexes on its head in *The Power* serves as a potent reminder about the suppressed talents and

capacities of real-world women as well as an earnest desire on her part to envisage a world in which women can also thrive and rise. To conclude, Naomi Alderman, in *The Power*, not only exposes the disconcerting imbalance of power that characterises the existing relationships between men and women but also proposes the urgency for a thorough reevaluation of the allegedly sacred and seemingly unalterable tenets of the prevailing hierarchical gender relationships.

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