

POWER IS A FORM OF WEALTH: REPRESSIVE AND IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS IN *THE POWER*

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ABSTRACT

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* asks the reader to take an active role in questioning the patriarchal power structures that exist today. It begins in a world entirely familiar to us except for the introduction of "the power", the ability of women to generate an electrical charge due to the development of a small organ called a skein. As the story unfolds, each of the female viewpoint characters draws power from a different ideological structure: Mother Eve from religion, Margot from the US government and military-industrial complex, Roxy from the world of organized crime, and Tatiana from a pre-existing dictatorship. As each character works to improve the world as they see fit, they gather increasing power not from their skeins but from the repressive state apparatus (RSAs) they come to lead. This paper uses Marxist theory of dialectical materialism and Althusser's extension of that idea, his theory of RSAs and ISAs (repressive and ideological state apparatus), to assess how that wealth exists in relation to gender and Alderman's philosophy on oppressive ideologies and the patriarchal power structure that exists today. Despite the portrayal of women resorting to the same type of violence against men that women experience today, the novel argues against the idea of *any* gendered oppressive system.

INTRODUCTION

Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, which leaves out a 5,000 year period during which our civilization is razed, forgotten, and built anew as a matriarchy, asks the reader to take an active role in questioning the patriarchal power structures that exist today. It begins in a world entirely familiar to us except for the introduction of "the power", the ability of women to generate an electrical charge due to the development of a small organ called a skein. As the story unfolds, each of the female viewpoint characters draws power from a different ideological structure: Mother Eve from religion, Margot from the US government and military-industrial complex, Roxy from the world of organized crime, and Tatiana from a pre-existing dictatorship. As each character works to improve the world as they see fit, they gather increasing power not from their skeins but from the repressive state apparatus (RSAs) they come to lead. Alderman narrates, "The power to hurt is a kind of wealth" (Alderman 78). This paper uses Marxist theory of dialectical materialism and Althusser's extension of that idea, his theory of RSAs and ISAs (ideological state apparatus), to assess how that wealth exists in relation to gender and Alderman's philosophy on oppressive ideologies and the patriarchal power structure that exists today. Each character goes through a similar arc of attempting to create a matriarchal utopia, but ends up falling victim to corruption or sabotage. Alderman has received criticism for concluding her novel with a female dominant society so unlike our own that it portrays a matriarchal society identical to the patriarchy it is meant to be critiquing. The paper argues that despite the portrayal of women resorting to the same type of violence against men that women experience today, the novel argues against the idea of *any* gendered oppressive system.

The Power does not explicitly see "men or male institutions as a major cause of present social ills", one of Sally Gearhart's criteria for a Feminist utopia. More specifically, it sees power and structural hierarchy (*currently* run by men) as a major cause of present social ills. Alderman suggests that while the "power" gives women overwhelming power over males, it also corrupts them and causes those major social ills. She doesn't distinguish between inherent corruptibility of men over women but rather the

inherent corruptibility of those in power. When female power creates the antithesis to the patriarchal power structure, our characters guide the world a step toward a female utopia, then step after step backward until the original paradigm is entirely reversed into a matriarchy just as unjust and gendered as the society at the start. In doing so, she does inherently critique our current patriarchal society.

Scholarship on such a new novel is rare, but a thorough and insightful essay was printed in Spring 2020. "Day of the Girls: Reading Gender, Power, and Violence in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*", written by Alyson Miller makes two arguments. The first, "the reversal of power creates an imagined scenario in which the full horror of current gender relations is revealed", this reading of the novel with Marxist theory leads to a different but compatible conclusion: the onset of overwhelming female power offers an image of women who are more willing to usurp their repressive gendered culture rather than reform it (399).

FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION

Alderman claims to write "in the grand tradition of feminist science fiction" ("Extended"). The subgenre has roots in feminist utopian writing such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" in 1906, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 novel *Herland*. In order to assess how Alderman critiques the gendered power structures in our society today, it is important to place it in the context of this tradition. She employs many of its tropes and themes while also inverting many elements of it. Just as *The Handmaid's Tale* inverts *Herland* with its dystopian patriarchal regime, *The Power* inverts Atwood's novel in such a way that it "might read as the revenge fantasy of Gilead's women" (Miller 403). Alderman, however, does not go back to the happy and peaceful land absent of men for thousands of years. Instead, she furthers the feminist SF tradition in order to critique genderless human nature in order to expose the hypocrisy and inevitability of an oppressive society. Unlike most SF, Alderman does not portray society as a strict utopia or dystopia. Instead, she posits a "thought experiment" which seeks to determine how the "individual exercise of power might contribute to power relations as a whole" (Jordan qtd. In Miller 398). She asks how our world would change if women were to develop a literal and overwhelming physical advantage over men.

As the commander in *The Handmaid's Tale* tells Offred in order to rationalize the authoritarian society he enjoys, "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs... Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some" (Atwood 211). A world of female superiority sounds like a recipe for a feminist utopia. The pre-Cataclysm events of *The Power* would be difficult to read as a feminist utopia. According to Gearhart, a feminist utopia contrasts the present with an idealized society separated from the present by time or space; although this is also true of *The Power*, it is an alt-universe of our own, identical save for the development of women's skeins. The novel sticks to Gearhart's tenet of seeing men or male institutions as a major cause of present social ills, but it only goes so far in its criticism of male institutions by suggesting women would create the same institutional oppression if given the chance. In an article appropriately called "Utopian Thinking: Building a Truly Feminist Society", written after this novel, Alderman makes a point to emphasize equality of gender, citing statistics about incarceration and violence against men. She claims men are not more "naturally criminal or violent" and that society is failing boys and men by "failing to teach them that there are answers that don't involve violence, that violence says nothing about how 'manly' you are" (Alderman, "Utopian Thinking").

In her article, Miller argues that fiction which "[redeploys] masculinist narratives against the hegemonic grain", can "subvert patriarchal ideology" but comes with a risk of "merely replicating a structure in which power is always divided upon gendered lines (Miller 404). To call this a "risk" mischaracterizes *The Power* because Alderman does not intend to "debunk [the] seeming naturalness" of "how inequality is manifested", as Miller suggests feminist SF aims to do (405). Instead, Alderman seeks to confirm that inequitable power structure, gendered or not, are "natural" by having women gain power and exert influence using methods recognizable in patriarchy today. In a novel that appears to be pessimistic about the potential for ending patriarchy, there is hope in the ability for young women to wake up the power in older women. Alderman: "We should have a certain humility in the face of the

righteous anger of younger women who look at the world they grew up in and say, 'No, we're not going to accept that'" (La Ferla).

The Power is "Often described as 'our era's [*The Handmaid's Tale*'" (Charles qtd. In Miller 399). Margaret Atwood was a mentor to Alderman during the writing of *The Power*. Alderman lists Atwood as a major influence on her writing in general, and Atwood is among the first names invoked in a discussion of feminist science fiction. She was also a mentor in the literal sense, paired with Alderman through Rolex's Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. Alderman's gratitude is evident by *The Power's* dedication to simply "Margaret" and Atwood's husband, Graeme, who "showed [her] wonders" (Atwood xx). Alderman's novel, in many ways, acts as an inversion of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Alderman uses Allie and Mother Eve to show the rise of a zealous religious sect capable of creating a society as oppressive as Gilead. Both novels familiarize the strange by describing cultural practices that seem dystopian but are symbolic if not literal reflections of women's experiences today.

MARXIST CRITICISM

It is no surprise that a novel called *The Power* makes a good subject for criticism from the perspective of Marxist theory. The main female characters are diverse in age, nationality, socioeconomic status, yet they largely follow a similar character arc. Each draws power from a different, formerly-patriarchal system of oppression: Mother Eve from religion, Margot from the US government and military-industrial complex, Roxy from the world of organized crime, and Tatiana from a pre-existing dictatorship. They gain followers and increasingly move "up the ladder" of their given power structure. They project intent to create a better world for women, but in truth, they make little attempt to dismantle the patriarchy, instead attempting to replace the men in power themselves. This objective becomes easier as they gain control of the systems of control they are a part of. This ease simply requires moral sacrifice and methods of control formerly used against women. Using marxist notions of false consciousness, dialectic materialism, and repressive and ideological state apparatus, the ideas presented in Miller's essay can further examine how each character attempts to manipulate their institution for maximum influence, confirming Alderman's claim that when handed power, "men and women, morally, tend to be about the same" ("Extended").

The concept of Marxist criticism known as dialectical materialism argues that political and historical events result from the conflict of social forces and are interpretable as a series of contradictions (thesis and antithesis) and their solutions (synthesis). In the case of *The Power*, political and historical events happen rapidly and with extreme consequences for the entire human race. On a broad scale, the thesis is our familiar patriarchy, which calls into being its Other, or its antithesis, in the form of matriarchal power catalyzed by sudden skein powers. However, because this is a continuous process, this theory insists society will never comfortably rest without conflict. For as long as patriarchy has been the norm, it cannot last forever. Applied to the "political capital" used by the characters, this concept will confirm that the violent uprising of women and attempt to hold onto power by force are an inevitable result of the symbolic neutering of the men in charge of a repressive state. Abigail Nussbaum observes "it's not surprising that the women who find themselves possessed of real power in real numbers for the first time in, quite possibly, all of human history, would be just as corrupted by it as any man before" (qtd. In Miller 419). A Marxist reading will make sense of the inevitable failure of what appeared to be movement toward a female utopia. A general history of the events of *The Power* will reveal a cycle of thesis-antithesis-synthesis that continuously escalates the gender conflict until the inevitable long-term synthesis: the original paradigm is entirely reversed, creating a matriarchy equally, if not more, oppressive and gendered as the society at the start.

Alderman establishes the cycle of escalating violence in retaliation against male abuse right away. Prior to the novel's timeline, things were as they are today, beginning with the status quo. The thesis, then, includes extreme violence against women and girls Alderman reminds of of the violence of patriarchal rule in the first chapters of both Roxy, who is home when her mother is murdered, and Allie, who has been repeatedly raped by her foster father. Here, Alderman introduces the antithesis to the

world of violence against women, the ability for girls to generate electricity. This contradiction is quickly resolved. The synthesis: both girls kill their attackers and go on the run.

This newfound power, exclusive to their gender and never previously available, quickly tightens the bonds between women of all ages. Inherently a form of wealth, the power was kept secret online for several months. The teenage girls knew the value of what they were feeling as their skeins grew in. Online, they shared videos and tips of how to control the power. Once the power becomes public knowledge, it is discovered that the girls can unlock it in older women. It does not take long for “strange movements” to arise across the world: “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’s clothing” (Alderman 77). These movements signify a variety of responses to this revelation. Like a businesswoman who may wear a pantsuit to seem more powerful in the office, boys understand that the way they present themselves matters when it comes to the influence you may have. Older men, suddenly threatened by the stronger sex, react in ways that are not so harmless.

The efforts to maintain order take the form of a scramble for men to continue to dominate women. Early in the novel, men react with far-fetched and unreasonable ‘solutions’ to a problem. Not long after Margot’s political rival and then-Governor Daniel Dandon likens a girl with a power to “someone walking around with a loaded gun” (69), he suggests “they should shoot those girls. Just shoot them. In the head” (94). Men continue to put up a fight, but their rapidly draining political capital are no match for that of women. Armed forces are deployed unsuccessfully to round up women. Legislation, which would be unenforceable if passed, is suggested to limit a woman’s freedom regarding her body.

The accepted ideologies of the pre-power culture are used as a justification for further oppression. Religion is used to justify treating women as less than human; science is used to justify forced violence to the young women’s bodies: “a fist fight breaks out on a popular news discussion programme between a scientist who demands that the Electric Girls be investigated surgically and a man of God who believes they are a harbinger of the apocalypse and must not be touched by a human hand” (Alderman 20-21). Note the scientists use of a newly coined term, perhaps making it easier to suggest surgical investigations (not autopsies) not of innocent children but “Electric” girls. Men’s efforts to maintain control, let alone justify it, are in vain. During a faceoff between women and an army of “brown-skinned men with beards and battle fatigues and black berets [with] new weapons, new armor”, the army is quickly defeated. Alderman describes it with language evocative of the wrath of God, suggesting “Kali herself had struck them down” (147) This time, God is replaced by a newly popularized name for a female spirit, indicating a shift toward a feminine dominant society.

As men’s attempts to hang onto social control become more futile, the effort is driven underground. A secret men’s movement forms on internet forums and in email inboxes around the world. UrbanDox, the alias for a person who eventually gains his own power from the amount of men desperate to take back the security of superiority that he becomes a widely known name, ultimately contributing to the nuclear annihilation of the world. Alderman, familiar with this online toxic masculinity, commented that she has witnessed targeted harassment by people doing “genuine works of evil”, several of whom form the composite character of UrbanDox. “I realized these people would not cease to exist”, which is likely why UrbanDox is as successful at grabbing power as he is in the novel. The ultimate synthesis of this conflict is four characters (two of them men) simultaneously saying “Do it”, ordering attacks that set the world on a path toward ultimate feminine domination. Here we have further proof of Alderman’s thesis that all people are corruptible, and any gendered power imbalance will lead to tragedy.

REPRESSIVE AND IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS

Alderman’s initial draft had a single viewpoint character, who was “twisted... in so many different directions [that] she didn’t make sense anymore” (“Extended”). If her initial goal was to show the futility of gendered power in any form, splitting the narrative between four viewpoint characters was an effective revision, enabling her to critique the oppressive ideologies of multiple branches of society: religious, totalitarian dictatorship, and... American. By putting her characters into moral conflicts, giving

them opportunities to use their power to their own advantage, and occasionally pitting themselves against each other, the viewpoint characters vacillate between protagonist and antagonist. This allowed the "villain" of the novel to not be just a singular person, or even an organization like Allie's religion/cult, but rather the systems of oppression through which the power dynamic was established.

No single message about power in *The Power* can be pinned down. Power and justice are not inherently connected. Indeed, power compels some to believe they are above the law. Power emboldens some to treat others badly. More than power, Nussbaum argues, the novel is "about the impulse to control, to dominate. And it's about the social conditioning that teaches us to look at people who do these things and see, not bullies and warlords, but leaders and visionaries" (qtd in Miller 412). The impulse to control may be innate. The social conditioning is not; we are raised absorbing the values of the culture we live in. Whether or not you believe men are superior, it is impossible to consider the power dynamic between genders without consideration of this social conditioning.

Marx describes the interplay between the ruling class and the working class using the spatial metaphor of infrastructure (or economic base) and superstructure. Infrastructure is constituted by the forces, means, relations of production, and is the foundation of society. The superstructure (the state and cultural ideology) is above that and relies on the infrastructure to function. The economic base of a society includes the workers themselves and technical knowledge to perform the work, such as training and knowledge, the raw materials, tools, and machines required to keep society running. In *The Power*, the base is irrevocably changed with females' new power. The power does require practice in order to control effectively, but it is suddenly imbued in almost every female of a certain age. The economic base also includes the relationship between workers and owners.

As characters gain power, they do not concern themselves with lifting the base from their oppressed standing. Rather, they seek to control as much of it as they can. Some, if they are lucky, come by this control easily. Tatiana has a nation of women who approve of her usurpation of the Moldovan Presidency, granting her military control, massive investments from the exiled king of Saudi Arabia, and leftover Soviet bombs. Due to her supercharged skein, Roxy is granted more authority over the operations of a drug empire by her father: henchmen, product, the entire manufacturing and distribution chain. Allie, once she assumes the identity of Mother Eve, easily performs "miracles", taking over a convent and gathering a cult following. After going viral online, more donations pour in than she knows what to do with. After Margot shocks her opponent in a live debate, constituents symbolically transfer their power to her with their votes, and she wins in a landslide. From then on, she is always poised for the next higher office. Tunde, even, gains literal "followers" using the internet. That is, until the internet is taken from him, at which point he is stranded and on the run. For most of these women's new followers, they find the same type of security and privilege as men do today in their leaders. Alderman shows us how easy it is to sway the masses given access to the tools that offer value to people.

The superstructure of a society arises from these means of production and those who do the work, consisting of culture and ideology. It is the force that Nussbaum described earlier, reconditioning society and how we live so that the production of infrastructure continues to be produced. In other words, maintaining the status quo. The least chaotic way to gain power, then, is to not interrupt operations of society but to take over the roles of power, making as few changes as possible; that is, until their power has become unimpeachable. A takeover, not a reform, of the systems of oppression is the goal.

Althusser expands Marx's theory of false consciousness with his idea of the repressive state apparatus (RSA), by which the ruling class dominates the working class. An RSA may be the government, a police force, the courts, NorthStar camps, and so on. The social function of RSA is to intervene whenever necessary in favor of the ruling class, often by violent means. As the ruling class controls the RSA, we see the characters gain control of the oppressed class in intervals throughout the book. As mentioned earlier, characters each use a different RSA in order to "repress, exploit, extort, and subjugate" not only the men in the world, but the women who offer their labor power (Leitch).

Typically, Althusser would argue that this labor power is ensured with wages. In a post-power world, the characters incentivize their followers not with wages, but by the promise of an expansion of a

female-friendly and just society. The women in Bessapara find freedom from sex slavery. Roxy offers access to glitter, a drug that enhances the power of a woman's skein (she presumably pays a wage, but it is not specified). Mother Eve offers sanctuary and a communion with a new God who values the women over men. Margot offers training and the consequent increase in strength to the girls who join her North Star camps; her voters support her for her pro-power policies.

From the RSA rises the ideological state apparatus (ISA). The RSA *administers* the oppression of the ruling class, often concealed behind qualities of "liberation" or "salvation". The RSA also informs and defines the less concrete ISA. For example, the women in the mountains of Bessapara are not instructed to perform violent sex rituals on men, but they are permitted and potentially encouraged by the new system of governing. It is the social branch of creating order, not a formal part of any state apparatus. The ISA spreads ways of looking at the changing society to reinforce control of the dominant class. The world of *The Power* complicates this process because the ruling class of men is permanently made less powerful than women. There is not one RSA. In the novel, characters collude to share power and influence. The novel calls attention to the interconnectedness of those at the top of our social structure and the social privileges of men.

As characters rapidly seize control of the RSA, ISA is thrown into chaos, leading to the rise of movements such as the one led by UrbanDox. This accounts for much of the destruction seen in the later chapters of *The Power*, and why the oppressed class of men is more angry and violent than any women's group today. Women today *are* oppressed. Of course, this is not a secret, but there would be a difference in the behavior of the oppressed class if they had spent the history of civilization as the ruling class.

Tatiana

The events that unfold in Moldova, later Bessapara, show the fragility of power at its highest level. President Viktor Moskalev underestimates the massive power shift that has occurred, saying of the mass killing of sex traffickers, "within a few days the situation will normalize". When asked if he would consider bombing his own country, he shows the utmost confidence in his RSA to sort things out at the cost of mass death of his own people: "if it has to be, that's how it must be. The trouble will pass in just a week or two" (105). He is so brazen because he is hiding the exiled King of Saudi Arabia, who supplies him with money and arms. Coincidentally, Tatiana and Margot will later negotiate similar political arrangements.

Tatiana comes to be dictator of Moldova when her husband Viktor suddenly and suspiciously dies in his sleep. Tatiana is unanimously installed as his replacement by the country's supreme court. Of course, there would be democratic elections eventually, but in order to not upset the RSA, "the most important thing is to maintain order at this time" (Alderman 105). As soon as the power is activated, the victims of Moldova's rampant sex trafficking take vengeance on their oppressors. Tatiana creates a new nation known as Bessapara, growing suspicious of those around her and the Saudi Arabian rebel army being formed. If this sounds like familiar behavior by an authoritarian leader, it will be no surprise that Alderman wondered what the "female version of Putin" would be like when creating this character (La Ferla). Her political capital makes her slowly unhinged. Aware of a rebel army being raised by the Saudi king Awadi-Atif to oppose her, she becomes paranoid and quick to want to launch offensive attacks. As a result of her politicking and power grabs, Tatiana meets a Shakespearean end when Mother Eve no longer finds her a useful pawn. Worried that Tatiana will get in the way of her plans, Mother Eve uses her power to control Tatiana's muscles, forcing her to commit suicide.

MARGOT

Margot Cleary begins the novel as a mayor forced to handle the crisis created by the power's emergence. Despite appearances that she is doing her best for young women, her commitment to maintaining order is subtle but apparent from the beginning. As movements begin to occur across the world, Margot reassures herself her work, "trying to keep everything normal, to keep people feeling safe and going to their jobs and spending their dollars on weekend recreational activities", is important. Already, she is prioritizing protecting the economy and businesses (RSA). She willfully ignores the unavoidable truth

that the world has changed fundamentally and permanently. Instead, she is concerned with protecting the status quo.

Things take a turn toward tyranny when Margot thinks she dooms her campaign with a shock to her electoral opponent only to be rewarded: "It turns out the voters lied... They said they respected hard work, commitment, and moral courage. They said that the candidate's opponent had lost their vote the moment she gave up on reasoned discourse and calm authority. But when they went into the voting booths in their hundreds and thousands, and tens of thousands, they'd thought, You know what, though, she's strong. She'd show them" (Alderman 169). From that point on, she is solely focused on her own political gain, disregarding even her own daughter's safety when it is inconvenient to do otherwise.

She initially gets exposure because of her idea to train the girls with power rather than look for ways to subdue or punish them. Throughout the rest of the book it is treated as an inevitability that she will continue to rise politically. In the chapter where she is first senator, she thinks to herself how she can spin her daughter's military service into the kind of thing a president would run on. Her leadership role of the NorthStar training camps and seat on five Senate committees offer her political influence on a global level, creating conflicts of interest. Alderman shows her slowly succumb to the sort of corruption that we see in Washington, DC today. Her final act in the novel is a full release of her power; Margot talks the President into an attack on what is now called the Republic of Women under the guise of doing what is best for the men being savagely murdered there. Alderman reveals her true motive, though: "There is a bonus in her contract if NorthStar deployments around the world top fifty thousand women this year. The bonus will buy her a private island" (389). She is the most corrupt of all of the viewpoint characters by the end of the novel. Motivated by nothing other than power, she creates a business of militarizing the power, seizes multiple powerful Senate committee seats, and cuts deals with a mad dictator, all for the sake of power and economic reward.

ROXY

Roxy Monke, daughter of drug kingpin Bernie Monke, suffers the greatest loss of the viewpoint characters, which is perhaps why she comes closest to being redeemed for her own violence and abuse of power. Roxy is violently attacked at the start of the novel when a group of her father's enemies break in to murder her mother. Killing one of the attackers impresses Bernie, and she unintentionally usurps her two step-brothers as Bernie's trusted "number two".

By the end of the novel, both Roxy's father and brother have betrayed her. Additionally, she discovers that her father was the one who ordered her mother's death. Through all of that though, Roxy has chosen not to kill her father. Each time she has shown him mercy.

Unlike Margot, Tatiana, and Eve, Roxy doesn't rely exclusively on her skein to gain power. Once it's well known that she is extremely powerful, she knows that fear will prevent anyone from causing trouble. Representing the black market and criminal organizations, Roxy is able to use some of her connections in order to help Mother Eve's new church as well as continue operations of her father's drug production. After she loses the skein, she sees that drastic measures Eve pushes for are not necessary and offers a more peaceful path forward. When Roxy says, "You want to start Armageddon," Mother Eve says, "It's the only way. It's the only way to win" (352). This startles her, but when she sees a violent sex ritual while on the run with Tunde, something changes. In her final chapter, she catches up to her father and tells him she should kill him. When he agrees, saying "Can't afford to be soft, girl," she answers, "That's what they keep telling me. Maybe I've learned my lesson. Took me long enough," (371).

MOTHER EVE

Allie Montgomery-Taylor, also known as Mother Eve, represents the religious RSA. She is a foster child being abused by her foster father until she uses the power to kill him. Shortly after, she begins to hear a voice she calls her mother. This voice leads her to find refuge at a convent, where she begins to gain her influence in the realm of religion. She takes on the name of Mother Eve and revises religious organizations, "re-interpreting the bible to remove the divine right of men ... In ways that position female voices as central" (Miller 410). Her scripture, the Book of Eve, warns, "when the people change, the

palace cannot hold" (Alderman 4). She does ultimately succeed in dismantling the palace of patriarchy. From the letters before and after the "historical novel", we know that 5000 years after Eve plays a part in a nuclear devastation of the planet, the world is seemingly good as new. However, now it seems all power structures and social roles have been gender swapped. Women are and apparently have always been the dominant sex, while men are "more kind, more gentle, more loving and naturally nurturing" (333). Has Eve really succeeded in creating a feminist utopia? The metatextual layer created by the letters between character Naomi and a fellow writer named Neil leave things open to interpretation. It is revealed that the novel is in fact "A sort of "novelization" of what archaeologists agree is the most plausible narrative" (Alderman xx). The reader is given the task of re-assessing the content of the novel due to the new context of it. It is a clever way for Alderman to force the reader to assess what is just in society. She decided to begin the novel in something like our real world because "we understand our history through the prism of today. And then we try to make that history back up the life we're living now rather than realize that we've invented it based on what we think the world must always be like because that's how it is right now" ("Extended"). The novel asks us to interpret it in two ways. Is this the way the world would shake out if the power were real, and is this a just reversal of the endless history of systemic oppression against women? Later, we come to understand that Neil wrote his own version of a dystopia, one in which his powerless group was once dominant, only to be overthrown by women who arbitrarily became stronger.

CONCLUSION

Whether this novel is optimistic, ends in utopia or dystopia is unclear. Every dystopia implies a form of utopia. The events are shown, in this case without comment, and the reader is left to decide: if this is not a good world, then what does a good world look like? Returning from this fictional world offers a new perspective on our world. Alderman offers no heroes and no clear moral. Near the climax of the novel, Alderman writes, "to a woman with a skein, everything looks like a fight", calling to mind "to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail". If you only have one tool at your disposal, it will not be appropriate for solving every problem. For our characters given extraordinary powers, it is no surprise they use their most powerful tool to solve whatever problem they have. This phrasing suggests that using the power only is not the best way to proceed.

Mother Eve insists that the only way to take control is to destroy what is and let humanity reset in the form of an oppressive matriarchy. Alderman implies this impossible act of power is the only way to make up for a history of ingrained masculine dominance. Stories at the foundation of feminist SF such as "Sultana's Dream" imply that the only way to achieve utopia is for one sex needs to have more power than the other. Alderman complicates that idea by showing us that the result of a reversal of gendered systems of power are no better than what we have today.

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