

How does Naomi Alderman use inversion to reimagine power relations with regards to gender and sexuality?

Introduction

In the current age, the rigidity of the heterosexual matrix remains concrete- whereby the binary of oppositional gender forms through power- be it discursive, performative or physical.¹ Indeed these categories are power in themselves, and to make the distinction is to rule and thus the binary of gender is how we experience and embody power in our everyday lives. There also remains a rigidity of gender identities and roles which are aligned with notions of power, and the reimagining of a world where power relations were reversed seems quixotic. Naomi Alderman's *The Power* employs the technique of inversion to reimagine power relations between men and women.² The text exposes the social construction of gender through the matrix of inequality as well as through the divisions between men and women. From the outset, Alderman prepares the reader for a thematic exploration of gender divisions, and her use of inversion calls the reader to consider to what extent the scenarios she portrays are dystopic; with shocking scenes such as sexual violence serving to illuminate women's own realities.

Alderman interrogates the function and problems associated with power, and the text is less concerned with who possesses power, and more with how social structures are enforced by violence and cruelty. The women in Alderman's electrifying novel live in a world where gender dynamics have facilitated physical dominance. However, when power is ignited within women globally, newfound physical dominance facilitates new gender dynamics. Ultimately, power is seen to be a corrupting influence regardless of what gender wields it. In this essay, I will explore Alderman's use of inversion in her text, and how power relations with regard to gender and sexuality are affected and effected. I will analyse power and gender as related concepts, and the way in which Alderman uses inversion to highlight realities alongside examples of inversion from the text such as scenes depicting sexual violence, war and the treatment of men.

¹ A term coined by Judith Butler. The heterosexual matrix suggests that we make judgements of people based on what we see. What we see we perceive as 'natural' rather than socially constructed. As a result of our heteronormative cultures, we define everything as heterosexual.

² Naomi Alderman, *The Power*, (Penguin Books, 2017).

Gender as power

Michael Foucault postulated 'I don't believe that this question of "who exercises power?" can be resolved unless this other question "how does it happen?" is resolved at the same time'.³ With regard to gender, an analysis of power is highly important as it clarifies the understanding of how social and cultural practises and beliefs have become integrated into our behaviors. The association of power with gender is also highly significant as gender can be seen as a locus for lasting inequality. In most societies, what we take to be an internal essence of gender is produced through a continuous performance of behaviours, these behaviours are implemented from childbirth and consequentially pertain to role expectations which entail very different approaches to power. Catherine Connell explained that 'doing gender is a theory of interaction; it presupposes a structural context that enables challenges to the gender binary'.⁴ This echoes Judith Butler's sentiments regarding her theory of performativity, where 'male' and 'female' don't exist unless we 'do' acts to constitute [their] reality.⁵

The disproportionate distribution of power is consequently closely tied to gender, and vice versa, power can be seen to create gender. Virginia Sapiro noted that gender 'is a sorting mechanism used by law, policy, institutional processes and social custom to different positions which, in turn, may create different political interests, preferences, responses and styles'.⁶ Sapiro suggests the way in which gender becomes a sorting mechanism, placing people at different places in societal hierarchy, sorting in ways which implement power and influence. Gender consequently becomes a social and political process rather than a biological reality. Participants effect the hierarchies of social settings through their shared sense-making practises.

'Doing gender' reflects what Kristen Schilt defines as the 'interactional process of

³ Caroline Ramazanoğlu, *Up Against Foucault: Exploration of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.

⁴ Catherine Connell, *Doing, Undoing or Redoing Gender? Learning from the Workplace Experiences of Transpeople*, *Gender and Society Vol 24, 1*, pp. 31- 55.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁶ Virginia Sapiro, 'Theorizing Gender in Political Psychology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. by Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 601.

creating gender identities that are then presumed to reflect and naturally derive from biology'.⁷ In performing traditionally domestic tasks such as childcare and cleaning, women's supposedly 'natural' tendencies towards nurturing and aesthetics consequently becomes associated and linked to the female genitalia. As a result of this the feminine identity is constructed and maintained.

Sexual differentiation is symbolically valued in patriarchal society, with notions of biological essentialism also aiding in the definition and differentiation of power roles. However, feminism argues that women are subjected by symbolic relations of power rather than being naturally inferior. This concept is meaningful to Alderman's text, and her use of inversion throughout the entire novel is guided by this thought. In a patriarchal society, the phallus is traditionally a symbol of ultimate male power, and in psychoanalysis, men are seen to envision themselves as 'sutured'. Suturing is a Lacanian concept designed by Jacques-Alain Miller, who defines it as 'that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in doing so gains meaning at the expense of being'.⁸ Suturing can be said to reinforce the status quo as the acquisition of a male's symbolic phallus is viewed in psychoanalysis as necessary for one's construction and realization of their gender identity.

In *The Power*, I argue that the women experience a suturing, through the development of the skein, which is representative of the phallus. Although the phallus is an incorporeal symbol and alternately the skein is corporeal, Alderman indicates that the physical power administered by the skein is not exclusively what facilitates the women's rise to power. The skein can also be seen as an inversion and metaphor of male privilege. Like male privilege, it swiftly becomes the norm and power becomes inscribed on the women's bodies. Power seemingly ascribes bodies as sexually different, and the gender contract is nullified due to Alderman's use of inversion merely reversing the status quo rather than overturning it, by the end of the novel, the category of women becomes man.

In this sense, Alderman's concept of power is a seemingly negative one, and whilst her tactics of inversion reverses the status quo, it disappointingly mirrors the previous society completely. Alderman suggests that power itself, cannot be inverted. The theme of power is present throughout the novel, and it bookends the story by the fictional author Neil Adam Armon. His novel begins and ends with extracts from 'The Book of Eve', the first stating: 'the

⁷ Kristen Schilt and Lauren Westbrook, *Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: 'Gender Normals', Transgender People and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality*, (2009). *Peer Reviewed Articles*. 7.

⁸ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 142.

shape of power is always the same; it is the shape of a tree'.⁹ The last extract is an 'Apocrypha excluded from the Book of Eve', which says: 'the shape of power is always the same: it is infinite, it is complex, it is forever branching'.¹⁰ The perception of the shape of power from the Book of Eve (the rewritten text for the new matriarchal Christianity) correlates power with nature, thus suggesting that it is a natural and legitimate form. However, in the Apocrypha excluded from the Book of Eve, it correlates power with confusion, complexity and chaos. However, it likens it to nature, explaining that 'like the rivers to the ocean, like the lightning strike, it is obscene and uncontained'.¹¹ this may be seen as suggestive that whilst power is a natural force, it is not necessarily a positive one. Alderman suggests how human systems of power are always problematic, and that whilst one is in power, there is another who is disempowered.

Alderman's depiction of power and the way in which many of the women go about obtaining it, can be equated with white liberal feminism, and the way in which it is weak in its perception of equality. White liberal feminism sees equality as aligned with the status of white men, however this is problematic as white men's status is contingent on the oppression of other people. While the text may be considered intersectional in the way in which the electrostatic power is globally distributed among women, the newly established inferior gender are treated in similar ways to women before. The women who take power rise to the same levels as their previous male counterparts, however this is flawed as the previous holders of power were reliant on the oppression of women and people of colour for the reinforcement of their positions.

Highlighting realities

Once their power is recognized, many women in *The Power* set out to reverse the status quo. Alderman uses inversion in her depiction of scenarios such as war, sexual abuse and political systems, with women either taking over or being venerated by societies as a result of their power. However, these scenarios only mirror that of the present patriarchal society. The way power is abused and not wielded for good calls into question the way in which power is dismantled dangerously and ultimately ineffectively. Audre Lorde stated that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', suggesting that oppression cannot be disrupted using

⁹ Alderman, p. 3.

¹⁰ Alderman, p. 330.

¹¹ Ibid.

the logic that created it.¹² The characters in *The Power*, do not adhere to this philosophy, and use violence and cruelty as a means to achieve dismantle and attain power. Their methods are reminiscent of the ways in which white men throughout history have used and abused their power and privilege.

The text sees the dismantlement of old power structures comparable to the creation of the preexisting ones. At the end of the text, a plan is instigated to induce a 'cataclysm', which will revert society back to the drawing board (but this time with women in charge). The narrative voice comments: 'Dismantle the old house and begin again', directly echoing Audre Lorde's sentiments.¹³ However, as a result of the frame narrative which places *The Power* in the context of a historical novel, the reader is aware that the 'cataclysm' did not in fact recreate a society in which power is evenly distributed and there is gender equality, instead the world which is built up from the ashes is exactly the same, with identical structures of power which consequently construct gender and vice versa.

Allie inadvertently comments on how the manner of dismantling and rearranging power systems are in themselves an inversion of the current system rather than a restructuring of old systems. When she arrives at the convent, she thinks: 'God is telling the world that there is to be a new order. That the old way is overturned. The old centuries are done'.¹⁴ She also employs religious inversion to reimagine power roles, saying 'Jews: look to Miriam, not Moses, [...] Muslims: look to Fatimah, not Muhammad. Buddhists: remember Tara, the mother of liberation. Christians: pray to Mary for your salvation'.¹⁵ Religion is just one of the social organizations in which the patriarchy manifests historically across different cultures. Consequently, through Allie's reimagining of women in powerful religious roles, gender is again redistributed in the political sense.

Simone de Beauvoir theorized that 'one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one', suggesting that gender is acquired over time by performative action.¹⁶ However, in Alderman's text, I believe that sex must also be considered in the anatomical sense. Sex must be considered as a gendered category serving a political purpose of reproductive sexuality; as Monique Wittig postulated: "'Men' and 'women' are political categories, not natural facts".¹⁷

¹² Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, (London: Penguin Random House), 2017.

¹³ Alderman, p. 328.

¹⁴ Alderman, p. 46.

¹⁵ Alderman, p. 115.

¹⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. By H. M. Parshley, (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1972), p.

¹⁷ Butler, p. 13.

There are many examples of inversions of gender identity markers in *The Power*. Throughout the text, a television news show updates characters on events and news from around the world. There is a linear switch and the female host becomes more assertive and confident; she becomes the main host, while the male host is replaced by Matt, an attractive and ditzy young man. Matt takes on the role of the complimentary co-host, previously embodied by a woman. When Tunde turns on his television 'Kristen is saying, the fourth-quarter isn't looking good. Matt is laughing attractively and saying, Now, I don't understand that kind of thing at all, but I'll tell you what I do know about: apple-bobbing'.¹⁸ This is among one of the ways which Alderman uses inversion to highlight women's own realities.

Perhaps the most disturbing scene is that where Tunde and Roxy meet in Moldova and spend the night in a refugee camp. During their stay, a group of female soldiers arrive and destroy the camp and round up the young men. What is interesting is the way the prose discusses women as opposed to men. A short passage describes how the female soldiers kill a woman who tries to stop them taking one of the men. Roxy watches as 'they overwhelm her easily, and kill her with a particular brutality'.¹⁹ However in a scene shortly afterwards, a man is raped by a female soldier and the descriptive passage spans over two pages. This is reminiscent not only of the way in which the use of inversion highlights female realities in terms of the violence and assault which is often part of war and conflict, but it seems that Alderman also uses inversion in terms of her narrative. It can be argued that gratuitous descriptions of violence against women is more prevalent than that against men in literature. In this section of the text, the narrative space granted the woman who experiences violence is limited to just a few lines, whereas the male rape victim endures two and a half pages of narrative space dedicated to the description of his assault. The description is also seemingly gratuitous in terms of the tone and structure, as one passage discloses:

'He will not stop screaming. Two of the women take him by the throat and send a paralysis into his spine. One squats on top of him. She pulls off his trousers. He is not unconscious. His eyes are wide and glistening. He is struggling for breath'.²⁰

The construction of the sentences in this passage echo the violence perpetrated by the soldiers.

¹⁸ Alderman, p. 246.

¹⁹ Alderman, p. 280.

²⁰ Alderman, p. 280.

The short and blunt sentences which describe the soldier's and victim's action are explicit and direct. Alderman's employment of the present tense for this section also makes the action extremely immediate and consequently more brutal.

Tunde is an important character in *The Power*, as he is the only male character who has a point of view in the text. Whilst the overall plot concerns the journeys of a myriad of characters who all impact the world in their own ways, Naomi Alderman herself has said that she views Tunde as the protagonist, stating:

“Tunde starts out as very confident, and the world slowly teaches him the reasons that perhaps he should not have been that confident. His story is the story about how a man in a world run by women learns how women have felt in a world run by men, living among wandering sadists, people who turn violent just because they can”.²¹

The way in which Tunde is forced to navigate himself through an uncertain world is reminiscent to female readers of their common experiences. The point he realises he is afraid as a male is when walking past a group of women in Moldova, he thinks to himself: ‘I’m not here, I’m nothing, don’t notice me, you can’t see me, there’s nothing here to see’.²² This use of inversion echoes street harassment and catcalling which is experienced by women regularly. This fear is heightened in this particular section as it is the chapter containing the most explicit accounts of sexual assault and violence against men in the mountains of Moldova. The fear induced in this part of the text is relevant as it generates so much disgust and disturbance. It almost feels unrealistic. However, as Alderman mentioned in an interview, her novel is ‘only a dystopia for the men [...] in my world, nothing happens to a man that is not happening to a woman in the world we live in today. So if we find my world to be a dystopia, then we are already living in a dystopia’.²³

²¹ Ruth La Ferla, ‘Naomi Alderman on the World That Yielded ‘The Power’’, *The New York Times*, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/29/style/the-power-naomi-alderman.html>> [Accessed 11 April 2019].

²² Alderman, p. 263.

²³ Lynn Neary, ‘In ‘The Power,’ Women Develop A Weapon That Changes Everything’, *NPR*, 2017, <<https://www.npr.org/2017/12/26/573507226/in-the-power-women-develop-a-weapon-that-changes-everything>> [Accessed 11 April 2019].

Conclusion

Ultimately, Alderman's use of inversion leads us to question to what extent are we already living in a society which some readers may identify as dystopian? When gender is removed, the scenes of sexual assault, workplace harassment and plagiarism seem typical of our current society. Whilst the skein is originally what catalyzes the female community, it is not what ultimately advances and heightens power for women. Instead it is the notion of power, and power becomes less reliant on the instigation of physical dominance, and more of an ideology emerging from a fear of violence. The original fear of violence from men propels women to a dominant position, and the power they obtain and achieve seemingly marks their bodies as sexually different. Alderman's use of inversion nullifies the gender contract and whilst the status quo is reversed, it is not overthrown. Ultimately, Alderman's use of inversion changes little if anything, the gender binary is still enforced as a result of hierarchical power. For the characters of the novel, the reason for exercising power is always the same, as Alderman simply declares: 'they do it because they can [...] that is the only answer there ever is'.²⁴

Alderman cleverly uses inversion to reimagine power relations to unsettling effect, and while initially the reader may view the text as a comment on gender, it is ultimately concerned with the ways in which power are inherently tied to notions of gender and sexuality. Gender may be seen as caused and enforced by systems of power, and Alderman's text cleverly displays the inherently corruptive nature of power. Mary Beard writes: 'If women are not perceived to be fully within the structures of power, surely it is power that we need to redefine rather than women?'.²⁵ The notion of power seems aligned with the perpetuation of cruelty and violence towards the less powerful. As readers, we are forced to question whether the best solution to this is for the victimized to become elevated to the same level of power as the oppressor. When one's power is maintained through the oppression of others, then the reimagining of power roles needs to first focus on how hierarchical power is facilitated by social categories such as gender and sexuality. Without this consideration, the status quo will remain unaltered, and the shape of power will always be the same.

²⁴ Alderman, p. 283-288.

²⁵ Mary Beard, *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, (London: Profile Books, 2017), p. 83.

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