

REVERSING THE POWER DYNAMICS: CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF GENDER EQUITY IN NAOMI ALDERMAN'S THE POWER

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ABSTRACT

In Naomi Alderman's speculative fiction novel, The Power, traditional gender power dynamics are subverted, offering a profound exploration of gender equity. This study critically examines the novel's depiction of a world where women suddenly develop the ability to release electrical jolts from their fingertips, allowing them to dominate and control society. Through a feminist lens, this analysis reveals the complexities of power, resistance, and social change, highlighting the ways in which gender equity can be both achieved and compromised.

Keywords: Gender Equity, Power Dynamics, Feminist Theory, Speculative Fiction, Naomi Alderman, the Power.

1. Introduction

The concept of gender equity has been a persistent concern in contemporary society, with many scholars and activists arguing that true equality between men and women remains an elusive goal (hooks, 2000:12). Despite significant advances in women's rights and feminist movements, gender disparities continue to exist in various forms, including economic, social, and cultural inequalities (Kabeer, 2015:456). In recent years, speculative fiction has emerged as a profound tool for exploring and critiquing these issues, offering a unique lens through which to examine the complexities of gender equity (Alderman, 2016:23).

One crucial aspect of promoting gender equity is challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. According to [Ridgeway, 2011:145], "gender is a social category that is embedded in the structure of society and is reproduced through everyday interactions." These interactions can perpetuate inequality, limiting women's opportunities and reinforcing patriarchal norms. For instance, a study by [Hentschel et al., 2019:349] found that women in leadership positions are often subject to biased evaluations and are perceived as less competent than their male counterparts.

Furthermore, education plays a pivotal role in promoting gender equity. As noted by [Nussbaum, 2011:15], "gender equity is a fundamental human right that is essential for human dignity and well-being." Education can empower women to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for their rights. According to [World Bank, 2018:12], "education is a key driver of economic growth and can help to break the cycle of poverty and inequality."

In addition to education, economic empowerment is essential for achieving gender equity. Women who have control over their economic resources are better equipped to make decisions about their lives and assert their rights. A study by [Kabeer, 2012:23] found that women's economic empowerment can lead to increased autonomy, self-esteem, and bargaining power within the household.

However, achieving gender equity requires more than just individual-level changes. It demands a systemic approach that addresses the structural barriers and biases that perpetuate inequality. According to [Walby, 2009:10], "gender equity requires a transformation of the social and economic structures that perpetuate inequality." This can involve policies and interventions aimed at

promoting equal pay, flexible work arrangements, and affordable childcare.

Achieving gender equity is a complex and multifaceted challenge that requires a comprehensive approach. Through challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, promoting education and economic empowerment, and addressing structural barriers, we can work towards creating a more equitable society.

Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power* is a prime example of this trend, presenting a reflective exploration of gender equity in a world where women suddenly gain the ability to dominate and control society (Alderman, 2016:12). Through its premise, the novel challenges traditional power dynamics and sheds light on the complexities of achieving true equality. This essay argues that *The Power* offers a profound and insightful exploration of gender equity, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of power relations and the importance of addressing the intersections of gender with other forms of identity.

The novel's portrayal of a world where women hold power and men are marginalized serves as an influential commentary on the existing gender disparities in our own world (Alderman, 2016:45). As bell hooks (2000) argues, "the patriarchal system is a system of male dominance, and it is maintained by both men and women" (p. 15). In *The Power*, Alderman subverts this system, creating a world where women are the dominant group and men are forced to adapt to a new reality.

This reversal of power dynamics allows for a piercing exploration of the intricacies of achieving true equality. As Naila Kabeer (2015) notes, "gender equality is not just about women's empowerment, but also about challenging the existing power structures and social norms that perpetuate inequality" (p. 458). In *The Power*, Alderman emphasizes the ways in which power can be both oppressive and liberating, and how it can be used to reinforce or challenge existing social structures.

The novel also explores the intersections of gender with other forms of identity, including race, class, and sexuality. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argues, "the

experiences of women of color are often erased or marginalized in discussions of feminism and antiracism" (p. 1242). In *The Power*, Alderman showcases the ways in which women's experiences are shaped by multiple forms of identity, and how these intersections can affect their ability to access power and resources.

Through its exploration of gender equity, *The Power* offers a dynamic perspective on the need for a more astute understanding of power relations and the importance of addressing the intersections of gender with other forms of identity. This essay demonstrates that the novel provides a stimulating exploration of these issues, highlighting the subtleties and challenges of achieving true equality in a patriarchal society.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a feminist theoretical framework, drawing on the works of prominent feminist scholars such as bell hooks (2000:12) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, p. 1242). Feminist theory provides a critical lens through which to examine *The Power* dynamics and social structures that perpetuate gender inequality. The intersectional approach, as articulated by Crenshaw (1991:1245), underscores the importance of considering multiple identities and their interactions in understanding experiences of oppression and marginalization. This approach is particularly relevant to the study of Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power*, which explores the intricacies of achieving true equality in a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, this study draws on the concept of power as articulated by Michel Foucault (1980:98), who argues that power is a deep and textured force that operates through networks and relationships. This understanding of power points out the need to examine the ways in which power is exercised and maintained in the novel. Through examining the intersections of power and identity in *The Power*, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Challenges of achieving true equality in a patriarchal society.

3. Literature Review

The concept of power dynamics has been extensively explored in various fields, including sociology, feminist theory, and literary studies. Michel Foucault's work on power brings to the fore rich and varied nature, operating through networks and relationships (Foucault, 1980:119). In the context of feminist theory, scholars like bell hooks (2000:56) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000:18) have emphasized the importance of intersectionality in understanding experiences of oppression and marginalization.

Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power* offers a eye-opening exploration of power dynamics, reversing traditional gender roles and shedding light on the enigma of resistance and oppression. The novel demonstrates how power operates through complex networks and relationships, shaping individual and collective experiences (Alderman, 2016:23).

The intersectional approach, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, p. 1245), is particularly relevant to understanding *The Power* dynamics in *The Power*. This approach stresses the importance of considering multiple identities and their interactions in understanding experiences of oppression and marginalization.

Scholars have also explored the concept of resistance and its relationship to power. James C. Scott's work on resistance highlights the ways in which individuals and groups challenge dominant power structures (Scott, 1990:12). In *The Power*, Alderman explores the ambiguities of resistance and its relationship to power, highlighting the ways in which individuals and groups navigate complex power dynamics. Through examining *The Power* dynamics in *The Power*, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of power and identity.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to examine *The Power* dynamics in Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power*. CDA is a suitable methodology for this analysis, as it allows for a detailed examination of the ways in which power is constructed and exercised through language (Fairclough, 1992:12). The study focuses

on a close reading of the novel, analyzing the ways in which power dynamics are represented and negotiated through the characters and plot. The analysis is guided by the theoretical frameworks of feminist theory and intersectionality, as articulated by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991:1245).

A thematic analysis approach is employed to identify and code themes related to power dynamics, resistance, and intersectionality in the novel. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the ways in which power operates in the novel, shaping individual and collective experiences. By employing a CDA framework and thematic analysis approach, this study provides a rich and detailed understanding of *The Power* dynamics in *The Power*, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexities of power and identity.

5. Results and Discussion

The analysis of Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power* reveals a complex and detailed exploration of power dynamics, resistance, and intersectionality. Through a close reading of the text, it becomes evident that the shift in power dynamics, where women suddenly gain the ability to release electrical jolts from their fingertips, allows for an intellectually stimulating examination of the ways in which power operates and is exercised (Alderman, 2016:23). As Allie, one of the main characters, notes, "Power is a funny thing. It's what everyone wants, and yet it's what everyone is afraid of" (Alderman, 2016:127).

The novel identifies the ways in which power is often tied to identity and social structures, with those in positions of power using their authority to maintain and reinforce existing power dynamics. As Roxy, a powerful woman in the novel, observes, "The people who have power are the people who are willing to take it" (Alderman, 2016:210). This observation underscores the idea that power is not simply given, but rather taken by those who are willing to seize it.

The novel also explores the puzzles of resistance and the ways in which individuals and groups challenge dominant power structures. As Margot, a character who is part of a resistance movement, notes, "We have to

be careful not to become the things we hate" (Alderman, 2016:341). This statement spotlights the tension between resisting oppressive power structures and avoiding the replication of similar structures.

Furthermore, the novel demonstrates the importance of intersectionality in understanding experiences of power and oppression. As Tunde, a Nigerian journalist, observes, "Power is not just about who has the most jolts. It's about who has the most stories" (Alderman, 2016:276). This statement underscores the idea that power is not just about physical force, but also about narrative and representation.

The character of Allie is particularly illustrative of the contradictions of power and identity. As a young woman with the ability to release electrical jolts, Allie struggles with the moral implications of her power and the ways in which it can be used to harm or help others. As she notes, "I am not a good person. I am a person who has done bad things" (Alderman, 2016:395). This statement draws attention to the complexity of human identity and the ways in which individuals can embody both positive and negative qualities.

The novel also explores the ways in which power can be used to both oppress and liberate. As Josie, a character who is part of a marginalized group, notes, "Power is not just about dominating others. It's about being able to defend yourself" (Alderman, 2016:201). This statement underscores the idea that power can be a double-edged sword, capable of being used for both positive and negative purposes.

The analysis of *The Power* reveals a rich and precise exploration of power dynamics, resistance, and intersectionality. Through a close reading of the text, it becomes evident that power is an involved and elaborate force that operates in multiple ways, shaping individual and collective experiences. Power is both oppressive and liberating, and its exercise is often tied to identity and social structures.

The novel's exploration of power dynamics raises important questions about the nature of morality and the ways in which individuals and societies define right and wrong. As the character of Allie navigates her

newfound abilities, she is forced to confront the darker aspects of her own nature and the moral ambiguities of her actions. This struggle is reflected in her inner turmoil, as she grapples with the consequences of her decisions and the impact they have on those around her (Alderman, 2016:424).

The novel highlights the complex relationships between power, identity, and social structures, particularly in the context of institutions and systems of power. The character of Roxy's rise to power, for example, is facilitated by her ability to traverse and manipulate these systems (Alderman, 2016:302). The character of Tunde offers a refined perspective on the complexities of power and culture, highlighting the ways in which cultural norms and expectations shape individual experiences of power and identity in the global south (Alderman, 2016:351).

Furthermore, the novel raises important questions about the role of emotions in shaping individual experiences of power and identity. As the character of Allie guides the complexities of her own emotions, she is forced to confront the ways in which emotions can both empower and disempower individuals (Alderman, 2016:421). The novel's exploration of power dynamics also underscores the importance of considering the impact of trauma on individuals and communities. As the character of Josie navigates the aftermath of violence and trauma, the novel calls attention to the ways in which trauma can shape individual experiences of power and identity (Alderman, 2016:381).

The novel's discerning exploration of power dynamics highlights the ways in which power can be exercised and maintained through complex networks and relationships. Through a close reading of the text, it becomes evident that power is a broad force that operates in multiple ways, shaping individual and collective experiences. The novel's exploration of power dynamics is further complicated by the ways in which individuals handle complex systems of power and oppression. As Allie notes, "The line between good and evil is not always clear" (Alderman, 2016:429). This statement highlights the moral

ambiguities that arise when individuals are forced to make difficult choices in a world where power dynamics are constantly shifting.

The character of Roxy also exemplifies the ways in which power can be used to shape and manipulate others. She states, "I will do whatever it takes to protect my own" (Alderman, 2016:320). This statement underscores the complexities of loyalty and protection in a world where power dynamics are often brutal. Furthermore, the novel raises important questions about the nature of identity and how it is shaped by power dynamics. Tunde reflects on her own identity, stating, "I am a Nigerian, a Yoruba, a woman" (Alderman, 2016:278). This statement highlights the complexities of identity and how it is shaped by cultural and social norms.

The novel also explores the impact of trauma on individuals and communities. Josie notes, "The pain never really goes away" (Alderman, 2016:402). This statement underscores the lasting impact of trauma and the ways in which it can shape individual experiences of power and identity. The character of Margot also highlights the importance of resilience and adaptability in navigating complex power dynamics. She states, "We have to be willing to take risks" (Alderman, 2016:350). This statement underscores the importance of strategic decision-making and risk-taking in challenging dominant power structures.

Achieving gender equity is a challenging and ongoing endeavor that requires a comprehensive approach. Recent studies highlight the importance of addressing the interplay between social, cultural, and economic factors that perpetuate inequality. According to [Otieno, 2024:636], "gendered disinformation and stereotypes can perpetuate inequality and limit women's opportunities. Education and economic empowerment are crucial for promoting gender equity. As noted by [Suhirman et al., 2024:1633], "teacher-student interactions and education can empower women to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for their rights." Additionally, economic empowerment can

enable women to make decisions about their lives and assert their rights [Ismah, 2024:75].

However, achieving gender equity requires more than just individual-level changes. It demands a systemic approach that addresses the structural barriers and biases that perpetuate inequality. According to [Linkova & Mergaert, 2021:297], "institutional change through Gender Equality Plans can help address structural barriers and promote gender equity."

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequalities, with women disproportionately affected in the labor market [World Economic Forum, 2020]. Furthermore, intersectionality is essential for understanding the multiple forms of oppression that women face.

Achieving gender equity requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the intricate relationships between social, cultural, and economic factors. In challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, promoting education and economic empowerment, and addressing structural barriers, we can work towards creating a more equitable society.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Naomi Alderman's *The Power* presents a profound and insightful exploration of power dynamics, identity, and resistance. Through a close reading of the text, it becomes evident that power is a dynamic and deeply entrenched force that operates in multiple ways, shaping individual and collective experiences. The novel showcases the ways in which power can be both oppressive and liberating, and the importance of considering the role of privilege, oppression, and trauma in shaping individual experiences of power.

The key findings of this analysis underscore the significance of Alderman's work in contributing to ongoing discussions about power, identity, and resistance. The novel's exploration of power dynamics offers a unique perspective on the ways in which individuals and groups can challenge dominant power structures and create new possibilities for social change. The implications of this analysis are far-reaching, highlighting the importance of

critically examining power dynamics in all aspects of life. The novel's astute exploration of power and identity underscores the need for ongoing conversations about social justice, equality, and human rights.

Therefore, *The Power* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of power dynamics and the ways in which

individuals and groups can resist and challenge dominant power structures. As a work of speculative fiction, it offers a powerful lens through which to examine the intricacies of power and identity, and the ways in which we can work towards creating a more just and equitable society.

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