

# The Significance of Female-Domination in *The Power*

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Over the past few years, many people, who are not only critics but also world-famous readers, have shown a great interest in Naomi Alderman's fourth novel, *The Power* (2016). For instance, former US president Barack Obama has named Alderman's *The Power* as one of his favorite books of 2017 and Emma Watson, who is a Hollywood star and known as a feminist, recommends this novel in her book list. Also, Alderman won the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction for her feminist sci-fi novel *The Power*.

This novel is composed of 8 chapters, and each chapter focuses on a variety of characters. Alderman writes a story as a form of reminiscence. It begins with the chapter, "Ten years to go" and ends with a chapter 8, "Here it comes." This paper addresses why Alderman creates this novel as a dystopian novel. The main objective of this paper is to find out the significance of female-domination.

## The Cause of Women's Electrical Power

"Muscle no longer matters when electricity is available" (Macdonald 117). Generally, muscle is meant to be a symbol of male power, but as we can see from Macdonald's words, with the use of electrical power, women as well as men need not obtain muscles which are the epitome of male power. We should in no case forget that the power, which is like electricity, is given only to teenage girls in the beginning of this novel. This paper takes the examples of two female characters, who are Roxy and Enuma and examine how their electrical power arises.

First, Roxy's story begins with the following scene, where she and her mother are violently attacked by two men.

The short one [one of the two men] grabs her mum by the throat; the tall one [the other of the two men] chases Roxy through the kitchen. She's almost out the back door when he grabs her thigh; she falls forward and he's got her by the waist. She's kicking and shouting, 'Fuck off, let me go!' and when he puts a hand over her mouth she bites him so hard she tastes blood. . . . The short one's pushed her mum up against the fireplace. Roxy feels it start to build in her then, though she doesn't know what it is. It's just a feeling at her finger's ends, a prickle in her thumbs. (7)

Roxy, for the first time, realizes the rise of her power. From the words when a particular action occurs, which are “kicking” and “shouting,” we can understand that she resists the assault from the man. However, Roxy says, “Fuck off, let me go!”, but is still restrained by him. However, when she witnesses that her mother being harmed by two invaders, she senses the electrical power as “a feeling at her finger’s ends, a prickle in her thumbs” is rising. In other words, when Roxy gives way to her anger the power generates. Her rage is also seen from other parts. For instance, “Her mum screams again, and Roxy pulls the lock off the door and bashes it open as hard as she can” (8), and “She jumps over the prone man, groaning and pawing at his face” (9). In this way, anger triggers power in the case of Roxy. Yet Roxy’s power is strengthened not only by her anger, but also by her dread.

Roxy develops her “anger” with “trepidation” : Roxy’s breathing becomes fast. She is frightened, but she is desperately wanting to help her mother. Words like “breathing fast” and “frightened” obviously express how Roxy is frustrated and scared. Margot’s part in chapter 1 (Ten years to go) explains that the female electrical power is caused by the accumulation of adrenaline in the brain. Therefore, releasing Roxy’s power is just through the touch, which is “a prickle,” but by mixing up the emotions of “anger” and “dread,” it grows more powerful and becomes visible such as “A spark jumps between the metal of the screw and her [Roxy’s] hand. Static electricity” (8). In this way, Roxy’s power originates from two emotions, which are “anger” and “dread”, and when they are mixed up and amplified, it is galvanized as electricity.

The rise of Enuma’s power is going to be examined. Enuma is only seen in the first Tunde episode (he is the male protagonist in this novel), still she given the best example of how the electrical power is caused. Tunde and his university friends including Enuma spend their holiday at home during summer vacation. Tunde regards her as an object of his sexual desire and plans on get her alone with him.

They [Tunde and Enuma] play-wrestle. He [Tunde] takes care not to really force her [Enuma]. He’s sure she’s enjoying it as much as he is. Her arm comes up over her head, holding the can, to keep it far away from him. He pushes her arm back a little more, making her gasp and twist backward. He makes a grab for the can of Coke, and she laughs, low and soft. He likes her laughter. (14)

As a result, Tunde’s plan works out as Tunde wishes, and the words such as “play-wrestle” which means mutual touching, “gasp,” and “twist backward,” are used to imply the sexual nature of their encounter. This quote sets up Enuma’s power outbreaking. An upsurge of her sexual appetite enhances her electrical power. Enuma’s situation differs from Roxy’s.

In this way, the cause of electrical power is expressed in the two cases on the

advent of the first use of power: one is emotional such as “anger” and “dread,” and the other is instigated by “sexual libido.” When women become exited, they are able to emit the electrical power.

### Three Types of Women

At first, women who can use the power are very few in numbers in the world, but the world gradually changes as the majority of women are able to exercise this power. “The effect of these electrical jolts ranges from a tingly sensation to scarring, shock, pain, permanent disability, dismemberment and sometimes death. (Ellman online)” In a book review, Lucy Ellman summarizes the power’s effects very briefly. These effects are seen on almost every page, but not every woman can control their electrical power at will. From Table 1, women are divided into three types: “Rejection,” “Confusion,” and “Exertion.”

Rejection	Chapter	Confusion	Chapter	Exertion	Chapter
Victoria’s mother	2	Jocelyn	except 3	Roxy	all
Sister Veronica	2, 3	Victoria	2	Margot	except 7
Sister Katherine	2, 3	Irina	7, 8	Allie	all
Morrison	5	Joanna	5	Savannah	2, 3
				Noor	2
				Shanti	4
				Nina	5, 6, 7, 8

Table 1: The Three Types of Named Female Characters in *The Power*

Some examples of “Rejection.” It is noteworthy about Victoria’s mother who becomes a topic of conversation between Allie and Victoria in Chapter 2 (Nine years to go).

There’s one girl, Victoria, who showed her mother how to do the thing [electrical power]. Her mother . . . had been beaten so hard and so often by Victoria’s stepdad that she hasn’t a tooth left in her head. Victoria woke the power up in her with a touch of her hand and showed her how to use it [electrical power], and her mother threw her out into the street, calling her a witch. (42)

By focusing on Victoria’s mother, we can clearly understand the oppression of gender norms.

Victoria’s mother is subjected to physical violence from her husband every day. Victoria wants to bestow her electrical power on her mother to save her, although her mother rejects it. Kazuyuki Kusayanagi is a psychology counselor dealing with domestic violence as a problem of gender in his work. He points out that women always supply affection for men; women are expected to support men and mind of his mental state,

and if men suffer from miseries or dissatisfaction, women have to bear the responsibility (Kusayanagi 25). Taking Kusayanagi's points into account, Victoria's mother's judgement is confused by her husband's domestic violence. Victoria's mother silently endures domestic violence because of gender norms.

Another keyword is "witch." In *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Witchcraft, the human exercise of alleged supernatural powers for antisocial, evil purposes (so-called black magic). A female held to have such powers may be called a witch or sorceress. . ." (*Britannica* 715). In the Middle Ages, those who use witchcraft with the support of devils are called a witch: such behavior as witchcraft is found in astrology, alchemy, production of therapeutic or poisonous drugs, and so on. In history, women suspected of using witchcraft were targets of slaughter, in so-called "witch-hunts." Hence, in recent times, women who are deviating from social standards tend to be called a witch. Thus, Victoria is called a witch by her mother because her mother judges that Victoria is not an ordinary girl; Victoria's mother thinks herself a normal woman, more than Victoria, because she adopts the gender stereotypes or social ideology. In this narrative, there are a few women who reject women's power; they are not able to transgress gender norms, in brief, this narrative shows the human psychology that people become suspicious of getting the novelty.

In the next place, we move on to "confusion" and focus on Jocelyne. In many book reviews, she is not listed as a main character, but we can easily perceive from Table I that she appears as frequently as protagonists in this novel. She inflicts a wound on her classmate when she could not control her temper, so that she spends her life learning how to control her volatile power. "Jos[lyne] has been spending more and more time alone, as her friends find new friends with whom they have 'more in common'" (64). In the term "more in common" means using the power is more normal than not using. The women's power spreads all over the world with meteoric speed. This rapid change confuses Jocelyne. She cannot master her power after five years. "She's [Jocelyne's] read articles by women who wish they couldn't do it [using power] and men who wish they could, and everything seems so confusing, and all she really wants is to be normal" (206). Her emotions are waved by perturbation and puzzlement. In other words, her emotions are similar to establishing her identity. Toshihiko Takahashi, who is a psychiatrist, claims that teenagers need to find their identity; they choose their future course in life "who they are" or "what they should do." The power's generation comes her identity to wave. In addition, a few characters of "confusion" are interspersed along this novel. They always regard the female power's jeopardy, probability, and morality as a problem. So, this story shows the women's emotional conflict of self-actualization too.

### Three Protagonists of “Exertion”

“Exertion” the third type is seen in many characters. Table 1 shows only seven named females, while a large number of nameless females belong to the “Exertion” type. Many kinds of women wield their electrical power for many reasons such as to take their revenge, satisfy their sexual desire including rapes, defend themselves from the reign of men, cooperate in military matters, and so on. Three female protagonists, Allie, Margot, and Roxy, are representative characters of “Exertion.” In this section, how they change in using their power will be examined.

Allie uses her power to kill her stepfather who sexually assaults her. From the earlier days of the spreading of the women’s power, she can change the form of her electricity, for instance, she can light a cigarette and make a spark jump between her hands and her bedside lamp glows brighter by her power. In “Nine years to go,” she realized that women’s power has a healing quality; she cures her friend’s epilepsy and neurolysis. People around Allie revere her as a special founder and establish a new religion. The followers increase all across the United States, and Allie propagates her religion and makes herself more and more charismatic. She uses the power for purposes of improving social welfare and women’s status, but she uses her power as a combatting force in chapter 8.

Will the greatest nation on the Earth, the land where I was born and raised, look on while innocent women are slaughtered and while freedom is destroyed? Will they watch in silence while we burn? If they abandon us, who will they not abandon? I call on women across the world to bear witness to what happen to you. If there are women in your government, hold them to account, call on them to act (325).

Allie raises her voice, “innocent women are slaughtered and while freedom is destroyed,” opposing the fact that women are still butchered by men who consider women dangerous. Allie restrains all men who resist women’s domination and restores women’s liberty. Thus, Allie’s pacific exertion changes into a forceable one.

Another powerful “Exertion” type is Margot. She is bothered by the fact that her daughter, Jocelyne, is deeply confused because she cannot command the power. She sets to know that many other girls are afflicted by their uncontrollable power like Jocelyne. As a consequence, Margot participates in the conduct of the facility which is called “The North Star.” Margot starts teaching that girls can become capable of using their power, and yet her desire for power becomes even stronger and in order to form the military force of the state and to attain enormous political power. She upgrades her political position from the mayoress to the senate so builds up enormous wealth. Furthermore,

she is planning to be the president of the United States in the near future through gaining a vast amount of fortune. In other words, her social and political status is growing in value overtime by deploying a corps of elite troops. When she talks about the war with the President, she says inwardly ‘Burn it all down’” (327). This defiant and offensive expression represents plainly her political ambition, and Margot is fired with her devil to obtain status. In consequence, her sanity of wielding the power catalyzes the point of amicable or educational view into aggressive exertion.

Roxy is the last exertion of the three. She employs her great power to give relief to refugees both male and female. However, her cooperative brother, who is Darrell, goes over to the enemy and robs the organ possessed only by women, which is called “skein,” that generates the electricity only available to women. Consequently, Roxy becomes powerless. She meets Tunde, who is in the midst of running away from women’s assaults. The two are both powerless and victimized here; Roxy loses the skein, and Tunde is among the weak in this female-dominated society. “. . . they run hand in hand, unwilling to let one another go. . . . They keep running until they can only walk, and still they walk on mile after mile in silence, palms pressed together” (287). “Hand” is a symbol of “friendship, [or] greeting” (*EDSI* 283), and “friendship” here has a meaning of “Accord, alliance, peace; a state of mutual trust and support between allied nations or peoples” (*OED* 194). In this situation, they form solidarity and unity as partners. After their cooperation, Roxy can take back her skein from Darrel and she ends the war by using her strong power.

As it turns out, the joint struggle lead to Roxy and Tunde going together. Roxy explains to her father about the story of a love affair, how she “got him [Tunde] out of a country full of mad women trying to kill him . . . so obviously he likes me” (329). At the time, she only accounts for the reason why Tunde becomes fond of her. The readers cannot understand why she comes to like him. Her father asks to see his grandchild. She answers with plenty of confidence, “Bet if I had a daughter she’d be strong as fuck” (329). She is certain that she wants her daughter to have the strong electrical power such as Roxy. As mentioned before in this paper, Roxy’s electrical power is triggered by “anger” and “dread,” and she avenges her mother’s death. Her incentive to retain the power changes as time goes on. The first stage of exertion is based on revenge, the second one is driven by relief, and last one is caused by her desire to pass the power on to her descendent.

As seen in the three types of woman’s exertion here, they are different from each other. Yet, these different types have something in common which is strong aggressiveness. Aftab Mangi, Yasmin Pardesi, and Hakim Kanasro explain in their papers

that “Alfred Adler (1970) observed that the power is certainly in every psychical event that endeavoring for superiority. . . .” (Mangi 222). Thence, the major characters of “Exertion” provokes their aggression as Adler’s indicates.

To conclude, what this paper makes clear is that female characters do not have the same consciousness of their power or the same gender norms. At the end of *The Power*, the narrator makes a significant remark: “The shape of power is always the same: it is infinite, it is complex, it is forever branching. While it is alive like a tree, it is growing while it contains itself, it is a multitude. Its directions are unpredictable; it obeys its own laws” (330). In short, no one can control perfectly their power in a male-dominated society or female one as well, even if whoever gets the power: political power, military power, and so on. Power makes its own way. In addition, the narrator takes “tree” as a metaphor that conveys that no matter how the power balance of binary oppositions such as male / female or white / colored are reversed, the vicious circulation of power struggle is carried on like the circulation of the growth of plants.

Almost all book reviews have claimed that *The Power* is a dystopian novel. Naomi R Mercer introduces, “In the end, a society that has not figured out how to treat women and men as equals — with the same amount of power for everyone—remains a dystopian reality” (Mercer 74). Elaine Showalter presents, “*The Power* is a major innovation in the overlapping genres of feminist dystopia/utopia, science fiction, and speculative fiction” (Showalter online).

Alderman comments about her book in the interview, “Every utopia contains a dystopia. Every dystopia contains a utopia. . . . if my novel is a dystopia, we’re living in a dystopia today” (Alderman 2). The worldview of *The Power* is clearly drawn about the female-dominated society completely contrary to a male one. Taking Alderman’s comments into account, the present society is still male-dominated. The female-dominated society presented in this novel might be something feminists want to realize badly. This may be one example of utopia for women in general. Although, what Alderman want to say is that even if women acquired power and overthrow history which was constructed by men, the historical domination and oppression will repeat itself. This paper shows that Alderman presents as continuity of a dystopic future created by female-domination.

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