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Reversing the Gaze: Gender, Surveillance, and the Reproduction of Power in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*

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Abstract:
Naomi Alderman's The Power (2016) imagines a world in which women acquire the ability to produce electric shocks through an organ called the skein. This change reverses the familiar balance of physical strength between men and women, but it does not end oppression. Through Roxy Monke, Mother Eve, Margot Cleary and Tunde Edo, the novel shows how new bodily power enters politics, religion, public life and military institutions. This paper examines the changing relationship between surveillance, control and privacy as women gain authority and men become more vulnerable. It considers public recordings, the training of girls, restrictions on men and the use of violence by competing groups. A transfer of power alone does not end oppressive practices. Women gain opportunities to resist abuse, yet some later use similar methods against others. Alderman therefore questions whether reversing a gender hierarchy can produce equality without changing how power is organised and exercised.

Keywords: Gender Reversal, Surveillance Culture, Bodily Power, Gender Hierarchy, Privacy, Naomi Alderman, The Power

Introduction

In Naomi Alderman's The Power, teenage girls across the world discover an electrical organ called the skein. They can also awaken this ability in older women. The change is sudden. Men, who have generally enjoyed greater physical power, begin to fear attacks, while women gain new ways to protect themselves. Soon the effects reach homes, streets, political offices and places of worship.

Alderman follows four main characters. Roxy Monke enters her father's criminal world after her mother is murdered. Allie Montgomery-Taylor escapes an abusive foster home and later becomes Mother Eve, a religious leader. American politician Margot Cleary supports NorthStar's training of girls.Tunde Edo, a young Nigerian journalist, records the

new power and its effects across the world. Their experiences show different sides of the same change.

The novel does not treat physical strength as the whole of power. Videos make girls visible to strangers. Training programmes regulate their bodies. New governments place limits on men's movements, while religious leaders justify the new order. This paper asks how such changes affect surveillance, control and privacy. It argues that female empowerment can challenge an unjust hierarchy without necessarily removing the habits and institutions that sustain domination.

3. Review of Literature

Tuhin Shuvra Sen reads The Power as a feminist dystopia that reverses established gender relations. He notes that Alderman "strategically flips the current power structure between the sexes on its head" (135). But this does not guarantee freedom. Sen also identifies "the reiteration of the same power abuse and gender violence" in the new order (144). His argument helps explain why the novel moves from women's resistance to their exercise of authority.

Melodie Roschman examines gender, religion and politics, particularly through Margot. She argues that the novel questions "patriarchal dominance, sexual purity, and national power" (10). Her reading shows that bodily strength does not operate apart from religious and political institutions. Those institutions give the new strength a wider reach.
Michel Foucault's account of discipline is useful where girls' abilities become objects of training and supervision. David Lyon's work on surveillance also draws attention to the collection and use of information, not only direct watching. These perspectives help distinguish public visibility from the power to regulate people. The present paper brings these concerns together. It examines how gender reversal changes who can watch, restrict and punish others, and what happens to privacy when new authorities emerge.

4. Discourse

4.1 Gender Reversal and the Emergence of Female Power

The skein changes more than the outcome of a fight. It changes who feels safe in everyday life. Parents soon warn their boys "not to go out alone" (Alderman 20). The warning is familiar, but now reversed. Men now experience the same fears that women have lived with for generations. The reversal takes hold before women establish any new political system.

The differences between these women matter to the argument. Roxy has strength but remains tied to her father's criminal business. Allie escapes one form of control but builds an organisation around her new identity. Jocelyn needs help with an ability that others celebrate. Margot sees what the change might mean for her career. Alderman does not suggest that every woman experience empowerment in the same way. She follows people whose choices are shaped by family, money, fear and ambition. The skein alters what they can do. It does not decide how they will act.

Tunde's first experience of the skein is personal. While flirting with Enuma, he calls himself her "lord and master." She shocks him, leaving his arm numb. His sudden "absolute vulnerability" (Alderman 15) disturbs him. He has not been arrested or threatened by an institution. Still, a private encounter has changed his sense of security. Physical power can alter a relationship even before laws and customs change.

Roxy discovers her strength when men attack her mother. She later uses it to enter the criminal world of her father, Bernie Monke. The narrator calls her "one of the youngest, and one of the first" girls to develop the ability (Alderman 11). Her strength helps her resist danger. It also draws her deeper into a world governed by threats and revenge. Power offers protection, but it does not necessarily change the surrounding violence.

Allie's experience begins in abuse. The skein gives her a means of escape from her foster home. She later becomes Mother Eve and gains followers who accept her religious teaching. Margot's daughter Jocelyn has a different problem: she possesses the power but struggles to control it. Margot, after acquiring the ability herself, sees political possibilities. These women are not equally secure merely because they share the same biological gift. Their situations matter.

As women gain influence in crime, religion and politics, men face growing restrictions. Yet Alderman does not present this as a simple victory for justice. The new strength can resist oppression, but it can also support fresh forms of it. The question is no longer only who possesses power. It is what that person chooses to do with it.

4.2 Surveillance, Visibility and the Control of Bodies

Public recordings make the new power known. After Enuma shocks him, Tunde wishes for "forensic evidence," perhaps "a photograph, or a video, or a sound recording" (Alderman 16). Later he films a girl shocking a man who has harassed her in a supermarket. He records the scene through "the camera's eye" (Alderman 17) and uploads it. The video marks a turning point. It "starts the business of the Day of the Girls" (Alderman 17).Soon there are "four or five videos every hour" (Alderman 18). A private ability becomes a public event.

There is also a difference between recording violence and preventing it. Tunde's first video helps strangers understand what is happening, but the online audience cannot protect everyone involved. The recordings may encourage sympathy or hostility. Much depends on who sees them and what that person can do next. The same image can become evidence for a journalist, a warning to a parent or a reason for an official to demand tighter rules. In this way, the novel presents public attention as uncertain. It can expose injustice without necessarily stopping it.

The videos inform people, but they also encourage fear. Television commentators demand that the authorities "Lock them all up, maximum security" (Alderman 22). When

Jocelyn becomes involved in a fight, reporters gather outside Margot's home. Girls are now physically stronger, yet they are also more exposed to judgment. Visibility does not always bring freedom. It may lead to calls for regulation.

Tunde experiences the other side of watching at a women's demonstration. He is refused entry until he allows the women to inspect him for weapons. Around thirty women observe him, and he knows that "any one of them could kill him with a single blow" (Alderman 57). His body is examined because he belongs to the newly vulnerable group. The scene is uncomfortable. Yet he remains a journalist with a camera, able to record the women and show their actions to others. He watches while being watched.

Training brings a more organised form of supervision. Jocelyn learns through practice to make her power "stronger and easier to control" (Alderman 65). At NorthStar she later learns to "tone down the highs" (Alderman 149). These lessons can prevent accidents. They also place girls under the authority of instructors and institutions. Foucault describes discipline as an art of "correct training" that can "multiply and use" individual abilities (170). NorthStar follows a similar course: it develops strength while deciding how that strength should be used.

The distinction matters. Filming an event does not give the person holding the camera control over everyone shown. Nor is training necessarily oppressive. But once institutions can classify girls, direct their abilities and assign them to official work, supervision becomes connected with authority. Women gain strength without becoming free from scrutiny.

4.3 Religion, Institutions and the Reproduction of Domination

Allie's escape from abuse marks the beginning of her independence. Her rise as Mother Eve, however, shows how personal resistance can develop into authority over others. She revises religious teaching: "They have said to you that man rules over woman," but now "woman rules over man" (Alderman 83). She promises "a new country" and "a new nation, mighty and free" (Alderman 83). Such promises attract women who have suffered under male power. They also establish another hierarchy among followers.

The three institutions do not exercise power in identical ways. NorthStar supervises girls who come for training. Mother Eve's followers accept her teachings and respond to her public commands. Bessapara can compel men to obey its laws whether they agree or not. Their differences are important. Training, belief and legal force shape behaviour in different ways. Yet each can bring individuals under the control of a larger authority. Women's electrical strength alone does not sustain the new order. Organisations turn that strength into rules and decisions.

At a gathering outside a police station, Mother Eve raises her hand and the crowd falls silent. When she tells the women to leave, "The girls from the convent turn and walk

away as one" (Alderman 118). She does not need to shock them. They follow because they recognise her authority. The scene shows how belief can direct behaviour as effectively as physical force.

Margot develops a different institution. Margot develops a different form of institutional power through NorthStar, which trains girls to control and develop their electrical abilities. She describes it as "a force for good" (Alderman 148–49). Yet the company soon gains from military recruitment. It can receive "a bounty for every girl" prepared to enter service without basic training (Alderman 211). Margot also benefits from its success. Later Tatiana Moskalev wants NorthStar women to form her "private army" (Alderman 222). A programme associated with safety now supplies organised force.

Roschman observes that Margot "duplicates the abuse of power" found in the structures being reversed (25). The point is not that girls should remain untrained. It is that their abilities become valuable to politicians and military organisations whose interests extend beyond their welfare. Those institutions can decide where trained women go and whom they serve.

Bessapara shows what happens when the reversal becomes law. Women who resisted exploitation gain political control, but men must now carry documents naming a female guardian and obtain permission to travel. Men without female relatives must report to the police (Alderman 243). These are not merely changes in public opinion. They are rules backed by the state. Men are classified by gender and made dependent on women for ordinary movement.

Religion supports the new state. Tatiana tells Mother Eve, "I was chosen by God for this" (Alderman 189). Mother Eve calls Bessapara "God's country" and the conflict "God's war" (Alderman 190). Religious belief now helps justify political violence. NorthStar supplies trained bodies, the government supplies legal restrictions, and Mother Eve supplies a language of divine approval. Together they show how new rulers can reproduce familiar methods of domination.

4.4 Resistance, Vulnerability and the Limits of Reversed Power

Roxy's story reveals how uncertain bodily power can be. She uses her strength to avenge her mother, but later refuses to kill Bernie. She knows that continued revenge will bring further violence: "someone will come for her in the end" (Alderman 205). Her restraint is important. The ability to hurt another person does not require her to do so.

Roxy and Tunde reveal two different limits of the new order. Roxy loses her skein. Without it, she becomes vulnerable to threats that her strength once helped her resist. Tunde still has his camera and professional skills, but fear prevents him from publishing freely. One loses physical power; the other cannot safely share what he knows.Both become vulnerable because other people have the means to harm or silence them. This is why privacy and

freedom in the novel cannot be measured by strength alone. They depend on whether a person can protect the body, make choices and speak without punishment.

Later, Roxy's family drugs her and has her skein removed. As it is taken from her body, she wants it back because it belongs to "Her own self" (Alderman 236). Darrell, her half-brother, receives the organ. Bernie claims the operation restores the proper order: "This is the way round things ought to be, that's why we did it. Not to hurt her" (Alderman 256). His words turn a violent violation of her body into a supposed correction. Her family has treated her strength as property it can transfer.

The transplanted skein works in Darrell's body. The novel observes, "Power doesn't care who uses it" (Alderman 297). Roxy's loss makes the argument concrete. Neither sex has a natural guarantee of freedom. What matters is who can decide what happens to another person's body.

Tunde meanwhile sees men humiliated and restricted in Bessapara. He writes, "At first we did not speak our hurt because it was not manly. Now we do not speak it because we are afraid and ashamed and alone without hope" (Alderman 239). He continues gathering evidence of violence, but fears "a knock on the door at 4 a.m." (Alderman 242). He has information and a means to publish it. Fear stops him. The journalist who made women's power visible now struggles to report abuses committed under the new order.

The attack on a refugee camp reveals the danger as armed women burn shelters and attack vulnerable men (Alderman 278–82). Roxy and Tunde hide in a tree. Without her skein, Roxy finds herself "Hiding. Like a man," and is "not sure what she is any more" (Alderman 284). Her fear does not come from being female or male. It comes from having no protection against those who can use force.

Male resistance offers no simple solution. UrbanDox calls for laws to protect men but also demands, "We need curfews on women" (Alderman 180). He answers one unequal system with another. Near the end, opposing leaders urge further violence: "UrbanDox says: Do it. Margot says: Do it. Awadi-Atif says: Do it. Mother Eve says: Do it" (Alderman 328). Their causes differ. Their readiness to impose their will does not.

The novel leaves room for personal choices such as Roxy's restraint, but its wider movement is towards conflict. Those who resist domination may adopt the same practices when they become powerful. Gender reversal changes the people exposed to fear and control. It does not, by itself, remove either.

5. Conclusion

The Power begins with an extraordinary change in women's bodies and ends by questioning the use of authority. The skein allows girls and women to resist violence. It also brings about changes like who is watched, who can move freely and who faces punishment.

Tunde's recordings spread knowledge, while NorthStar turns bodily ability into an institutional resource. Mother Eve gives the new hierarchy religious support, and Bessapara enforces it through law.

Roxy's loss of her skein shows how easily bodily freedom can be taken away, even from someone once considered exceptionally strong. Tunde's fear shows that possessing information does not guarantee the freedom to share it. UrbanDox, meanwhile, seeks to answer restrictions on men with restrictions on women. The pattern continues.

Alderman does not suggest that women's earlier suffering was unimportant or that their resistance was wrong. Rather, she shows the limits of replacing one dominant group with another. Equality requires more than a change in who holds power. It also requires changes in the rules, institutions and choices through which people exercise it.

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