

Matriarchal Vengeance: Reading Feminist Dystopia in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*

Mary Louisa Lum (PhD)¹

Abstract

Alderman's (2016) *The Power* falls within the concept of post-apocalyptic dystopia which can be defined as "narratives of a world changed by some global cataclysm, need not in fact always be overtly dystopian, but may portray ostensibly idyllic back-to-nature scenarios or ideologically laden and usually masculinist fantasies of survival" (Booker and Thomas, p.11). This paper seeks to examine the conflicting binaries within gender that lead to the extreme dystopia presented in *The Power*. Although the author provides a fictional apocalypse that results in a drastic shift of power dynamics, contemporary realities seem to support the idea that such an apocalypse is not farfetched. Matriarchal vengeance orchestrated by women gaining superpowers have nightmarish outcomes as men are tortured and abuse. Tolerance and equality are rejected as all opposition to the new status quo is squashed. The natural environment also suffers devastation because of neglect and the destructive weapons used in the conflict. Women, who are natural protectors of the environment, are rather engaged in a war of dominance that devastates the environment thereby foreboding a dystopic future in which both the male and the environment are at danger. Millett's (1970) and Chinweizu's (1990) extreme views on gender roles juxtaposed with the conceptualization of gender by Beauvoir (1949) and Butler (1990) provided a theoretical context for the exploration of gender norms that could escalate matriarchal vengeance.

Key Words: Matriarchy, vengeance, conflict, dystopia, gender

Introduction

In a world divided by opposing views regarding gender norms, where everyone is talking yet no one is listening, it is not surprising that apocalyptic dystopias such as that which is conveyed in Alderman's *The Power* (2016) seem appealing. The question of female oppression is currently very topical with extreme viewpoints from both staunch patriarchal and radical feminist groups; the former insisting that it is the natural order of things for men to dominate while the latter insist evolution necessitates a feminine coming into power. Gender conflicts permeate social media forums creating echo chambers of divisiveness wherein difference is envisaged as unnatural. Pellerin (2016) professes that these extreme arguments regarding gender norms arise from the fact that contemporary society is still perceived from the "straight White Male" perspective. Building from this premise, any gender expression that is non binary and heterosexual is stigmatized leading to the gender war of words. Questioning gender constructions constitutes the centrality of feminist discourse with Beauvoir (1949) opining that the patriarchal pedantic view of women was polarized by feminist postulation for equal rights. The critic states that assertions like "be women, stay women, become women" (p.23) have been commonplace macho parlance since women started advocating for their rights. Women too, in Beauvoir's opinion, have been attempting to evolve from their femininity especially feminists who resist biological difference. Though this seems absurd, it explains the insecurity women faced with society's subjugation of the gender. Men are seen as subject, absolute while women are perceived as other to Beauvoir and this upheaval of women's otherness in Alderman (2016) is dystopian as men attempt to fight to maintain the status quo and fail dismally. Butler (1990) extends Beauvoir's argument by showing how gender norms are arbitrarily constructed to favor patriarchy - affirming that one is not born a woman but is forced by heterosexual norms to identify as such. *The Power* (2016) falls within the concept of post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction which arises from the new superpowers that women acquire. Its outlet is a skein visible near the collarbone that lets out electrical charges that could be fatal. The power is strong within younger women though they can reignite it in the elderly. This topples the gender balance that has been male dominant for centuries.

¹ Department of English and Foreign Languages (ANLE), University of Douala

Women are ready to avenge crimes of oppression evident in the inhuman acts perpetrated on men. This matriarchal world is a bleak dystopia because of the extremity of gendered violence perpetrated on men. Booker and Thomas (2009) define apocalyptic fiction as:

Narratives of a world changed by some global cataclysm, need not in fact always be overtly dystopian, but may portray ostensibly idyllic back-to-nature scenarios or ideologically laden and usually masculinist fantasies of survival. While the post-apocalypse is thus arguably not delimited with the generic category of dystopia, in the main it falls under it. (p. 11)

Though the critics indicate that not all apocalyptic fictions are necessarily dystopian, they always describe a return to nature scenario as they foretell the reversal of the order of things. This assessment is corroborated by critics like Wheeler (2013) who describes this phenomenon as “apocalyptic discontinuity and to end-of-the world scenarios that are predicted on the force of nature” (p.37). *The Power* (2016) differentiates itself from other dystopian apocalyptic fictions which are patriarchal in nature. While it is “ideologically laden”, it does not seem to bring about the “idyllic back-to-nature scenarios”; rather, it results in a dystopic future characterized by female vengeance. The matriarchal dominance projected in the novel creates an alternative artistic vision of a future led by women with vengeance as the agenda. Through the frame narrator, one understands that the events in the novel are futuristic (five thousand years from now). In this futuristic universe, women gain superpowers with deadly electrical charges, and within ten years completely devastate the male centric world order. God becomes reinvented as the Mother; women become ruthless crime dons and greedy politicians. On the other hand, men become the marginalized group with brutal acts of violence carried out against them while in most places, they cannot move freely without the permission of women. The negative effective of the feminist desire or utopia of reversing the current power dynamics fits appropriately into what some critics consider to be dystopian literature. Labang (2014) quotes Booker’s (1994) definition of dystopian literature as “...specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thoughts, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political system. (3). In Labang’s (2014) opinion, Booker’s definition “... conforms to John Stuart Mill, who coined the word to function as a converse of utopia. If utopia is a desirable place where everything is as it should be, then dystopia is an undesirable place” (p.61). Thus, dystopian literature seems to be characterised by the same kind of oppositionality that typifies gender relations. While the female desire to reverse power dynamics could be seen as idealistic, “potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism” (Booker, p.3) is evident in the vengeance that derives from their development of superpowers.

Alderman makes use of metafiction intentionally to remind the reader that *The Power* is a work of fiction and not reality; a message that seems to require emphasis. The polarity of the debates on gender necessitates a reminder to extremists on both ends of the gender spectrum that books like *The Power* (2016) and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) are fiction and not documentaries. Millet (1970) and Chinweizu (1990) hold radically opposing views in defense of feminism and patriarchy, which will enhance the exploration of matriarchal vengeance in *The Power* (2016). Millet sees patriarchy as a system rigged against women which needs to be toppled. She asserts that:

If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by the half which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be two fold; male shall dominate female, elder male dominate the younger. However, just as with any human institution, there is frequently as a distance between the real and the ideal; contradictions and exceptions do exist within the system. While patriarchy as an institution is a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political, social, or economic form, whether of caste or class, feudality or bureaucracy, just as it pervades all major religions, it also exhibits great variety in history and locale. (p. 25)

The excerpt underscores the deep-rooted nature of patriarchy within society. Considering that it is built on the premise of male dominance, this domination is prevalent across all social classes and facets of society. In this rigged system, women are the marginalized entity since all variables like history and religion along with the principles on which society is built are male oriented. The annihilation of patriarchy becomes the only medium through which women can flourish. Radical feminists believe that the eradication of patriarchy is the only means through which women can truly be free and Alderman (2016) provides an artistic realization of that desire. Unfortunately, the ferocity of matriarchal vengeance is catastrophic.

Feminists like Beauvoir (1949) and Wittig (1980) have lamented that society is constructed from the masculine vantage point making the female inconsequential. Wittig builds on the former's idea of becoming a woman by insisting that it is not a question of gender but that of class. Women are as a social class appropriated by men in the same way that owners of capital appropriate the labor of the masses. Lesbianism therefore is an escape from bondage which is why lesbians are not women (Wittig 1980). Custodians of patriarchy justify the subordination of the woman as natural law while some like Chinwezu (1990) speculate that women are the privileged group. The tone deafness of such masculinist views is illustrated hence:

There are five conditions which enable women to get what they want from men: women's control of the womb; women's control of the kitchen; women's control of the kitchen of the cradle; psychological immaturity of man relative to woman; and man's tendency to be deranged by his own excited penis. These conditions are the five pillars of female power; they are decisive for its dominance over male power. Though each is recognized in popular jokes and sayings, their collective significance is rarely noted. (p.15)

In the above excerpt the critic outlines the pillars of female power which are all imposed duties like childbirth or societal impositions. It is ironical that a woman's control of the kitchen is considered a pillar of power along with the caretaker duties that are not valorized. The objectification perspective of the author is lost on himself since he assumes that women take up maternal roles and provide sexual gratification as fate. The five supposed pillars of female power curiously target male gratification as female agency does not seem to matter. Chinwezu (1990) is not alone in this thinking as many chauvinists complain when Beauvoir (1949) reiterates that women are no longer confirming to patriarchal expectations. Ironically, evolution is encouraged as a vehicle of progress, yet the rights of women are still debatable. How does a world that celebrates diversity become fixated on gender binarism? Does the quest for women's rights infringe masculine liberties as depicted in Alderman (2016)? Butler (1990) attempts to synthesize the argument by establishing that gender is fluid and a societal construct which must evolve for the sake of diversity.

Numerous critics have commented on Alderman (2016) from diverse perspectives, including thematic, stylistic and genre related critiques. Jordan (2016) explores the dynamics of power relations among the sexes upon the reversal of dominant roles when women come into the power. He posits that "oppressed women assume that divine intervention has saved them from the hell-on-earth of the previous existence, and a new religious leader is ready and waiting to feminize the faith" (<https://www.theguardian.com>). By claiming to represent a higher power it becomes easier for more women to align with the cause which is why the revolution gains global impetus. The drastic difference is the upheaval of religious views from patriarchal to matriarchal centered which the current study reads as a psychological weapon of oppression against men.

Read (2017) sees the plausibility of female oppression if women are accorded an opportunity. Although any form of oppression is wrong, the critic seems to see reasons for female anger. Read (2017) focuses on the outrage men express when an exclusive female event is hosted like the all-female theatre screening of *Wonder Woman*. The critic finds this outrage ironic since women have been excluded from the public spheres throughout most of human history. The analogy is extended to the utopian phenomenon established by Alderman in *The Power* (2016). The ability to have superpowers arise from the powerlessness that women have been subjected to and the critic reads Margot's triumph as the attainment in fiction of women's desire. Margot's act of stunning her obnoxious and condescending opponent during the gubernatorial race, on national television, is something that numerous women would do if opportune. Ironically, the utopian idealization becomes dystopian when women chose vengeance instead of forgiveness.

Abshavi and Kargozari (2020) and Sen (2020) explore Alderman's *The Power* as a vision of how society will evolve if women have superpowers. Exploring the potentiality of such an evolutionary accident, Abshavi and Kargozari (2020) discover that power dynamics can turn volatile in such a scenario. Focusing on the present predicaments of women in places like Saudi Arabia and Moldova, the critics affirm that places with less freedoms can actually see such vengeful outcomes if women ever have the capability to dominate. Sen (2020) shares this consensus and encourages peaceful coexistence in order to avoid such a dystopia. The current endeavor attempts to explore the potentiality of matriarchal vengeance as an avoidable phenomenon that can only be attained if society embraces diversity as an advantage. Respecting human rights and respecting individual rights to identity expression is proposed as the way forward.

Abuse as Impetus for Vengeance

Butler (1990) avers that conflicts among the genders abound in the fact that society idealized specific genders, creating hierarchies that become abusive. Such idealization often leads to heterosexuality being affirmed as the normative sexual orientation therefore propping patriarchy as the accepted order of society. Alderman (2016) depicts chaos as the outcome of stringent conformity to one gender norm. The normalization of patriarchy as the yardstick of social function has also been the concern of Millet (1990) who insists that society:

Like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance- in short, every avenue of power within the society, including coercive force of police, is entirely in male hands. As the essence of politics is power, such realization cannot fail to carry impact. What lingers of supernatural authority, the Deity, "His" ministry, together with the ethics and values, the philosophy and art of our culture. (p. 25)

It is this knowledge of patriarchal domination that urges critics like Kresteva to hold that strictly speaking women do not exist. Millet (1970) affirms the universality of female oppression as evident in the description of societal systems as male centered. This view is challenged by Butler (1990) who avers that women's oppression is ingrained within a network of culture, race and class; thus, invalidating the universalist claim to oppression.

Alderman (2016) provides a panoramic view of women's perceived oppression from a global perspective. Using the variables of culture, race and class provided by Butler (1990), one deciphers that women within liberal societies are less thirsty for vengeance. Incidentally, women in restrictive and impoverished societies become militant and eager to avenge their oppression. Abuse is portrayed as an impetus for patriarchal vengeance in Alderman (2016) as women rise to topple patriarchal oppression upon receiving the power. The character, Allie, exemplifies this phenomenon. She is fostered by the Montgomery-Taylors who use her to showcase their standing as kind and giving members of the community. The fact that she is multiracial makes her the perfect poster child of hypocritical humanism as postulated by her foster parents. Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor is a fanatical Christian who believes women are put in the world to satisfy men's needs. This conviction is why she fosters Allie as a sex slave for her husband.

Critics like Brooks (2019) and Sen (2020) have explored physical and psychological violence in Alderman (2016). These critics both concede that sexual slavery is utilized as a tool of oppression by both genders. Allie's experiences in the Montgomery-Taylor household depict sexual violence that often starts with physical assault; "but before she can form half a word he's hit her very hard across the mouth, back-handed. Like a tennis swing at the country club" (p.30). The force with which Mr. Montgomery-Taylor hits Allie is outrageous. The use of the image of tennis which requires substantive force to swing the racket further illustrates the level of violence. The ordeal gets worst:

Each word was punctuated with a punch, or a slap, or a kick... she doesn't beg him to stop. She knows it only makes it go on longer. He pushes her knees apart. His hand is at his belt. He's going to show her what kind of a little whore she is. As if he hadn't shown her many times in the past. Mrs Montgomery-Taylor sits downstairs listening to the polka on the radio, drinking sherry, slowly but unceasingly, little sips which couldn't do no one any harm. She doesn't care to see what Mr Montgomery-Taylor does up there in the evenings; at least he's not catting around the neighborhood, and that girl earned what she's getting. (p.30)

The use of focalization enables the author to share subjective character perceptions. Through internal focalization, Allie gives commentary of her constant abuse in the Montgomery-Taylor household. The use of short and direct sentences communicates the violence meted upon the sixteen year old. She knows begging for mercy is useless and all they can do is to endure the abuse that quickly escalates to rape. In an ironically disinterested view, Allie describes being raped by her foster father as his way of showing her that she is a little whore. This shows Allie has been habitually abused under the guise of punishment. Her foster mother is as culpable as her husband because she drowns out Allie's screams with music and alcohol. Allie expects no help from her because in the foster mother's mind, she deserves what she is getting. The diction shows that the Montgomery-Taylors have no regard for Allie other than to use her as a sex slave. Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor prefers her husband to rape her foster child than pursue other women.

Victims of physical and psychological assault often exhibit trauma because of the ordeal which can lead to depression and other disorders. Allie believes there is a presence that speaks to her and encourages her to endure when things get grim. This presence is represented by an inner voice, and she first became aware of it when Mr. Montgomery-Taylor was raping her; “it was some other time, years ago, when Allie was pressed back, head cricked against the headboard, his one hand around her throat like this, that the voice first spoke to her, clearly, right inside her own head” (p.31). Psychoanalysts may interpret this as neurosis, but Allie thinks it is the voice of a divine presence that seeks to assure her that she is meant for greater things. In the first apparition “the voice had said: You are strong, you will survive this” (p.31). Usually, when people hear voices it is precarious and does not augur well for anyone involved.

The egregious nature of Allie’s abuse results from socialization of the female as expressed in the relationship of the Montgomery-Taylors. Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor believes men are dominant and free to do as they desire. In her mind, men cannot be monogamous so to maintain the sanctimonious image of perfection, she takes in a sex slave in the guise of helping the under privileged. This abhorrent behavior is only made worse when she justifies that Allie “earned what she’s getting” (p.30). For a mind to become so depraved as to condone and enable the grooming and sexual violation of a child shows a profound level of brainwash by patriarchy which Cixous (1976) proclaims is “the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women” (p.878). Butler (1990) describes this brainwash as acquiescing to the heterosexual and phallic centrality of society. Allie can only depend on herself for liberation:

Nothing special has happened today; no one can say she was more provoked than usual. It is only that every day one grows a little, every day something is different, so that in the heaping of days suddenly a thing that was impossible has become possible. This is how a girl becomes a grown woman. Step by step until it is done. As he plunges, she knows that she could do it. That she has the strength, and perhaps she has had it enough for weeks or months, but only now is she certain. She can do it now and leave no possibility of misfires or reprisals. It seems the simplest thing in the world, like reaching out a hand and flicking off a light switch... there is a smell like rain in the room. So that Mr Montgomery-Taylor looks up, thinks that the rain has started at last...but his heart is gladdened by the thought rain even as he continues with his business. Allie brings her hands to his temples, left and right... He spasms and pops out of her... His jaws are clattering together. He falls to the floor with a loud thump. (pp.31-32)

The excerpt details the disgusting abuse of power. Mr. Montgomery-Taylor claims to punish Allie for her transgressions and ironically, his phallus is the instrument of punishment. The fact that he has perpetrated such disgusting acts of rape on Allie for years without retribution supports Cixous’ (1976) assertion that the phallus has been used to dominate women for centuries. The irony of the violation of the child as justified punishment is only made worse by the knowledge that their crimes can go unpunished. No one will believe Allie if she makes known her abuse because of her social standing as a problematic foster child to whom the Montgomery-Taylors are extending their magnanimity.

Allie’s status as a mixed race fostered child has discredited her as a victim from societal gaze which is why Butler (1990) opines that women’s oppression is not universal since under privileged women suffer differently. It is this awareness that gives Allie the conviction that she is the only one to end her abuse. The awareness of the power instills confidence for a positive outcome which is why she practices without ceasing until she is certain that she has enough fuel to annihilate her abuser. Through internal focalization, one realizes that though abusers might not see it, the victim often grows “a girl becomes a grown woman” (p.31) giving them the opportunity to retaliate. The years of abuse hardened her and she had time to plan her revenge, coming into the power gives her certainty that she can accomplish her mission.

Masculinist viewpoints that perceive women as powerful because they wield sexual power over men, never dwell on the proliferation of rape and sexual assault as in the case of Allie. The fact that women have been traded for the gratification of male pleasure is described as men’s inability to control their emotions in the presence of women. Mr. Montgomery-Taylor’s habitual abuse of Allie for numerous years will therefore be justified from this masculinist perspective that has led to victim shaming in contemporary society. The fact remains that women who suffer sexual assault are sometimes shamed as victims. This worldview is abhorrent and has disastrous outcomes as evident in the fanaticism of Allie when she becomes Mother Eve. By indoctrinating her followers to reject matrimony and encourage segregation, she leads the women to start breaking the shackles of bondage as postulated by Wittig (1980).

Characters like Margot and Roxy equally suffer abuse in different degrees; Margot is tormented by Daniel, her chauvinist collaborator while Roxy's father kills her mother and attempts to kill her as well. Both women like Allie become very exacting in their vengeance and allow atrocities to be meted on men without pity.

Divine Reversal: God the Mother

God has been defined as male since antiquity as manifested in the portrayal of gods from Greek and Roman mythologies. Zeus and Jupiter are sky gods and the supreme of all the deities. Critics like Jahangiri (2015) and Flood (2019) have made comparisons between Abrahamic religions and classical mythology focusing mainly on the creation of the world from chaos, the wrath of god, the creation of man from clay and woman as an afterthought. Regarding Zeus and Jupiter, it is not farfetched to link them to the God celebrated in the *Old Testament* who is equally a sky god who created the world and often destroys his creation in fits of wrath. Freud, probably envisaging this similarity insisted that human beings created God, a supreme father in the sky as a way of finding meaning. Alderman (2016) depicts a dystopian reality wherein God is defined as the Mother instead of the Father. In Nietzsche's existential fashion, God the Father is killed and God the Mother is born with Mother Eve being her chosen daughter. The Feminine Testament is introduced wherein women are elevated and the views of men are marginalized.

All religious traditions illustrate prophets usually men who hear the voice of God and take the message to the masses. The *Old Testament* chronicles many of these divine encounters beginning with Abraham who was quite friendly with God. Incidentally, women have not been blessed with the ability of hearing god speak leading feminists like Daly (1974) to become suspicious and describe the gods as thieves "who have stolen our identity" (qtd in. Suchocki, 1994, p.57). Suchocki (1994) has also commented on this male centered view of religion at the expense of the feminine by positing that "their sociological position on the boundary of a male-dominated tradition has given them a perspective that clearly shows the androcentric and cultural biases of traditional notions of God" (p.57). It is not surprising that in the new matriarchal global dispensation, the patriarchal view of religion is toppled. Allie in imitation of the ancient prophets has a vision in the form of an inner voice motivating her. Initially, she thinks it is the voice of her mother but later understands that it is God after finding refuge in the convent. The sisters try to hold to the patriarchal notion of religion citing the untrustworthy nature of women since "Eve passed the apple to Adam" (p.46). Allie does not think Eve was wrong in passing the apple because maybe the world needed "something new" (p.46). Interestingly, the voice agrees with her leading to Allie's epiphany "are you God?" and the response is "who do you say that I am" (p.46). This is a parody of biblical narratives with the call of Samuel, the young man who mistakes the voice of God to that of Eli. Eli upon realizing this tells him "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'" (1 Samuel 3:9). This is also reminiscent of Jesus' questioning of his disciples about who they think he is "but who do you say that I am" (Matthew 16:15) with Peter confessing that he is the Son of God.

Christ like the Voice leads the chosen to arrive at the conclusion of their divinity. Allie's conversion experience mimics the numerous prophetic conversions of men in the bible:

Allie thinks, I know that you speak to me in my hour of need. I know that you have guided me on the true path...God is telling the world that there is to be a new order. That the old way is overturned. The old centuries are done. Just as Jesus told the people of Israel that God's desires had changed, the time of the Gospel is over and there must be a new doctrine... the voice says: There is a need for a prophet in the land. Allie thinks, But who? The voice says: Just try it on for size, honey. Remember, if you're going to stay here, you're going to need to own the place so they can't take it from you. The only way you're safe, honeybun, is if you own it. (p.46)

Through internal focalization, there is a distinction between Allie and the Voice which is prodding her to arrive at her epiphany as the chosen one. She rationalizes that it is time for change and parallels it to Jesus' revolution of religion in the *New Testament*. The necessity for a prophet is raised by the Voice and Allie seems hesitant to claim it but is convinced by the fact that she has to own the convent in order to stay and the only way is by declaring the good news like Jesus Christ did in Israel.

Hearing voices is considered as indications of hallucination or psychosis to psychologists like Volpato et al (2022) and Lonergan (2017). Both critics aver that Audible Verbal Hallucinations (AVHs) and psychosis are prevalent in up to 8% of the non-clinical population and is often symptomatic of feelings of guilt and shame. Referencing Allie's life as a foster kid who is unwanted by anyone - evident in the way she moves from home to home - along with the abuse she suffers at the hands of the Montgomery-Taylors, it is evident that she is pervaded with feelings of guilt and shame.

The fact that voice becomes very assertive when Mr. Montgomery-Taylor starts raping her is suggestive. Several studies have explored hallucinations among biblical prophets particularly Ezekiel (Nussbaum 1974) who opine that psychoanalysts show interest in this phenomenon as the state of ecstasy often erode the sense of reality that might lead to delirium.

Allie's visions cannot be authenticated or challenged like those of past prophets though some of the sisters in the convent try at their own peril. Killing in the name of God is another strategy that is utilized in Alderman (2016) and this killing is passed on as a miracle to justify the new era of feminine evangelism. Feminist evangelism seems to be based on a reversal of the divine doctrines that have placed men at the centre of existence while women are relegated to the periphery. The idea of killing in the name of God is a reversal of the biblical principle from Exodus which forbids killing. One of the culprits of such killing is Sister Veronica who was resistant to change:

The next morning, Sister Veronica is still at prayer in the chapel. At six, when the other sisters file in for Vigils, she is there, prostrate before the cross, her arms outstretch, her forehead touching the cool stone tile. It is only when they lean forward to touch her arm gently that the women see that the blood has settled in her face. She has been dead for many hours. A heart attack. The kind of thing that can happen at any moment to a woman of her age. And, as the sun rises, they look towards the figure on the cross. And they see that, engraved now into his flesh, traced with scored lines as if carved with a knife, are the fern-like markings of the power. And they know that Sister Veronica was taken in the moment that she witnessed this miracle and so had repented of all her sin. (p.82)

The killing of Sister Veronica in front of the altar is the miracle that the new order needs to become popular. Dying in front of the cross is proof of revelation especially since there are signs that indicate the surging of the power from Jesus' crucified body to validate Mother Eve as God's true prophet. Social media as a source of dissemination carries the message worldview with outstanding results. The Vatican's call for caution at such obvious miracles is disregarded making matriarchal rule the new world order. The death of Sister Veronica symbolizes the readiness by the new order to destroy any form of oppression.

The Sisters of Mercy convent becomes the first home of the new religious order as Allie metamorphosis into Mother Eve is complete. Through a televised sermon, the world is introduced to God the Mother whose prophet "Eve wears a hood, the better to preserve her humility" (p.83). Mother Eve's sermon is an imitation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount wherein he appeases the poor and disenfranchised. The pattern of repetition is evidence of this imitation "they have said to you that man rules over woman as Jesus rules over the Church. But I say unto you that woman rules over man as Mary guided her infant son, with kindness and with love" (p.83). This is an upheaval to the cardinal rule of religion that places masculine experience over the feminine. Eve continues to topple other religious dogmas "They have said to you that man and woman should live together as husband and wife. But I say unto you that it is more blessed for women to live together, to help one another, to band together and be a comfort one to the next" (p.83). Matrimony in the bible is depicted as an institution of female subjugation since they are required to submit to their husbands. Another religious dictate that Eve's sermon challenges is contentment; "they have said to you that you must be contented with your lot, but I say unto you that there will be a land for us, a new country. There will be a place that God will show us where we will build a new nation, mighty and free" (p.83). The promise of a new nation is similar to that of the Israelites which indicates that women are the new chosen ones. In the Sermon on the Mount, the use of phrase "blessed are the" (Matthew 5) is repeated throughout; the use of "they have said" in Eve's speech is intended to draw parallel to her as a prophet of Jesus' status as well as to establish the reversal which is characteristic of feminine evangelism.

Young women are the first converts of the new faith and venerate Mother Eve as God's messenger starting with those at the convent. They came to the shelter to seek reprieve and Eve has given them hope and a new home after they chase out the nuns. Their dedication to the cause gives purpose to their lives. This is the new felicity for them, where they can be free and happy owners of the earth. Booker and Thomas (2009) postulate that group euphoria as the one experienced by the young women in the Sisters of Mercy convent is characteristic of apocalyptic science fiction. To them:

Unsurprisingly, dystopian works always often portray a group of people tied together through bonds of solidarity, friendship, or love in order to face the undesirable conditions. Such small communities are the space or shelter where humanity- or the remnants thereof- can be renewed even in the bleakest of times... YA dystopias often have a distinct spiritual or post-secular undertone alongside the more visible criticism of institutionalized and dogmatic forms of belief. (p.21)

Christians envisage apocalypse as the channel to paradise on earth and apocalyptic fictions are mostly inspired by the notion. The young women at the convent are all victims of abuse and have found shelter in a space run by women without any masculine intervention. Though the nuns ascribe to the patriarchal norms of the church, most of them are kind and tolerant with the desire to nurture and comfort the abused girls. The girls themselves find solace in each other and since they are generally left alone if they complete their chores, they learn how to control and build their power together. The thought of being thrown out of the convent is unacceptable, leading to the violent takeover. This is the first step towards the fulfillment of the promise of a new nation for women. Bessapara is envisaged as such a promised land under Tatiana especially due to the fact that she is completely devoted to Mother's Eve mission which is why Eve considers taking over when Tatiana becomes too erratic. Such a theocracy will be the full realization of the prophecy and the standard to emulate.

Allie's reversal of key principles, sermons and teachings of Judeo-Christian religion is indicative of the reversal that is required for a utopia to become a dystopia. Her assumption of a Christ-like personality as well as her teaching of the converse of what the biblical Jesus taught suggests not just that she has yielded to the call of the inner voice that spoke to her but also that she is ready to destroy the male-centred narrative which Christianity has propagated for centuries.

Crime and Politics

Crime and politics are specialties in which women are underrepresented and those who make the effort are often frustrated from attaining upward social mobility. Mechkova et al (2022) conjecture that women's ability to succeed in the political sphere is frequently hampered by corruption and ill faith actors; while in many instances they are used as "window dressing" to legitimize rule where in reality male patrons continue to dominate policy decisions" (p.42). In Alderman (2016), Margot is initially treated as window dressing since as mayor; her contribution is not appreciated by Daniel, the governor. He takes credit for her good ideas and belittles her publicly. Things change when Margot's daughter Jocelyn reignites her skein which she uses to make political gains. Similarly, Tatiana is first introduced as the trophy wife of President Moskalev, though she quickly kills her husband and establishes the new nation of Bessapara. Roxy Monke on the other hand is the illegitimate daughter of a British crime baron who does not believe daughters can run the family business despite the fact that his sons are completely incompetent. Sen (2022) is of the opinion that the power upheavals documented in Alderman (2016) is caused by patriarchal attitude towards women's emancipation goals. Chinweizu (1990) reflects this staunch opposition to women's liberation since his five pillars of power squarely put women on the margins. He proclaims men's rights to supervise the activities of women because "that man who abandons the kitchen to woman, and grovels for access to a womb, are not ordained by nature or by god, but result from how woman, who controls the cradle, has chosen to condition boys and girls" (p.16). This attitude of incredulity towards women is evident in Alderman (2016) where men like Bernie Monke, Daniel and Mr. Montgomery-Taylor see themselves as overlords.

In the context of politics, Millet (1970) explores historical evolution of governance from feudal to representative systems in which men are still privileged. To the critic, one constant in the history of humanity is "the scheme that prevails in the area of sex" (p. 24). The domination of the female gender is described by Millet (1970) as sexual politics. This is illustrated thus:

The word "politics" is enlisted here when speaking of the sexes primarily because such a word is eminently useful in outlining the real nature of their relative status, historically and at the present. It is opportune, perhaps today even mandatory, that we develop a more relevant psychology and philosophy of power relationships beyond the simple conceptual framework provided by our traditional formal politics. (p.24)

Alderman (2016) provides a panoramic global dystopia by artistically developing unique character experiences introducing the reader to women's uprisings in Saudi Arabia, India, Moldova, Nigeria, United States and the United Kingdom. The authorial intention is to show that this is a global apocalypse not just an isolated phenomenon. Tunde the young journalism student, the first victim of the power acts as the objective outsider who brings the entire panorama together. The most cataclysmic of events are documented through his investigative journalistic skills.

The novel captures the experiences of a political sphere where even women who have legitimately won political power are still not considered as major players in governance. Margot Cleary's mayoral career is plagued with negative criticism from Daniel Dandon who does not see her as a partner in governance but as an incompetent subordinate.

Margot is hard working and efficient but Daniel takes credit for all her innovative ideas and blames her for his incompetence and shortsightedness. His belligerent nature is evident in the utterances he makes “I try, I really try, always to have something positive to say, you know... your people haven’t given me a single thing I can use here” (p.70). Listening to Daniel berate Margot, one will think she is his subordinate instead of being an elected official like him. When the crisis begins, Margot is the one who does the required research to help the state mitigate and control the situation. It becomes increasingly difficult for Margot to keep herself from hurting him “as Daniel drones on, she can feel it out quite simply. She has enough power within her to take Daniel’s throat in her grip and pinch him out with one blast” (pp.70-71). Attacking Daniel is an outlet of the maternal anxiety harbored by career women like Margot. Male chauvinism is one hazard that women face in the workplace which has been explored by critics like Stamarski et al (2015) and Rubin et al (2019). Most women in male dominated professions habitually find the workplace inhospitable which affects both mental health and job satisfaction (Rubin et al 2019). The mental toll on Margot is evident when she struggles to remain civil despite being belittled by Daniel constantly. She is aware that “he’s not her superior. They are equals. He can’t fire her. He’s talking as if he could” (p.71). It is not surprising when Margot finally zaps Daniel on live television.

Daniel’s attitude is an example of how through patriarchy men assume that they have the birthright to leadership. Millet (1970) hypothesizes that “what goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged... in our social order, is birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system, a most ingenious form of “interior colonization” has been achieved (p.25). The chauvinism of male characters in Alderman (2016) is as an extension of real-world situations where men are downright condescending to their female colleagues (Read 2017). The commentator draws parallels from the gubernatorial debate between Margot and Daniel to the presidential debates between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump where Trump was outright sexist and belligerent. The critic believes that if ever there was a time for a woman to wish for superpowers to shut up a chauvinist that debate would have been the time. The debate scene plays out accordingly:

‘Of course, we can’t expect you to understand what this means for hard-working families. You’ve left your daughters to be raised by NorthStar day camps. Do you even care about those girls?’ that’s enough, and her arm reaches out and her knuckles connect with his ribcage and she lets it go. Only a tiny amount, really. It doesn’t even knock him over. He staggers, his eyes go wide, he lets out a gasp, he takes one, two, three steps back from his podium and wraps his arms around his midriff. (p.167)

Male politicians constantly use the double standards of parental neglect on their female opponents as evident in the aforementioned excerpt. Women are accused of being negligent parents when trying to attain career success while men do not face the same scrutiny. The NorthStar Day Camps is an innovation brought about by Margot as a safe space to contain and teach young girls to use their power responsibly which is replicated by the entire country. Ironically, Daniel uses it as an insult implying that women are meant for homemaking and childcare and not for public office. Daniel’s lack of self-awareness is the direct cause of the live television disgrace which paradoxically works in Margot’s favor as she wins the race.

Tatiana’s killing of her husband President Moskalev and her assumption of his position is a clear instance of crime and politics which contributes to the dystopia experienced in Bessapara. While her action is an expression of the feminine desire to reverse the narrative of female marginality in politics, her management of the affairs of the nation results in a dystopia. Moldova is strived with corruption, exploitation and human trafficking making it a fertile ground for unprincipled activities. The new nation of Bessapara is rocked by instability as Northern Moldova is fighting Bessapara, sponsored by the exiled House of Saud in order to try and regain power. As Tunde rightly surmises, America does not wish for previous regime to return to power in Saudi Arabia making Bessapara a proxy war zone. Tatiana has not made things better for anyone; she has become like any other tyrant surrounded by luxury while the nation starves. Her palace seems to have “been transported brick by brick from Disney” (p.219) while “Tatiana Moskalev is – no kidding- sitting on an actual throne” (p.219). She also “has a ring on each finger and two on each thumb” (p.220). The ridiculous setting suggests that Tatiana is fulfilling a childish dream instead of actually providing leadership to the people of Bessapara. She has no leadership experience, and her only accomplishment was participation in the Olympics, which lands her the role of President Moskalev’s trophy wife. In the context of dystopian narrative, the killing of President Moskalev could be considered as the apocalyptic act while the horror that the nation experiences under Tatiana is the post-apocalyptic dystopia.

Evidently, Tatiana is one of the strong women through whom the idea of matriarchal vengeance is expressed in the novel. Though she is a murderer and an incompetent leader, America needs Bessapara in the fight against the exiled House of Saud which is why Senator Cleary, ranking member of five strategic senate committees “defence, foreign relations, homeland security, budget and intelligence” (p.217) has to negotiate with Tatiana and help her regime despite the arbitrary laws put in place to completely disenfranchise and violate men’s rights. Both Margot and Tatiana have clearly used their power for their selfish gains while predator imagery used to describe them shows how authoritative they have become. The encounter is recorded through Margot’s internal focal view as “the snake meets the tiger... the jackal greets the scorpion” (p.220). These two deadly women escalate the bleakness of the new era through outlandish acts of self-gain. Through Margot, the United States will overrule any United Nations attempts to prosecute Tatiana for human rights abuses in Bessapara while the United States will run NorthStar training camps in Bessapara. The revenue will go directly into Margot’s pockets. Troops trained in Bessapara will be used for peacekeeping in Saudi Arabia if the exile regime tries to reclaim power. Their actions prove that women can be shady politicians just like men, though Margot’s daughter Jocelyn pays for her mother’s greed with her life.

The dystopia engendered by the female characters’ desire for vengeance against a male dominated system is conveyed in the degree of criminality in Bessapara, which provides a heaven for criminal activity for Roxy Monke who is instrumental for creating offshore accounts for Mother Eve and funding opportunities. She uses the country as the base for the production of her drug, Glitter which becomes very popular among drug users the world over. She is lauded at Bessapara as a business entrepreneur and invited to presidential banquets alongside dignitaries like Senator Margot and Mother Eve. Glitter is described as a drug that enhances women’s power which is why it is highly solicited. Roxy thinks she can handle the family business better than her half siblings Ricky and Darrell especially after Ricky is incapacitated but Bernie Monke does not approve. He gets doctors to rip out Roxy’s skein and implant it into Darrell who is put in charge of Roxy’s glitter business. His incompetence leads to mismanagement and Roxy later reclaims both her business and her skein leaving Bernie with nothing as punishment for killing her mother through Primrose. Roxy has the most powerful skein and initially she acts cocky and reckless. When she is forced into exile for killing Primrose, her perspective about life changes completely and she becomes very calculating and composed thereby making her an asset to individuals like Mother Eve and Tatiana.

Conclusion

The potentiality of matriarchal vengeance is made manifest in *the Power* (2016), a futuristic novel that provides a hypothetical picture of female viciousness upon the acquisition of superpowers. Conjuring a world five thousand years into the future where in women topple patriarchy and enact vicious acts of revenge against men is meant to entertain while cautioning extremist groups advocating for the oppression of other groups that the balance of power can drastically change. Against the backdrop of theoretical conceptualization on gender dynamics, it was underscored that hanging on to binary views is outmoded and inadequate. Diversity in all its forms must be encouraged for harmonious coexistence. Extreme ideologies can only result in dystopian situations with the inhuman acts excused in the name of God. The femininity of God allowed for a change in status quo in which women assume divine authority to perpetrate evil deeds on men. Women as criminals and political leaders make for a bleak world as within ten years of the activation of the skein, their greed and thirst for vengeance only enhance bleakness. The crime and wanton cruelty that pervades Bessapara, the predicted new nation that God has promised women further exemplifies the consequences of extremism.

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