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Challenge of Gender Role Reversal in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*

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Abstract. This study aims to investigate the gender role reversal reflected in Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and its impacts on societal structure. In conducting the study, V. Geetha's theory of gender role reversal is employed. Moreover, this research is designed as descriptive qualitative research because the data are in the form of words, and the analysis results are described using rich, detailed, and descriptive language to capture the complexity. In addition, gender study is applied since the study deals with gender issues. The results of the study show that as women are empowered with physical strength through the 'skein' of new organs in the female body, they take over the roles that men have. The women take over the roles of leaders in society and institutions. This reversal of gender roles has significant impacts on society. The women use their power by legalizing injustice such as men being mistreated by governments, and impose restrictions on men's rights to act and behave in society. In addition, the gender role reversal leads to international conflicts such as war in some countries and terrorism. This research highlights that when women have more power and dominance in society, the social structure changes.

Keywords: *gender role reverse, leader, patriarchy, power, society*

INTRODUCTION

Gender role refers to the behaviors and roles individuals adopt based on their gender, influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations. These regulated gender roles often restrict individuals from acting according to their desires. These roles cover a wide range of life aspects, including social interactions, work, and family life. Influenced by cultural values and social norms, which can vary significantly across different societies and historical periods, gender roles shape many facets of human behavior. These include clothing choices, career paths, reactions to various situations, and dynamics within personal relationships. They also influence the attitudes of each gender, often promoting a division of labor where men are seen as breadwinners and women as homemakers (Qing, 2020). Despite changes over time, traditional gender roles frequently position men in the “public” sphere and women in the “private” sphere (Miller & Borgida, 2016).

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The gender roles contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchy. Patriarchal society limits women's human rights to a certain extent. It gives full priority to men (Sultana, 2012: 2). Men have privileges and hold dominant positions in society. These privileges enable men to act arbitrarily towards women, who are traditionally seen as weak and confined to domestic duties. Men sustain their dominance by highlighting both actual and perceived biological disparities between the two recognized sexes, arguing that women are inherently inferior (Rahayu et al., 2022). Men, who are in a position of power and control in a patriarchal society, often disadvantage or marginalize women. This can take the form of various oppressive and discriminatory actions directed at women, including unequal access to political representation, employment opportunities, education and reproductive rights (Yasmin Shafeeq, 2004: 126). However, women today are challenging societal norms by reversing these traditional gender roles. Gender role reversal describes a situation in which an individual adopts or modifies their gender role, countering traditional gender expectations assigned to each sex. Gender roles emerge from interactions between individuals and their environments, which dictate appropriate behaviors for each gender (Putri, 2022). Studies on gender neutrality reveal that discrimination is often harsher against minority men compared to minority women (Arai et al., 2016). When people become aware of unfair social norms related to their gender, they may challenge these norms. Gender role reversal is sometimes employed to maintain social order, such as in cultures where women adopt traditionally male behaviors to perform certain jobs.

This research aims to explore gender role reversal as reflected in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*. The novel presents a scenario where women gain physical power, leading to significant shifts in societal structures and gender dynamics. *The Power*, a novel by Naomi Alderman published in 2016, follows four main characters: Roxy, Margot, Allie, and Tunde. Teenage girls discover they have the ability to generate electricity from their bodies, and this power is first revealed in a series of small incidents around the world. Roxy, a girl from a London crime family, uses her power to fend off attackers. Margot, a politician, begins to see the potential for using this power to advance her career. Allie, a foster child, uses her power to escape her abusive foster father.

In Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, women develop the ability to generate electric currents within their bodies, a phenomenon initially exhibited by teenage girls who can discharge electric shocks at will. As this ability becomes widely recognized, women worldwide become cognizant of their newfound power. This shift significantly disrupts the balance of power between men and women, leading to extensive social, political, and cultural transformations. With women gaining dominance, the novel explores how they challenge traditional gender roles, dismantle oppressive systems, and assert control over their lives. However, this newfound power also leads to violence and the abuse of authority, with some women becoming as cruel and oppressive as the men they once opposed.

This research aims to examine the gender role reversal depicted in Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and its societal implications as portrayed in the narrative. The novel illustrates how women, endowed with unique powers known as 'skeins', disrupt traditional gender roles

and alter the prevailing social structure. By investigating the gender role reversal in *The Power*, this study encourages readers to reconsider conventional notions of gender and power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study employs V. Geetha's theory of gender role reversal to analyze gender issues in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*. Geetha (2002: 31) asserts that social norms dictate the appropriateness of masculine and feminine behaviors. Society enforces expectations for men and women to behave in certain ways, rewarding those who conform and punishing those who deviate, resulting in distinct societal roles for each gender. She underscores that women are increasingly assuming roles traditionally occupied by men, such as working outside the home and participating in outdoor activities for survival (Geetha, 2002: 34). Geetha emphasizes that traditional gender roles can be reversed and that social roles are integral components of the fundamental structures of power and privilege, which can evolve over time.

This reversal of gender roles challenges stereotypical expectations of men and women. Geetha contends that social roles are integral to the fundamental structures of power, approval, disapproval, and privilege. These structures are pervasive in our lives, influencing our work, living conditions, behaviors, and thoughts (Geetha, 2002: 37). This theoretical framework is essential for understanding how Alderman's novel reflected the reversal of gender roles and its impact on societal structures. The analysis focuses on the depiction of women who acquire physical strength and dominance, thereby challenging and subverting patriarchal systems.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method, renowned for its flexibility, which allows the researcher to select the most appropriate techniques based on the research questions and the phenomenon under investigation. The qualitative descriptive research is to provide a comprehensive summary of events or experiences. Common data collection methods within this approach include observation, in-depth interviews, and content analysis, among others (Kothari, 2004: 96). This methodology is particularly suited for examining the gender role reversal in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, as it enables the analysis of narratives that depict gender role reversals and their societal impacts. Additionally, this method allows for an in-depth examination of how gender role reversals are represented in the novel. Through text analysis of narratives and quotations, the researcher aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these gender role reversals are reflected and their broader implications.

1. Data collection procedure

First, Naomi Alderman's *The Power* was comprehensively reviewed on three occasions to achieve a profound understanding of its narrative content. Secondly, meticulous notes were made to document specific data pertinent to the research focus. Following this, a systematic classification process was employed to identify and categorize instances

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within the data that exemplify gender role reversal as reflected in the novel and the impacts on society that reflected in the novel.

2. Data analysis procedure

Following the collection of research data, the researcher proceeded with its analysis employing content analysis techniques and qualitative descriptive methods. First, a detailed description of the research data was compiled, outlining the various themes and patterns identified within the dataset. Secondly, the researcher interpreted the results of the data analysis to address the research problem statement, examining how gender role reversal is reflected and its implications as depicted in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*. Finally, the researcher makes conclusion from the result of the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of gender role reversal in Naomi Alderman's *The Power* uncovers profound implications for societal structures. In the novel, a global phenomenon occurs where women suddenly acquire the ability to administer electric shocks through a newly evolved organ known as the 'skein'. This transformative physical capability, formerly emblematic of male dominance, transfers to women, fundamentally reshaping social hierarchies and power dynamics. With this newfound ability, women assume control over societal leadership roles, including within religious, political, and criminal spheres.

Moreover, the research explores the broader societal ramifications stemming from these reversed gender roles. The ascendancy of women into positions of leadership, enabled by their newfound power to control and influence, disrupts established societal norms. This shift in power dynamics precipitates various forms of injustice and conflict on local and global scales. Women, empowered by the skein, wield considerable influence, resulting in instances of oppression and violence. Such transformations are exemplified in scenarios where women assume leadership in conflicts and engage in acts of terrorism, underscoring the profound consequences of these power shifts.

1. Gender Role Reverse Reflected in Alderman's *The Power*

According to Geetha (2002: 34), roles are subject to reversal and may be reassigned to another gender. In Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, women are depicted as formidable individuals due to their possession of a novel physiological attribute known as the 'skein', an organ newly manifesting in their bodies capable of generating electric shocks. This newfound ability endows them with enhanced physical, social, and political dominance, effectively reversing the traditional roles once occupied by men. The narrative portrays women assuming leadership roles empowered by this ability, thereby challenging conventional gender norms where male leadership predominates. The characters of Margot, Allie, Roxy, and Tatiana Moskalev exemplify this transformation, illustrating women's ascendancy in domains traditionally dominated by men, including politics, religion, and criminal fields.

a. Margot Cleary as a Political Leader

As a mayor, Margot exemplifies courageous leadership, addressing the city's issues directly and unflinchingly. She is depicted as a leader who acts swiftly and decisively, as evidenced by her immediate and effective response to the outbreak, which likely saved many lives. This is illustrated in the quotation: "Some of you might remember Mayor Cleary as a leader who acted swiftly and decisively after the outbreak, probably saving many lives" (Alderman, 2016: 85). While men often receive authority and respect more readily in leadership positions, women frequently encounter additional obstacles to achieving the same level of recognition. Margot's adept management of the outbreak earns her significant respect and authority, demonstrating that women possess the same leadership capabilities as men. Her actions challenge the stereotype that leadership is inherently a male trait.

b. Allie as Religious Leader

Allie is portrayed as a young girl escaping from a tumultuous family history, embarking on a transformative journey that leads to profound events. Upon discovering her ability to generate electric shocks, she not only gains newfound physical prowess but also undergoes a spiritual metamorphosis, assuming the role of the charismatic religious figure known as Mother Eve.

As Mother Eve, Allie emerges as a compelling religious leader, advocating for female empowerment and equality in a message that resonates globally. Her leadership offers hope and a transformative path for oppressed women, attracting a large following with her egalitarian ideals and optimistic vision of women's potential. Allie reinterprets religious doctrines and establishes a new theology that empowers women, establishing herself as a central spiritual authority.

They come to ask for her teachings.

They say, 'Why do you call God "She"?'

Eve says, 'God is neither woman nor man but both these things. But now She has come to show us a new side to Her face, one we have ignored for too long (Alderman, 2016: 79).

This quotation underscores a reversal of traditional gender roles within religious contexts. While historical religious leadership has predominantly been male-dominated, the narrative portrays women assuming prominent roles in spirituality due to their newly acquired ability, the 'skein', which enhances their physical strength and societal influence. Allie's teachings and leadership in religion exemplify her authority and influence as a spiritual guide.

c. Tatiana Moskalev as a Political Leader

Tatiana Moskalev is depicted as a ruthless and ambitious political figure. Initially, as the wife of a president in Eastern Europe, her influence was largely contingent on her husband's authority. However, her position undergoes a significant transformation after acquiring electrical abilities. With her newfound power, Tatiana orchestrates a coup

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against her husband, deposing him from office and assuming authoritarian control herself. She employs her electrical capabilities to assert dominance and suppress opposition. Tatiana use her powers to frame and eliminate her husband, driven by ambitions to succeed him as the president of Moldova and establish a new nation named Bessapara. This ambition underscores her ruthless pursuit of power and her willingness to eliminate obstacles in her path to achieving political dominance. This is can be seen in the quotation below. ¹

It is something of a surprise to the world's community when, in the immediate aftermath of his death, the Supreme Court of the country unanimously votes in emergency session to appoint his wife, Tatiana, as interim leader (Alderman, 2016: 97).

The quotation above show that reversal of gender roles becomes apparent as Tatiana assumes leadership, not solely due to her marital relationship with the former leader, but also because of her acknowledged qualities and capabilities endorsed by the highest governing bodies. This exemplifies how women attain positions of authority not only through relational or political affiliations but also based on their individual merits and leadership skills. Such transformations in gender roles can significantly impact political dynamics, facilitating women's ascent to pivotal roles, particularly during critical transitions of power and emergency situations. Her leadership is a result of both her qualities and the institutional recognition of those qualities, rather than just being a result of her political or social connections.

This transformation in gender roles has significant implications for political dynamics. As women like Tatiana ascend to pivotal roles, especially during critical transitions of power or emergency situations, they bring new perspectives and approaches to governance. Their leadership facilitates more inclusive and diverse decision-making processes, potentially leading to more equitable and effective solutions to societal challenges. Moreover, Tatiana's example demonstrates the potential for women to break through long-standing barriers and assume roles traditionally reserved for men. This shift inspires other women to pursue leadership positions, fostering a more balanced representation in political and organizational spheres. The acknowledgment of women's individual merits and leadership skills by governing bodies catalyzes broader societal acceptance and support for gender equality in leadership.

d. **Roxy as Business Criminal Leader**

Roxy is portrayed as a young woman burdened by trauma and a deep-seated resentment stemming from her mother's violent death. When she was sixteen years old, both she and her mother were assaulted by members of a mafia group claiming to be adversaries of her father. Witnessing her mother's brutal murder instills in Roxy an intense desire for vengeance against the perpetrators. Upon confronting her father for assistance in identifying her mother's killer, Roxy is shocked to discover that her father had orchestrated the attack on her mother. In response, driven by a thirst for retribution, Roxy assumes control of her father's criminal enterprise, intending to avenge her mother's death.

Roxy initiates meetings with Allie, also known as Mother Eve, at a church and assumes a prominent role as her chief assistant. During this time, Allie expresses a need for a bank account and identity that align with her newly acquired abilities. Roxy offers Allie her services involving illegal identities and bank accounts, which constitute Roxy's current illicit business operations.

Roxy laughs. 'What's the problem? Got too much?'

Allie looks at Roxy thoughtfully for a moment. 'Only Sister Maria Ignacia has a bank account. And I ...' She runs her tongue over her top front teeth, makes her lips click.

Roxy says, 'You don't trust no one, do you?'

Allie smiles. 'Do you?'

'Price of doing business, mate. Got to trust someone or you'll get nothing done. You need a bank account? How many do you want? Want some out of the country? Cayman Islands is good, I think, don't know why.'

'Wait, what do you mean?' But before Allie can stop her, Roxy's taken out her phone, snapped a picture of Allie and is sending a text.

Roxy grins. 'Trust me. Got to find some way to pay my rent, don't I?'

(Alderman, 2016: 107).

The quotation illustrates Roxy's leadership within a criminal enterprise. It showcases her astuteness and proactive approach in swiftly offering assistance to Allie. Recognizing the critical need for financial resources, Roxy takes immediate action to secure bank accounts, including offshore options. Her decisive actions highlight strong leadership qualities and a command of the situation. Roxy guides the discussion and takes practical steps towards achieving their objectives, underscoring her authoritative position. The ability to lead and effectively manage situations is often stereotypically attributed to male leaders, yet Roxy's actions demonstrate that women can excel in these roles as well.

2. ¹² **The Impacts of Gender Role Reverse on Society that Reflected in *The Power***

In Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, the sudden reverse in gender roles, where women gain power and start oppressing men, leads to significant changes in the global social order. As women ascend to political leadership, new inequalities emerge, including restrictions on men's rights and a lack of governmental policies to address their oppression. This dramatic reversal in gender roles sparks international conflicts, with various countries and groups perceiving the change as a threat to their cultural norms and social stability. The novel highlights the resulting new injustices against men and the rise of international tensions.

a. **Legalizing the Injustice against Men**

The injustices due to the reverse in gender roles is depicted through legalizing injustice faced by men, who now encounter restrictions on their rights and freedom within society. Women, in turn, experience limitations on their freedom of movement, strict behavioral control, and decreased access to power. For men, the emergence of new, lethal drugs

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poses a significant threat, especially to young men with promising futures. Notably, there are no laws prohibiting these drugs unless mixed with other illegal substances. It can be seen in the quotation below.

The problem is, there's been a story in the paper. Not a big story, not page one. But page five in the *Mirror* and the *Express* and the *Daily Fucking Mail*, about this 'new death drug that's killing 'young men with their whole lives ahead of them'. It's in the paper, but there's no fucking law against it yet, not unless it's cut with something else. Which this stuff in the fucking hourglasses is (Alderman, 2016: 157).

The quotation above demonstrates a man's perception of injustice from the government, highlighting the growing concern among men regarding their safety. The women have developed a new deadly drug, instilling fear in men about their collective security. This anxiety is compounded by the fact that the current government is predominantly female and has failed to enact laws to address this critical issue. Consequently, there is a prevailing belief that the government is indifferent to men's plight, further deepening the sense of injustice. The quotation underscores the unfair treatment of men resulting from the shift in women's power, reflecting a broader societal shift in gender roles and authority. The lack of governmental action on the deadly drug issue is perceived not merely as a policy failure but as a deliberate oversight, exacerbating men's feelings of vulnerability and injustice. This situation highlights the complexities of gender politics, where the rise of women in power has led to unintended consequences for men's sense of security and justice. It serves as a poignant example of how shifts in power can create new dynamics of inequality, challenging traditional perceptions and necessitating a reevaluation of policies to ensure equitable treatment for all genders.

b. International Conflicts

As women gain the ability to produce electrical shocks, they overturn the traditional power hierarchy, leading to significant discontent and feelings of injustice among men. In their attempt to resist this new order, men form radical groups and engage in violent actions, hoping to reclaim their lost dominance. These acts of terrorism are not merely isolated incidents but are part of a broader, escalating conflict that spreads across the globe. Countries plunge into chaos as traditional gender roles are challenged and overturned, leading to widespread violence and instability. This escalating conflict underscores the fragile nature of societal structures built on rigid gender roles. As power dynamics reverse, the deeply ingrained expectations and norms shatter, revealing the potential for widespread unrest and conflict. The resulting wars and acts of terrorism highlight the lengths to which those feeling disenfranchised will go to restore their perceived rightful place in society.

b.1 War in some Countries

The conflict in society is seen in the war between the northern part of Moldova and the southern part, led by Tatiana Moskalev as the new country. It can be seen in the quotation below.

1 Tatiana Moskalev was right, and she'd given him good information. He spent two months investigating in the hills of northern Moldova – or the country that used to be Moldova and is currently at war with the southern part of itself – carefully questioning and bribing the people he met there (Alderman, 2016: 132).

The quotation illustrates the chaos in Moldova due to drastic shifts in gender roles, which have sparked internal conflicts and deepened divisions within the country. These profound changes generate significant opposition, particularly from groups in the north, leading to an ongoing and violent conflict with the south. The destabilization caused by these shifts undermines cultural identities and disrupts deeply ingrained social norms, exacerbating the turmoil and unrest throughout the nation. President Tatiana's support for the conflict in the south further complicates the situation, as her stance intensifies the divisions and adds fuel to the already volatile environment. Her involvement underscores the complexity of the conflict, where political leadership and personal affiliations intertwine with the broader societal upheaval caused by the reversal of traditional gender roles. This support also highlights the intricate dynamics of power and resistance, where leadership decisions can either mitigate or amplify societal conflicts.

The chaos and war in Moldova serve as a powerful testament to the disruptive potential of reversing entrenched gender roles. The resistance to these changes illustrates how deeply rooted gender norms are and how their upheaval can lead to widespread conflict and instability. The northern groups' fierce opposition to the evolving roles of women and men underscores the societal challenges that accompany such transformative shifts. Their struggle to maintain traditional power structures against the rising tide of gender equality exemplifies the broader global tensions between progressive change and conservative resistance. The quotation highlights that the chaos and war in Moldova stem from the profound resistance to the ongoing gender role reversal.

b.2 Terrorism

the terrorism that occurred at the fondue chain place, there is also an incident at a medical clinic that serves women's health problems in Tucson, Arizona. A newspaper reports that a group of theorists named "Male Power" is attacking women who are at the clinic. This can be seen in the quotation below.

In a letter to this news channel, a terrorist group calling itself Male Power has claimed responsibility for the attack, which destroyed a medical clinic catering to women's health issues alongside a busy mall in Tucson, Arizona" (Alderman, 2016: 174).

The quotation shows that men are affected by the gender role reverse in today's society. This attack is carried out as an act of protest against the gender role reverse. The attack causes panic and damage to a medical clinic that specializes in women's health in Tucson, Arizona. The fact that men are responsible for these attacks on women proves that they do not accept the sudden gender role reverse. They feel that these changes are causing a loss of long-established traditional gender norms and roles. Also, they do not accept that

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their position has been replaced by women who now dominate society. This illustrates the chaos of gender role reverse that men do not accept.

Furthermore, terrorism has become more intricate and widespread. It no longer confines itself to domestic boundaries but transcends national borders, affecting different regions of the world. Terrorist organizations are becoming more structured and perpetrate attacks persistently. This narrative underscores that terrorism is not merely a local issue but has evolved into a global menace. This is illustrates escalating conflict where acts of terrorism are men's responses to the reversal of gender roles that have empowered women. These actions reflect disapproval from individuals who feel threatened or disadvantaged by these changes. They perceive a loss of the respect and freedoms they once enjoyed, now feeling like victims of injustice perpetrated by women. Consequently, men seek to challenge and undermine women's newfound power through terrorist acts. This quotation underscores that significant gender role reverse often lead to increased chaos and violence.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights a significant shift in gender dynamics, where women worldwide gain the ability to generate electric shocks through a newly developed organ known as the 'skein.' This newfound physical capability disrupts traditional norms of male dominance, resulting in substantial changes to social structures and power relationships. Previously marginalized women begin to assert dominance in areas, while men increasingly experience marginalization. However, this reversal in gender roles does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes; instead, it exacerbates existing inequalities, albeit with roles reversed. The women empowered by their skein abilities which grant them perceived physical superiority, oppress men, reflecting a cycle where power shifts without addressing the root causes of oppression.

This gender role reverse is evident in the novel through women assuming positions of leadership and using their newfound ability to reshape society to their advantage. Characters like Margot, a politician, leverage their authority to gain political influence and strengthen their positions. Tatiana Moskalev, the wife of the president, takes drastic steps such as killing her husband to ascend to the presidency. Allie, also known as Eve, harnesses the power of the skein and follows whispered instructions from what she regards as "Mother," using this power to propagate a new religion and garner societal support. Similarly, Roxy utilizes her skein powers to change the leadership in family criminal business. This female leadership challenges traditional gender roles in society, which typically assign women to domestic roles while positioning men as leaders both within the household and in areas such as politics, religion, and criminal.

The impact of this gender role reverse on society is profound. One of the impacts is the injustice experienced by men. With power now held predominantly by women, men face restrictions on their rights and freedoms. They encounter mistreatment from local and state governments and discrimination in various aspects of life, including employment opportunities and civil rights. This reversal also leads to deep societal tensions, sparking

widespread social conflict. These conflicts escalate to the international level, manifesting in wars and acts of terrorism in various countries. Countries led by influential women often find themselves in conflict due to resistance from men against this societal power shift. Men are unwilling to accept the abrupt transfer of power from their group to women and resort to spreading terror and engaging in war as forms of resistance. This phenomenon underscores that when patriarchal power structures are reversed, inequality and conflict persist.

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