Female Bodies as Anti-Patriarchal Weapons in *The Power*: Reimaging Power Dynamics and Gender Roles in the TV Series Adaptation of Naomi Alderman's Acclaimed Novel

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Abstract

Extremizing patriarchal tendencies and prejudices, most of feminist dystopias depict women's condition in nightmarish realities, illustrating repressive and sexist systems that cancel their identities and their freedom, as in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018). Based on the acclaimed novel written in 2016 by Naomi Alderman, the 2023 Amazon series *The Power* reverts this trope and builds a world where women possess an unrestrainable power: they can emit electricity from their hands thanks to a new organ, the skein. Their new ability completely subverts the power dynamics in society and annihilates patriarchy and its millennial oppression, but the results are not completely utopian. The proposed paper aims to analyze three main topics: 1) the representation of women's roles, identities and bodies in the series, 2) the narrative and the techniques of control, manipulation, and oppression used by patriarchal/matriarchal dystopian powers, and 3) the comparison between the series and the novel and the relations between the plot and the actual socio-political reality.

Keyword: Dystopia; Embodiment; Gender-based Violence; Patriarchy; Power Relations.

Warning

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Women's bodies in "good" and "bad places"

Romantic princesses, evil queens, superheroines, *femmes fatales*, damsels in distress, fighters, victims, wives, mothers, sexual objects: women in the real-life inspired or fictional worlds of literature, comics, cinema, art, games, and series play many, often conflicting, roles.

Satirically extremizing or reversing patriarchal tendencies and prejudices, utopia and dystopia frequently depict women's condition through three main narratives, that are not exclusive and that can blend: empowering, repressive, and overturning.

Several works imagine idyllic scenarios, where an empowered female gender enjoys rights and emancipation, as happens, for example, in Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1888) and in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). Lane and Gilman describe matriarchal realities without men where women lead a peaceful, cooperative, developed, and nurturing community. Despite the "limited reconfigurations of […] sex and gender roles" (Broad, 2009, p. 247) of the time and the negative depiction or elimination of non-white racial categories, these novels are among the first utopian feminist works that impulse an "extreme rejection of male leadership" (Anderson, 1990, p. 87) and imagine a "totally new society in which patriarchy has been eradicated" (Suksang, 1995, p. 128). In Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), one of the four parallel realities described is Whileaway, a future all-female, crime-free, and agrarian Earth. In James Tiptree Jr.'s *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* (1977), three male astronauts travel by accident hundreds of years into the future and, after being rescued by a female space crew, discover an advanced and egalitarian society ruled by women after men's extinction. But Dave, Bud, and Lorimer are not able to accept a matriarchal reality and to "leave behind the traditional male role" (Luedtke Seal, 1990, p. 77): moved by pride and hyper-masculinity, they become violent (Bud even tries to rape one of the female astronauts who saved them) or angered and end up killed by the women on the spaceship.

Many other titles illustrate women's lives in repressive and sexist realities that cancel their identities and freedom. In Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), Nazism won a global war and annihilated both racial and religious otherness and women. Masculine myths and totalitarian power devastatingly erased female consciousness and physicality. Reduced to "a collection of wombs and breasts and livers" (Burdekin, 1985, p. 105), women are still used for procreation, but men deeply despise them:

> Hairless, with naked shaven scalps, the wretched ill-balance of their feminine forms outlined by their tight bifurcated clothes – that horrible meek bowed way they had of walking and standing, head low, stomach out, buttocks bulging behind – no grace, no beauty, no uprightness, all those were male qualities (Burdekin, 1985, p. 12).

Similarly, in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and the acclaimed Hulu TV series adaptation (2017 – ongoing), the sterile and fundamentalist dictatorship of Gilead comes to power and women are deprived of their rights and chained to traditional and repressive gender roles. Fertile women called Handmaids are "two-legged wombs" (Atwood, 1986, p. 136) regularly raped and forced to give birth. Anticipating the real-world implications of the overturn of the Roe v. Wade voted by Supreme Court in 2022[10], in Leni Zumas' *Red Clock* (2018), abortion is outlawed in the United States and the bodily autonomy of the novel's protagonists is profoundly affected. In Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018), women are not only shorn of their rights but also of their voices, since they cannot pronounce more than 100 words a day without getting electric shocks by a metal bracelet they are obliged to wear.

The third main narrative builds worlds where women negatively overturn their roles, revoke gender canons, and become oppressors or murderers of men. Extremizing

[10] The *Roe v. Wade* was the landmark United Stated supreme Court ruling that, in 1973, recognized the right to abortion, stating that the decision to continue or end a pregnancy – before fetal viability – is personal and not subjected to governmental interference.

patriarchal fears of emasculation and gender equality, in the female-dominated reality of Edmund Cooper's *Who Needs Men?* (1972), women soldiers hunt the last few thousand men alive who hide in the Highlands of Scotland. In Sheri S. Tepper's *Gate to Women's Country* (1988), opposing the ecological and peaceful utopia built for the female citizens, society spatially and politically marginalizes men that are basically divided in two groups: servants allowed to live inside the Women's Country and soldiers who live in warrior camps.

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) crosses all three narratives: it caustically shows 1) the patriarchal limitations, the gender-based abuses and the *bias* in everyday life; 2) an empowering alternative that seems to promise a utopian future for women; and 3) the shattering of this hope when the new female order leads to violence, corruption and, ultimately, apocalypse.

The Power's power dynamics of gender

"Weaving an intricate tapestry of societal power dynamics through the prism of gender" (Raso, 2023, p. 67), Alderman's acclaimed speculative novel tells the personal and socio-political implications of the skein, a new organ at the base of the collarbone that appears in the vast majority of female adolescents giving them the ability to shoot electricity from their hands (Electric Organ Discharge, EOD). This mutation has been probably originated by the Guardian Angel, an antidote to nerve gas released into water during the Second World War. "It is theorized that Guardian Angel merely amplified a set of genetic possibilities already present in the human genome. It is possible that, in the past, more women possessed a skein but that this tendency was bred out over time" (Alderman, 2017, p. 125). Thus, girls are also able to awaken the normally underdeveloped skein in adult women through their electric touch.

The Power follows the lives of several main characters. Divorced with two daughters, Machiavellian Margot Cleary, Mayor of a small town in New England, becomes Governor and promotes an enhanced program for girls in the NorthStar training camps, where they can learn how to safely use their power. Said program easily upgrades to private military corporation. Her adolescent daughter Joselyn, nicknamed Jos, possesses a skein that is not functioning well and she "can't control the power inside her" (Alderman, 2017, p. 86). Feeling not "normal", she struggles to fit in this new empowered female society and starts a relationship with Ryan, a boy with "chromosomal irregularity" (Alderman, 2017, p. 153) who has the EOD and with whom she shares a sense of inadequacy. The illegitimate daughter of mobster Bernie Monk, Roxy is a British girl with an exceptionally strong power that comes to lead the family criminal business, selling Glitter, a special drug that enhances skein's ability. Refusing to adapt to the new matriarchal order, her father kidnaps Roxy and has surgically removed her skein to implant it in his son Darrell. She is "stripped of her fertile abundance" by two men that "appropriate such abundance" (Raso, 2023, p. 77). Emerging from an unbearable suffering, Roxy "realizes that she is not less of a woman for having lost her generative power" (Raso, 2023, p. 77). Allie is a biracial orphaned girl who was sexually abused by her foster father. After killing her rapist, she runs away and takes refuge in a convent where she evolves into a magnetic spiritual leader. Under the name of Mother Eve, she preaches a new feminist religion, "re-visioning

religious and spiritual texts in ways that position female voices as central" (Miller, 2020, p. 410) and referencing to God as a Goddess. Tunde, the only male protagonist of *The Power*, is a popular journalist from Nigeria, the first to report about the EOD. He covers the awaking of the skein worldwide and the resulting feminist revolutions in several countries, including Saudi Arabia, India, and Moldova/Bessapara, being injured and risking to be raped and murdered by women several times. The wife of the autocratic president of Moldova, Tatiana, kills her husband and inherits the power. Following a civil war, she leads the new feminist country of Bessapara. This "Republic of Women" quickly becomes an apartheid state that systematically abuses and kills men and "gender-traitor" women that try to protect them. After a chain of dramatic events, the stories of the protagonists and the history of the entire world are brought to an abrupt end by the Great Cataclysm, probably a nuclear war, because "the only way to ensure the continuation of this power in women is to completely destroy the old patriarchal order and recreate a new matriarchal one" (Shuvra Sen, 2022, p. 142).

In 2023, *The Power* has been adapted in a series for Amazon Prime Video. Developed by a female team composed by Naomi Alderman, Raelle Tucker (who also worked for *Jessica Jones*, the 2015-2019 Netflix series dedicated to the rebellious and combative Marvel superheroine), Claire Wilson, and Sarah Quintrell, it stars Toni Colette, Auli'I Cravalho, John Leguizamo, Toheeb Jimoh, Ria Zmitrowicz, Halle Bush, and Zrinka Cvitešić.

The first 9-episode season doesn't cover the whole novel and some details, also relevant ones, are simplified or changed. Margot (Toni Colette), for example, is still married to his husband Rob (John Leguizamo) but their relationship is falling apart. The couple have also a son who is not in the book, Matty (Gerrison Machado), who starts to feel insecure and emasculated by the EOD and ends up radicalized by UrbanDox, an online misogynist, toxic, and populist figure that preaches men's rights. It is also revealed that Tatiana (Zrinka Cvitešić) has a sister named Zoia (Ana Ularu), a pregnant victim of the brutal sex trafficking widespread in the country. She later becomes the leader of the insurgent women in North Moldova.

Nevertheless, the series follows the major storylines from the novel, and, in case of a renewal, it is plausible that the plot will broadly explore the development of the book.

Margot: Harbinger of Power and Victim of Misogyny

"Gorgeous, fierce, powerful" (Ep. 01x05), Margot Cleary-Lopez, Mayor of Seattle, is divided between family and political duties and ambitions. She is constantly under the eye of the press and the public opinion not only for every political choice she makes, but also for her look and her facial and bodily expressions, because "female bodies have been culturally marked and coded as emotional, hysterical, abject, and irrational" (Miller, 2009, p. 154). After a sexist meeting with Governor Daniel Dandon (Josh Charles), an angered Margot talks with her husband Rob accidentally quoting Miller's analysis. She complains about the *bias* and the double standards women in position of power, especially in politics, must endure: "If my face looks too angry for like one second, I am emotional, irrational, hysterical, and totally unelectable" (Ep. 01x02). And the fact that, according to Carnevale *et al.* (2019), 13% of United States citizens still "believe that men are better suited emotionally for politics than most women" (3) reinforce Margot's exasperation. Even her

shoes become a debate: they are too expensive, or too cheap and she has to conform to the public feedback, while "Governor Dandon wears 1.000$ Ferragamos [and] no one says *anything*" (Ep. 01x02). To not see their leadership diminished, women have to "take gracefully" (Ep. 01x02) mansplaining, misogynist comments, and dirty jokes. They must never show their fragility, their boldness and/or their feelings. "Women's inability to properly control emotions is one of the most salient and consistent stereotypes in the West" (Frasca *et al.*, 2022, p. 421) and vain, arrogant, and power-hungry Daniel is the embodiment of this chauvinistic narrative. In his interactions with Margot, the Governor always appears sarcastically critical of both her political and personal levels. And the critics are generally tied with her feminine sphere. He patronizes Margot about her work: to belittle Margot's fear about the EOD, he reminds the mayor that "the sky is always falling because that's governing" (Ep. 01x02). He gives her unsolicited advice on her marriage and her private life: "You seem stressed. […] Go home. Go hang out with your husband" (Ep. 01x02). He devalues her political opinions and concerns inviting her to "calm down", to "wait patiently and quietly", to "not get her panties in a bunch", to "not get hysterical" (Ep. 01x02, Ep. 01x03). The unethical reference to hysteria is extremely dangerous and ruthless since this "medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable" (Micale, 1989, p. 320) in women has been used for centuries as "evidence of both the instability of the female mind and the social function of women defined in relation to their reproductive capacity" (Devereux, 2014, p. 20).

Although in the novel she will evolve into a corrupted, avid, and unscrupulous figure, in the first season of the series, Margot seems really devoted to her feminist political agenda: she fights for bodily autonomy and against the attempt to control or repress female bodies. Her speeches directly deal with the actual limitations of reproductive rights in the United State, such as, for example, the aforementioned Supreme Court's 2022 decision to end the constitutional right to abortion, leaving to the federal states the regulation of this sensitive matter. In 2024, "in 27 states, access to abortion is currently limited depending on gestational age, with bans ranging from six weeks to more than 24 weeks. Abortion is almost completely banned with limited exceptions in another 14 states" (Haines, 2024). Disregarding Daniel's prohibition to talk about the EOD, Margot becomes the first politician to officially speak about the theme, also giving medical information about the skein. The most intense part of the statement is about women's rights:

> It seems that people in positions of power have been telling us it's a hoax. […] This is not a hoax. […] I have two beautiful girls at home and […] it's not ok with me for politicians to make decisions about what happens in my children's bodies. In the past, we've all seen what happens when we don't give women information about what's happening in their own bodies. We have all seen or felt that cycle of shame and desperation. Back-alley abortions. Teenage girls with no resources forced into giving birth. Rape victims too afraid to come forward, and postpartum moms suffering in silence. Let us be done withholding (Ep. 01x05).

After this, Margot decides to run for Governor. In the season finale (Ep. 01x09), she shocks Dandon with the EOD during a live debate, when, after an already harsh confrontation, he questions her integrity and her abilities to protect her family, also calling Jos "unstable". The series doesn't show it yet, but, in the book, Margot will win the

election because, despite defining her violent action as "unforgivable and immoral" and reprehending her offense against "reasoned discourse and calm authority" (Alderman, 2017, p. 169), the voters populistically rewarded the strength and the assertiveness she had shown. She assimilates the aggressive and prevaricating characteristics normally associated with political patriarchal power: after all, power is not male or female, it belongs to those who are able to use and exploit it in the most dominant way possible.

Jos, Ryan, and Matty: Queer Love, "Mutant" Lives, and the Problem of Radicalization

Margot and Rob's first daughter Jos (Auli'I Cravalho) is a shy and sensitive girl that experiments a flawed skein. As in the book, sometimes she functionally uses it, sometimes she can't produce enough energy. While in Alderman's work, Ryan (Nico Hiraga), her intersex boyfriend with the EOD, is a minor character, their relationship in the series is deepened, along with the queerness of their bodies. Describing the alienating crisis of adolescence using the metaphor of mutation is a successful narrative, as the long-running *X-Men* saga proves. Created in 1963 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for Marvel Comics, the X-Men relate the adventures of humans born with a genetic mutation (X-gene) that activates in them superhuman powers or features (e.g., flight, telepathy, telekinesis, speed, extra strength, shapeshifting, etc.). Mutants start to develop their powers during puberty and must frequently fight to fit in a society dominated by anti-mutant rhetoric and actions. Quoted by Darowski (2014), comic writer Kurt Busiek states that: "adolescent feel like the [mutant] other, so that sense of being alienated, not being understood, the fear that people won't like you if they know your true self" (8) is part of the teenage lives. Jos and Ryan are like mutants in their reality, even if the situation is overturned for some aspects: in the new matriarchal order created by the EOD, it is the malfunctioning of the female power and the presence of the power in a male body that create isolation, not the power itself. But the marginalization process that limit their personal and social development is the same. It moves from the use of labels and denigratory words: mutants are "genejoke", "mutie", "deadend", girls like Jos who are not able to properly use their skein are "fizz", "blanket", "flat battery", "pzit", "as the sound of a woman trying to make a spark and failing" (Alderman, 2017, p. 64). Language helps to erose social cohesion and to dismember society, debasing discordant bodies, reinforcing public prejudices and fears, and legitimating hate crimes and bias. When Matty records a romantic electric gesture from Ryan to Jos and, violating their privacy, posts it on UrbanDox website, for example, people angrily threaten and debase the boy and his family. The toxic masculinity not only opposes female emancipation but also male anomalies, as Ryan says to Jos: "the people who hate you […] they don't know it yet, but they hate me" (Ep. 01x07). After the release of the video, the girl is extremely scared that her boyfriend could be experimented on, while Matty boldly underlines that "he should be in a lab" (Ep. 01x08): "he's a fucking freak" (Ep. 01x08), because he differs from the normative male body. Ryan is not only the target of male bullies but also of female ones, as the girls that laugh at him and call him "sparky" at school (Ep. 01x09).

Jos and Ryan represent otherness and queerness. They incarnate rejected bodies that are perceived as abnormal, as "anti-bodies" (Vallorani, 2012, p. 19) by both female and

male orders. Simply and logically, "people are different from each other" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 22) and have the right to be different but the dominant binarism of a heavily gendered society opposes "that the different parts of the [human] package might be recombined in an infinite number of ways" (Warner, 1999, p. 38). In *The Power* and in real life, normative bodies can easily be interpreted as a "social gift" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 560). They appear "docile and useful" (Foucault, 1995, p. 305) under the gendered perspective of conservative and traditional power, while the queer bodies and the queer couple can be viewed as "a failed orientation" since "in the straight space, [they] might look like they are slanting, or oblique" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 560).

Moreover, for Jos and Ryan, the weight of social conformity and expectations, the rhetoric associated with their new empowered but conflictive reality, and the judgment of community influence the self-representation and self-perception of their two non-normative and non-assimilated bodies. They feel like outcasts, monsters. In addition to the love they feel for each other, their bond is strengthened by their fragility and their non-conformity. Their relationship is a challenge to the old and the new *status quo*. The couple is ruthlessly separated in the final episode. Worried about the impact that the "scandal" of Jos and Ryan would have on the campaign, Margot's advisor Helen (Edwina Findley) – probably without her boss's approval – suggests to Ryan's family a training camp called NorthStar where he could learn how to manage his EOD. According to the shocking revelations of Daniel during the public debate with Margot, the place is a conversion camp where children with skein are forcefully medicated and experimented on against their will.

Opposing Jos and Ryan's queerness, Matty is a concentrate of toxic masculinity, patriarchal myths, and traditional gender stereotypes. He feels unappreciated and emasculated by women's empowerment. Radicalized by UrbanDox's theories, he uses a dangerously aggressive and prejudicial narrative that insists on misogynist clichés like "the male voice [doesn't] matter anymore" or "men and women need to know their place" (Ep. 01x06). Matty has turbulent relationships with his family, especially with Jos who inadvertently wounded him with his power during an altercation. He is also angry with his parents because their roles are unnatural, since her mother is a powerful figure and his father is a supportive husband who does "female stuff" like cooking. In the season finale, UrbanDox recruits him to spy on his mother's campaign using a vile and manipulative speech. "A rubid misogynist who has a unique talent for riling up disgruntled men" (Ep. 01x05) and millions of followers, Urbandox is able to create adepts like Matty using the "three pillars of radicalization": "the need to feel that one is significant and that one matters", "the ideological narrative that enshrines violence as the means best suited for the attainment of significance" and "the social network – the group or category of people whose acceptance and appreciation one seeks and whose validation of the ideological narrative is essential to its believability for the individual" (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2019, p. 4). The influencer says that he "sees" Matty and "understands" his anger against women and against his mother, who is putting his male existence in danger. He doesn't want to hurt women, he just wants to protect men. If Margot will lose the election, everything will be back to normal, where the desired "normal" is a system dominated by structural female subordination and hegemonic masculinity. UrbanDox uses Matty's hatred and fears to convert him into a "soldier" of his crusade in name of natural order because men are on top of "the food chain of Earth". "Once in a while, a new top dog shows up and tries to

supplant the apex. You think it goes down like some peaceful transfer of power? No, the entire system devolves into chaos. […] We can't let these feminazis zap us into submission" (Ep. 01x05), he says on his website. Despite his rhetoric full of violence, he presents his opinion as legitimate since free speech should be always guaranteed and rejects any accusation to foment the increasing spike in hate crimes and terrorism. Reminding viewers that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway, 1991, p. 149), UrbanDox embodies real-life "manosphere", "the dominant arena for the communication of men's rights in Western culture" (Ging, 2017, p. 1). Since 2009, it welcomes online groups with extreme misogynistic narrative and agency preaching female submission, humiliation, and sexual subjugation with aggressive and debasing arguments similar to the ones of UrbanDox. The manosphere has been connected to several crimes, including Isla Vista (May 2014) and Umpqua Community College (October 2015) mass shooting, cases of college campus sexual assault, and rape and death threats against female personalities like journalists, politicians, singers, and gamers (Ging, 2017, pp. 3-10).

Allie/Eve and Roxy: The Prophetess and the Soldier

Allie Montgomery and Roxy Monk are the two most powerful characters both in the novel and in the series. Allie is a Black girl with a history of abuse, including being raped by her foster father Clyde. She has been victim her entire life of patriarchy, systemic injustice, racism, gender-based violence, religious bigotry and zealotry. As in the book, she hides in a convent after the murder of his attacker. Supported by a female voice in her head, "she evolves into a charismatic speaker, encourag[ing] the girls to practice their power and use it to stand up to the nuns and authorities" (Warchał, 2020, p. 91). She starts her religious revolution under the name of Eve, the first woman, the sinner and the mother of humanity. She initially preaches to the "young women with experiences of domestic abuse, neglectful families or underprivileged backgrounds" (Warchał, 2020, p. 91) in the convent, but, also using social media, she reaches millions of other girls and women around the world. Her eloquence is tough, liberating, almost hypnotic. She encourages "her followers to embrace the feminine history of world religions" and to "reconceptualize monotheistic, patriarchal religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as less hostile to women by turning to goddesses or female deities instead of male gods" (Warchał, 2020, pp. 91-92). Allie/Eve baptizes in water, with her electric power, the convent girls and women after they share their stories of suffering and abuses, stories too many women can relate to. In fact, globally, an estimated 736 million women – almost one in three – have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life (UN Women, 2023). Allie/Eve talks to all of them, intersectionally, regardless of age, race, class:

> There's never been a God for girls like us. They tell us we're nothing. And we beg, we cringe, we smile. We keep silent because we think it will protect us. And no matter what we do, we're lacking in some way. There's always some standard we don't live up to and they bury us in shame. And all this time, our word has counted for nothing. They didn't hear us when we spoke and, well, now the world will listen (Ep. 01x07).

In the last episodes, her influence seems to diminish when the convent discovers that she is a murderer and when she kills Sister Veronica (a nun who didn't trust her and was about to report her to the police), but the voice inside her head promises the coming of a soldier. And Roxy arrives. The British girl has been constantly marginalized by her paternal family because she is illegitimate, but, thanks to her extraordinary power, she eventually manages to obtain a share of Bernie's criminal business. After discovering that her father ordered the murder of her mother, she violently fights with him and runs away. Intrigued by Eve's online videos, she flights to US looking for this prophetess of a new matriarchal religion. Roxy doesn't believe in God, she knows that Allie/Eve is not speaking on behalf of a feminine deity, but she is strong, stronger than anyone the American preacher has seen. Thus, the two bond and Allie/Eve welcomes her to the "family".

Allie/Eve and Roxy's help reverse gender roles and canons. They epitomize a politically engaged youth, the rebellious voice of the new generation of activists that question the patriarchal order. They invite girls and women to acquire awareness of their own abilities and knowledge about their bodies, relating the discover of their power to the normalization of the feminine sexuality. The purity myth endangers women's roles, identities, and freedom dangerously connecting their worth with their sexual behavior: "A woman's worth lies in her ability – or her refusal – to be sexual. And we're teaching […] girls that, one way or another, their bodies and their sexuality are what makes them valuable" (Valenti, 2009, p. 10). By contrast, Allie/Eve teaches her followers that their female bodies are strong, emancipated, and valuable regardless of patriarchal moral:

> You have been taught that you are unclean, that you are not holy, that your body is impure and could never harbor the divine. You have been taught to despise everything you are and to long only to be a man. But you have been taught lies. God lies within you, God has returned to earth to teach you, in the form of this new power. Do not come to me looking for answers, for you must find the answers within yourself (Alderman, 2017, p. 115).

The new female power possesses a strong physical energy that also promotes sexual freedom because it gives an enhancing pleasure to the carriers. At the same time, this power is anger and fire. It is driven by the desire to rewrite an unfair society. Allie and Roxy teach girls how to manage their power using almost identical similes, asking their disciples to rely on their rage against the system and the individuals that supported its injustice. "It's like throwing a hook. […] You gotta […] aim with your eyes but hit with your heart. […] Concentrate. Really concentrate. Who do you hate?", says Roxy. "You kinda gotta let it build up, like water boiling and think of every bad thing that has ever happened to you, and it's in our chest and it's growing. Now, let it all out", says Allie/Eve (Ep. 01x07).

Tatiana and Zoia: from Silence to Power

First lady of Moldova, Tatiana is an objectified character with broken dreams. As a girl, she was a talented gymnast training for the Olympics, oppressed by a tyrannical and hypercritical mother. She had to put her aspirations aside when she forcibly married much

older, gross, and predatory Finance Minister Viktor Moskalev, who later became the autocratic president of her country. Adult Tatiana's appearance is very baroque, almost caricatural, but she has no voice. She spends most of her time in silence, completely overshadowed, debased, and sexualized by her husband. She obeys to his commands, as when Viktor orders her to wear an ankle monitor from Russia that report the use of electric powers. She is an overdressed porcelain doll in a sumptuous palace, an object of pleasure, an ornament. She represents a theatrical incarnation of the "beauty myth" analyzed by Wolf (2002), a myth that assumes that "beauty objectively and universally exists" (p. 12) and imposes imperative norms and mass culture's ideals (e.g., youth, thinness, etc.) on women's bodies and self-perception. Tatiana's "cultural fixation" for her physical appearance, her make-up, or her perfect wardrobe reflects a social "obsession" that directly links "female beauty" with "female obedience" (Wolf, 2002, p. 187). The "beauty myth" supports patriarchy enhancing gender hierarchy: it "is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power" (Wolf, 2002, p. 13). "When women [demand] access to power, the power structure [uses] the beauty myth materially to undermine women's advancement" (Wolf, 2002, p. 20), as also happens to Margot in her political career. The first time Tatiana shows a real fee will is when she kills her husband, after he beats her dog and threatens to kill the group of rebel women lead by her estranged sister Zoia. Tatiana is a complicated figure because she is not simply a traumatized and abused victim of a hateful patriarchal system, she is a strategist who wants power not only to help the women of her country but also for her own personal gain. To achieve her goal, she has no qualms about murdering Solongo, the impoverished maid that awakened her skein, and accusing her of Victor's murder.

Tatiana's story intersects with the history of her country, where girls and women with the skein are violently repressed, killed, and/or experiment on. Moldova is a traditional and conservative reality dominated by rigid and oppressive roles that constructs a gendered society in which "not biology, but culture, becomes destiny" (Butler, 2010, p. 11). Viktor and Tatiana epitomize the classic binary opposition between a dominant, powerful, and strong masculinity and a passive, fragile, and eroticized femininity. Said opposition is exasperated by Moldova's conservative reality in which "the hyper-masculinized version of appropriate behavior for men links power and sexuality with violence" (Reid-Cunningham, 2008, p. 284). And the war against women's bodies includes human sex-trafficking. In *The Power*, Alderman (2017) states that "Moldova is the world capital" (p. 93) of this criminal activity. It is confirmed by several organizations, including the IOM (International Organization for Migration): "although in the 1990s, Eastern Europe has surfaced as a substantial source of victims of human trafficking, Moldova has been considered to have the highest rates of trafficking victims (IOM 2019)" (Bogdan, 2020, p. 3). According to UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) report, from 2000 to 2010, IOM counted 2741 victims of human trafficking and "most victims [were] women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation, primarily to Turkey, Russia, Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries in the Middle East and Western Europe" (Ghimpu *et al.*, 2011, p. 4).

The Power imagines what would happen if women forced into prostitution and sex-trafficking were not powerless anymore. They would revolt against men and male social structures. Interviewed by Tunde, Zoia expresses all her fury against not only her traffickers but also the accomplice reality that allowed this crime, a reality where

gender-based violence is systemic and normalized, since, according to UN, "one in four women aged 15 to 49 in Moldova has been a victim of domestic violence" (Ghimpu *et al.*, 2011, p. 4):

> Where were men like you when I didn't have electricity coming out of my hands? […] You want to give me a voice? I have learned how to say 'help me' in eight different languages. All the country I was sent to, they just pushed my head harder into the bed. The ones who call for peace are often the ones who caused the pain first. Everybody knew about our suffering. You're not writing this to educate. Only to remind them how safe they already are. I will give you your interview. But I will not give them peace. Go tell my sister a real, big change is coming, and I need her to pick a side (Ep. 01x07).

Zoia "will not give them peace" also because she has just become the mother of a girl, the result of a rape. When the rebel talks to Tatiana by phone in the season finale, she states that her fight is also for her daughter, for the future generations of women: "Let's make sure she doesn't get screwed up like we did". "She won't. She has the power", Tatiana answers.

In countries where women's rights are not protected or secured, the EOD exasperates the opposition between male and female agenda leading to violent revolutions, to the "days of the girls" fighting back patriarchy and challenging repressive *status quo*, as the one in Riyadh reported by Tunde. Society is displayed so infected by poisonous male authority and oppression that a peaceful mediation and the redistribution of power appear impossible for women like Zoia. As other abused characters victim of systemic injustice like V from Alan Moore and David Lloyd's comic *V for Vendetta* (80s) or the posthuman hosts from the HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022), she wants to destroy society and rebuilt it from the ground. In *Westworld*, one of the most effective refrains to explain the rebellion of enslaved androids is a quote from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597): "These violent delights have violent ends". Similarly, *The Power* reflects on the desire of women to be like a "tsunami" or a consuming "fire" for this violent system constantly privileging one part over another. The result in Moldova is a brutal polarization of society and the overturning of gender-based violence, with men marginalized, abused, hunted, and killed.

Tunde: the Value of Witnessing and Empathy

Tunde Ojo is the only main male character of *The Power*. As Rob, Margot's husband, he generally embodies a positive and anti-patriarchal manhood, far from toxic masculinity, even if he is initially represented as an opportunist and sexist figure. A Black Muslim young man from Nigeria, Tunde is the first to publish a video on the EOD. His female friend Ndudi wants to investigate with him the story of a new "juju" (magic) but he prefers to go on a date. He changes his mind when the girls he is with uses her skein. Thus, he records without consent a group of young women using their power. After discovering him, they react with violence, injuring Ndudi with a strong electric discharge. When his post goes viral, he is recruited by BBC to cover the awakening of the "electric girls" around the world but Ndudi loses her story and she is also ostracized by her community, labeled as a witch. Even if distraught by what he caused to his friend, Tunde

decides to follow his dream to become a journalist. His travels around the world are a journey of redemption, awareness, and improvement. He documents EOD and the related revolutions in several nations, including Saudi Arabia, Moldova, and United States. The events in Riyadh are particularly tragic and traumatizing for Tunde. After a girl, Amal, is almost beaten to death for using her "unholy" power, the revolt explodes, leading to the aforementioned "Day of the Girls". It's liberating but bloody. He risks his life watching women and men die, mothers opposing sons, daughters fighting fathers. Soon after Saudi Arabia, there will more days like this on a global scale, with girls and women reshaping power relations and structures and subverting the patriarchal order with their new ability and the strength of their new voices.

Tunde needs to adapt to this new order. He thinks of himself as a male savior, but this trope starts to crumble when Noura, a Riyadh protester, helps Tunde to flee the country, while he assumes that she would be the one in need to be protected and to escape. "I want change, yes, but I'm not fighting to leave. […] Did you think you were going to save me?", Noura says (Ep. 01x04). She shows Tunde his misconception about women, and he is ready to listen, to learn. He learns the impacts of patriarchy on society and recognizes his own privileges. Tunde is an ally of women's rights and he faces mortal dangers for his journalistic mission. He sincerely believes that "the system is broken and only women can rebuild it again" (Ep. 01x08). But he is also aware of the potential risks. During episode 4, joyful and empowering imagines of girls and women all over the world complement Tunde's reports:

> In Saudi Arabia, for women all over the world, it is the dawn of a new day. New freedoms. New privileges. New abilities. […] It is a law of nature that for every action, there is a reaction. But we must all be better than our nature. For those of us committed to the equality of all humanity, it must be our mission to ensure that the price of this new day dawning is not too steep. And I believe we can.

His faith in "the inherent goodness" of humanity is challenged by the violent outcomes of this potentially utopian global reshaping and his PTSD brutally emerges in the final episode, during the combats between Zoia's revolutionary forces and the Moldovan army, leaving him in a situation of danger.

Female Monstrosity/Monstrous Bodies

Bias, victim blaming, sexual objectification, gender-pay gap, psychophysical abuses, slavery, trafficking, femicides, rapes and mass-rapes remind us that female social and individual bodies have been and are territories of sexual, political, economic, colonial, racial, and military conquest. In *The Power*, since they are not passively subjected and exploitable "lands" for patriarchal hegemony anymore, they become "weapons", as Governor Dandon often underlines, insisting on the dangerousness of women's bodies. Echoing X-Men world, "mutant" women need to be controlled. If possible, they should be also deprived of their new destabilizing ability. In Marvel reality, there are forced registration, depowering serums and technologies and virus infecting only the X-gene carriers. In the world dealing with the skein, women and girls are marginalized, tracked down, and persecuted. When the phenomenon escalates, girls in United States are

separated from boys. They are not allowed to use school buses, handcuffed, and forced to wear rubber gloves. After that, women of all ages are required to be invasively tested for the EOD, getting fired in case of refusal or positivity. Possible vaccines are studied. Globally, women and girls are beaten, abused, and killed for their power. In Moldova, girls with the skein are brutally experimented on, leading to the death of the "volunteers". Many states, including U.S., buy the outcomes of these criminal and unethical trials, recalling what happened after the Second World War with the results of the human experimentation on several diseases, including plague, typhoid, scarlet fever, and tuberculosis, and conducted in China by "the infamous Unit 731, Japan's biological warfare research unit" (Rees, 2009, p. 43). "The U.S. played a [..] key role in concealing information about the biological warfare experiments and securing immunity from prosecution for the perpetrators", trading, as other countries, "leniency for access to data" (Brody *et al.*, 2014, p. 220). New technologies are created to register women's use of the EOD, such as the ankle monitors Tatiana is obliged to wear, anticipating the electrocuting wristbands from Dalcher's *Vox*. Patriarchal politics transform women's bodily autonomy and rights in a question of national and global security and try to repress them.

Women with the EOD are monstrified. When women transgress gender roles and stereotypes, when they show empowered identity and sexuality, when they refuse patriarchal structures, when they undermine masculine myths and order with their independence, when they do not embody the contemplative, pure, gracious, and nurturing ideal of the eternal feminine, they become monsters, freaks, and witches. Quoting Creed (1993), "the monstrous-feminine is constructed as an abject figure because she threatens the symbolic order. The monstrous-feminine draws attention to the frailty of the symbolic order" (p. 83). The (so-called) monstrosity can be treated, annihilated, or assimilated. It cannot be expressed, freed, understood, or respected.

In real and fictional dystopias, women's bodies and languages are limited and/or crushed by cult of masculinity and patriarchal power. Offred, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, says that women live in the spaces between the stories. She "is forced to recognize her anonymity, to almost forget her real name, to experience herself as a subject-object, interchangeable with the other Handmaids" (Mascio, 2020, p. 252). Deprived of freedom, knowledge, and autonomy, Gilead's women have no power over their identities and over their wombs. Some of them are so monstrified that are both dehumanized and defeminized: when Gilead women cannot give/produce sexuality, fertility, obedience, or labor, they are confined in toxic camps and re-named "unwomen". Revenging the countless characters annihilated by patriarchal dystopias, *The Power* shows women all over the world as capable of reclaiming their body, raising their voice, and writing the pages of their stories. They are not monsters (despite the misogynistic male supremacist narrative). They best recall Haraway's cyborgs, "disassembled and reassembled" (Haraway, 1991, p. 163) hybrid entities that defeat gender dualism, stereotypes, normative embodiment, and systemic subordination, exalting "the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (Haraway, 1991, p. 175).

While Alderman's work has been criticized for "neglect[ing] the intersectional nature of identity politics" (Raso, 2023, p. 70) and for naturalizing "white heteronormativity […] as a universal experience of womanhood" (Miller, 2020, p. 399), the series also give recognition to intersectional bodies. Compared to the novel, it is positively enhanced by

the presence of a more multiracial cast and by a more inclusive LGBTQIA+ representation. For example, opposing their absence in the book, the TV adaptation shows empowered trans character, as Sister Maria (Daniela Vega), giving also to trans women the possibility to develop the skein due to their high level of estrogen (even if the matter is not well explained or further investigated).

The life of all women improves with the skein because they are not afraid to walk in the real and metaphorical dark anymore, as Jos perfectly explains in *Scarlet Minnow* (Ep. 01x05), talking about her daily life:

> I run with both my earbuds in now. […] I don't make elaborate plans with friends just to make sure we all get home from a party safe. I didn't even realize I was living in constant fear. […] I just feel like a hundred pounds lighter and a hundred times stronger because I have this thing in me. Can you imagine what it's going to be like for Izzy [Jos' youngest sister]? She's not gonna look at the ground when a guy passes by. And she's never gonna worry about what she's wearing. Can you imagine growing up with that kind of freedom?

As Margot affirms during the debate, the EOD is lowering violent crime rate (rape, domestic violence, kidnap, etc.), including against Black trans women, who, on a real global scale, are at high risk of deadly violence. According to the Trans Murder Monitoring, in fact, approximatively 75% of the victims of trans and gender diverse people murders worldwide are Black or racialized trans women (Transrespect.org, 2023).

The Power lies between utopia and dystopia, but it chooses neither. After all, someone's "good place" can represent someone else's "bad place". The world before the awakening of the skein silently witnesses women suffering for repressive dystopian structures. The dawn of a new matriarchal world promises utopia, but its outcomes will simply overturn systemic power relations. In the series, there is still hope for a better world, but we know from the novel that this story is not about a peaceful recognition of equal rights, there will be no happy ending. This story is about reversing gender roles, prejudices, and identities and showing the dystopian reality women experiment in everyday life from the male point of view. This story is about power, an unjust, corrupted, controlling, and despotic power. This story is about what happens when a dominant part of society imposes its privileges on a marginalized and dehumanized otherness.

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