

Reimagining Gendered Histories: Counterfactual Historical Fiction

in Naomi Alderman's The Power

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Abstract

Once the inversion of traditional historical text, in which the previously unthinkable is put in the dominant role, the sociopolitical fabric is instigated to re-imagine itself. The Power by Naomi Alderman is precisely such a provocation, and it invites the readers to a counterfactual environment where gendered power structures are turned upside down and restructured along the terms of domination reversal. This paper challenges the novel in terms of the counterfactual historical fiction, arguing that Alderman creates another gendered history that reveals the contingency of social, political, and epistemic norms. The counterfactuality of imagining a world where women will have acquired a biological ability to subdue men is not only a speculative fantasy but also a methodological device meant to shed light on the contingency of patriarchal history. Based on classic work in counterfactual studies, especially the possible-worlds theory and feminist historiography, the analysis reveals how the text recreates the idea of historical causality, disrupts universalist notions of gender, and predicts the processes by which history can be told and made authoritative. Finally, The Power illustrates that counterfactual historical fiction may disrupt the naturalised truth and widen the perspective of possible futures by subjecting them to strict political criticism.

Keywords: (counterfactual, epistemic , possible-worlds theory , sociopolitical) .

إعادة كتابة التواريخ الجندرية ضمن السرد التاريخي المضاد للواقع: قراءة نقدية في رواية

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الملخص

بوصفه قلباً للنص التاريخي التقليدي، حيث يُسند الدور المهيمن إلى ما كان يُعدّ سابقاً غير قابل للتصوّر، تُدفع البنية السوسيوسياسية إلى إعادة تخيّل ذاتها. وتمثّل رواية *The Power* لـ Naomi Alderman استفزازاً من هذا النوع؛ إذ تدعو القراء إلى فضاءٍ تاريخيّ مضادّ للواقع تتقلب فيه بُنى السلطة الجندرية رأساً على عقب، ويُعاد تنظيمها وفق منطق انقلاب علاقات الهيمنة. يناقش هذا البحث الرواية من منظور السرد التاريخي المضادّ للواقع، مجادلاً بأن الدرمان تُنشئ تاريخاً جندرياً بديلاً يكشف عن طابعية (لا حتميّة) المعايير الاجتماعية والسياسية والمعرفية. إن تخيّل عالمٍ تكتسب فيه النساء قدرةً بيولوجية على إخضاع الرجال لا يُعدّ مجرد خيالٍ استشرافي، بل يمثّل أداةً منهجية تُستخدم لتسليط الضوء على طابعية التاريخ الأبوي. واستناداً إلى الأعمال الكلاسيكية في دراسات المضادّ للواقع—ولا سيما نظرية العوالم الممكنة والتأريخ النسوي—يُبين التحليل كيف يعيد النصّ تشكيل مفهوم السببية التاريخية، ويزعزع التصورات الكلاّنية للجندر، ويتنبأ بالآليات التي يروى بها التاريخ ويُمنح سلطةً معرفية. وتخلص الدراسة أخيراً إلى أنّ *The Power* تُظهر قدرة السرد التاريخي المضادّ للواقع على تفكيك الحقائق المؤنّسة/المطبّعة، وتوسيع أفق المستقبلات الممكنة عبر إخضاعها لنقدٍ سياسيٍّ صارم. الكلمات المفتاحية: (الواقع المضاد، المعرفي، نظرية العوالم الممكنة، الاجتماعي السياسي).

1. Introduction

“Cleopatra's nose: had it been shorter, the whole aspect of the world would have been altered” (Pascal, 2003 [1670], p. 48). Pascal's celebrated statement captures the intuition that the smallest change in the past could have altered the entire course of history, and that historical events are volatile. Scholars in various fields have utilized this observation to investigate hypothetical variations on events by suggesting antecedents that have never occurred and tracing the implications that would arise from them.

Scholars stress that such reimagined pasts are possible through a process of mentally reversing or genetically modifying some actual historical moment so that another, rationally consistent chronicle could take its place. In the literature, histories constructed on this principle examine how altering a critical historical situation produces a new social or political environment, thereby questioning the contractedness of the historical record itself (Raghunath, 2021).

These projects also do not adhere to the traditional historical fiction format, which requires grounding in the historical record, but they openly violate chronology as they recreate real circumstances, characters, and events to make them seem more believable. The strength of their work lies in operating as thought experiments: both start from a specific point at which the perceived world has taken a different course than the real world, challenging the reader to consider the idea of contingency, causality, and the invisible forces that have shaped the past.

Even though some feature aspects of science fiction or fantasy, many others do not, indicating that their central desire is not technological speculation, but rather a philosophical inquiry into the way histories are produced, recalled, and told. The rewriting of unreal historical events through a logic of reconstruction can help highlight the instability of historical certitude and prompt a reevaluation of the possibilities, voices, or choices that could have led to a different present (Raghunath, 2021).

1.2 Counterfactual Historical Fiction.

Riyukta Raghunath, in *"Alternative Realities: Counterfactual Historical Fiction and Possible Worlds Theory,"* defines the concept of counterfactual historical fiction as a literary genre that constructs imagined worlds that diverge from actual history. According to Raghunath, there is a literary genre called counterfactual historical fiction,

which encompasses histories of worlds that diverge in some way from our actual history. According to Raghunath, “Counterfactual historical fiction is a literary genre that comprises narratives that are set in worlds whose histories run contrary to the history of our actual world” (2017, p. 1). A genre distinct from general speculative fiction is that which explicitly rewrites or revises actual historical events by creating a fictional world of counterfactual history, where a single significant event in actual history is altered. Raghunath notes that this kind of construction of a “what-if” scenario is philosophical in nature: “Such fictions single out a crucial event in our actual world history and contradict it to create a counterfactual fictional world” (Raghunath, 2017, p. 7). Raghunath differentiates the so-called *counterfactual historical fiction* and the more familiar *alternate history* since the former is more appropriate to describe a contrary attitude towards real-world facts:

Using the premodifier ‘counterfactual’ instead of ‘alternate’ emphasises the typical nature of this type of fiction to present a world that is contrary to the history of our actual world. The term ‘alternate’ only conveys that such fiction presents a history that is different to or a substitute to the actual world history (Raghunath, 2017, p. 8)

The genre has one of the most straightforward and influential definitions in the essay “*Alternate History*” by Andy Duncan (2003) places alternate history, or what is commonly termed *counterfactual historical fiction*, in the context of a narrative mode whose intent is to rewrite the historical record, exploring the possibilities of divergence. His main statement was the paradox of the genre, “An alternate history is not history at all, but a work of fiction in which history as we know it is changed for dramatic and often ironic effect” (Duncan, 2003, p. 209). This sentence describes

the ontological and epistemological duality of alternate history. On the one hand, Duncan recognizes its fictionalization; it is not an extension of historiography, a continuation of the factual documentation. Conversely, he also stresses its reliance on historical fact, as the meaning of the story lies in its relative lack of conformity with the familiar record. What is the creative force of the genre that emerges from this interplay between the real and the imaginary, between what was and what could have been?

Hence, *counterfactual historical fiction* is a genre that imaginatively rewrites the past by creating a point of divergence, thereby creating coherent alternate worlds in which the course of events differs radically, as discussed in history. It is a mental and narrative experiment that questions causality, possibility, and human perception of the past.

1.3 Major Characteristics of Counterfactual Historical Fiction.

Saul Kripke provides philosophical grounds in *Naming and Necessity* that shed light on the key characteristics of counterfactual historical fiction. Possible worlds, as Kripke's notion of how the world could have been “ways the world might have been” (Kripke, 1980, p. 18) or “possible states or histories of the world” (Kripke, 1980, p. 18), provide a paradigm for imagining how the world's history could have unfolded. Under such counterfactual circumstances, Kripke stresses that things are not discovered about a counterfactual circumstance, but rather stipulated: “things aren't ‘found out’ about a counterfactual situation, they are stipulated” (Kripke, 1980, p. 49), meaning that such worlds are not found, but instead created through thought or narrative. The creative process of counterfactual fiction is equivalent to this act of stipulation, as authors create plausible but unrealized historical paths. Kripke further differentiates between essential and accidental properties and observes that “the properties an object has in every counterfactual world have

nothing to do with properties used to identify it in the actual world” (Kripke, 1980, p. 49).

This understanding enables counterfactual histories to change contingent facts, such as wars, discoveries, or revolutions, without affecting the inherent identity of figures and nations, as he terms it, through *rigid designation*, in which the names “refer to the same object in all possible worlds” (Kripke, 1980, p. 49). As a result, continuity of history is even maintained in the face of radical changes in situations. Moreover, Kripke’s explanation that the purpose of *possible worlds analysis* is designed to explain the distinction between necessity and contingency, revealing the philosophical profundity underlying counterfactual narratives, which depend on examining what could have been and what should not have been altered. Counterfactual historical fiction, in this sense, is a narrative mode of modal logic: it is a way to construct consistent alternate histories and challenge the boundaries between the necessary and the contingent, in a manner that translates philosophical speculation into imaginative narrative based on metaphysical rigor.

The *avatars of story* presented by Marie-Laure Ryan are various forms and manifestations of narrative as a *cognitive construct* (Ryan, 2006, p. 525) that can occur in different forms and different media. It is based on the human desire to generate events in the form of meaningful patterns, although it does not fit into the traditional form of history. It is characterized by the convergence of factual and fictional spaces, as Ryan refers to it as a quality, “*narrativity as a scalar property rather than a rigid binary*” (Ryan, 2006, p. 525). In this regard, counterfactual fiction is not external to history, but rather reconfigures it by imagining

alternatives, situated between what actually happened and what might have happened.

Another essential characteristic is its pragmatic *use of fictionality* (Ryan, 2006, p. 525). According to Ryan, fiction “is not a property inherent to certain media but a specific use of the media for which the concept is valid” (Ryan, 2006, p. 525). In this way, counterfactual narratives revisit historical structures as arenas of play, challenging readers to rewrite history through speculative reconstruction. They are also characterized by the *boundary transgression and hybridization* of boundaries, which, according to Ryan, constitutes the postmodern Doctrine of panfictionality, where the boundaries between reality and fiction become epistemologically fragile (Ryan, 2006, p. 525).

Lastly, *counterfactual historical fiction* exhibits what Ryan calls metaleptic and ontological crossing, creating “a switch between two radically distinct worlds, a configuration of strange loops and tangled hierarchies” (Ryan, 2006, p. 527). This is because such narratives create worlds that shift between the imaginary and the real, producing a metaleptic gesture that challenges the distinction between truth and fiction. Overall, the central characteristics of counterfactual historical fiction, cognitive narrativity, scalar fictionality, pragmatic hybridity, and ontological crossing are all the traits that make it a genre that recreates history by way of narrative possibility.

In *Telling It Like It Wasn't*, Catherine Gallagher terms such a hybrid form of narrative “counterfactual historical fiction,” which arises from the interface between historical investigation and speculative imagination. It is based on the philosophical understanding of contingency that the past was not predetermined but comprised various possible paths. Gallagher dates the origins of counterfactual thought to the work of

Leibniz, who speculated on the existence of “*possible worlds*,” and Clausewitz, who used hypothetical alternatives to inform military strategy. History, from this perspective, is a field of potentiality, not of necessity; counterfactual fiction, therefore, works on the premise that things could have been different, and the fruitfulness “things might have gone otherwise” of its creativity is derived from dramatizing the possibilities that were never actualized (Gallagher, 2018, p. 23).

The conditional or “what-if” structure, which is a characteristic of all counterfactual narratives, is the other notable characteristic. According to Gallagher, the counterfactual is defined as “an explicit or implicit past-tense, hypothetical, conditional conjecture pursued when the antecedent condition is known to be contrary to fact” (Gallagher, 2018, p. 25). This type of structure is based on a familiar junction, the “moment of departure” into which the story ventures a different set of events. This could be the reimagining of historical fiction in which the South wins the American Civil War, Hitler wins the European conflict, or a significant discovery or murder does not occur. The “what-if” clause is, thus, a formal and conceptual engine: it turns historical fact into a narrative experiment.

Gallagher emphasizes the hybridity of counterfactual historical fiction. It inhabits a gray area between academic history and fiction, a synthesis of the evidentiary urge of historiography and the creative liberality of fiction. She differentiates three related methods: the *analytical counterfactual history*, as written as speculative historiography; the *alternate-history narrative*, which recasts actual historical entities into new paths; and the *alternate-history novel*, which populates alternate historical situations with entirely invented men and women. This hybridity enables the form to challenge historical causation within a narrative

context, while also broadening the moral and emotional aspects of history through fictional embodiment (Gallagher, 2018, p. 26).

Another crucial characteristic is the re-examination of the past, which is done in terms of causality. By rewriting history in the form of what could have happened, counterfactual fiction prompts the reader to reflect on how the actual process of history unfolded. It highlights the limitations of turning points, the contingency of human choice, and the interplay between chance and necessity. Gallagher notes that this aspect connects counterfactual writing to the methodological issues of military and political history, in which strategic speculation of the form, “if only this had happened,” is a necessary instrument of analysis. Therefore, instead of abandoning itself to the truth, counterfactual fiction enhances historical knowledge by revealing the vagaries of causation and the arbitrariness of consequences.

Counterfactual historical fiction is grounded in real history, though it has the liberty of speculation. According to Gallagher, the plausibility of the genre is relative to its closeness to real life: the alternate universe cannot be too close to the original history, or the reader will struggle to see its difference and the way the alternate history fits into the real one. This conflict between the familiarity of the historical frameworks and the shock of deviation is the force of the form. Counterfactual fiction maintains its analytical and emotional intensity through such controlled departures.

Lastly, Gallagher points out the ethical and political aspects of the genre. The potential of the unrealized past can be used to conduct cultural self-investigation through counterfactual fiction. Alternate histories of slavery, colonialism, totalitarianism, or revolution are not just entertaining but also explore collective guilt, moral responsibility, and historical

memory. Gallagher observes that there is seldom any comforting correction in these narratives; on the contrary, they render official histories unstable and reveal the unstable tensions by which national and ideological identities form. Counterfactual fiction appears to be durable, as she notes, “seems enduring not because it solves problems but because it destabilizes solutions,” not by finding solutions, but by dismantling them, making the reader live in the uncertainty upon which all historical judgments are based.

Collectively, these features render the genre a crucial contemporary genre of revisiting the past and challenging the histories in which societies make sense of themselves.

1.4 Possible Worlds Theory

Possible Worlds Theory (PWT) has evolved from a section of philosophical logic into one of the most convincing approaches to analyzing literary works. Initially developed to describe the logic of modality, which encompasses what is necessary, possible, or impossible, it now provides critics with a tool for tracing the stratified ontologies of fictional works. The doctoral dissertation of Riyukta Raghunath, titled *Alternative Realities: Counterfactual Historical Fiction and Possible Worlds Theory* (2017), expands and reformulates this framework based on the cognitive method of reader engagement with the worlds of counterfactual fiction. As she states,

Possible Worlds Theory is a suitable methodology with which to analyse this type of fiction because it is an ontologically centred theory that can be used to divide the worlds of a text into its various ontological domains and also explain their relation to the actual world.” (Raghunath, 2017,p.3)

In this regard, PWT cannot be simply a philosophical abstraction, but a narratological tool that reveals the structures, images, and comprehension of fictional realities. The Possible Worlds Theory has its theoretical foundations in the metaphysical assertion made by Leibniz, who posited that God created “the best of all possible worlds.” This was later developed by philosophers like Saul Kripke and David Lewis into a formalized modal logic.

Raghunath admits that it is incomplete to discuss a genre of counterfactual historical fiction that specifically rewrites history, as it requires the active participation of the reader. But as it stands, the theory fails to give enough attention to the readers in its examination of fiction. Counterfactual accounts, such as the one in which the Axis won World War II, are based on factual history to create meaning for the reader. In the absence of that realization, the conflict of reality and fantasy breaks down. Consequently, Raghunath suggests that “must go beyond categorising the worlds of texts by also theorising what readers do when they read this type of fiction.” (Raghunath, 2017, p. 3).

To explain this interactive process, Raghunath narrows down Possible Worlds Theory to a cognitive-narratological version. She presents three major concepts: Reader Knowledge Worlds (RK-worlds), Ontological Superimposition, and Reciprocal Feedback, which are all used to explain how readers negotiate the boundary between fictional and actual history in their minds.

The former is the first of these, namely, RK-worlds, the world of knowledge that the reader brings to the interpretation process. According to Raghunath, “an ontological domain which I am calling RK-worlds or reader knowledge worlds to label the domain that readers use to apprehend the counterfactual world presented by the text” (Raghunath,

2017, p. 3). The reader who develops an interest in reading a book like *Fatherland*, by Robert Harris (1992), as noted by Raghunath (2017, p. 23), triggers awareness of real-world World War II history when they encounter the novella and seek to make sense of the divergence the novel takes. The mental process of reading, therefore, becomes a cross-world comparison: the reader superimposes their RK-world (what actually happened) on the textual world (what the fiction imagines).

It is this comparative act which Raghunath refers to as ontological superimposition, a mental process which “supports a Possible Worlds analysis of counterfactual historical fiction and model[s] how readers process such fiction” (Raghunath, 2017, p. 14). In this way, the fictional and the actual are superimposed, allowing the reader to discern where the story departs from historical accuracy. It is the resulting doubled vision of seeing both worlds simultaneously that produces a rich interpretive tension at the center of a counterfactual fiction.

In turn, this can be complemented by reciprocal feedback, a process in which fiction not only relies on the reader's historical knowledge but also shapes and reformulates it. The counterfactual world challenges, reconstitutes, and, on occasion, problematizes the reader's historical perception. According to Raghunath, her model is developed to “address the reader’s role by focusing on how they cognitively interact with the worlds built by counterfactual historical fiction.” Reading then becomes a reciprocal process between thought and imagination, between recollection and creation (Raghunath, 2017, p. 1).

This reconceptualization, then, enables Possible Worlds Theory to rise above its philosophical roots and emerge as an active theory of the relationship between fictional invention and historical reality. It not only

classifies worlds but also explicates how worlds are lived in, interpreted, and reimagined by the readers who inhabit the actual and the possible.

1.5 Counterfactual Historical Fiction and Post-Truth Theory: Intersections and Divergences.

The connection between counterfactual historical fiction and post-truth theory is founded on the fact that they both challenge the notion of truth, narrative, and epistemic authority. The two phenomena challenge the consistency of fact, reiterating the idea that history is never a record but a mediated process, which is determined by interpretation, emotion, and belief. The emergence of the *postfaktisch* (post-factual) condition, which made the headline in *Lying in Counterfactual Fiction: On the Critical Function of Metafactuality*, is a symptom of the *postfaktisch* (“post-factual”), condition, declared Germany’s Word of the Year in 2016, reflects a widespread “*feeling that in the political arena ... commonly agreed-upon truth was losing its hitherto unquestioned prominent status,*” as emotional appeal increasingly “*replace[s] a reference to facts, thus undermining the possibility of effectively exposing political lies*” (Navratil, 2021, p. 77). This crisis of factuality, where the substitution of truth by affect and ideology establishes the cultural sense against which counterfactual fiction comes to be noteworthy.

Counterfactual historical fiction is a practice that is both involved in and critical of this post-truth condition, yet it is not destructive. Navratil defines counterfactual fiction as the type of fiction that “*consciously alter commonly known facts about the real world within their respective storyworlds*” (Navratil, 2021, p. 78). Such writings, including novels such as *The Man in the High Castle* and films like *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS*, disrupt historical certainty to dramatize contingency and undermine the legitimacy of formal histories. Similar to post-truth discourse, they

demonstrate that truth gets mediated by the use of narratives and interpretation. Nevertheless, they are not meant to deceive, but rather to reveal how meaning is created. Counterfactual fiction, therefore, simulates what Navratil refers to as a “*hermeneutically significant variation of fact*” (Navratil, 2021, p. 82), making falsity a tool for critical thinking.

This is the primary distinction between the subversion of aesthetics and political trickery, which is crucial to their divergence. Navratil directly compares counterfactual fiction with lying and points out that “*lies are characterized not only by their untruthfulness, but also by an intention to deceive ... [whereas] counterfactual scenarios never entail an intention to deceive*” (Navratil, 2021, p. 84). The genre obtains “*derives its epistemic and aesthetic potential from the shared understanding that a particular proposition is untrue ... [it] reflexively draws attention to its own falsehood*” (Navratil, 2021, p. 85). In comparison, post-truth rhetoric relies on the obliteration of reflexivity, concealing its untruthfulness to manipulate belief. That is, counterfactual art exposes the machineries of deception, whereas post-truth politics turns them into the norm.

This argument by Navratil, therefore, posits the counterfactual fiction as the aesthetic response to post-truth relativism. Since counterfactual narratives rely on establishing the reality of facts to note their deviations, they implicitly affirm the presence of truth and its relevance. “*If there simply were no facts to begin with,*” Navratil writes, “*it would not be possible to counterfactually deviate from them*” (Navratil, 2021, p. 79). Quite on the contrary, counterfactual fiction reinforces the distinction between fact and fiction, “*supports these distinctions*” (p. 80). By strongly exploiting the lack of truthfulness, it welcomes what he describes as a “*willing construction of disbelief,*” a willingness to accept

the fictionality of the narrative, which enhances the reader's critical power (Navratil, 2021, p. 91).

Finally, counterfactual historical fiction and post-truth discourse occupy the same epistemological field of instability between truth and narrative, but they proceed in opposite ethical directions. To hide the truth, post-truth culture employs narrative affect. In contrast, the counterfactual fiction uses fictionality to explain the ways of creating, bending, and maintaining the truth. *“despite their respective links with the general topic of nonfactuality, works of counterfactual fiction ... ultimately do not undermine the distinction between truth and falsehood but ... emphasize the abiding importance of truth, especially in the political sphere”* (Navratil, 2021, p. 92). In a time and age in which lies have come to appear as truth, counterfactual art seems like an exercise in epistemology-
-a self-reflexive resistance that turns imagination into a trial of truth.

١.6 Naomi Alderman

is an English novelist, game writer, and television executive producer, born in 1974. Her most famous works include the speculative science fiction novel *“The Power,”* which was adapted into a television series and released in 2023, and won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2017. Alderman was born in London and studied at the University of East Anglia (UEA) and Oxford University, where she specialized in creative writing (Alderman, n.d.).

Her first literary work, the novel *“Disobedience”* (2006), was praised by critics and later adapted into a movie. She has also co-created *Zombies, Run!*, a popular fitness game. And published in several media, such as a Doctor Who novel. Alderman is one of the Best of Young British Novelists, as listed by Granta, and was mentored by Margaret Atwood. She is a Royal Society of Literature Fellow and creative writing professor

at Bath Spa University. Alderman is a feminist, and her works are actively imbued with relevant themes related to gender and power, a strong characteristic of her work (Alderman, n.d.). It is specifically that *The Power* is responsive to the concerns raised by modern feminist movements, such as Me Too (Alderman, n.d.).

Naomi Alderman has made significant contributions to interactive storytelling, a blend of literature, digital, and game narrative. She was the lead writer on "Perplex City," an alternate reality game, and co-created the popular fitness and audio adventure game "Zombies, Run!" She also wrote the main content for a series of alternate reality games, including "Perplex City." This combines narrative with physical activity, enabling players to participate in the story actively. The game has sold more than half a million copies and has been praised for its rich storytelling (Alderman, n.d.).

Another immersive fiction podcast created by Alderman is "The Walk," a podcast designed to be experienced as you walk through it, where the listener becomes the protagonist, taking part in a story that is seamlessly integrated into their real world. She has been known to be preoccupied with storytelling, "bleeds into the real world," enabling her to engage deeply with her listeners (Shapiro, 2018).

Her interactive storytelling is oriented towards the agency of the audience, so her game writing is "novelistic" yet participatory, considering the unpredictable decisions made by players within the story. Alderman discusses the concept of sharing stories and experiences in common, rather than a linear narrative authored by one person, which further develops the so-called "collaborative protagonist models" in interactive and digital stories.

Additionally, Alderman has written stories for other projects, such as “The Winter House,” an online interactive short story, and has been employed by various clients, including the BBC and Penguin. She also trains writers in interactive format game writing, with an emphasis on narrative excellence (Mees, 2025).

1.7 *The Power* by Naomi Alderman

The Power by Naomi Alderman is a fictional speculative fiction novel that presents a world where teenage girls worldwide develop the ability to create and produce electrical jolts from their fingers. This abrupt change of gender roles shifts the power balance between men and women, making them the predominant sex both physically and socially. The story is narrated from multiple perspectives, particularly those of Roxy, a London girl from a family of criminals who uses her authority violently and strategically, and Allie (later known as Eve), an abused girl who employs her authority to perform miraculous acts and establish a new religion. Another prominent figure, Margot, becomes a political activist who believes in empowering girls and training them to harness their strength to bring about societal change. In the meantime, a young journalist, Tunde, records the world's chaos, where women are becoming leaders, and in many cases, they are overthrown violently, shattering the existing patriarchal systems (Alderman, n.d.).

The novel culminates in political, social, and religious crises in different locations, one of which is Bessapara, a fictional country founded by a female military general. One of the themes is power relations, gender roles, violence, and the possibility of power being corrupt. The novel is also an excellent account of how a fundamental transformation of physical strength can upset a deeply rooted social order, reflecting the ambiguities and threats of newfound imperialism. (SuperSummary, n.d.)

In 2017, *The Power* was a novel that won the Women's Prize for Fiction and was adapted into a television series, which premiered in 2023. It is generally regarded as a thought-provoking and insightful analysis of gender, power, and societal change, presented in the form of speculative fiction.

1.8 Counterfactual Structure and Methodology.

The story of Alderman is an example of the truth being lightened by reversal, as described by Catherine Gallagher: “truth illuminated through reversal.” The author herself confirms the mirroring intention: “Nothing happens to a man in my world that isn’t already happening to a woman in this one.” (The Guardian interview, 2016). This quote suggests that *The Power* is not a re-enactment of a gendered revenge fantasy, but rather a counterfactual restructuring of historical causality. The teenager's discovery of the skein marks the moment of departure, which, according to the concepts of Possible Worlds, opens a new ontological reality; the plausibility of this reality depends on its connection with the real world.

All the major narratives in the novel are an ethnographic account of this change. Roxy ascending in organized crime in London makes it literal in the process of electrifying economic violence:

It literally and figuratively refers to the electrical and metaphorical electrification of economic violence, as the gang Roxy belongs to does not employ conventional masculine means of physical force and weaponry, but instead utilizes electrically charged female power. “Girls who run the business for her, and collect the profits, and knock the heads together that need knocking. It’s not that a bloke couldn’t do the job – some of them’d do it handy – but it’s better if they don’t need a gun.” (Alderman, 2016, p. 129). Populism relies on spectacle as it is revealed when Margot is on her way to the political heights in America:

She appears on the television to talk about Jos's injuries. She says, 'Terrorism can strike anywhere, at home or abroad.' She says, 'The most important thing is that our enemies, both global and domestic, must know that we are strong and that we will retaliate.' (p.313)

Margot's power depends on televised performance and emotive rhetoric rather than policy substance. By transforming personal tragedy into a public display of strength, Margot embodies the populist leader whose authority is built through media spectacle, fear, and the manipulation of collective emotion.

Meanwhile, Allie, who will become Mother Eve, channels divine rhetoric through the current in her hands:

Mother Eve says, 'As we've all lived blessed lives, as we all strive every day to listen to Your voice inside us, as we all honour our own mothers and the sacred light inside every human heart, as we all worship You and adore You and love You and kneel before You. Holy Mother, please, take the force of our prayers. Please, Holy Mother, use me to show your glory and heal this boy now!' (p. 181)

These voices represent distinct epistemological regimes within the world of Alderman. Every woman defines power in her own way, but they all come to the same conclusion: the moral meaning of power is a decision made by people who have power. In this way, the counterfactual inversion presented by Alderman satisfies the definition of the genre given by Raghunath, where a narrative runs counter to the real world and yet remains coherent. This is achieved through its maintenance of realism in fantasy, as *The Power* propels the reader into the face of the continuation between fantasy domination and the real oppression of history.

1.8.1 Futuristic History as Reversed History.

The action of *The Power* takes place in a world that is “recognizably post-globalization, post-war, and socially stratified.” Such political capitals as London, Washington, Riyadh, and Lagos remain, and their hierarchies are inverted. The novel constructs, therefore, what can be referred to as a future history of the past: a world leading up to the apocalyptic Cataclysm, rendered as an already-archival one. The futility of doubling temporality as a retelling of the past renders the imagined world of Alderman a counterfactual account; a history that tells the story from a different, gendered ground. “The shape of power is always the same: it is infinite, it is complex, it is forever branching. ... The closer you look, the more various it becomes.” (Alderman, 2016, p.317) This consideration of the protean essence of power provides the philosophical platform for the setting of Alderman: the formations of dominance remain through mutation rather than annihilation. Her future history is a reflection of our own past, revealing the grammar of human authority that repeats itself.

The metafictional frame, 5,000 years after the events, presents *The Power* as an unearthed document written by Neil Adam Armon, a male historian living in a matriarchal future. His letters to Naomi, the editor, make historiography an ideological performance. Naomi rejects the re-creating of the male dominance by Neil as implausible or fetishistic to say the least, she responds by saying that “such histories are improbable. This, Neil contradicts, is the problem with history. You can't see what's not there.” Their discussion summarizes Alderman (Alderman ,2016, p. 322): even the archive is powerfully produced. “Are patriarchies peaceful because men are peaceful? Or do more peaceful societies tend to allow men to rise to the top because they place less value on the capacity for

violence?” (Alderman, 2016, p. 320) The fact that the future world will not believe patriarchy is analogous to our failure to believe matriarchy, which proves that the plausibility of history is never culturally police. The counterfactual narrative is thereby transformed into historiographic metafiction in the novel, in which history becomes the object of fiction itself.

1.8.2 Myth, Religion, and the Production of Truth.

In the internal story, power is changed into faith. The way myth becomes the foundation of new truth is demonstrated by the metamorphosis of Allie as mother Eve: “When a multitude speak with one voice, that is strength and that is power.” (Alderman, 2016, p. 312). At the same time, journalist Tunde attempts to record this revolution, only to discover that the truth is more complicated than a simple product: “The truth has always been a more complex commodity” (Alderman, 2016, p. 239). His disappointment is a sign of the failure of factual record in an emotional world. Alderman thus enacts the metamorphosis of event → narrative → scripture, demonstrating that the power of history is not bound by fact, but rather by emotion.

1.8.3 The Post-Truth Condition, Power, and Emotion.

The counterfactual history of Alderman ultimately becomes a post-truth allegory. The political career of Margot is the best illustration of this state: she shocks her opponent in one of the debates, but is still reelected as the voters believe that strength is more critical than a polite approach. The logic of the crowd is also evident in the fact that she is a strong person, as she demonstrates this through statements like “She’s strong; she’d show them” (Alderman, 2016, p. 166), which suggests that society operates based on emotional identification and a lack of moral reasoning. In this world, as well as it is in ours, truth is performance. “You know

what they say about ‘truth’ and ‘the appearance of truth’ being opposites.” (Alderman, 2016, p. 10). The matriarchal society does not discount its mythical roots, as they are believed to be true. As soon as women are physically dominant, they need no further explanation: Because they could. This is the only response that can be given. “Because they could. That is the only answer there ever is.” (Alderman, 2016, p. 276) This is why Alderman literalizes Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, at which point simulation (or belief) supplants evidence (or history). Truth is electricity that spreads through the owners of its wave.

1.8.4 Setting as Philosophical Proposal.

The world of Alderman is a kind of philosophical laboratory that is also experimenting with whether the moral order can resist the reversal of power. Every geographical site, from Roxy London, the hub of crime, to America, the home of Margot, the temple of Allie, and war-torn Moldova, is a microcosm of domination and repetition. Even the landscapes are ideological: the modern democracies are disintegrating into matriarchal authoritarianism; religion is being turned into a weapon; the post-Cataclysm world is rescripting its own history to justify its form. By doing this, Alderman establishes the setting epistemology, where the world is not a background but an obstacle, and demonstrates that the logic of civilization is symmetrical in its reversal.

Conclusion

The Power demonstrates that the logic of counterfactual historical fiction can shed light on the most fundamental forms of history, identity, and power by recreating their very conditions of possibility. By assuming the female learning of electrical skills, Alderman builds a world that is very different from our own. Through this timeline shift, he reveals the contingency of social orders and how hierarchical structures are often

merely assumed to be natural or inevitable. Authority is played out in a gendered game in this new reality, challenging the reader to consider how readily systems of dominance can be reversed, reproduced, or distorted when history is rewritten. The world-building of the novel anticipates the concept that identities, especially those formed by gender, sexuality, and embodiment, are never predetermined and are constantly being rewritten by cultural discourses, biological myths, and social ideals. Alderman, in her alternate history, uses the metaphor of the skein to trace the origin of electrical power to the beginning of puberty and menstruation. However, she does not view the female body as a source of pollution or vulnerability, but rather as a source of power, control, and unpredictability. This discursive reorganization challenges the old patriarchal myths of menstruation and reveals the ethical turmoil that accompanies any restructuring of power, warning of the violence, extremism, and cycles of domination.

The novel offers no easy answers about empowerment. Just like any counterfactual, the truth and memory in this case are volatile, and the framing device of a future historian rewriting the past serves as a reminder that any history, this one being turned upside down, is defined by point of view and ideology. The Power combines speculative what-if scenarios, historiographic critique, and post-truth allegory into a coherent counterfactual epistemology through its interwoven form. Its location is a historical simulation; its narrative frame makes history a subject of discussion; and the characters enliven the timeless re-enactment of domination. The final point Alderman makes is that it is not women who would corrupt power differently, but that power is a genderless corruption. The familiar and inverted world of the novel reveals the nature of truth as something that is constantly rewritten by those who control the narrative about it. Ultimately, The Power provides its own answer to its own

question: what if the historical winners write history? Then, all revolutions, whether patriarchal or matriarchal, will be just another rebranding of the same hierarchy, using another myth.

Ultimately, The Power interrogates the imaginary world through its perceived world, revealing how readily human societies could have been different, how power can harden or fail under circumstances and contingencies, and the extent to which cultural discourses shape the perception of gendered bodies. Its combination of precog reinvention and embodied metaphor makes the novel a powerful addition to both feminist philosophy and the broader counterfactual historical fiction, causing us to remember that alternative histories are not just an imaginative activity, but a critical instrument for reinterpreting the forces that shape lived experience.

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