

Psychological Impact of Oppression in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*

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Abstract:

Naomi Alderman, acclaimed for her feministic views and orthodox religious contexts has highlighted the effects of dystopian world in her novel, *The Power*. This speculative fiction is modelled upon certain fictitious forms that focuses on the psychological trauma faced by the protagonist Allie. The lack of motherly care from her childhood becomes the voice she hears. The character she sets up in herself takes the role of a mother. The voice has an empowering tone which makes Allie feel powerful and independent. Focusing on *The Power*, the author's words constrain the reader to analyse it from a psychological perspective. The patriarchal world enforces relentless tyrannical acts over women that causes emotional unrest in them. This psychoanalytical study is a need of the hour to highlight that such women who are deprived of support need solace and support to empower themselves as manifested by Alderman in her novel.

Keywords: psyche, empowerment, trauma, motherhood, feminism.

Naomi Alderman, a British novelist is known for her exemplary oeuvre on unique themes on the orthodox Jewish beliefs, lesbians, bisexuals, their identity and science fictions like *The Power*. *The Power* provides an unimaginable world where matriarchy takes the lead. The girls acquire an electrical power to shock their oppressors. The novel picturizes a dystopian world which may arise if the patriarchal aggression continues. The subversion of patriarchy and its norms are portrayed by Alderman in her novel as the speculated consequence of the perpetual subjugation of women.

Psychoanalysis is a kind of healing process in medicine where a patient's unconsciousness is brought to realisation. The Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, coined the term 'psychoanalysis', which came in to practice by the 1880s. It has its roots from the term 'psyche' which means mind or soul. Through this theory, he construes the therapy for neuroses. He classifies personality into three components: id, ego, super ego. Among the three, id holds the unconscious part. It encompasses the impulsive thoughts and is the zone of wish fulfilment and the repository of psychic energy. Freud studied the repressed thoughts of the unconscious in adults. In literature, psychoanalysis focuses on two aspects: one about the mindset of the character and the other about the psychology of the author.

In contrast to other criticisms, Psychoanalytic criticism discusses about human needs and regards. In this way, it is plausible to study Alderman and her experiences.

The present study explores the ways in through which the central character-Allie, gains her consciousness in the end when she realises the state she is in. Freud believed that, the subconscious emotions which are held in memory causes hysteria. He believed that it is caused by childhood sexual abuses faced by an individual. Hysteria is a Greek word which means 'womb' as it was believed that this disorder begins in the uterus. Naomi Alderman's *The Power* having a set of distinct characters in role shows Allie as a psychological victim. From a dystopian feminist perspective, the novel highlights Allie as a feminist set in motion by her mind voice.

To highlight Allie as a psychologically dysfunctional character the main motif used is the absence of her mother. Though not a main theme, motherhood plays a vital role here.

Allie in the introductory scene is found sitting over her mother's tomb. "Allie pulls herself up on to the tomb, leans back to look at the name – she always takes a moment to remember them: Hey, how're you doing there, Annabeth MacDuff, loving mother now at rest?" (Alderman, 2017, p. 26). These lines show her extreme isolation, her intimate love for her mother and her desperate conversation with the tomb of her mother. Allie is orphaned from a very little age. She is being passed from hand to hand. From her conscious age, Allie finds that none of her mothers were good to her. Her unconscious motivation starts here. Allie is too young to have any such subconscious thoughts, but one could understand that the absence of true love made her to. The voice Allie hears must be the emotional defense she makes in order to control her emotions. A person affected psychologically, tries to escape the reality and Allie's bereavement makes her disengage with the real world.

In the case of Allie, she has no one to discuss her intimacy. This is where the abuse becomes a mental trauma. The use of the auditory imagery by Alderman enhances the psychological perspective of the reader. The voice accompanies Allie from her very childhood. As an orphaned child, she has a peculiar behaviour. She becomes forlorn to the circumstances and gets depressed every time. Motherhood is a boon and an immense credit of being a feminine. A mother is one who guides, protects and acts as a role model of morality for every child. Life without her would be unstable and full of ignorance. Allie is portrayed to be living in such a stage. Her profile being introduced as she is lighting a cigarette, her usage of diabolical words and her immoral conduct gives an obnoxious outlook. George G. Thompson, Professor of psychology in the Ohio State University, in *Child Psychology: Growth Trends in Psychological Adjustment* says, "These conditions of intermittent mothering by a fluctuating group of nursery attendants were disastrous for the psychological growth and general meta-physical health of the infants" (1969, p.636).

In fact, the other female characters except Allie get such a support from their family. Roxy is motivated for the power acquired by her through her father and brothers. "Her dad's body is a castle for her. A shelter and a weapon" (Alderman, 2017, p.47). Jocelyn is never put down of hope as she has her mother to fix her issues. But in case of Allie, her

motivational needs are never met as a child or a youngster. The love which she should have received from her family is rather replaced by her abusive foster father and her careless foster mother. M.H. Abrahams, Professor of English, Emeritus and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, president and director of National Humanities Center in North Carolina, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* opines, "Freud proposes that literature and other arts, like dreams and neurotic symptoms, consist of the imagined, or fantasied, fulfilment of wishes that are either denied by reality or prohibited by the social standards of morality and propriety" (2015, p.320).

The repressed wishes collected in Allie's mind take an unrealistic form as psychologists call it as 'Phantasy'. Allie's psychological instinct of femininity is under oppression here. Every decision that Allie undertakes is appreciated, and she is led completely by the voice. "She calls her Eve and the voice says: Good choice, the first of women; excellent choice" (Alderman, 2017, p.42). As Allie is denied the love and affection from her foster mother, she fantasies her own mother to fulfil whatever she has lost. This idea of keeping one asset in place of another could be related to the theory of displacement which is one among the defense mechanisms put forward by Freud. Though Allie is under the care of her foster mother she displaces her with the voice inside. It is a kind of defense made by her to survive the harsh reality. She manages to live in a virtual world than enduring the relentless neglect of her foster mother. The voice could be alluded to the voice of a feminist. It motivates Allie in every crucial movement and moment of hers. It could also be considered as a voice against inequity. Motivation in any form could make an individual succeed for sure. The voice becomes Allie's mother and guides her. Chandra Nisha Singh who is a senior Reader in Lakshmibai College, Delhi and a feminist in *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing* manifests:

Women conceive of their mutual friendships and community as a political weapon against a heavily subjugating androcentric value system. They structure, imaginary and real, autonomous and segregated worlds which are operational without male interjections and from which the patriarch is, as a principle, cased out. Their sisterhood, as an ideological alternative to woman's universal socio-political and historical subjugation, perceives women's bonding as the only and inevitable solution to woman's innate urge for human dignity. Sisterhood and women's community are regarded by feminists as both a refuge from and challenge to the oppressive facets of the society. (2007; p.351)

Allie's outbreak of hysteria must be the result of her unpleasant experiences. Sexual abuse is an unimaginable arena for any young, innocent child. She is not be capable of tolerating such an ignoble torment. Allie's foster father threatens her, sexually abuses her and proclaims it to be right. Allie is used up like a toy by her boyfriends. "Usually, she'd let the boys touch her if they wanted" (Alderman, 2017, p.28). The sexual abuses become psychological abuse when Allie finds no way to express her inner yearning to anyone. Chandra Nisha Singh, the renowned feminist writer and senior reader in Lakshmibai

College, Delhi in *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing* highlights how a female character is desperately needed to be portrayed as a victim because of the oppression she faces. She further opines:

The female protagonist is either a sociological and psychological prisoner of her conventional matrices, ideologies and pervading norms or is debased and fragmented by individual desires, marital drudgery, suspicions, power imbalances, pain and pessimism. She is finally a participant in the forging of aggression, pollution, sexism and alienation. Otherwise, the character is a rational and reasonable, harmonised optimist who has both faith and potential to recreate a new fictional reality. (2007, p.85)

Women most of the time accept men as their domineers. Allie's foster mother, Mrs. Montgomery Taylor is heedless to any of the victimization made to Allie by her husband. As she didn't voice out for her foster child, Allie had no other chance than killing her foster father. Patriarchy grew up as most women did not voice for their rights.

Beyond the para psychic motifs used by Alderman, through her biblical connotations, Allie is a traumatic victim indeed. The other characters in *The Power* also hear a voice in their heads. Roxy hears it when her mother is in the verge towards death. Tunde hears a voice in his head in his struggling self along with Roxy in the jungle. Jocelyn in her fight against Darrell hears two motivating voices of her parents. Unlike these voices, Allie's inner voice drives her throughout. It is because of the excessive oppression she faces than the others. In addition to this, it is Alderman's excessive concern to provide complete focus to Allie as she rejuvenates herself through the portrayal of Allie. Though Alderman maintains the flow with her fictitious notions, in the end she reveals Allie's real self. The cognitive sense of Allie deceives her. Allie becomes the subject and the voice, her operator. Allie in course of time

becomes its slave. Joseph Bristow, professor in English Literature at UCLA, in *Sexuality*

says:

Freud's next major study, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), makes a radical claim on the ways in which the unconscious exists in parallel with the conscious mind but operates according to a distinct logic of its own. Unlike the conscious mind, which functions under the rational orders demanded by culture, the unconscious is the psychic domain that has undergone the arduous but ineluctable process of repression. (1997, pp.63-64)

The protagonist herself experiences a conflict between being Allie and Eve. That is to say that she experiences a split personality. Alderman herself makes a differentiation of Allie and Eve. "Eve is kind and quiet and watchful, where Allie was spiky and complicated" (Alderman, 2017, p.44).

Allie becomes obsessed with her religious beliefs and scorns anyone who is against it.

In the name of religion, whatever rules that the Eve inside Allie proposed brought

disorderliness. This is evident in her reply to a girl who questions her, saying, "And you will be damned for your doubt. God will not forget that you did not trust Her in this hour of triumph" (Alderman, 2017, p.84). The subconscious compulsion makes her dominant and aggressive. But as the author points out, "The voice in Allie's head has been quiet these past few days" (Alderman, 2017, p.109). Allie remains herself when she is with her friend Roxy. Roxy again becomes the healer of Allie. She distracts Allie from her psychosis. The voice must be Eve's own as the voice does not always give a clear answer. When Allie asks a question to the voice, it simply gives unsure answers. "She says: Is it this one?" and "The voice says: I'm thinking so" (Alderman, 2017, p.75). The voice replies only with a suggestion but not an assurance here. Though Allie thinks the voice to be her mother, one could understand in the later part of the novel that, Allie lives in a fantasy and it fulfils the mere contentment of her instincts but does not restore the place of her mother.

Allie attains an extra power over the other women characters in the story. She excels others in the new biological change. She heals pains and reads minds. Allie becomes a prophet who preaches about Mother Mary's supremacy. Alderman's inner psyche could be well read here. The extremities in the orthodox norms must be the reason for creating a powerful character like Eve. She becomes a televangelist often addressing the public with the fame she achieved through her power. She becomes the complete hope of the oppressed women.

Naomi Alderman's portrayal of biblical characters show her inner psyche and her experiences as an orthodox Jew. Belonging to a Jewish community, Alderman lived a strict, religious life. The influence of Christianity made her bring out biblical characters like Eve and Mother Mary. She uses a number of biblical parallels in her narration. The way women are restricted from independency could be perceived in her works. The Jews highly subdue women in the name of religion. Alderman's orthodox Jewish school makes boys thank God for not being born as a woman. The kind of discrimination made against girls has made Alderman manifest such an apocalyptic dystopian novel where women take the role of men. She uses many symbols related to Christianity. Through Eve Alderman shows that religion could be exploited by anyone.

As Allie becomes herself at last by removing her religious facade, Alderman too liberates herself from the religious confinements.

"The voice always did have a Biblical way with it, just like that" (Alderman, 2017, p.40). One can understand that Naomi Alderman too had such a voice guiding her. Allie tries to prove her worth and becomes Eve, the healer and the saviour of girls. Alderman's feminist self is embedded in the character Allie. The inner disguise of Allie as Mother Eve and her assumption of mother Eve talking with her are biblical influences on Alderman. The final cure comes for Allie when she realises the difference between her body and spirit, and as Alderman says, "And with this she is undone. Her mind disconnects from itself. For a while she is not here. The voice tries to speak, but the howling of the wind inside her skull is too loud and the other voices are now too numerous. In her mind, for a time, it is the war of all against all."

It cannot sustain" (Alderman, 2017, p.318).

Allie who was under perturbation of saving women from men realises that her foster mother, a woman made her to be abused by her father. Allie's Ego is touched. Ego is one among the facets of personality as classified by Freud. This entity which helps to distinguish between the reality (Allie) and fantasy (Eve) is provoked. The delusions created by Allie shattered into pieces as she learnt that women were evil too. Alderman shows the way, "Power doesn't care who uses it" (Alderman, 2017, p.297). The novel is classified under the tenor of dystopian fiction as women when they acquire an extreme power of destruction will surely use it as means to avenge men.

The present study concludes that women's psychology must be duly avowed. If Allie had been given proper care by her foster mother, she would not have turned traumatic.

Women experience subjugation and share the same experience in their living. Everyone has an inner voice that may be the sound of yearning, the sound of motivation or the sound of confusion. One should listen closely to it and make the right choices for them to live peacefully amidst crisis. A psychological approach to Alderman's novel explains the character's behaviour and motivation. It appeals to the senses of the reader. Thus, the way a traumatic life changes a person and how motivation is essential for such distressed people particularly women can be learnt and understood from *The Power*.

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